

# **Blood and Water**

By: Oliver Gordon Brewer IV

## **Prologue:**

Junayd looked out over the rolling dunes of the Eremus Desert. His mind was as restless as the ever-shifting sands that swirled in beautiful, golden wisps. He knew he should be able to look back into his father's face and give the answer the khaishar was waiting for, but he simply couldn't make their eyes meet. His father's gaze was as steady and stern as ever, and Junayd knew it would not waver until the chief's will was heeded.

"Well?" said his father. "Would you be a man?" The old warrior loosened his keffiyeh, revealing his rough, dark-skinned face. This face resonated with many things, authority, wisdom, experience, but never fear or pity. Nevertheless, Junayd could find no words to speak.

"It is your time," said the khaishar. "You have reached your seventeenth year. It's time you took your first steps as a man. How can you lead our people if you haven't even the strength to take a murderer's life? Our tribe needs warriors, not cowards. Lions will not follow a lamb."

Junayd wanted more than anything to please his father, but faced with the task at hand, he wasn't sure his hands would obey him. Was his heart hard enough to rip a man out of this world?

Looking down at the trembling, whimpering figure bound in front of him, Junayd slowly drew his curved shamshir. With shaking hands he raised the blade above his head. He hardened his heart, tensed his arms and swung down. Something inside

him objected, and the blade stopped just inches from the culprit's neck.

His father's dark face reddened and twisted into a scowl. "Stupid boy! Coward!" he yelled. "This man is an enemy of our kin. This dog, this *kaísin*, has already taken three D'jarakaí lives and now you will not take his? How could I have raised such a mewling pup for a son?" Junayd remained silent.

His father sighed. "If you will not do what must be done, it falls to me." The khaishar drew his own blade and started toward the prisoner.

Junayd's heart beat like a drum in his chest. He knew that if any hands but his own performed the execution, he might never redeem himself in his father's eyes.

"Forgive me," he whispered. He raised his sword a second time, gathered his strength and swung. He shut his eyes as the blade sliced cleanly through his victim's flesh. The prisoner's head fell and rolled across the sands, leaving a red trail in its wake.

His father stopped, sheathed his sword and nodded. "Well done, my son. You've delivered justice."

Seeing how his son trembled, the chief stepped forward and put a hand on Junayd's shoulder. "You did only what you had to. By proving the strength of your will, you've become a man, and one day soon, you will be a khaishar."

Junayd looked into his father's dark brown eyes and struggled to hold back the tears pressing against his own. Despite the hard look on the chief's face, he could see understanding there.

"Killing is not easy, but it is the burden that men like us must bear," said the khaishar. "Clean your sword. Today you return as a man of the D'jarakaí."

As the chief spoke, he pulled a ring of gold-painted rope from inside his cloak: Junayd's agba, the symbol of his manhood. "Only a D'jarakaí warrior has the right to wear this," said his father. The khaishar removed the ring of simple string that crowned Junayd's head and replaced it with the agba. "Today, you have earned an honor that all the gold and water in the world cannot buy."

## Chapter I

The D'jarakaí greeted the return of their khaishar and his son with a chorus of cheers. The agba crowning Junayd's brow told them the boy had passed his father's test; their chief's son was now a man.

As the two trotted through the mass of tents, every man, woman, and child they passed stopped to bow to their khaishar. Junayd smiled to think that he would one day receive the same greeting.

The D'jarakaí camp was a sight to behold. The mass of colorful linen tents bustled with tribesmen and their beasts. The glint of metalwork could be seen all around, and the glimmer of water —always a beautiful sight in the desert— was visible in every bowl, cup, or basin. The tribe's herds were healthy and numerous, growing fat off the oasis around which the encampment was currently pitched.

*Thank the Makers, I was born a D'jarakaí.* Junayd knew the other tribes of the Eremus were not blessed with the same prosperity as his own. On the few occasions that he had beheld the plain-looking camps and meager herds of the neighboring tribes, he had always thanked the heavens that his kinsfolk were not cursed to scrape a living from the desert as those poor peoples were.

He and his father stopped and dismounted before the khaishar's pavilion. Junayd tied his mount, Scarab, to the nearest tent peg and offered the dark horse a handful of oats. As the horse chewed his morsel, the two men walked through the linen flap into their family's household. Like all peoples of the desert, or "*Eremukaí*" as they were called in their native tongue, the D'jarakaí were nomads without any one place to call home. Nonetheless, in his family's pavilion, Junayd had always

felt as at home as a king in his castle. Bright blue linen formed the walls of the mobile palace and plump, fluffy cushions served as the beds and furniture.

No sooner had they entered than they heard a rasping voice snap, "Dirty swine! You'll be keeping your filth out of my home! What do you think this is!? A goat pen?" Both men shuddered as Junayd's mother burst out of her bedchamber.

Khaishará Fataya Brakar D'jarakaí was the only earthly creature Junayd knew of that his father feared. The short, swarthy woman was the one creature in the desert that could give the khaishar an order without being whipped on the spot.

"Our apologies, my beloved khaishará," said Junayd's father. "We have come to gather water and rest ourselves for our journey tomorrow."

"*We? Our?*" Junayd thought. "*No. He must have misspoken. He's never even hinted that I might accompany him so soon.*"

The khaishará grunted. "Yes, well I'd best not see this happen again. I'll have baths drawn for the both of you. You'll not go before an Aurean emperor looking like filthy camel herders."

"Yes, of course," said the khaishar.

"*Could it be?*" Junayd thought. "*Am I going too?*"

Soon three servants hurried in with pitchers of water for the men and their mounts. Junayd heard Scarab snort appreciatively as the horse took a slurp from his drinking trough. Junayd scooped up a handful of water, splashed it against his face and ran his wet fingers through his raven hair. He then dipped a ladle into the pitcher and took a long gulp.

As he felt the cool water flow down his parched throat, he was reminded of what a blessing it was to have such an abundance of this precious substance. He contemplated the clear, glimmering

liquid in the pitcher, pondering how he and his family could have enough to bath in, while other Eremukaí had scarcely enough even to drink. He knew that the D'jarakaís' wealth and prosperity were due chiefly to their copious water stores. He also knew the importance of the pact that guaranteed them this blessing.

The khaishar rinsed his face and called for the servants to draw a bath, then turned to Junayd. "You will be accompanying me on our journey to pay homage to Emperor Hallucar. If you are to be khaishar, it's time you gained some experience in diplomacy."

Junayd nearly leapt with excitement. *It was true! Finally, he would see Vere Aureus with his own eyes!*

Throughout his bath and the rest of the evening, Junayd's face was fixed with a permanent smile, and that night, despite his comfortable bed of cushions and blankets, he found sleep elusive. When he finally drifted off, his dreams were filled with visions of the city of Vere Aureus, a shining metropolis with streams of crystal-clear water flowing through golden streets.

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There was a loud *shiiing* as the twenty-five members of the khaishar's *Horlas Ashayat* drew their shamshirs to salute their chieftain. The men were all armed for the journey and clad in their traditional blue keffiyehs and white tunics. Mahir Jarum D'jarakaí, the unit's captain, trotted his horse up to Junayd's father and bowed his head. "Hail, Honored One," he said. "We are prepared to ride, my khaishar."

Each of the khaishar's elite retainers was a tested veteran, whose loyalty and prowess had been

proven in battle, but Mahir was known as the best of them. He was fierce, courageous, skilled and, above all, loyal. The khaishar had often said it was a true blessing to have such a warrior in his service. Junayd hoped he'd have Mahir, or a man like him, by his side when he took his father's place.

Junayd and his father had donned their finest ceremonial garments: white linen tunics, blue cloaks with golden lining and dark blue keffiyehs to cover their heads. Fastened to their belts were golden-hilted shamshirs adorned with sapphires in the pommels and khanjas in silver sheaths.

The khaishar and his son had always looked remarkably alike, sharing the same brown eyes, raven hair, and a lean, strong build. Clad in their matching garments, they would have been difficult to tell apart, were it not for the *aso'ga* that crowned the khaishar's brow. The golden circlet was a symbol of authority and responsibility for the man tasked with leading the D'jarakaí. Though it was small and light, Junayd knew it weighed heavily on the brow that bore it.

The khaishar raised his hand and the *Horlas Ashayat* sheathed their swords. "Your men are ready, then?" he asked Mahir.

"As always," Mahir replied. "I have already selected the five who will remain to guard your household. They are keeping watch over your home as we speak."

Junayd's father nodded and turned to the assembled riders. "You have all served me with honor before. I'm sure this time will be no different."

"Our swords are yours, Honored One!" twenty-five voices answered.

"Very well then," said the khaishar, "We ride for Vere Aureus."

The banner carrier took up the D'jarakaí standard, a blue banner painted with the likeness of a rearing, white horse. The khaishar took the lead, and the company galloped off into the sands of the Eremus.

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The first day of travel passed slowly. Their company followed the setting sun past one sand dune after another. As usual, there was scarcely a soul to be seen in the Eremus. Apart from the occasional trade caravan, the only signs of life visible amongst the rolling dunes were the camels, snakes, buzzards, and jackals that made their homes there.

An outsider might have looked at the quiet sands and felt safe, but any Eremukaí would know better. The open desert was never safe; bandits and hostile tribesmen were a constant danger, and the dry, unchanging desert itself was even deadlier. In spite of this, Junayd had never felt afraid amongst his father's *Horlas Ashayat*. They had never failed in their duties before, and he was confident they would not falter now.

When night fell, the party pitched camp around a small well, taking the opportunity to rest, refill their waterskins and water their horses. They were careful to set watches and sleep in shifts; in the Eremus, any traveler caught sleeping was likely to awaken with his throat slit.

The Obice Mountains came into sight around noon on the next day. Their peaks stretched across the horizon like a great wall erected by giants. The mountain range was often called the "*Aurean shell*" as it separated the lush, green lands of the Aurean Empire from the harsh sands of the Eremus. There were few gaps that allowed easy passage through the mountains, and the passes that



did exist were under constant guard, making it all but impossible to enter the Aurean lands undetected.

The party made for the Odós Pass, the nearest and largest passage through the mountains. A short way down the path, they came to a stone keep carved out of the mountainside. The khaishar raised his hand, signaling for them to stop and await permission to progress further.

A lone man-at-arms rode out from the keep to meet them. He was armed with a longsword and clad in lamellar armor with a steel kettle helm, the typical apparel of an Aurean soldier.

“Hold there,” the watchman commanded in rough Eremukaí. “State your business.”

Seeing that the rider hadn’t yet mastered the Desert Tongue, Junayd’s father answered in the Aurean language. “We are sons of D’jará, proud allies of the emperor. We come to pay our homage to our liege lord.” He indicated the D’jarakaí banner.

The soldier nodded. “Pass, friend. Go in peace with His Imperial Majesty’s protection.”

The khaishar returned the man’s nod, and the party rode on. As they made their way down the road, the sand and stone of the mountains gradually turned to green meadows and tree groves. It wasn’t long before Junayd found himself riding through a lush landscape of golden wheat fields, blooming orchards, and shimmering waters.

For three days the D’jarakaí trekked through the Aurean lands, finding inns to house them and their horses when night fell. Most Aurean innkeepers didn’t mind providing lodging to Eremukaí, as long as they had the coin to pay for it. However, Junayd and his companions knew that some of the inns’ patrons might not take kindly to “*dunemen*” of any tribe, and so they kept to themselves.

Though Junayd was somewhat offended by the bitter glances he and his companions received,

he found it difficult to blame the fairskins. Less than two hundred years ago, almost every tribe of the desert, including the D'jarakaí, had made it their business to plunder Aurean villages and rob their merchants whenever possible. Even after the Ylaján Invasion and the forging of the pact between the two peoples, those who lived west of the Obice had little trust for the dark-skinned peoples of the east. Junayd's father was quite aware of this; whenever their party passed a town, outpost or watchtower, the khaishar made sure their banner was raised, lest they be mistaken for raiders.

The Aureans seemed as fascinated with Junayd and his company as he was with them. Every face they passed turned to stare. Children pointed playfully. Friendly bystanders waved politely. Those less friendly retreated into their homes and bolted the doors.

Junayd enjoyed viewing the villages, farms, estates, and vineyards they passed. He marveled at the decadent villas with their amber waves of barley and rows of lush grapevines. But what truly captured his eye was the Caelestis River.

The river twisted across the landscape like a giant, shining adder, and life seemed to spring up everywhere it touched. Fishermen, cattle, birds and some strange beasts Junayd didn't recognize bustled about the glistening water like bees around a flowerbed. The sight was unlike anything he'd yet seen.

As the party trotted across a bridge over the river, the khaishar slowed his horse and pulled back to ride beside Junayd. "You know the importance of this journey, do you not?" the chief asked.

"Of course Fath...I mean, my khaishar," Junayd replied.

His father chuckled. “‘Father’ will do until we reach the gates. Now tell me, why do we make this visit?”

Junayd had heard the answer a thousand times. “To pay homage to the emperor of Vere Aureus,” he recited. “Once every year. The khaishar of the sons of D’jará must bow before the emperor and pledge his allegiance.”

“And why do I pledge my loyalty to this foreign emperor?” the khaishar asked.

Junayd must have heard this answer more than a thousand times. “Honor, friendship, *kaí*...” he answered, “and water.”

Junayd knew as well as any D’jarakaí that the lush lands before him, and, by extension, the lord of these lands, were the source of his tribe’s plentiful water supply. Since boyhood, he had watched the convoys arrive from the Obice Mountains, their wagons loaded with enormous urns of the precious liquid. He remembered how cheering crowds of his kinsfolk would always gather to greet the shipments.

For more than a century, Junayd’s tribe had faithfully served the Aurean crown, and for just as long, both peoples had prospered. With the D’jarakaí at their side to serve as scouts and light cavalry, the Empire’s strength had never failed against any outsider that dared to invade it. D’jarakaí riders also served as guides and escorts through the treacherous Eremus, making it possible for Aurean merchants to traverse the desert and forge plentiful trade routes with the east.

In exchange for their service, the sons of D’jara were granted regular shipments of water and access to the Aurean Empire’s lakes, rivers, streams, and springs. In addition, the Aureans provided them with a steady trickle of coin, trade rights, and when necessary, the backing of the imperial armies. This

old alliance brought wealth, security, and power to both peoples.

After a few more hours of riding, the party came to a tall hill, green and beautiful but an unwelcome sight for the weary men and their horses that had to traverse it. By the time they'd reached the crest, Junayd was so tired that his head drooped nearly to Scarab's neck.

"Ahh! Here we are," the khaishar exclaimed, clapping his son on the shoulder. "You'd best take a good look, son. A man seldom forgets seeing the '*White City*' for the first time."

Junayd lifted his head and gasped. The city below shone like a diamond lying in the desert sand. From its high walls to the roofs and towers of the buildings within, the city's stonework gleamed like polished ceramic. The profound beauty of Vere Aureus was unmatched by anything Junayd had seen before.

The party slowed their horses to a walk as they neared the city gates. The gateway alone was three or four times as tall as any tree Junayd had ever seen. The gates themselves were crafted of bronze-plated oakwood and preceded by an iron portcullis.

As the D'jarakaí retinue came to a stop, a helmeted head appeared atop the parapet. "Identify yourself!" the sentry shouted.

Junayd's father nodded to the banner carrier, who raised the tribal standard. Recognizing the signal, the sentry called for the gates to be opened. The portcullis began to rise and the gates' hinges creaked as the doors swung inwards. Beyond the first set of gates was a short passageway with murder holes overhead and turret slits along the walls. Junayd was glad he hadn't come to attack the city. As the gates behind them groaned shut, another set

of gates before them opened, unveiling a sight that made Junayd's jaw drop.

Vere Aureus was resplendent and alive in a way he had never imagined. The city was constructed almost entirely of the same variety of white stone. Most of the buildings bore the marks of Aurean architecture: perfect symmetry and the domes and arches that Aurean builders fancied.

Men, women, and children dressed in colorful garments shuffled aside to make way for the approaching D'jarakaí. Being from a port city, the inhabitants of Vere Aureus were more accustomed to foreigners than the Aureans of the countryside; they greeted the new arrivals with bows and warm salutations. Junayd found this to be a welcome change from the begrudging acceptance he'd received on his journey there.

On his right was the city's famous bazaar, an enormous marketplace filled with stalls displaying wares and commodities of every kind. A host of merchants gave their calls and haggled with shoppers under the shade of the market's roof.

On Junayd's left stood the Grand Temple, an enormous structure crowned with a bronze-plated dome and four great minarets. Smoke billowed from the tops of the spires as the priests began their midday ceremonies.

Of all the city's wonders, the most magnificent was the party's destination, the Imperial Palace. The royal residence stood by the harbor, overlooking the Great Channel. Every inch of the structure, from its massive, gold-plated dome, to its halls, to its gates, was a credit to Aurean architecture. An outer wall with a gate of solid bronze surrounded the central complex. Within the wall stood a bronze-plated door set in a vaulted threshold. A balcony, from which the emperor and his court could address the populace, jutted from the facade

above the entrance. The palace's exterior was coated in white marble with red tiled roofs and pilasters along the walls. Arched windows and balconies allowed a generous view of the city and the great port that nourished her.

As the company trotted toward the palace, Junayd couldn't help but feel a tinge of embarrassment. Now that he'd had a glimpse of Aurean opulence, he was sure that even the fine desert garments he and his companions wore would look like burlap sacks compared to what they would find within.

After passing through the palace's outer gates, the group dismounted and a stableboy came to lead their horses away. Junayd hastily dusted the sand off his clothes and straightened his back as the great doors swung open. His jaw dropped for the second time that day.

The hall was adorned with gold, silver and precious stones. The white marble columns supporting the vaulted ceiling were carved in the likeness of grapevines winding from the base to the top. Iridescent mosaics composed of shards of stained glass stretched across the floor and walls. Completing the scene was a sparkling fountain bubbling in the center of the hall.

As Junayd stood gaping at the splendor around him, a unit of armored guards promptly assembled at the far end of the hall and marched forward to greet the arrivals. These soldiers' gold-lined purple cloaks and the horsehair plumes on their helmets marked them as men of the emperor's Prosidiar Corps. Junayd had been looking forward to meeting members of their order.

The most elite and prestigious branch of the imperial forces, the Prosidiars were charged with guarding empire's dignitaries, the Imperial Palace, and members of the royal House Harsonine itself. Though sometimes described as arrogant and

haughty, these men-at-arms were widely renowned for their loyalty and combat prowess.

As the Prosidiars approached, one of their number, whom Junayd guessed to be their lieutenant, yelled “Halt!” and the file of soldiers came to an abrupt stop. The officer stepped forward and bowed before Junayd’s father. “Khaishar D’jarakaí, your presence honors us. His Imperial Majesty awaits you in the throne room.”

“The honor is mine,” the khaishar replied.

The D’jarakaí party followed the Prosidiars down the hall. As they approached the throne room, Junayd checked to make sure there wasn’t a speck of dust left on his tunic. He could already feel beads of sweat forming on his face as the doors swung open.

The chamber was filled with a chattering crowd of nobles, merchants, generals, logothetes and other courtiers, all lavishly dressed, as expected. The interior of the palace’s gold-plated dome formed the room’s ceiling. A wooden staircase ran up along the walls to the cupola at the top, which served as the emperor’s observation tower. In the center of the floor stood a great throne on a pedestal, both of which were carved from the same slab of green marble. Sitting on this throne with his bejeweled, onion-shaped, golden crown on his head, was Emperor Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus.

Though Junayd knew the immense power this man commanded, he found that the sovereign’s appearance was hardly imposing. The emperor’s belly bulged out over his belt and his soft, pale skin hung off him in folds. Braids of red hair dangled down beside his rows of chins, which jiggled when he turned his head.

Junayd was not surprised by his host’s appearance. Though Hallucar sat upon the highest throne in the land, it was well known that he was no

warrior. Rather, he preferred to reside in his palaces, feasting, hunting and tending to matters from afar. Nevertheless, Junayd knew better than to offend any Aurean emperor. Even his father feared the ruler of the “White City.”

The members of the court fell silent as the D’jarakaí made their entrance. “Hail Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus,” announced a nearby herald, “lord, master, and protector of Vere Aureus and all under its dominion!” All those in the chamber, including the D’jarakaí, quickly repeated the herald’s salute and knelt before the throne.

“Yes, yes, let us dispose of the formalities,” Hallucar roared. “On your feet, all of you. Our friend, Khaishar D’jarakaí, did not travel so far for these silly, ceremonial...things.” With considerable exertion, the emperor lifted himself to his feet. “Welcome, my dear friend and ally!” he said, spreading his arms. “I see you’ve brought your son this time.” The emperor looked at Junayd and smiled warmly. “He looks to be a strong lad. I’m sure he’ll make a mighty khaishar. He is, after all, his father’s son.”

“Your Imperial Majesty, as always, it is a privilege and an honor to be in your presence,” said Junayd’s father. “Allow me to present my son and heir, Junayd Jarum D’jarakaí.” Junayd bowed.

“And I suppose he has come to take his first oath of fealty,” said the emperor. “Very well then. Let’s get on with it. My hunger and thirst cannot wait much longer.”

Walking side by side, Junayd and his father approached the throne. The two knelt before the pedestal, and in as clear a voice as he could manage, Junayd joined the khaishar in reciting the pledge he’d been taught since boyhood: “By the everlasting love of Mother Ursha and the steadfast justice of the Father Talis, I, Junayd Jarum D’jarakaí, pledge



my undying loyalty and that of my people to the royal House Harsonine. I vow to serve and defend the rightful ruler of Vere Aureus and all lands under his protection, until the day I breathe my last.” Junayd let out a sigh of relief as he and his father rose to their feet.

“And may this alliance bring prosperity to both our peoples, as it always has,” said the emperor. “Now that that’s done with, to the feasting hall! It’s time the future Khaishar D’jarakaí had a taste of Aurean hospitality.”

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Even in his father’s pavilion, Junayd had never seen such an abundance of ambrosial, mouthwatering delicacies. The enormous table was laden with platters of colorful fruits, juicy meats, sugared pastries and a monstrous man-sized, roasted fish in the center.

The feasting hall was large enough for myriad entertainers to perform around the table while the diners ate their fill. Musicians in festive garments filled the air with the sounds of lutes, lyres, flutes, and song. Dancers twirled about in colorful, bell-covered skirts, keeping a rhythm with the castanets on their fingers.

The mahogany banquet table was set with twenty seats on each side and five on each end. Emperor Hallucar sat at its head with his wife and two children at his sides. Beside them sat Oren Licinius Marthal, *megas domesticos* of the imperial armies.

Hallucar certainly seemed to be enjoying himself. He shoveled food down his throat so fast Junayd wondered how he managed to breathe. The emperor was known as a kind and generous man, but sadly, that was about all the good that could be said about him. The man’s reputation as a ruler was

not nearly so impressive as his sweet tooth. Hallucar's passions were for song, feasting, wine, and hunting. But, much to the dismay of many in his court, the man's duties as emperor seldom seemed to catch his interest.

Though few would dare say so to his face, the emperor's reign had been far from prosperous. Despite ample protests from his councillors, Hallucar had failed to bolster the imperial fleet. As a result, the Aureans had lost nearly all their territory in the Camaean islands to Ylaján aggressors. Worse still, the coastal waters had become infested with Amaltri pirates, and there were increasing reports of brigands plaguing the Great Channel. Even the emperor's grip on his own administration was flimsy; his nobles and governors had grown insubordinate under their sovereign's weak hand.

Fortunately for Hallucar, a much stronger presence was seated to his right: Empress Theodora Lucretia Mercinius Harsoninus. Unlike her husband, the empress was slender and not focused solely on stuffing herself. Her auburn hair flowed down around a face that reflected wisdom and experience.

The daughter of a powerful *strategos*, Theodora had been born to riches, but unlike the man seated next to her, a life of privilege had not made her soft. She had learned the inner workings of the imperial court at a young age, and by the time she met her husband-to-be, she was already showing talent for the political arena. Perhaps this was why Emperor Justirias Marcos Harsoninus III, Hallucar's father, had chosen her as a match for his son.

Though the empress' form was slight, she cast a great shadow across the imperial court. She served as a much-needed source of strength behind her husband's throne. It was often she who tended to his administrative responsibilities and saw to the governing of the empire. There were even rumors

that the messages, petitions, and reports addressed to the emperor were instead delivered directly to her. Junayd had often heard his father say that the empress was one of the primary reasons disaster hadn't befallen the realm already.

Seated to the empress' right was the royal heir, Torvinus Marconius Harsoninus. A mere three years of age, he sat in a high chair, idly toying with the grapes on his plate. The boy's face bore the typical characteristics of Harsonine lineage: red hair, blue eyes, and a small, button nose. Little Torvinus had scarcely learned his first words, but he was destined to become the most powerful man east of the Middle Sea. It amused Junayd to think that he would one day kneel before this innocent, little creature.

To Torvinus's right sat his sister, Miracel Larissa Harsoninus, who was about Junayd's age. The princess was known far and wide as a wise and kindhearted beauty. However, Junayd knew the same had been said of every emperor's daughter since the beginning of the Harsonine dynasty. Such descriptions were seldom truthful, more often a sort of propaganda cultivated by the palace to facilitate the matchmaking process. As Junayd had expected, Miracel was not the stunning beauty described in the tales, but he did find her features somewhat attractive: long strawberry blonde hair, high cheekbones, light blue eyes, and fair skin.

"Not a goddess, but not bad," Junayd murmured, chuckling to himself.

Noticing Junayd's eyes on her, the girl turned and examined him in turn. She looked him over, and for a moment, their eyes met. Then she turned up her nose, gave a vain "*Hmmph*" and returned her attention to her food. Junayd did the same. Apparently, the stories about a kind and well-mannered Harsonine princess were nothing but lies.

Directly across from the Junayd sat Varcon Torelius Mercinius, Empress Theodora's younger brother. A youth of twenty-four, Varcon shared many of his sister's physical features but otherwise had much more in common with his brother-in-law. Like the emperor, his attention was focused mainly on stuffing down every scrap of food he could reach. Though he had little aptitude for much else, Mercinius was adept at merrymaking, which was likely how he managed to win his way into the emperor's good graces. In fact, he had curried such favor with Hallucar that the emperor had gone against the advice of the entire imperial council, including the empress, and appointed the youth *classis dominum*, high commander of the imperial fleet.

Everyone but the emperor could see that Mercinius' appointment had been a devastating blunder. The empire's losses in Korras and Ralluck, as well as the piracy that plagued their shipping lanes, were proof of the youth's incompetence. But, much to the chagrin of his inner circle, Hallucar dismissed all complaints against his brother-in-law, insisting that he only needed, "a bit more time to uncover his talent," though it was clear there was none to be found. Mercinius had earned such resentment from the rest of the court that, were it not for the favor he held with the emperor, he likely would've been marked as an outcast.

To the emperor's left sat Oren Latonius Marthal, the most powerful presence in the room, aside from the empress. The general had the unmistakable look of a soldier: a well-muscled form, tanned skin, and a closely shaved head. The tip of a sword had left a scar running down the right side of his neck, and half of his right earlobe had been severed by an arrow. But his most distinguishing feature was the false eye, crafted of gold, that filled his

left socket. It was this mark that had earned him the nickname, “Lord Golden Gaze.”

Born into a family of wine merchants, Marthal had been the first of his house in generations to pursue a career of military service. In spite of his origins, Marthal’s extraordinary martial abilities, as well as his natural talent for navigating the imperial court, had earned him a place in the Prosidar corps at only twenty-two years of age. After serving on a number of expeditions with Hallucar’s father, he was given his first command at the age of twenty-six. After five more years of successful campaigns, he was placed at the head of a force sent to crush an incursion led by King Aegis of Proctarum. Upon dropping the king’s head at the emperor’s feet, the general had been bestowed with the title of *megas domestikos*, supreme commander of the imperial armies. This title granted Marthal a seat in the emperor’s inner council and made him second in power only to House Harsonine itself.

During his time in the palace, Marthal had earned a reputation as a devoted and effective military leader but also a clever, ruthless and ambitious one. Even Junayd could see that the commander was both respected and feared by the rest of the court. Even the empress was cautiously polite when addressing him.

As the food gradually vanished from the table, Junayd began stuffing himself with every delicious morsel he could reach. By the time the great fish was carved, he had almost no room left. But, not wanting to be rude, he forced down what he could.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, the emperor rose to his feet. “And now to the great ballroom!” he roared, dribbling wine down his chins.

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Aside from the throne room, the ballroom was the most luxurious room in the palace. It was topped with a ceiling of stained glass that cast kaleidoscopic light across the marble floor. Tall windows with gold and silver frames lined the walls, and the room was furnished with mahogany woodwork.

Upon entering the gargantuan hall, the men and women of the court immediately spread out and began dancing. Even Junayd's father and some of his *Horlas Ashayat* joined in, taking Aurean ladies as their partners. The floor was soon covered with twirling figures, clad in jewels and flowing velvet.

Junayd had far too much in his belly for any sort of dancing. He decided instead to flee up the spiraling staircase to the palace's southern balcony. As he ascended, he thought of how out-of-place he and his kinsmen must have seemed amongst these Aurean aristocrats. Even if all the tribes of the desert combined their wealth, they could never hope to match the riches found in the palace. The value of the D'jarakaís' alliance with Vere Aureus was clearer now than ever before.

Upon reaching the top, Junayd walked out onto the balcony and gazed down at the view below. The waters of the Great Channel glimmered in the faint light of the setting sun. Across the channel stretched the famous *Vincio Aureus*, the colossal stone bridge that linked the bulk of Vere Aureus on the channel's southern banks to Alta Turre, the district on the northern shore.

The massive arch bridge was a sight to see, but the city's southern seaport sprawling around it was even more enthralling. The docks and harbors bustled with life. Junayd could see merchants and fishermen loading and unloading their wares. He saw sailors disembarking and staggering eagerly to the nearby taverns. Children drove wheelbarrows up

and down the wharf, peddling freshly caught shellfish.

What most captivated Junayd was the multitude of exotic ships. His father had told him that a trade hub like Vere Aureus would always have a port brimming with vessels from across the Middle Sea and beyond. But he had never imagined anything like what he saw below. Until then, the closest thing to a ship he had seen was a small Terrakan fishing boat. He had never thought they could come in so many shapes and sizes.

Small dhows from the Salmak Coast glided like ducks across the water. Rows of oars propelled long Ylaján galleys through the waves. Fat-bellied trade cogs carrying foreign spices, wares, and even caged beasts furled their great sails to drop anchor at the wharf. Longships from the icy northlands slid over the waves, laden with their cargoes of fur and lumber.

The most wondrous sights of all were the treasure ships. Each of the massive vessels was rigged with brightly-colored sails. A few of the tarps were dyed purple and decorated with the Harsonine sigil, a red rose and a white one with their stems entwined, while other ships bore standards from other lands. The ships' aft-castles were inlaid with gold, silver, and in some cases, large gems. The bows were decorated with painted figurines carved in the shapes of dragons, serpents, nymphs, and beautiful women.

These magnificent vessels carried treasures intended as gifts to foreign rulers, as well as dignitaries sent to treat with said rulers. The ships' purpose was not merely to transport wares, but also to serve as symbols of the wealth and power of those whom they served. The colossal masterpieces fulfilled this purpose splendidly.

Junayd stood there, spellbound, until he was roused by the patter of footsteps behind him. He turned to find himself face to face with Princess Miracel. "Oh- eh... Your Grace..." he stammered. "I umm..."

"Pleased to meet you as well, faithful servant," the girl giggled. "Your quick wits do impress me."

Junayd blushed and knelt. "My lady..." he began.

"Oh, get up," she snapped. "No one's watching, you silly sand-dweller. You are Junayd Jarum D'jarakaí, son of Khaishar D'jarakaí, are you not?"

"I am, my lady."

"Then do tell me," said the princess, "How does it feel to be in a civilized land?"

"Your city is more beautiful than anything I've ever seen," Junayd replied. His voice did not betray his offense at the girl's curtness.

"Of course," she said. "How could a barbarian like you have ever beheld anything that could compare to the 'white city?' It must be quite an experience for you, seeing as you're likely used to living in a hut made of camel du—"

"Miracel, hold your tongue!" Junayd and the princess spun around to find Empress Theodora standing on the balcony behind them.

The hubris in Miracel's face quickly turned to fear and embarrassment. "Mother, I was simply speaking with—"

"Down to the ballroom!" barked the empress. "We'll speak of this later."

Miracel lifted her gown and scampered off. Before disappearing down the staircase, she turned and gave Junayd a vicious scowl, as if he were to blame for her mother's anger.

The empress turned to Junayd. "I must apologize for my daughter's harsh tongue," she said.



“Please know that our house holds nothing but respect for the sons of D’jará.”

“O-of course, my lady,” Junayd stammered.

The empress gave him a friendly smile. “My daughter is still young and vain, but I’m sure that one day she will come to appreciate the role that D’jarakaí swords play in protecting our lands.”

Junayd smiled back. “Many thanks, Your Grace.”

“Come now,” the empress said, gesturing toward the festivities below. “Let us make merry. Another D’jarakaí has taken his first steps as a man. This is something to celebrate.”

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Junayd had never before set foot in a bedchamber of the Imperial Palace, but he’d always imagined them as rooms full of luxury surpassing anything he’d seen in his home. He wasn’t disappointed.

The sleeping quarters allotted to him were three times as decadent as his own bedchamber. The bed was covered with colorful silken cushions and a stuffed, red linen blanket. Drapes of green velvet hung around the bed and beside the window. An intricately woven carpet covered the floor. The aroma of sandalwood wafted from smoking, brass censers.

Junayd stripped off his outer garments, flopped down on the cushions and savored the comfort around him. Before letting himself drift off to sleep, he went to the window and looked out over the city below. The dusk’s soft glow fell beautifully over the white masonry, and the skyline stood tall across the horizon.

Marveling at the beauty before him, Junayd thanked the Makers that his ancestor, Khaishar Juhar Jarum D’jarakaí and his contemporary, Em-

peror Tarquis Marcos Harsoninus, had been wise enough to form their alliance all those years ago. Had the two not had the wisdom to forge their pact, the Siege of the Dark Sun might have ended differently; the Ylajáns would likely have razed Vere Aureus to the ground, the beautiful sight below would not exist, and the Aureans and D'jarakaí today would be far worse off for it. As Junayd lay down on his mattress and shut his eyes, he prayed that he might be blessed with the same wisdom when he donned his father's aso'ga.

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The sun had just risen above the horizon when Junayd, his father, and their party departed through the city gates. Junayd could not draw his mind away from the wonders he had seen within the walls. Yet, somehow he still yearned to be back amongst his kinsfolk. He found himself missing the whinnies of the horses, the acacia trees around the oasis, and the hot sand beneath his feet. As marvelous as Vere Aureus had been, his home would always be in the Eremus.

The party made their journey back along the same route they had come by, staying at the same inns and passing through the same towns. This time Junayd noticed that the Aureans they passed seemed much more at ease. He supposed the fairskins preferred seeing Eremukaí leave their lands rather than watching them come in.

Gradually, the green pastures and rivers turned to stone and sand, and soon they passed the outpost of the Odos Pass. After entering the Eremus, they made their camp at the first well they came across. After a brief rest, they broke camp early the next morning and set out again.

As they rode over the dunes, Junayd pondered what it would be like to have to answer to the spoiled shrew of a princess he'd had the misfortune of meeting. He shuddered at the thought of himself kneeling at her feet while she stood smirking over him. "Father," he asked, turning to the chief riding beside him. "When I'm khaishar, will I really have to answer to Hallucar's daughter?"

The khaishar uncovered his face. "Unless she's married off to some foreigner before then. Otherwise, she'll always be a Harsonine. Why do you ask?"

"I've known my share of girls, some gentle, others not," Junayd grumbled. "But I don't think I've ever met a worse brat than that carrot-headed bitch."

The khaishar laughed. "Don't let this trouble you, my son. The girl's vanity will subside in a year or two. Besides, sooner or later she'll realize how much the Harsonines need our swords to keep their realm and throne safe; once she's come to accept that, she'll be much friendlier with us."

Junayd smiled and nodded. He took pleasure in knowing that even a pampered brat like Miracel would have to show him respect one day.

He was entertaining himself with the thought of the proud princess on her knees, begging for his help, when Mahir suddenly pointed north and shouted, "Riders approaching, my khaishar."

All eyes turned toward a great cloud of sand that seemed to be galloping toward them on several dozen hooves. As the approaching riders drew near, Junayd could make out the standard flying above them. It was a brown banner bearing the likeness of a green buzzard, the sigil of the Alikai tribe.

Junayd's father raised his hand, signaling for his party to stop and await the approaching riders. Junayd estimated the Alikai company's numbers to

be approximately equal to theirs. The glint of steel and the bows protruding from the men's backs told him they were well-armed.

The Alikáí, clad in shabbier garments than the D'jarakaí but looking no less dangerous, slowed their steeds to a trot as they approached. Their leader rode forth to offer his salutations.

Junayd's father smiled and spread his arms as if to embrace the strangers. "Greetings, brothers. How may I serve you?"

The Alikáí leader did not return the greeting but instead unwrapped his keffiyeh to reveal a dark, scarred face, twisted into a scowl. Junayd instinctively reached for his bow but then thought better of it and lowered his hand back to his side.

"You are Khaishar Muhib Jarum D'jarakaí, are you not?" barked the Alikáí.

"I am," Junayd's father replied, his smile fading. "And to whom am I speaking?"

"I am Khaishar Salim Morbuyet Alikáí," the rider snarled, "the man whose nephew you murdered mere days ago!" Junayd felt a chill crawl up his spine; killing a member of another tribe, especially a khaishar's kin, was a crime that demanded blood. Even if the man's accusation were false, it was likely to lead to trouble.

Junayd's father frowned and shook his head. "You must be mistaken. The sons of D'jará bear no ill will toward the sons of Alí."

The Alikáí chief pulled a strange object from his saddlebag and held it up for the men of both sides to see. Junayd gasped. It was a severed head. Worse still, it was a head that he recognized. He had cut it from its body just a few days ago.

Hearing the gasp, Khaishar Alikáí's gaze fell on Junayd, who silently cursed himself for his weakness. Then the man's gaze returned to

Khaishar D'jaraí. "So, you recognize my nephew after all, or at least your boy does."

The Alikáí chief returned the head to his saddlebag. "His name was Harrak Morbuyet Alikáí," he said coldly. "It is our people's custom to ensure that a murderer knows the names of his victims before facing justice."

Khaishar D'jaraí's face turned grim. "No murder was committed. The man we executed was a thief and a cutthroat. He had the blood of our kin on his hands."

Khaishar Salim's eyes narrowed. "My beloved nephew has lost his head to a D'jaraí sword and I will see his blood repaid!"

Junayd's father opened his mouth to speak but the Alikáí ranted on. "Every son of Eremus knows that the sons of Alí do not forget our debts. Perhaps it's time you were reminded!"

Junayd could recall only scattered fragments of what happened in the next few moments. There was the hiss of a blade being drawn, a flash of steel and then his father falling to the sand in a bloody heap.

"NO!!!" Junayd cried.

Riders of both companies surged forth. The air filled with yells and shouts: "To arms!," "Out swords!," "Send them to the Abyss!" Arrows whizzed between the warriors, and several saddles were emptied before the blades had even begun to clash.

Driven by rage and guided by instinct, Junayd nocked an arrow and let it fly toward the nearest Alikáí. The shaft found its mark, sinking deep into the man's chest. The unfortunate warrior grunted, fell to the sand, and lay still.

Junayd heard a great howl on his right and turned to see another Alikáí charging him with a raised shamshir. He quickly drew his own blade and

spurred Scarab forward to meet the challenger. Their sword strokes met and the sound of steel on steel resonated over the shouts and screams of battle.

Junayd and his opponent turned their horses and charged again. This time Junayd ducked under his foe's swing and sliced through the Alikai's abdomen. The enemy rider gave an agonized yelp and fell to the ground. Junayd trotted up to his fallen opponent and finished him off with an arrow through the eye.

He looked up, brandished his sword and gave a vicious howl, only to see that the battle was already over. Eleven D'jarakai riders had fallen, but they had won the day. The pounding of Junayd's heart gradually subsided, and he felt his blood begin to cool. The enemy khaishar and his remaining warriors were fleeing back the way they had come, and his father's men were seeing them off with taunts and triumphant shouts. But the cries of joy soon died down as the men remembered their wounded khaishar.

Junayd dismounted and sprinted to his father's crumpled form. "My khaishar!" he cried. "Father! Where are you hurt? Let me see the wound."

The khaishar attempted to rise from the wet, reddened sand beneath him, but he lacked the strength and collapsed. "Junayd, my son," he gasped. "Come."

Pulling his keffiyeh across his face to conceal his tears, Junayd knelt by his father's side. "It's just a flesh wound. You will heal. Won't you?" he asked in a breaking voice.

Mahir knelt by the khaishar's side and examined his chief's wound. Junayd hoped desperately that the captain might offer some comfort, but Mahir only shook his head.

The khaishar smiled at his son. "I saw you in the battle," he said. "I thank the Makers for giving me such a fine warrior as a son. I can rest peacefully knowing that our people have you to lead them."

"But... wh-what do you mean?" Junayd sobbed.

"It seems my time has ended," the khaishar whispered. "Now yours has come. The sons of D'jará are in your hands. You're their shepherd now. Guide them well, and...and..." The man's breath was fading, but he managed to force out few more words. "Remember, I will be watching over you... along with my father, his father and...and all..." The khaishar's eyes slipped shut and his head went limp.

"No! " Junayd cried. "My khaishar! Father! No!!!" He knew his yelling was in vain; his father had already passed from the world. But he had to release the pain that racked him. Once his voice was exhausted, Junayd put his head in his hands and endured his grief in silence.

Even the hardened men of the *Horlas Ashayat* could not hide the anguish they felt at losing their leader. Tears welled up in their eyes as they loaded their khaishar's body and those of their fallen brethren onto the now riderless horses. Losing comrades was nothing new to these warriors, but any of them would have given his own life rather than watch their khaishar fall.

Junayd attempted to stand but his knees buckled beneath him. It had only been a matter of days since his father had helped him take his first steps as a man. Now he was walking alone.

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As Junayd and the remnants of his party rode into camp, they were greeted at first with wel-

coming cheers. These turned to curious murmurs as the khaishar's absence was noticed. When the truth was revealed, curses and cries of grief rose up, as the D'jarakaí began mourning their lost chieftain.

Junayd's mother came running out of the khaishar's pavilion to greet her son and husband. At first, her face bore a warm smile, but her grin vanished when she saw the body resting on the khaishar's mount. For a moment, she only stared silently. Then the khaishará, whom Junayd had never seen shed so much as a single tear, fell to her knees and wailed to the heavens with grief.

It wasn't long before the funeral rituals began. The *abduls*, tribal holy men, led the gathered crowds in prayer while the pyres were prepared for the khaishar and his fallen warriors. The entire tribe gathered to watch as the fires were lit and the flames rose high toward the stars, where Junayd knew his father now rested.

As the pyres crackled and roared, the khaishará stepped onto a pedestal before of the assembled mass of D'jarakaí. With all eyes on her, she began, "Sons and daughters of D'jará, our honorable Khaishar Muhib Jarum D'jarakaí, has passed from this world, along with eleven of his noble warriors. Let us honor them in death as we did in life. May the Makers accept their souls."

Thousands of voices repeated her blessings. "We honor them in death as we did in life. Makers, accept their souls."

The khaishará took up her late husband's golden *aso'ga* and approached her son. "Kneel," she said. When he realized what was happening, Junayd's legs buckled, forcing him to his knees.

His mother placed the *aso'ga* on his trembling brow and shouted, "A khaishar has fallen..." she motioned for him to rise, "and a new khaishar has risen. Hail Khaishar Junayd Jarum D'jarakaí!"



“Hail Khaishar D’jarakaí! Hail! Hail!” Junayd heard his kinsmen roar. The little golden circlet resting on his brow suddenly felt heavier than the earth itself.

## Chapter II

“How much did he promise you?” Junayd asked.

The young goatherd standing before him grunted. “Thirty moons. We agreed on thirty silver moons and yet he comes to me with half that!” He picked up his pouch of the silver coins and flung it at the defendant sitting next to him.

The accused, a merchant named Marnak, rose to his feet. “You cheated me, Zarif!” he snapped. “Not one of those goats was so much as four months old. What can I do with eight measly goat kids?!”

Zarif shrugged. “Those were eight of the strongest, healthiest kids my ewes gave birth to this year. They would have been plenty big in a year or two. Besides, our agreement was that I give you eight healthy goats. You never asked for eight full-grown goats.”

Marnak's face turned livid. “Bandit!” he barked. “That’s what you are! You want thirty moons for a pack of goats scarcely weaned from their mothers’ milk!? You’ll get nothing more from me but the edge of a sword!”

“Peace!” Junayd shouted. “I’ll not see blood spilled over a few wretched goats. We will settle this like honorable men.”

He turned to Mahir, who stood behind him with two of his men. “Ensure that there are no...*incidents* in my absence.” Mahir nodded and eyed Zarif and Marnak sternly.

Junayd rose from his oaken *khaishar*’s chair and withdrew to the pavilion’s council chamber. Waiting inside were the clan elders, or *maliqs*, of the defendant and the accuser, along with Junayd’s mother.

The maliq of Zarif's clan turned to the maliq of Marnak's. "I still don't see why you thought it necessary to trouble our Khaishar with such a matter. A deal was made but not honored. The course of action is simple: your kinsman must pay the sum he promised."

"I couldn't ask my kinsman to honor such an unfair bargain," the other maliq protested. "Marnak has a family to feed. Besides, forgive me for saying so, but your man is clearly a swindler."

"You go too far!" snapped Zarif's Maliq.

"Enough!" barked the khaishará. Both men shut their mouths at the sound of her voice. "The khaishar has heard both your testimonies and those of your kinsmen. May the Makers give him wisdom while he contemplates his verdict."

The eyes in the room turned to Junayd, who sat and rubbed his brow. As a boy, he had often seen his father tackling such disputes but never given much thought to the challenge they could pose. He knew it would be impossible to deliver a verdict that would make everyone happy. The best he could do was give a fair answer without outraging either party.

For a moment or two, he sat there, twiddling his thumbs. Then he rose and motioned for the maliqs and khaishará to follow him back into the central chamber. He sat back down in his oaken chair, cleared his throat, and turned to Zarif. "I'm afraid that thirty moons is too much to demand for only eight young goats. Although you are owed more than you have been given, I'm afraid I cannot ask Marnak to give you more than twenty."

"But—"

"Hold your tongue!" Mahir snapped. "Our khaishar has spoken. You will accept your fair payment and return home peacefully."

“And you, dear Marnak,” said Junayd’s mother, “will pay the additional five moons without complaint. And you will be more cautious next time you strike a deal. Should this happen again, our khaishar will not be so sympathetic to a man who is foolish enough to make the same mistake twice.”

Marnak gave a low grunt and nodded. “Very well...As you say, my khaishar.” He and Zarif bowed and slipped out of the pavilion with their maliqs close behind them.

Junayd let out a long sigh and flopped down on one of the room’s large cushions. Little more than three weeks had passed since he had watched his father’s body burn and first felt the weight of the khaishar’s aso’ga on his brow, yet he already felt as if the burden were crushing him. It was as if he had blinked and the entire world had changed.

From the moment he had donned the aso'ga, even his closest boyhood friends had taken to greeting him with a bow and a courteous “My khaishar.” Since taking his father’s mantle, he hadn’t heard his first name from anyone but his mother.

Over the years, he had watched his father hold councils, make judgments and lead his people to war. But Junayd he had never wielded any real authority himself. Now he was doing his best to make his decisions with a firm hand, as his mother had counseled him. But nonetheless, when seated in his father’s oaken chair, he couldn’t help but feel as if it were many times too big for him.

At least he didn't have to carry his burden alone. His mother was there with her sharp wit to guide him and her harsh, feared tongue to defend him. No one dared question his word with her nearby.

He also had Mahir and the *Horlas Ashayat*, who had proven to be as fiercely loyal to Junayd as they had been to his father before him. He was

thankful to have them all by his side, especially their leader.

Of all the feared and deadly warriors amongst the D'jarakaí, Mahir was known as the most dangerous. He was rumored to have killed more than a hundred enemies in his time. Even the most arrogant fools in the Eremus knew better than to risk his ire. Junayd always felt stronger with Mahir at his back.

Still, even with these allies beside him, Junayd's mind was seldom at ease. But now that the day's business was over, perhaps he could finally take a moment to find a bit of peace. He caressed his aso'ga in his hands, watching the light glint off the polished gold. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes and waited for his mind to settle.

Peace still eluded him. *How could he ever be a khaishar? How could he ever be his father? Khaishar Muhib had left too soon.*

"Junayd, are you well?" asked his mother.

Junayd looked up. He'd fallen so deep into his self-pity that he'd forgotten he wasn't alone in the room. Mahir, his guards, and the khaishará were staring at him with looks of concern in their eyes. Junayd shook off his worries and sprang to his feet. "Yes...yes, of course."

Before the khaishará could inquire further, the tent flap opened and Junayd's tribal steward, Dabir Brakar D'jarakaí, wobbled in. The chamberlain approached Junayd and bowed as low as his stocky, short-legged figure would allow. "My khaishar, I hope this isn't a bad time, but there's someone here requesting an audience."

Junayd nodded. "I suppose now is as good a time as any."

"Excellent," said Dabir. He turned and called for the fellow outside to enter.

An Aurean in a white tunic with the Harsonine sigil woven across the chest brushed through the flap. “Hail the honored Khaishar Junayd Jarum D’jarakaí,” the emissary said with a bow. He pulled a scroll from a wooden tube on his back, cleared his throat, and read aloud: “His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus, wishes all to know that he grieves sorely for the loss of his friend and ally, Khaishar Muhib Jarum D’jarakaí. He extends his deepest condolences to the kinsfolk of his fallen shield-brother.”

Junayd nodded. “When you return, please give His Grace our thanks.”

The messenger continued. “His Grace also wishes to invite the newly-crowned Khaishar Junayd Jarum D’jarakaí to Vere Aureus to swear his first oath of fealty as khaishar of the sons of D’jará.”

“W-wha...?” Junayd stammered. *He had only just been crowned. How could he leave his people already? There was still so much to attend to.* The Alikai had already begun launching raids on the camp. There were even rumors that they had forged alliances with the other tribes. And on top of that, as khaishar, Junayd was expected to choose a khaishará from amongst his *kai*, and every clan in the tribe was clamoring for him to grant their daughters an audience. Of course, he had known he would have to make his ceremonial visit to the White City eventually, but he had never imagined having to depart so soon.

Junayd’s mother spoke up. “Our khaishar humbly begs His Grace’s pardon, but with the loss of his father, there is much that demands his attention and...”

Junayd cut her off, “I will be there, as my lord requests.” The khaishará turned and glared at him. For a moment, the look in her eyes was stern,

but it soon softened into understanding, perhaps even admiration. They both understood that Junayd would have to speak for himself if he was ever to command any respect as *khaishar*.

“His Grace may expect me in six days’ time,” said Junayd, “and please inform him that I promise to serve with as much loyalty and honor as my father before me.” The emissary smiled, bowed, and took his leave.

Junayd turned to the others in the room. “Mother will assume my duties until I return,” he said. “Dabir, make the preparations for our journey, and Mahir, assemble the men. We leave for Vere Aureus at noon tomorrow.”

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The sun was high and the wind soft when the party set off the next day. Though this was certainly not Junayd’s first trek through the Eremus, it was his first time taking the lead. Nevertheless, he held his head high and gave orders in as firm a voice as he could summon.

When he and his twenty-five *Horlas Ashayat*—new recruits had been sworn in to replace those who had fallen—reached the outpost guarding the Odós Pass, they were again hailed by the sentry. Junayd had the banner raised and identified himself to the soldier, remembering to address him in the Aurean tongue. They were allowed to pass without delay.

As before, the further they ventured into the Aurean Empire, the more looks they drew from those around them. Junayd was careful to pay the stares no heed and hold his head high. He kept his keffiyeh wrapped around his face, lest anyone see his confidence waver.

A few days later, Junayd found himself once again before the bronze gates of Vere Aureus. He sat erect on Scarab and uncovered his face to announce himself. As before, the sentry peered over the battlements and yelled, "Who goes there?"

Junayd motioned for his banner carrier to raise the standard, and the gates soon swung open. Though he had seen the city's glamour before, the exquisite, white stone buildings, glittering wares and colorful, exotic garments still managed to astound him.

The citizens in the streets respectfully made way for the D'jarakaí as the party trotted past them. Once they were through the palace's outer gates, Junayd and his companions dismounted and handed their reins to the waiting attendants.

As on the last visit, a unit of Prosidiars awaited them behind the inner doors. Their lieutenant approached Junayd and bowed. "His Imperial Majesty bids you welcome, Honored One. He awaits you in the throne room."

Junayd nodded. "We are honored to be in his presence. Lead on."

Junayd and his party followed their Prosidiar escorts down the marble hall, hastily dusting off any dirt or sand that might have clung to their garments. As the throne room's oaken doors were heaved open, Junayd shouted, "Attention!" and the *Horlas Ashayat* obediently snapped into their upright posture.

The courtiers and nobles of the court greeted Junayd as courteously as they had on his last visit, this time addressing him as "Khaishar D'jarakaí." Upon seeing the arrivals, Emperor Hallucar's face broke into a warm smile. He heaved his corpulent body up from his throne and descended the pedestal's marble steps.



“Come, young khaishar!” his deep voice boomed. “Come and be welcomed properly.” Junayd approached the foot of the throne and knelt before the Aurean ruler.

“None of that! None of that!” Hallucar motioned for Junayd to stand. “We are friends. Let us greet one another as such.”

To Junayd’s surprise, the emperor spread his meaty arms and embraced him. He hadn’t expected such a display of affection from an Aurean sovereign, but he politely returned his host’s embrace.

“I cannot find words to describe the pain I felt when I heard the news of your father’s murder,” Hallucar explained. “Khaishar Muhib Jarum D’-jarakaí was a dear friend and loyal ally. He shall be sorely missed, but I have no doubt that he’s passed his strength and honor to his son.”

“Many thanks for your kind words, Your Imperial Majesty,” Junayd replied in as clear a voice as he could manage. “I may not be my father, but this much I can promise: I shall serve and guard the Aurean Empire, the city of Vere Aureus and House Harsonine with the same strength and loyalty as I would my own blood.”

The emperor’s grin widened. “Of this I have no doubt. Let us waste no more time. The pact between us can now be renewed.”

Junayd knelt, took a deep breath and recited the vow he had been taught since boyhood: “By the Makers’ infinite light, I, Khaishar Junayd Jarum D’-jarakaí, chief of the sons and daughters of D’jará, pledge my undying loyalty and that of my people to the royal House Harsonine. I vow to defend and serve the rightful ruler of Vere Aureus and all lands under his protection, until my last breath.”

The emperor cleared his throat and gave his own pledge. “And I, Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus, Emperor of Vere Aureus, lord and protector of the

Aurean people, swear that, so long as it is within our power, House Harsonine will stand with the sons of D'jará as they have stood with us. For as long as the D'jarakaí continue to serve us faithfully, they shall know neither thirst, nor hunger, nor poverty. We Aureans will know them as friends and allies. Their enemies shall be ours, and our enemies theirs."

The emperor motioned for Junayd to stand. "Rise, my friend."

Junayd stood and looked his liege lord in the eye. They clasped each other's forearms, sealing their friendship in the ceremonial fashion, and the throne room filled with applause. Junayd smiled and let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"And now," Hallucar announced, "The empress and I shall extend our hospitality to our most welcome guests. Khaishar D'jarakaí, you and your men must be famished after your long journey, we ask that you dine with us in the amphitheater. Some wonderful spectacles have been arranged in your honor."

Junayd smiled and nodded. "We would be delighted, Your Grace."

"Splendid!" the emperor bellowed. "Let us not delay the games any longer."

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Yet another testament to the prowess of Aurean architects, Vere Aureus's amphitheater was an awe-inspiring work of construction. Its magnificence rivaled even that of the Imperial Palace.

Erected in Alta Turre, on the northern side of the Great Channel, the famous arena was an enormous, oval-shaped structure with walls standing nearly as high as the Grand Temple's minarets. Tens of thousands of seats lined its interior and its exteri-

or was decorated with marble panels depicting the city's history; her past rulers, her fiercest battles and her greatest heroes. Many regarded the amphitheater as one of the world's wonders. Now that he'd seen it for himself, Juanyd couldn't help but agree.

The best seats available were in the emperor's viewing box, a large open-air chamber overlooking the sands below. Hallucar sat in the box's largest seat with his wife and daughter seated beside him. Only Torvinus had been left in his chambers, his mother having deemed him too young for the amphitheater's spectacles. Junayd, Marthal, and Mercinius had been deemed important enough to be granted seats in the box as well.

The box's inhabitants were denied no pleasure. Each occupant was allotted a cushioned chair and a small table set with delicacies. Servants stood ready to fetch more food and wine whenever it was called for.

On either side of the box were the "noble rows" for lesser dignitaries and the more important spectators. Mahir and the rest of the *Horlas Ashayat* were seated there amongst a large array of Aurean nobles and courtiers. Junayd noticed that the D'-jarakaí talked freely amongst each other but had little success in conversing with those around them. Allies or not, many Aureans still detested the idea of mingling with "*dunemen*." Though he knew to expect as much, Junayd couldn't help but feel that this treatment was unfair, especially considering the years of service his people had given the fairskins.

The amphitheater was used for entertainment of every kind. It hosted plays, musical recitals, chariot races, public executions, animal hunts, and gladiatorial combat, the latter of which was being held that very moment.

Seeing as this was Junayd's first time witnessing an Aurean gladiatorial match, Empress

Theodora had been kind enough to explain the sport on their way across the Vincio Aureus: Combatants were usually prisoners of war and condemned criminals. Each had been fortunate, or perhaps unfortunate, enough to be offered a place in the games. Every fighter knew that to set foot on the amphitheater's sands was to take a wager: his life against his freedom. Should he win, he would be one step closer to earning his release. If he lost, his execution would most likely be carried out by whoever bested him. Though it was not unheard of for a losing fighter to be spared, only the most impressive combatants had a chance of earning such clemency.

At the moment, a murderer wielding a great axe was facing off against a pirate armed with a sickle-shaped sword and buckler shield. Though they were only minutes into the match, it was already obvious who the victor would be. The pirate easily parried his opponent's clumsy swings and drove him back toward the wall with deft hacks and slashes. The murderer struggled unsuccessfully to hide his fear while the pirate advanced, a smug grin on his tanned face.

Junayd was seated between Marthal and Mercinius. Upon first catching sight of him on their way out of the palace, the princess had greeted him with nothing more than a quick curtsy. And in the time since, she had done her best to pretend he wasn't there. She addressed him only when her mother demanded it, and what few looks she gave him were disdainful glares and scowls.

Junayd supposed she somehow blamed him for the trouble she'd gotten into the last time they'd met. Not that it bothered him. In truth, he wanted as little to do with her as she with him.

Her parents, on the other hand, were perfectly willing to converse with him. Hallucar entertained him with a string of jovial, drunken jokes,

letting the wine drip down his chin as he laughed. The emperor's sense of humor was not nearly as acute as the fat man believed, but Junayd pretended to laugh all the same.

The empress, on the other hand, inquired about more serious matters: How had he fared in his first days as khaishar? Had there been any further trouble from the Alikai? Was the D'jarakaí's water supply sufficient? Junayd answered her questions as best he could, trying to sound as strong and capable as his father, though he knew this was impossible.

Mercinius' attention was completely dominated by the spectacle on the sands. He turned to Junayd only once or twice to inquire about how his wine tasted or which fighter he was cheering for. But Junayd didn't mind the noble's poor manners. He had little desire to speak with such a man anyway.

The Aurean whose company Junayd enjoyed the most was Marthal. The commander spoke of his great respect for Junayd's father. He especially enjoyed recounting the battles he and the late khaishar had fought together.

"Khaishar Muhib and I had to squeeze through quite a few tight spots," Marthal chuckled, "but no host that walks the earth can ever hope to stand against the Aurean armies with the D'jarakaí at our side." Marthal tapped his gilded eye. "Did he ever mention how I lost this?"

Junayd shook his head. "No, sir."

"It was years ago, back when you probably still had baby fat on your cheeks," Marthal recalled. "Your father and I were investigating reports of Amaltri raiders plundering the coast near Mar Aureus. We managed to guess the next place they'd attack, a fishing village south of the city. We got there just before they did."

“I was assembling my phalanxes when an Amaltri scum took a shot from the deck of his sloop. As you can see, he didn’t kill me, but the arrow sliced my eye wide open, broke the socket too.”

Marthal rubbed the skin around the golden eye. “Funny, one of my oldest friends saved my life that day, but not by doing anything right; just the opposite actually.” The general chuckled again. “Malonius is the man’s name. He’s a fine soldier now, but at the time, the poor lad was just a junior officer, fresh out of training. This was his first command, so naturally, his men were out of formation.

“The funny part is, if he’d had his men in order, I wouldn’t have had to turn my head to order them straightened out. And had I not turned my head to yell, the arrow would’ve gone straight through my eye, and I wouldn’t be sitting here today. Thank the Makers for clueless recruits, eh?” Marthal and Junayd shared a hearty laugh.

“So the Amaltri bastard thought he’d killed me,” Marthal continued, still smiling. “He was jumping with joy, like he’d just bagged himself a white stag, pointing and laughing and yelling who-knows-what. Then your father rides up and lets an arrow fly right back at the oaf. Only in his case, there’s no Malonius to save him. It goes right through the bastard’s blinker and sends him straight off to meet the Makers.” The general and Junayd burst into another fit of laughter.

Once they were done with their guffaw, Marthal’s expression grew serious. “As I said, I can think of none who can stand against our two peoples united, but those Amaltri sea dogs still haven’t given up... Neither have the rest of our enemies. To make matters worse...I’ll tell you the truth: the Aurean armies aren’t what they once were. We’re stretched a bit thin. And with that lout in charge of

our fleets”—he jerked his head toward Mercinius, who remained oblivious to their conversation—  
 “We need our armies more than ever.”

Junayd frowned. “Oh? I didn’t realize. If you require our support you need only...”

Marthal waved his hand dismissively. “It’s noble of you to offer, but the situation’s being tended to. I’ve taken the liberty of hiring a few swords from the Salmak Coast to bolster our forces here.” Empress Theodora turned and gave Marthal a curious look, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Salmakans might be bloodthirsty sellswords, but you’d be grateful to have them on your side in a fight,” the general explained. “Some of their chiefs are seated right over there.” The general indicated a handful of rough-looking figures seated in the noble rows.

The Salmakans’ black skin was intricately tattooed and their ebony hair hung in long braids down their backs. They watched the combatants on the sand below hack at each other with obvious amusement.

“I beg your pardon, Marthal,” Theodora suddenly snapped, “but I do not recall the emperor granting you permission nor funds to bring foreign sellswords to our lands, let alone within these walls!”

Marthal raised his hands defensively, “Forgive me, Your Grace. I should have informed you sooner. I’ve paid these men from my own purse. It was a great personal expense but still a small price to pay for the safety of our people. If it please you, consider these men my personal guests.”

“You know our laws,” the empress said sharply. “No foreign warrior enters the walls of the Imperial City without a direct invitation from—”

“Now now, dearest,” Hallucar interrupted. “I’m sure our most loyal *megas domestikos* acted

only out of concern for the empire's well-being. If he sees fit to defend our realm at his own expense, he should hardly be scolded for it."

"Many thanks, Your Imperial Majesty," Marthal said. "Forgive me, my empress, if I've overstepped. I only meant to do my duty."

Theodora glared at him. "And you think your '*duty*' includes inviting foreign cutthroats onto our doorstep without giving the slightest notice to my husband or myself? My father-in-law would've considered such insubordination an act of treason!"

"A thousand apologies," Marthal said. "It's just that so many matters demand Your Graces' attention and I thought it best to fulfill my own duties without burdening you further. Besides, ever since your brother's defeats in the Camaean Islands..."

"Now just a minute there!" Mercinius piped up, having taken notice at the mention of his name. "I don't much like your tone, *soldier*. You'd best learn to keep a respectful tongue in your head when in the presence of noble blood."

Marthal's eyes narrowed. "Is that so? Well, that '*noble blood*' of yours couldn't keep the Ylajáns from sacking Dorma. It couldn't keep the Amaltri from seizing our ships and murdering our people. You may have cost us rivers of blood, Mercinius, but let's just be thankful we didn't lose any of your precious *noble blood*, eh?"

Mercinius gritted his teeth. He began to rise from his seat, but when he saw Marthal doing the same, he thought better of it and sank back down. "Low-born dog," he spat. He waved his hand dismissively and turned his attention back to the games. Marthal scoffed and did the same.

Theodora wasn't packed off as easily as her brother. "You've gone too far, Marthal," she barked. "I could be persuaded to forget your slight toward my brother, but bringing foreigners into our city..."



“Enough bickering,” Hallucar gurgled through yet another cupful of wine. “My dear, this is a celebration, not a tribunal! Kindly refrain from harassing our loyal servant with your accusations. And you two, Oren, Varcon, friends shouldn’t quarrel like this when there’s so much merriment to be made. Forget your troubles and enjoy yourselves.”

Marthal nodded and begrudgingly offered Mercinius his hand. It took a moment or two for the noble to swallow his pride and shake it.

The empress opened her mouth to speak further, but her words were drowned out by a deafening roar from the crowd. The murderer lay flat on his back, his hamstring sliced by a sword thrust. He groped desperately for his axe, but his opponent brought a foot down on his hand.

Grinning from ear to ear, the pirate seized a tuft of his foe’s hair and yanked the poor fellow’s head up for the crowd to see. He put his blade to the murderer’s throat and looked up expectantly at the audience.

The spectators began chanting “KILL! KILL! JUSTICE! KILL!” A look of despair came over the defeated fighter’s face.

Hallucar set down his goblet and rose to give his verdict. A gladiatorial match could end in two ways: death or clemency, though it was more often the former.

Hallucar approached a table set with two baskets of rose petals, one full of white, the other red. Without hesitation, he took a handful of the red petals and tossed them out over the sands.

With a cry of triumph and one swift blow, the pirate severed his opponent’s head and held it high like a spoil of war. Once again, Junayd was nearly deafened by the roar of the masses.

“Finally, the desserts are here!” exclaimed the emperor. He flopped back into his seat, plucked

a tart from one of the servants' platters, and crammed it into his mouth.

The match's victor made his exit, grinning and brandishing his curved sword. The loser's body was dragged away and preparations were made for the next event.

"Ahh," Hallucar smiled. "The tiger hunt. I expect this will be most entertaining. The gamemaster tells me he's never once seen a tiger as large as the one he's procured for today." Junayd had never seen a tiger, but he was sure it would be a terrifying sight.

A door in the wall opened, and sure enough, an enormous, striped, catlike beast came bounding out and began snarling at the spectators. The tiger roared viciously and the crowd roared in turn. Three hunters strode out onto the sand, twirling nets and spears. They took up their positions and cautiously advanced on their quarry. The creature growled and poised itself to pounce.

Though Hallucar's mind seemed focused only on the games and his sweets, Theodora's was clearly still burdened. All throughout the hunt, she never stopped glaring at the general sitting to her left.

In truth, Junayd didn't blame the empress for her unease. Even for a man like Marthal, bringing sellswords into Aurean lands, let alone into the White City itself, without the emperor's blessing was unheard of. Past rulers had taken men's heads for even attempting such actions. Fortunately for Marthal, Hallucar wasn't any of his predecessors.

Junayd was roused from his thoughts by a platter of pastries laid in front of him. The smell of freshly baked dough convinced him it wasn't time to fret. He banished all unpleasant notions from his mind and nibbled on a fig tart while watching the tiger lunge at the hunters below.

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Junayd was grateful to be allowed another night in an Aurean bedchamber. Though no amount of luxury could replace the comfort of his home, it was impossible not to miss the satin bedding, the aroma of the censers, the beauty of the tapestries and all the other amenities the palace had to offer.

He was about to undress for bed when he heard a loud knock at the door. When he opened it, he was surprised to see Mahir stumble in. “B-beg your pardon my...my...khaishar...” stuttered the by-no-means-sober captain. “Just wanted to let you know that my two best men and I will be sleeping outside your door tonight.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Junayd said, stifling a laugh, “but the *Horlas Ashayat* have earned a good night’s rest. I believe the Prosidiar Corps are more than capable of ensuring my security. If you like, you may ask them to post men by my door, but I’ll not deny my men a night on Aurean cushions.”

Junayd suppressed another bout of laughter as he watched Mahir trip over the room’s carpet and cling to an incense censer to keep from falling. “Besides, forgive me for saying so, but it’s easier to stand *guard* when one can stand *up*.”

“Ohh, n-no, my khaishar,” Mahir stammered. “I’m more than capable of doing my duty. I might’ve had an extra glass or two of that spiced wine, but Aurean nectar is nothing for a real warrior’s stomach. I’m as battle-ready as ev- AHH!”

The captain yelped as he tripped over one of the window’s curtains. He clutched desperately at the velvet but still fell flat on his belly. He did, however, manage to tear the curtain down with him. This time Junayd couldn’t suppress his laughter.

Blushing, Mahir staggered to his feet. He dipped his hand into the room's bronze basin and splashed a handful of water over his bearded, sun-scorched face. He then shook his head to throw off the stupor.

"Forgive me, my khaishar," he said. "I confess, I've always had a weakness for Aurean wine. But I cannot rest without knowing that my chief is safe, and I'm afraid I don't trust any Aurean with your life."

Junayd frowned. "What do you mean? There's no reason to suspect that Hallucar..."

"He is not the Aurean that concerns me," said Mahir. "There are certain...rumors running through the court. As you've seen, the emperor is a good and kind man, but a kind heart alone does not inspire loyalty. Hallucar has neither a passion nor a talent for ruling, and his hand is far from strong. His wife is different, of course. There are many who say she's the *real* head of House Harsonine. Judging from what I know, I can't help but agree."

As he paced the room, Mahir tripped again on the carpet and fell flat on his back. He pulled himself to his feet, cursed, and kicked at the rug's edge. Junayd chuckled again.

Blushing even more, Mahir gave his face another splash and prudently chose to sit down in the room's armchair. Once he'd regained his composure, the captain continued, "Theodora is one of the two great pillars holding up Hallucar's great arse. The other is Marthal. You've met him, yes?" Junayd nodded.

"Marthal's a good soldier and his men follow him without question," Mahir explained. "Some of the veterans he's commanded have even taken to calling themselves 'Marthal's Fangs.' He's also a very popular man; he's got friends everywhere. He and the empress have had their share of disagree-

ments, but Hallucar needs them both if he wants to keep his crown on his head and his head on his body. The sad truth is, I don't think the fat man even knows it."

Junayd was confounded by his friend's words. Of course, there were always tales of scandal and palace intrigue hovering around the court, but he had never heard anyone suggest that a Harsonine emperor was in any real danger from his own people.

"What do you mean?" Junayd asked. "I know Hallucar's not the most popular emperor in Aurean history, but he's still emperor."

Mahir shook his head. "In my time with your father, I learned that matters here aren't that simple. Not all men are as honorable as we'd like to think... or as they would have us think. I'm sure there are still many who remain loyal to the crown, but I would not risk trusting anyone in the palace. If there are traitors, they'll want to see you on their side or dead. I think you'll agree that, in either case, they can't have their way."

Junayd nodded. "I understand. You and two of your men may guard the door if you see fit. But sleep in shifts; I would have you well rested for tomorrow's journey."

Mahir stood and bowed as steadily as he could manage. "Many thanks, my khaishar." With that, he lumbered out the door and shut it behind him.

Junayd scratched his chin. The notion that the emperor himself might be in danger in the Imperial Palace complicated what little the understanding of the court he thought he'd had, and the last thing his mind needed now was more complications.

Junayd took a sip of spiced wine, hoping the drink would ease his mind. Fortunately, it did. Now it was clear why Aurean wine was so famous. A few

sips later, his troubles drifted away and he sank into a deep sleep.

### Chapter III

Junayd woke to the sound of the city bells giving their morning chorus. Groaning, he rose from his bed and pulled on his shirt. As he dressed, the bells' harsh clanging continued to resonate throughout the city. The Aurean merchants and scouts he had met in the desert had described the sound of the great instruments as soothing and melodic. It was often said that the bells' "music" was one of the White City's greatest wonders.

*Horse Dung!* The clanging and banging was enough to make one envy the deaf! How could anyone be asked to endure such an awful racket every morning? For the first time since setting foot in Vere Aureus, Junayd was glad he didn't live there.

He opened his chamber door and found a recently-awakened Mahir and two *Horlas Ashayat* rubbing the sleep from their eyes. He felt a pang of pity for the captain, who after the previous night, undoubtedly had enough pain in his head without the clamor of the cursed bells.

Junayd smiled to his bodyguards. "I trust the wine from last night has run its course." The men nodded and murmured affirmatively. "Well then," he said, hauling one of them to his feet, "let's go and pay our final respects. Hurry up and rouse the rest of the men. I would not keep the emperor waiting."

Their troop marched through the hallways and across the courtyard. The rest of the *Horlas Ashayat* joined them one by one until all twenty of them were assembled. Once again, the palace was buzzing with its usual legion of servants, bureaucrats, courtiers, and Prosidiars.

As Junayd turned a corner, an old man in a long, white robe burst out of a nearby corridor and nearly collided with him. Skidding to a stop to

avoid a crash, the man dropped his satchel, and a pile of scrolls spilled out. Junayd and his companions bent down to help pick them up, but before they could touch a single scroll, the man had already scooped them up and begun stuffing them back into his bag.

The stripes across the old man's robe marked him as a *logothete*, an imperial minister. This was odd, as imperial officials typically had attendants to help them carry documents. Also, such Aureans were usually too concerned with their image to be seen sprinting through the palace like this fellow.

"Is there something we can help you with?" Junayd asked.

"Wha...oh...umm...no," the logothete stammered. "Forgive my clumsiness, Honored One."

Mahir cocked an eyebrow. "What's your hurry, friend? Is the palace afire?"

"Oh just...just got somewhere to be—f-far from here," mumbled the old man. "You lot have a fine day." He crammed the scrolls into his satchel and took off toward the palace gate.

Junayd was puzzled by the incident, but even more so when he saw similar cases further down the hall. Dozens of nobles and courtiers were darting to and fro. Many of them seemed to be in a hurry to collect their belongings and depart.

Junayd turned to Mahir. "They look as if they're afraid the roof is about to fall. Have you heard anything that might explain this?"

Mahir shrugged. "Could be that some sort of impromptu meeting has been called. Or perhaps some urgent matter has come up. It's anyone's guess, but I wouldn't let it concern you. Strange goings-on are not uncommon here."



Junayd nodded. He continued leading the party down the hall, keeping his shoulders back and eyes forward.

Finally, the party reached the throne room. Inside, the imperial court was waiting to see them off. All four Harsonines were there, clad in ceremonial garments of purple silk with golden lining. Hallucar sat in his marble throne with his family seated in mahogany chairs beside him. Theodora sat to the emperor's right with little Torvinus in her lap, and to his left sat Miracel with her usual sour expression.

"Ahhh, my dearest Khaishar D'jarakaí," Hallucar said with a smile. "The sun set too soon last night. I only wish I could've enjoyed your company a bit longer."

Junayd fell to his knee. "I wish the same, Your Imperial Majesty," he said. "But we have kinsfolk who await our return. A khaishar belongs with his *kaí*."

"Yes of course," said the emperor. "But, before you go, I have one request to make of you."

Junayd lifted his gaze to meet his liege lord's. "Oh...well, I-I am at your service, Your Grace."

"The empress and I would ask your help in alleviating a regret... a regret concerning our daughter," Hallucar said, nodding toward Miracel. "Theodora and I have always done what we thought best for our children. We took every step to ensure that our daughter would always be refined, gentle, and above all, safe. Sadly, our wishes have left her confined to our city like a bird in a cage. Her mother and I cannot bear to see her locked up here any longer. We think it's time she had a chance to stretch her wings." Theodora looked on approvingly while her daughter's light blue eyes went wide. A

murmur of surprise emanated from the courtiers around them.

Junayd frowned. "How might I help with that?" he asked.

"After a long and serious discussion," said Hallucar, "the empress and I have decided that the bond between our peoples might be greatly strengthened if our dear Miracel were to...to spend a year of her life in the Eremus amongst your noble people."

Junayd's jaw dropped. Astonished gasps filled the room. Miracel cast a horrified glare at her parents, then at Junayd. Her eyes told him she would rather spend a year living amongst wolves in the deepest forest than spend a day living with him and his kinsfolk. Her face was livid with rage, and her knuckles had turned milk-white from gripping the arms of her chair.

As much as the princess might have loathed the idea, Junayd was sure he liked it even less. He pondered what he could have done for the Makers to curse him with such a fate. The thought of spending even a minute in the Eremus with such a spoilt Aurean brat, complaining about the sand in her shoes, the hot sun on her fair skin or the absence of perfumed baths...It was unbearable. Yet he didn't see how he could refuse without offending his liege lord.

"So," Hallucar asked. "What say you, Honored One? Will you grant our house this favor?"

All eyes turned to Junayd, whose mouth suddenly felt drier than desert sand. He struggled to force himself to speak. "Your G-Grace, I am honored by..."

A sudden rumpus of bells and trumpets cut him off. Junayd had always hated the sounds of both, but he found this clamor to be far worse than any he had heard before. The sounds came all at

once, as if a mob of children had suddenly picked up the instruments and started blasting and banging as loudly as they could. But as awful as the noise was, even Junayd knew it signaled something far worse: an enemy was at the gates.

The chamber erupted into a racket of panicked shouts and screams that added to the already deafening noise of the trumpets and bells. Most of the courtiers and servants sprinted for the doorway. Others cowered beneath furniture.

The Prosidiars set about securing the palace. A few dozen hurried out to their defensive positions; others rushed to bar the throne room's oaken doors. The D'jarakaí grasped their hilts and took up protective positions around Junayd. Torvinus sobbed and clutched his mother's skirts.

Once the insufferable alarms had fallen silent, Junayd could hear familiar sounds coming from the great hallway. He heard the clang and hiss of steel on steel. Then came shouts, cries of rage and howls of pain. As the noise drew closer, Junayd could also make out the twangs of crossbows and the thuds of shafts striking the gate. Whoever the attackers were, they had already breached the palace. Empress Theodora tore a strip of silk from her gown and blindfolded Torvinus to shield his eyes from whatever was to come.

Junayd's *Horlas Ashayat* formed a circle around him as the sounds of battle outside slowly subsided. A noblewoman let out a terrified shriek and pointed to a red shape swelling under the door. When Junayd saw the puddle of blood, he knew the palace's defenses had failed.

"Out swords!" he yelled. His words were followed by the loud hiss of D'jarakaí blades being unsheathed and the creak of bows being drawn.

The brief silence was broken by a loud bang against the throne room's gates. The oaken doors

shuddered as they were rammed once more. The crashes came, again and again, each time shaking the gates more violently. Finally, the iron head of a battering ram broke through, showering splinters onto the marble floor. Those in the room held their breath as the ram drew back one final time. The last blow snapped the gate's bolt, and the shattered doors swung open. The ram fell to the floor and the attackers swarmed in.

Junayd recognized the first dozen or so as Salmakan sellswords. Then, to his astonishment, Aurean soldiers followed. At first, he thought his eyes were deceiving him, but a closer look confirmed that they were indeed Aurean *valtra*.

The handful of Prosidiars still in the chamber roared and bravely charged the intruders. The loyal guards put up a valiant struggle, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Several Prosidiars fell to a volley from the enemy archers. The rest were quickly cut down by scores of pikes and swords.

Junayd raised his shamshir, but Mahir's iron grip seized his wrist. "Not now, my khaishar," the captain whispered. "There's nothing to be done. This fight is over."

Junayd let his hand fall slowly to his side. "How? Why?" he asked himself, "*Why would Aurean soldiers attack their own city?*" As if to answer him, a figure clad in blood-splattered steel plate armor stepped forth into the throne room, its face concealed behind a faceplate.

"Who are you!?" Hallucar yelled. "How dare you come into my home? You will suffer for this! No enemy of Vere Aureus enters here and leaves with his head!"

"How true," the figure replied in an oddly familiar voice. "And I see our realm's greatest enemy, a fat, drunken imbecile, sitting on the throne in front of me. As a servant of our empire, I am duty-

bound to remove his arse from his throne and his head from his plump shoulders.”

The intruder let his shield fall and removed his faceplate. Every throat in the room seemed to gasp all at once.

“Marthal?!” exclaimed the emperor. “B-but why? What... You...”

“How long did you think I’d let your worthless, sausage-like fingers meddle with our lands!?” Marthal barked. “I will no longer see my homeland burdened by the weight of a bloated, drunken, pompous fool.”

Marthal gestured to four of his Salmakan sellswords. Grinning savagely, the barbarians stepped over the dead Prosidars and approached the throne’s pedestal. Each seized a member of the royal family, dragged them from the throne and threw them at Marthal’s feet. The man holding Hallucar gave him a sharp kick behind the knee, forcing him to his knees.

The emperor looked up at his betrayer, his face and beard wet with tears. “Marthal... Oren, why? I always valued your counsel. I trusted you like a brother. You were more than a servant or counselor. I counted you as a friend.”

Marthal didn’t answer. He raised his sword and, without a trace of remorse, brought it down through the emperor’s neck. The onion-shaped crown clattered to the floor and Hallucar’s head fell at his killer’s feet. Theodora and her children looked on in horror.

A wounded Prosidiar raised his head and summoned the strength to yell, “TRAITOR! MURDERER! COWARD!” One of the mercenaries silenced him with a javelin through the chest.

“And now,” Marthal said coldly, “to finish the cleansing.”

He whistled and his men dragged the rest of the court, kicking and screaming to the center of the room. “My countrymen,” the general shouted, “For years we have had to watch Vere Aureus and all lands under its dominion suffer in the flimsy grip of an incompetent fool. But tonight, strong hands have seized the reins of our glorious empire.”

He raised his bloodied blade and hollered, “Rejoice, for I pledge to you all that I will not only guard our homeland but also guide it back greatness and glory. Know that I promise both to reward loyalty, and punish treachery, as swiftly and decisively as I have done here today.”

With that, he took up Hallucar’s crown and placed it on his own brow. As he turned, Junayd noticed a drop of the late emperor’s blood dripping down from the crown’s rim and over the usurper’s golden eye.

Marthal spread his arms. “You may now kneel before your new sovereign!” His men lowered their pikes and crossbows, making it clear that their commander had not meant to offer a choice. After weighing the options, all but a few in the room chose to bend the knee. Without a second thought, Marthal snapped his fingers and those still standing crumpled to the ground, bristling with crossbow bolts.

Marthal turned and looked expectantly at Junayd and his cohorts. The soldiers in the room eyed them as well. Junayd looked at the newly-made corpses, then at his men. Reluctantly, he sheathed his sword and his *Horlas Ashayat* did the same.

Marthal smiled. “We’ve much to discuss, my dear khaishar, but we’ll talk later. I have some business to attend to first.”

As he spoke, the faint sound of fighting rose up from a distant corridor. Marthal grunted. “The

palace is not yet ours.” He pointed to one of his officers, “Lucinius, take however many men you need and wipe the place clean of stragglers. And be quick about it.” The officer saluted and hurried out, taking half the soldiers and most of the Salmakan sell-swords with him.

“And now,” Marthal said turning to the remaining Harsonines, “to finish the cleansing here.” He approached the empress’ trembling form and raised his sword once more. Torvinus still clung to her gown, sobbing noisily.

“Coward! Murderer! Traitor!” Theodora shrieked, her face contorted with anguish. “You may have our lives today, but someday soon, we’ll have yours. I swear it by the Father’s justice!” She finished her curse by spitting in her betrayer’s face.

Marthal casually wiped the spit from his cheek and swung his blade down through the empress’ neck with the same remorseless efficiency as he had done with husband. Theodora’s head rolled across the floor and came to a stop facing Hallucar’s. The couple’s lifeless eyes fell on each other as if to say a final farewell.

Miracel crawled to her dead mother’s side, sobbing and wiping tears from her face. She pulled her brother from the dead empress’ embrace and held him close, as if she could somehow protect him from what was to come. In a final act of defiance, she pulled a dagger from her father’s belt and waved the blade at her parents’ killer.

Marthal’s thin lips curled into a smile as he swatted the blade from her hand. “Very brave of you, my lady. It’s a shame your courage will be wasted. I’d like you to know I take no pleasure in this. You’re not to blame for your family’s failures. But your house is like a weed; it must be dug up, root and stem.”

Miracel's tears dripped to the floor and mixed with her parents' blood. "P-please! Please, no!" she pleaded, clutching her brother tightly.

Marthal raised his sword. "Hold still. I'd like to make it quick for the both of you."

Just then, Junayd felt something surge up within him. It was suddenly clear what he had to do, what his father would have done. Marthal had made a mistake; with so many of his men off securing the palace, there were few left around him. Junayd slowly took up his bow and gestured for his men to ready themselves.

Marthal tightened his grip on his sword. Miracel hung her head hopelessly. Just as Marthal tensed himself to swing, Junayd nocked an arrow and let it fly. His shot found a chink in the armor behind the general's left knee. The shaft sank into the flesh and the bloody tip emerged out the other side of his target's leg.

Marthal gave a thundering howl and crumpled to the floor, clutching his ruined knee to his chest. Startled, his men struggled to ready themselves, but the D'jarakaí were upon them before they knew what was happening. Mahir and his swordsmen quickly dispatched the soldiers guarding the gate. Junayd's deadliest bowmen sent arrows into the Salmakans and Aureans at their flanks.

Junayd dashed across the room and seized Miracel by the arm. With great difficulty, he managed to drag her and the terrified prince in her arms out through the gates.

Mahir rushed to Junayd's side and slung the two Harsonines over his shoulders. "I'd say we've overstayed our welcome," he said with a smirk. "Let's get out of here."

The D'jarakaí yanked their blades out of the enemy corpses and dashed down the hallway, cutting down anyone who dared to block their path.



Having heard their commander's cries, the rest of Marthal's men still in the palace were already rushing back to his side.

Once the D'jarakaí reached the front gate, they pressed their bodies against it and pushed with all their might. As the great doors creaked forward, crossbow bolts flew from behind, making loud *twangs* as they struck the wood. Junayd heard the man next to him yelp as a bolt impaled him through the neck, pinning him to the door. Some of the *Horlas Ashayat* turned and returned fire with their bows.

Finally, the door was forced open and the D'jarakaí rushed out into a scene of havoc. The entire city was alive with the clash of weapons, shouts of fury and moans of the wounded. Bloodied corpses littered the streets. Men, women, and children cried out in terror.

Junayd felt a body collide with him, nearly knocking him over. He turned and found himself looking into the panicked eyes of a priest. Tears streamed from the man's wide eyes and his white ceremonial robe had been splattered with blood. The clergyman took one glance at the D'jarakaí, then sped off, wailing at the sky, "Mercy! Sweet Mother have mercy on us!"

"Marthal's dogs are trying to wipe out those still loyal to the Harsonines," Mahir shouted. "If we're lucky, we can use the chaos to make our exit."

Five of the *Horlas Ashayat* came running with the horses. Junayd took Scarab's reins and swung himself into the saddle. "Mount up! Let's show these murderous bastards the meaning of speed!"

The company began galloping down the street to the gate. All around them, battle raged and bodies fell. An Aurean soldier planted himself in

Junayd's path, aiming his pike at Scarab's throat. Without thinking, Junayd nocked an arrow and let it fly. The shot struck the soldier's helm, knocking him senseless, and Scarab leapt over his limp body.

A few of Junayd's cohorts were not so fortunate. One was impaled on a soldier's pike and tumbled screaming to the cobblestones. Another was knocked from his saddle by a Salmakan javelin. By the time they reached the gates, only fourteen of Junayd's twenty *Horlas Ashayat* remained.

When they neared the gates, Junayd was relieved to see loyal guards heaving them open. As soon as the opening was wide enough for a horse to slip through, the D'jarakaí spurred their mounts through it.

Just as Junayd passed through the first gateway, he heard a crossbow bolt whizz past his head. The traitors had taken the gates; they were shooting from the murder holes. But fortunately, the outer gates were open already. As the last of his riders bolted through, Junayd kicked Scarab harder than ever before. The dark horse sprang forward, as if he knew what was at stake. Horse and rider leapt through the gates just as the portcullis fell shut behind them.

Junayd and Scarab gasped for breath. The D'jarakaí riders regrouped beneath the wall. They could still hear fighting on the battlements above them. A soldier fell screaming from the parapet and landed next to Scarab, who let out a startled whinny. As the dead man's blood reddened the cobblestones, Junayd could hear crossbows being wound on the walls above them.

"Hyahh!" he shouted. He and the *Horlas Ashayat* galloped down the road. They didn't slow their horses until well out of range of the enemy archers.

Miracel, who until now, had done nothing but sob, looked back and pointed at the walls behind them. “Look...” she said in a shaken voice.

The banners bearing the Harsonine sigil were being pulled over the wall and torn to pieces. In their place, new banners were being lowered, crimson ones bearing the likeness of an eye emblazoned in gold.

#### Chapter IV

The next few days consisted of nonstop travel, though not the sort Junayd was accustomed to. The party rested by day and rode by night, moving with all haste to stay ahead of Marthal's reach.

Instead of inns, they took shelter in barns and stables. They were sure to compensate the owners handsomely on the condition that their presence would remain undisclosed. They stopped by a market only to buy a pair of cloaks and an extra horse for Miracel and Torvinus. They avoided the cities and towns so as to cut their chances of encountering anyone who might recognize the Harsonines.

After the second day of travel, Miracel's sour demeanor returned. Though still traumatized and quieter than usual, she still found the nerve to whine: "We must stop and rest," "My brother is hungry," "Don't ride so quickly; I can't keep up," "You call this food!" Junayd still pitied the newly-orphaned girl, but her belly-aching was beginning to take the edge off his sympathy.

Upon reaching the Obice, they made camp in the shadow of a mountainside. The *Horlas Ashayat* prepared a quick supper of biscuits and honey. Torvinus gobbled the morsels down, while his sister stared miserably at her helping.

"Don't you have anything else?" she hissed. "We've had nothing but this mush since we started."

Junayd rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry...my lady. We Eremukaí travel light."

Miracel pouted. "Once you've delivered my brother and me to whatever loyal city you intend to,

the first thing I'll do is have a meal fit for a human being."

Junayd and Mahir exchanged glances. "Err...my lady, I'm afraid that's not possible," Mahir said tentatively.

"What do you mean? Of course it is!" Miracel snapped. "Not everyone eats like you... people. An Aurean kitchen will certainly have decent food."

"He means we can't take you to any Aurean city," Junayd explained. "We're still unsure of who and where your family's enemies are. Marthal's reach is far too long; no Aurean town is safe for you now."

Miracel sprang to her feet and threw her biscuit to the ground. "What do you mean?!" she hollered. "Then where on earth do you intend to take us?"

Junayd cleared his throat. "It would be an honor to host you and your brother until —"

"Me, live amongst you and your kind?" Miracel scoffed. "Are you thinking of that ridiculous proposal my father made back at the palace? Surely you realize he couldn't have been serious. He's always been one for a good joke, but he wouldn't be so cruel as to send his own daughter off to the desert to live with you barbarians."

"That would be cruel indeed," Junayd muttered under his breath.

"You and your brother are the heirs to the Aurean crown; the future of your house lies with you," Mahir explained. "Marthal knows he hasn't truly won until the last Harsonine is dead. He will do all within his power to end you, and his power is great in this land. If you value your life and that of your brother, you will come with us."

Miracel's scowl softened, at the mention of her brother. She looked at Torvinus. The boy looked back with crumbs and honey smeared across his

young face. After a moment or two of pondering, she nodded and sank back into her seat.

The ride through the desert was unpleasant for Miracel, which meant it had to be worse for those traveling with her. She never ceased complaining about the “unacceptable pains” or the “intolerable torment” she and her brother were forced to endure. She squawked on and on about the sun scorching her skin, the unfair water rationing, the aches in her thighs, the sandy wind stinging her face and an endless list of other grievances Junayd didn’t care to remember.

Junayd was almost grateful when a sandstorm forced them to take cover at an oasis. At least the wind drowned out the girl’s nagging.

When they finally arrived at the D’jarakaí camp, the greetings and welcomes they received quickly turned to surprise and confusion at the sight of the men’s wounds and the strange Aurean girl with a boy in her arms. For the time being, the two new faces were introduced only as honored guests of the khaishar.

When they reached his pavilion, Junayd dismissed most of his *Horlas Ashayat*, asking only Mahir and two others to stay. The khaishará and the tribe’s maliqs awaited him inside.

His mother looked up from her conversation with one of the elders. “Ahh, at last, you’ve...” Weary and disheveled, Miracel strode into the pavilion, cradling an equally exhausted Torvinus in her arms. “By the Makers!” cried the khaishará. “What’s happened? Who is this?”

Junayd clapped his hands. “We have guests. Make them welcome.” A pair of servants led the two Harsonines to the pavilion’s guest chamber.

Junayd turned to his assembled kinsmen. “We have much to discuss.”

He recounted the events of the past few days, beginning with his arrival in Vere Aureus and ending with their escape. Dabir and the maliqs were shocked at the turn of events, but Junayd's mother, being better informed of the ongoing within the Aurean court, bore no sign of surprise.

"A man like Marthal in the court and a man like Hallucar on the throne..." she said gravely. "This day was bound to come."

"The young emperor and his sister will reside with us until it's safe for them to return home," Junayd announced. "They are to be treated not only as friends of our *kai* but as my personal guests. And anyone who disputes their welcome or violates my hospitality—" Junayd gave those around him a stern look. "—will have me to answer to." Those present nodded obediently.

"Well then," said the khaishará, "there is the matter of how to make our lord and lady's home safe for their return. Many of the empire's towns and armies are governed directly by Harsonines. I'm sure they, at least, will remain loyal."

"Yes, my khaishará, but Marthal had no shortage of support in his homeland," Mahir added. "I have no doubt that soldiers, nobles, governors, officials and many more are flocking to him as we speak."

"We must know who stands with us and who against us," said Junayd. "Send riders to the nearest Aurean towns and garrisons. Perhaps they can bring word of where the lines are being drawn."

"At once, my khaishar," Dabir said with a bow. The steward wobbled out of the pavilion as quickly as his stubby legs could carry him.

"So, my friends," Junayd said to his assembly. "Before we discuss foreign matters any further, what has transpired here in my absence?"

“Nothing worth speaking of,” the khaishará answered. “We’ve had a few horse thieves and some clan disputes, but besides that, the sons of D’jará remain as strong as ever.”

“Ahh, excellent,” Junayd said with a smile. “It’s refreshing to hear some good news for a change.”

“However,” she said gravely, “there is still the matter of the Alikái...”

The tribal assembly spent the next few hours contemplating how to contend with their enemies in the desert, who had made no efforts to cease hostilities. Some maliqs wished to call for peace; others called for a raid against the Alikái. The discussions were interrupted when Dabir wobbled in through the tent flap. “Pardon me, my khaishar,” the steward said. “Two messengers have arrived requesting an audience.”

Junayd frowned. “*Two* messengers? Where from?”

“Both come from the Aurean lands,” Dabir explained, “but serving different masters.”

Junayd needed no further explanation. “Send them both in.”

The steward frowned. “Both at once?” Junayd nodded.

Dabir bowed and ushered the Aureans into the pavilion. One wore a white tunic with the Harsonine roses across his chest; a royal emissary. The other wore a blood-red tunic with a freshly painted eye emblazoned in gold. Both men bowed before Junayd while still eying each other with mutual disdain.

“You certainly didn’t waste time getting here,” Junayd smirked. “I’m impressed; reaching us in so little time would take speed worthy of an Ere-mukaí.”



He nodded to the Harsonine messenger.  
 “You may speak first.”

The Aurean cleared his throat. “Honored One, I bring word from Marcus Leo Harsoninus, nephew of the great Emperor Hallucar, strategos of the Harenosum province, administrator of the city of Hortus Magna, and commander of the Third Army. My lord wishes to inform you that he and all who remain loyal to the realm’s rightful rulers are called to Hortus Magna for a war council. He bids you join them.

“My lord knows he can count on your loyalty and that of your kinsmen. He also knows that, with our strength combined, the usurper Oren Licinius Marthal *will* be brought to justice. The blood of his victims will be avenged and glorious House Harsonine will be restored to its rightful place.”

Junayd nodded and turned to Marthal’s messenger. “You may now speak,” he said. “But I advise you to be wary of what you say. Your master already has D’jarakaí blood on his hands and I am in no mood for games.” His *Horlas Ashayat* gripped the hilts of their swords to ensure that his message was clear.

The messenger was trembling slightly, but his eyes held the fire of loyalty and determination. He straightened his posture, cleared his throat, and began, “Honored one, His Imperial Majesty, Oren Licinius Marthal, lord and protector of Vere Aureus and all peoples under its dominion, offers you his pardon for the trouble you caused... and for the wound you inflicted on him. He promises that all will be forgiven if you and your kinsmen will pay him homage, pledge your loyalty and return the two prisoners you made off with.”

Junayd’s eyes narrowed at the mention of the now orphaned Harsonine children. The intensity

of his stare caused Marthal's emissary to pause and gulp.

Then the messenger cleared his throat and continued, "My lord also wishes to remind you that he is not one to forget his friends, nor his enemies. He knows you are no fool, and he trusts that, in your great wisdom, you will see reason and throw off the yoke of a broken dynasty. Return to Vere Aureus and you will find him waiting with open arms."

Both messengers waited eagerly for Junayd's answer. "Leave me for a bit," he said. "I cannot go to war without first consulting my people." The messengers bowed and exited the pavilion.

"Dabir..." Junayd called.

"At once, Honored One" said the steward. He scurried off to fetch the rest of the tribal council. Soon the pavilion was full of all the tribe's maliqs, officers, and other dignitaries, all chattering noisily amongst themselves. A pair of servants led Miracel and Torvinus to a separate tent where they could stay until the meetings' end; it wouldn't do for them to overhear what was being said.

Junayd took a seat in his oaken khaishar's chair. "I trust Dabir has informed you of the matter at hand," he said. "Please, speak your minds. I would not take us to war without first consulting my kinsmen."

The first to speak was Sayid Brakar D'-jarakaí, maliq of the Brakar clan and Junayd's maternal grandfather. "Honored One, you are your father's son (Makers, grant him peace) and understand honor as well as any man," the maliq said in his deep, aged voice. "You know there is nothing lower than an oath-breaker. For generations, we have prospered through our friendship with the Harsonines. To break our pact with them would bring only shame and disgrace to our *kaí*. We must honor

the word we gave them, whatever the cost.” A chorus of voices muttered in agreement.

“Not so fast!” barked a raspy voice. The voice belonged to Nynok Tarí D’jarakaí, maliq of the Tarí clan. “Honored One, your sense of loyalty to the Harsonines is admirable, but as khaishar, your first duty is to your *kaí*, to your people, before any outsider. If we should back the wrong horse in this race, our *kaí* will lose everything; our water, our wealth, our strength. We’ll be reduced to living like one of the thirsty, little tribes in the eastern dunes! Do you want to see your people suffer so?” Many tribesmen in the room shuddered at the thought.

“And what makes you so sure that this Marthal bastard is stronger than a dynasty that has held firm for centuries?” asked another maliq.

“Marthal has a great deal of support in the empire,” Nynok answered, “especially where it counts most: the Aurean armies. Also, his reputation as a warrior speaks for itself. He was the strength behind Hallucar’s throne. Make no mistake; he’s not what struck the Harsonines down; he’s what held them up this long.” The assembled council murmured amongst themselves. None could say the man was wrong.

“And I suppose you would have us spit on our years of service to the Harsonines, promise our allegiance to Marthal and hand over the two guests under our protection?” Junayd’s mother asked angrily.

Nynok shrugged. “I care for my tribe and my kinsfolk more than I care for fair-skins or their politics. I take no pleasure in saying so, but it’s time to forge new alliances.” The room filled with noise as each man tried to outshout the man next to him.

Junayd silenced them with a clap of his hands and turned to his mother and Mahir, “What is

your counsel?" Their words meant more to him than all the other voices in the room combined.

Mahir spoke first. "The choice is yours, my honored khaishar. You know I would follow you down any path, but I will say this: your father would have been proud of what you did in Vere Aureus. It would be a shame to undo it all now."

"The choice is indeed yours, Honored One," said the khaishará. "You ask my advice, but I say you already know which path to take. I can see this in your eyes; they are so much like your father's."

Junayd took a deep breath, rose from his chair and addressed his tribesmen. "I thank you all for your counsel," he said. "I have made my decision." He turned to Dabir. "You may recall the emissaries."

Dabir waddled out of the tent and returned with the two Aurean messengers behind him. "I have your answer," Junayd announced.

Every eye in the room watched intently as he approached the two men. He stopped just a pace from them and looked each in the eye. Both stared back anxiously.

Without warning, Junayd drove his knee into the red-clad messenger's groin and followed up with a punch to his stunned face. The Aurean yelped, crumpled and lay curled up and groaning, in the sand. Junayd bent down and spoke into the unfortunate emissary's ear, "Return and tell your master that a D'jarakaí heart is not as easily corrupted as his own. We stand by our word until the day we meet the Makers. He is a fool if he thinks we will be accomplices to his acts of treason and murder." Junayd rose to his feet. "You have your answer, filth," he spat.

He turned to two of his servants. "I'm not sure I like this man's attire," he said. "Give him a cloak of flea-ridden camel hide and a bath in sour

milk. Then, send him back to show his master what we think of his ‘most magnanimous offer’.” The servants nodded and dragged the still-groaning messenger out of the pavilion.

Junayd turned to the royal emissary, who was grinning with delight at the other messenger’s fate. “Tell your lord I will be present at his council and that, as always, the sons of D’jará remain true to their word,” said Junayd.

The emissary’s grin widened. “At once, Honored One. My lord will be most pleased.”

Junayd drew his shamshir and planted it upright in the sand. He then turned to his assembled kinsmen. “Tell our men to sharpen their swords, wax their bowstrings, water their horses, and harden their hearts,” he said. “We have a war to win and a traitor to kill!”

\* \* \*

The young khaishar’s refusal came as no surprise to Marthal, and so it did nothing to dampen his good mood. He could still take pleasure in the day’s parade. In fact, when he thought about it, perhaps the Eremukai’s answer could be considered welcome news; now he could repay the little sand rat for his ruined knee. His left leg still ached horribly, but the greatest pain came from knowing it would never be the same again. Thank the Makers, he at least could still ride.

The injured leg and the splint that held it straight were now concealed within a suit of ornate, gilded armor; it wouldn’t do for the people to see their new emperor as a cripple. The crowd watching his procession gave a smattering of praise and applause. Some cheered and threw roses, but most looked on in silence.

The people's somber demeanor was hardly surprising. They had just seen their city ransacked and many of their neighbors killed. One could hardly expect them to be bursting with joy. But simple acquiescence would suffice for now.

Marthal trotted down the wide street, waving and smiling to the faces around him. He tossed handfuls of silver moons into the masses and watched the people scramble for the coins. A retinue of servants marching behind him offered warm bread to the hundreds of hungry hands reaching out from the crowd.

As he dipped his hand into his purse for another fistful of moons, a scuffle in the crowd caught his eye. A young boy, no older than twelve, was groping for a barley loaf dropped by one of the servants. But a burly fellow wanted the same piece, and the lad was losing the battle. The boy fought with all his might, but his scrawny arms didn't have the strength to overpower the challenger.

After holding his young opponent at arm's length for a few moments, the beefy fellow finally threw his elbow into the lad's face, knocking him flat on his back. The victor seized the bread loaf and sank his teeth into the chewy, brown dough. To Marthal's surprise, the boy scrambled back to his feet. Blood flowed from his nose down his dirty face, but his eyes burned with a fire that Marthal had not seen in years. The youth gathered all the strength in his small body and charged, snatching angrily at the bread.

Despite the lad's determination, his competitor was still unwilling to part with the loaf. With a vicious snarl, the man seized his attacker by the hair and lifted him off his feet. Then, with his clenched fist still clutching the bread, heavy-set fellow began pounding the screaming boy's face. Blood splattered onto the dough, dying it red as if it had been

dipped in communion wine. But even the heavy blows couldn't seem to knock the fight out of the boy.

"That'll be enough," Marthal yelled. The street fell silent at the sound of his voice. He turned his horse and trotted toward the scene he'd been watching. The crowd parted to let him through.

Upon seeing Marthal approach the portly man with the bread froze and dropped the boy to the cobblestones. "Your Im-Your Imperial Majesty," he stammered, "I didn't mean nuttin'. Was only tryin' to teach the lad a lesson, 'tis all."

"I think our young friend has had enough 'teaching,'" Marthal said. He dismounted as he spoke, leaning on one of his guards for balance.

He approached the perplexed, little urchin and pulled him to his feet. He looked into the lad's green, dirt-rimmed eyes. He saw fear, as he'd expected, but also something more: a spark of strength, that glint of ambition he knew so well.

Such a spark was the mark of those who had the drive to take what they wanted from the world. In this boy, he saw the will, the spirit, present in the few great men he had known and admired. Any other observer might have dismissed it as youthful feistiness, but time had taught Marthal to read eyes like windows to the soul. With proper stoking, the boy's spark might one day grow into a flare of glory.

\* \* \*

Asher was no stranger to beatings, nor to pain. In his father's smithy outside Alta Turre, he had been constantly reminded that, should he displease the old blacksmith, pain would come without fail. His father had never hesitated to use his rod, his belt or even his hot poker to "*discipline*" anyone

he chose. The lashes were endless, and they came with a blacksmith's strength behind them.

Besides having taken plenty of beatings himself, Asher had watched the brute beat his older sister, his younger brother and his mother, over and over. But as much as Asher hated his father, he hated his mother even more. As far back as he could remember, she had done nothing but cower when her husband slipped into one of his snits. The pathetic craven of a woman had always cringed like a rabbit, never lifting a finger to protect her children or even herself. Asher and his siblings had known that the forge held nothing for them but a lifetime of thrashings, but only Asher had mustered the courage to try and run away.

Of course, his fortunes hadn't changed much since. As an urchin living on the streets, he had gotten his share of scars and bruises, but his years at the smithy had hardened him. By the time he found himself on the south side of Vere Aureus, the threat of a licking wasn't nearly enough to faze him.

However, the man standing before him was more daunting than any he had encountered before. He had heard plenty of rumors about "Lord Golden Gaze," but until now, the man had been only a thing of legend; a great hero out winning battles, a mighty tyrant plundering towns and crushing armies, a bloodthirsty demon devouring all in his path. Asher had never dreamed that he would one day look upon the famous golden eye, let alone have it look back at him.

Staring at the man standing over him, Asher wondered which of the stories about Marthal were true. Could he really have killed a hundred Ylajáns with his bare hands? Could that eye of his really look into a man's mind? Asher hoped to the Makers that the story about the general gobbling up naughty children was only a rumor.



“Hungry?” Marthal asked.

“Aye,” Asher said, in a bold but cautious tone. “I got nothin’ and this bastard’s as fat as a hog!” He jerked a thumb towards the nervous-looking man with the bread. “I figured it weren’t unfair to snatch a bite.”

Marthal chuckled and turned to the onlookers around him. “The little brawler has a point, but it seems this morsel has already been claimed. Let’s see if we can find another.”

He looked through the crowd and spotted a baker carrying a wheel of cheese. “Pardon me, friend,” he said, gesturing for the baker to approach.

The baker bowed. “Yes... Your Imperial Majesty.”

“What price would you ask for that fine wheel you’ve got there?” Marthal asked.

“This?” the baker asked. “It’d be six pennies for any other man, b-but of course, it’s yours if you want it, Your Grace.”

Marthal produced a golden sun from his purse and flicked the coin into the man’s palm. “Consider the difference a gift,” he said. Gleefully caressing the gold, the baker handed the cheese wheel to Asher, who wasted no time in stuffing his mouth it.

Marthal bent down and looked deeply into the boy’s eyes, his golden pupil glistening in the sun. “Where’s your family, young lad? It’d be shameful to keep all that for yourself.”

Asher shrugged. “Gone,” he said through a mouthful of yellow mush.

Marthal frowned. “Gone? What do you mean?”

Asher didn’t answer; his attention was fixed on the cheese he was munching. One of Marthal’s guards stepped forward and struck the boy across the face with the back of his glove. “You will an-

swer your emperor when he speaks to you,” the guard scolded.

Marthal’s arm shot out and closed its iron grip around the surprised guard’s throat. “You’ll not lay a hand on my subject without my command,” he said sternly.

The guard’s face flushed red. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, *what?*” Marthal grunted, squeezing harder.

“Y-yes, Your Imperial Majesty,” the man coughed.

Marthal nodded and released him. He turned his attention back to Asher. “Now, what is to do be done with this lost soul?”

Asher’s cheese-covered face looked up at the general’s. He shuddered as a frightening thought crossed his mind: *had the gift been intended to fatten him up for the emperor’s supper?*

Marthal’s lips spread into a grin. “I think I have a fine idea. Since my...well, since the day we removed the fat man from the throne, I’ve been having difficulty with day-to-day tasks. This little lad looks handsome and strong enough to be my page.”

Several members of the crowd gasped, but young Asher didn’t understand. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“Should you accept, it would mean you go where I go and tend to my personal needs,” Marthal explained. “You’ll travel with me and spend your days at my side. If you please me, you may someday even earn yourself a position in my court. What say you?”

Asher looked down and kicked at the dirt. True enough, he was hungry. But was he hungry enough to give up his freedom and become someone’s manservant?

Marthal cocked the eyebrow above his golden eye. “There’ll be cheese...” he said.

Asher looked up. "What sort of cheese?"

"Any kind you like. There's an entire shelf of wheels in the palace storeroom," Marthal said with a smile. "If you accept, you may have your pick." Asher licked his cheesy lips. After a moment of thought, he shrugged and nodded.

"Splendid!" Marthal said, rising to his feet. "My men will escort you to your new quarters. I don't know where you've been sleeping lately, but I think you'll find your new accommodations much more comfortable."

Marthal returned to his horse and remounted as a guard came to lead the excited boy to his new home. As ordered, the procession had waited patiently for his return. "Let's continue," he shouted. He smiled at the satisfying rhythm of marching feet behind him.

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The D'jarakaí camp was even more alive than usual. Men were buckling on their arms, readying their horses, filling their waterskins and saying goodbye to their families. The sound of neighing horses and chattering warriors grew louder, as more and more horsemen flocked to the mass assembling south of the camp.

Junayd bridled Scarab and strapped his waterskin to the dark horse's saddle. Once he'd prepared the horse for their journey, he retreated to his family's shrine to recite his midday prayer. As per tradition, he rinsed his hands and feet and knelt facing north; the Makers would not accept a noonday prayer unless it was made facing *Ericos Santor*, the holy mountain. Just when he was about to begin, he heard the chamber's flap open behind him.

It was Miracel. Her Aurean gown had been replaced by a traditional desert thawb, but she had

refused to cover her head like the other women in the camp; instead, she insisted on showing off her long, red locks. As a result, her face was already sunburnt, though it was often difficult to tell whether the red hue was from the sun or her disgust at having to wear “a sand-dweller’s rags.”

Miracel had been less than agreeable since her arrival, but she now seemed even more irritated than usual. Her fists were clenched and her face was twisted into a scowl.

“Pardon me, ‘*Honored One*,’” she hissed, “but it seems your steward has been misinformed. He’s just told me that I’m to remain behind with the women and children while you and your men ride for Hortus Magna. As I’ve already told him, this certainly cannot be the case.”

Junayd bit his lip. “Well...umm...”

Miracel continued, “If I do not accompany you and your warriors, I will not arrive at Hortus Magna in time to attend the war council. And that simply will not do!”

Junayd contemplated the girl’s scowling face. “A thousand apologies, my lady,” he said cautiously, “but I’m afraid Dabir has made no mistake. Your safety is my greatest concern and...”

“I will not be left behind like some child!” she snapped. “I am Miracel Larissa Harsoninus, daughter of Emperor Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus and Empress Theodora Lucretia Mercinius Harsoninus. Taking part in the war against my parents’ killers is not only my right; it’s my responsibility. I will not be kept out of the struggle for my own family’s crown!”

Junayd sighed; this was not going to be easy. He had hoped the girl would see reason; she did not yet have the knowledge, skills or experience necessary to forge battle plans. But it seemed he’d have to make her understand.

“How many men have you killed, my lady?” he asked.

Her angry look turned to one of puzzlement. “W-what?”

“How many enemies have you killed in battle?”

“Well... none, I suppose,” she answered. “As an Aurean dignitary, my place is not...”

“And how many battles have you won?” Junayd interrupted her.

“I... have yet to win any victories in the field, but...”

“And how many war councils have you attended?” he interrupted again.

“This would be my first,” she said, her scowl returning to her face. “But it matters not. As a Harsonine, it is my right to oversee these matters. I know my place and you should know yours, *sand-dweller*.”

The girl had worn through the last of Junayd’s patience. His eyes narrowed and he glowered at her, sending a silent warning to go no further.

Miracel took no heed. “As a daughter of the great House Harsonine, I order you to bring me to my rightful place at my family’s war council. I’m certain you and your dunemen can manage that.”

Junayd clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. “Well...my lady. There are two things you seem to have forgotten,” he said coldly. “First, I am bound to serve only the rightful ruler of Vere Aureus, and though you may be of royal blood, you have no crown on your head. Therefore, I do not take your orders—no, don’t interrupt; it’s clear you need to hear this—Second, in case it’s escaped Your Grace’s attention, you are no longer in the White City. You are amongst *my* people and under *our* protection. As my guest, you will heed our laws and

show no disrespect to me nor my kin, lest you lose your welcome. Is anything I've said unclear?"

Miracel's scowl had vanished. She took a slight step back, biting her lip as she did so. Junayd could see her pride had been snuffed. "I...I apologize Honored One," she said in a shaky voice. "I will...I will respect your wishes."

Junayd's face broke into a satisfied smile. "Many thanks, my lady. If there's anything else you need, please say so."

Miracel's eyes fell to the ground as she scurried out of the room. Junayd beamed to himself and knelt to begin his prayer.

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Miracel stormed out of the pavilion, kicking baskets and jugs out of her path. She wrapped her face in her keffiyeh to hide her dismay. Even after being robbed of both her parents and her home, she could still do nothing but sit and watch things unfold around her.

All her life, she had been treated like a purebred mare: blessed with an excellent pedigree and every worldly comfort, but no say in who her masters were, where she could gallop or even which stall she slept in. Since the day she had come into this world, her reins had always been in another's hands. Now, it seemed this would never change.

Her blue eyes grew moist as she shuffled between the tents. A tear rolled off her cheek and fell to the ground, leaving a dark spot where it struck the sand. She couldn't understand why, but somehow, the sight of her own tear aroused something within her.

"I don't care what some duneman says!" she whispered to herself, rubbing her eyes. "Damn him! Damn Marthal! Damn them all to the Abyss! I'm

not some little girl they can order about however they please. I won't be *owned* any longer." She didn't give a damn what anyone told her. Even if she were denied a seat on the council, she would not stand by while others did her fighting for her. She would find her own way into the war.

*But how?* Though she despised the khaishar's condescending words, he had been right about one thing: she had never swung a sword or drawn a bow in her life. Apart from the slaughter that had taken place on her last day in Vere Aureus, she had never so much as witnessed a battle. As much as she hated to admit it, Khaishar D'jarakaí had a point: she wasn't yet ready.

*"Hsssss..."*

A soft noise awoke her from her thoughts. Startled, she swiveled her head. She saw nothing but the sands, the mass of tents and a D'jarakaí goatherd tending his flock. She looked up at the blue, cloudless sky and saw nothing but the blazing desert sun. She looked to the ground and clasped her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

Slithering across the sand no more than two feet from her, was a long, jet-black serpent. A chill crawled up her spine; she recognized the creature. She had seen it once before; in the basket of a snake charmer performing at the palace. The charmer's warning echoed through her mind: "Keep your distance. This here's an 'ebony cobra.' A bite from him and you'll be dead in minutes."

Miracel dared not move an inch. She stood petrified with her hand still clasped over her mouth. *Hsss...* The cobra's forked tongue flickered between his white fangs. He lifted his head and spread the flaps of his hood. His black eyes fixed on Miracel. *Hsss...* He bared his fangs.

She was about to make a run for it when the creature suddenly flew out from in front of her, car-

ried by some strange force. Shocked, she turned and saw the beast's squirming coils impaled against the trunk of a nearby ghaf tree. The creature hissed and thrashed its tail, but it could not wriggle off the arrow shaft that had skewered it.

Miracel turned and saw the goatherd standing with a drawn bow. "Are you all right?" he asked, lowering his weapon. "You've got to be wary of those little devils around the camp's edges."

Miracel saw concern in the young herdsman's dark eyes. "Yes, I'm perfectly well," she said with a curtsy, "thanks to you, sir."

The herdsman scratched his head; such a courtly gesture was strange to him. "Umm... My pleasure," he said. "I wouldn't stray out here alone if I were you. The Eremus has much more to be afraid of than little snakes." The young bowman turned to return to his goats.

"Wait," Miracel piped up. "May I ask your name?"

"Zarif Tarí D'jarakaí" the herdsman answered, "at your service."

"Well... Zarif," Miracel said, "May I ask why such a skilled archer as yourself does not ride with the other warriors?"

"I *was* one of those tasked with staying to protect our *kaí*," he answered. "But as fate would have it, the khaishar has just recently charged me with escorting a fairskin merchant caravan to the Terrakan Shore. I suppose I ought to consider that a stroke of luck; I'd rather face a hundred men than another of my wife's snits." He rolled his eyes. "*Naziha*... She's the curse I bear for choosing a bride based on her dowry. The woman's a *she-demon*, I tell you... or something worse..."

"Would you perhaps do me another service?" Miracel asked.



Zarif cocked an eyebrow. "And what might that be?"

Miracel paused for a moment, then replied, "I would be most grateful if you would teach me to shoot as you do."

The herdsman stared silently for a moment, then broke into a fit of laughter. "You're joking, yes?" he wheezed.

"Certainly not!" Miracel snapped. "And I can promise that you will be well compensated for your service."

That seemed to get the man's attention, but he still looked unconvinced. "I'm afraid I'd require more than a hug and a kiss," he chuckled. "And even if you had the means to pay me, surely you must know that, amongst our people, it's the *men* who do the fighting. Training you would be against our ways."

"I am not of your people," Miracel replied. She pulled off her hood and veil to reveal her fair face and long red locks. "I am Miracel Larissa Harsoninus of Vere Aureus, daughter of Emperor Hal-lucar Tarpal Harsoninus and Empress Theodora Lucetia Mercinius Harsoninus."

The D'jaraka's eyes went wide as a pair of buckler shields. He attempted to bow but bent so low that he nearly fell on his face. "Pardon me, errr...milady. I didn't recognize you."

"And what do you say to my offer," Miracel asked. "If you instruct me well, I promise to reward you with twice what those goats are worth." She gestured towards the bleating herd behind him. "What say you?"

The man's eyes grew even wider. "Well..." he replied. "So long as the khaishar approves..."

"The khaishar need not know how I choose to spend my spare time," Miracel snapped. "This is

a private matter, between you and me. Do you accept or not?" She extended her hand expectantly.

Zarif thought for a moment, then gave a sly smile. "If I'm going to be keeping secrets from my honored khaishar, I will have to be compensated for my guilty conscience."

Miracel frowned. "Is twice the value of your mangy, flea-bitten herd not more than enough for a few archery lessons?"

"That will be an extra twenty moons for insulting my stock," he replied. "And you are asking me to defy the will of my chief and kinsman, not to mention break an ancient tradition by teaching battle skills to a woman. This is no small thing to ask of a man of honor, such as myself." Zarif's smile grew into a smug grin. "I'll need *four* times the value of my herd. Oh, and I don't suppose you have your own bow? No? If that's the case, I can lend you one, for a reasonable price, of course."

Miracel's eyes narrowed. "If it will ease your 'conscience,' you'll take *three* times the value of your fleabags — I'll call them what I like — along with a fair price for the bow."

"Wonderful!" the D'jarakaí exclaimed. He grasped her outstretched hand and shook it firmly. "A bit of haggling in the marketplace is a healthy thing, yes? Well then, Miracel, we can start your training as soon as I've completed my escort duties. I should be back in say...five days."

Miracel's eyes narrowed. "You won't get a penny from me until my lessons have begun. And as long as you are in my employment, you will refer to me as 'Mistress.' I am a daughter of House Harsonine. You are a desert goatherd. You would do well to remember that."

Zarif waved dismissively. "No, thank you, *Miracel*. I don't need another mistress to torment me. Don't you remember? I'm already married." He

pointed at the tree with the limp cobra carcass pinned against it. "This spot. Five days from now. Noon. Tell no one. Bring payment."

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It was nearly noon when Hortus Magna came into sight. The buildings visible above the walls were constructed mostly of simple wood and sandstone. The marble minarets of the city's famous temple soared high above the rest of the skyline.

The bulk of his host was still making its way through the Odos Pass, so Junayd was accompanied only by Mahir and two other *Horlas Ashayat*: Ekram and his younger brother Farhat. Ekram was a stocky, bearded fellow who never stopped chatting about whatever happened to be on his mind. Farhat, by contrast, was a quiet, lean, young man who blocked out his brother's chatter with the sound of the sap he was constantly chewing. Whatever quirks the two may have had, Junayd knew his father had trusted them, and so he did as well.

"Who goes there?" shouted the gatekeeper. Ekram raised the D'jarakaí banner and the gates creaked open. As Junayd and his companions trotted through the gateway into the streets, he took his first look at the city around him.

Though the city's buildings could not match the architectural splendor of the White City, they were certainly not crude-looking. The temple, though not quite as large as the one in Vere Aureus, was certainly a sight to behold. Like White City, the town had a bazaar full of stalls and merchants giving their calls. Junayd also took notice of the date palms rising up from patches of unpaved ground.

"*Not quite as impressive as the White City,*" Junayd thought, "*but not too shabby.*"

Junayd and his company trotted through the city's cobbled streets. Townsfolk scampered out of their way as they approached. He noticed that even the town's crowds looked different from those of the White City.

Hortus Magna was considered the border between the sands of the Eremus and the pastures of the Aurean lands. Being home to peoples from both sides of the Obice, the town was one of the few places in the empire where desert-dwellers and fair-skins could mingle freely. Amongst the populace, Junayd spotted fair-skinned Aureans walking beside dark-skinned Eremukaí and creamy-colored *mitz-clahs*, or half-bloods. Junayd had to admit he felt more at home here than he had surrounded by fair-skins in the western regions.

Hortus Magna had been built around the nourishing waters of the Caelestis River, which still flowed through the city in a great canal. It wasn't until Junayd and his companions were near the center of the city that they realized the Strategos' palace lay on the other side of this canal. Rather than force their way across one of the crowded stone bridges, they offered a bargeman a fistful of pennies to ferry them and their mounts across the waters. Scarab and the other horses were reluctant to put their weight on such a small craft, but fortunately, the trip was short and placid.

In accordance with Aurean customs, the Strategos' palace stood in the heart of the city. The palace was an immense sandstone building composed of a great multistory structure in the center and a number of smaller compounds around the base, all surrounded by a small palisade. Every window, balcony, and threshold had a purple awning to provide shade. Junayd could also see flowered vines hanging down from the ledges of the rooftop garden.

Upon seeing the D'jarakaí banner, the sentries bowed and opened the gates of the palisade. Stable boys came to lead Scarab and the other horses away, and the four D'jarakaí marched across the threshold.

Once they had entered the great hall, a rather corpulent herald in a white tunic hobbled over to them and bowed. "Honored Khaishar Djarakaí, my lord bids you and your companions welcome," he said, "He awaits you in his garden. But first, there is the matter of protocol. I'll have to ask that you proceed unarmed and with only one companion." Ekram, Farhat, and Mahir exchanged glances.

"I do hope you understand the necessity of these security measures," the herald explained apologetically. "We've had to take greater care since..."

"I would expect nothing less," said Junayd. He handed his weapons to a waiting attendant and his men did the same. "Lead on," he bid the herald. He motioned for Mahir to follow him, and Ekram and Farhat withdrew to the palace's guest quarters.

"Has anyone else arrived yet?" Junayd asked.

The herald smiled and nodded. "Imperator Sarconius and the Eighth Army have come from the south, Strategos Raconi from Portus Mundi, Imperator Maconith from the north, Exarch Taronus from Mar Aureus, and Admiral Sacor is here to pledge his loyalty as well. I've been told the empress' brother, our *classis dominum*, managed to flee Vere Aureus before the traitor could lay his grip on him and that he's already gathering a fleet of loyal ships to join our cause. Many others who could not be present have also pledged their loyalty."

Junayd beamed. "Splendid news!" he exclaimed. If the herald's words were true, their enemies had plenty to worry about.

As the herald heaved his heavy form up the steps, Junayd turned to Mahir. “The winds have blown us good fortune!” he said, smiling. “It seems that the greater share of Aureans have remained loyal after all. This little ordeal ought to be over quickly. Wouldn't you say?”

Mahir looked less cheerful than expected. He leaned over and whispered, “I wouldn't get too excited just yet, Honored One. I'll wager my best horse that many of our *'allies'* who *'could not be present'* have told Marthal the same thing. There are always those who wish to wait and see which way the wind is blowing before choosing sides.”

Junayd's smile vanished. He cursed his juvenile naivety. A khaishar should know better than to take a man at his word, especially when it came to politics. At least no one else had seen him in his stupidity.

As they ascended past the fourth floor, the light of a doorway appeared at the top of the stairs. Junayd straightened his back and did his best to appear self-assured as they walked into the light.

The rooftop garden was beautiful. The terrace was covered with small palms, pear trees, flowers, green shrubs and exotic plants from all across the Middle Sea. In the center was a round, white marble table with a few dozen seats around it. A little over half of these seats were full. Junayd recognized most of the faces seated there. He had been compelled to meet such people on his past visits to the imperial court.

“The honored Khaishar Junayd Jarum D' - jarakaí, chief of the sons of D'jará and devoted servant of House Harsonine,” announced the herald.

A young Aurean with red hair and piercing blue eyes—unmistakable Harsonine features—smiled and stood to greet them. “Greetings Honored One,” he said warmly. “I am Strategos Marcus Leo

Harsoninus, administrator of Hortus Magna, master of the Harsenosum province, and commander of the Third Army. May none be more welcome here than you.”

Junayd sized up the young lord. He stood a bit short but still looked strong. Junayd guessed him to be somewhere in his mid to late twenties; not quite old enough to have much experience of his own, but old enough to have the good sense to listen to those who did.

Junayd also took note of the hefty, dark figure standing just behind the strategos, a Salmakan clad in lamellar armor with a scimitar strapped to his back. He guessed this great bull of a man to be the famous Unaka, Marcus’ shield bearer and the most feared warrior in the province. This Salmakan’s reputation extended even into the Ere-mus. It was said that he had been parted from his tongue long ago—there were many stories as to how and why—but he no longer needed it; his sword did his talking for him.

Junayd bowed. “It is an honor to be here, my lord. As always, the sons of D’jará are proud to serve the Aurean Empire and House Harsonine.”

Marcus grinned. “I think I speak for all of us when I say we are pleased to have such a strong and loyal warrior at our side.” He gestured to an empty chair. “Please, join us.” Junayd took his seat at the table and Mahir stood at his back.

“Pardon me, milord,” the herald said, hobbling over to the table, “but a rider arrived about an hour ago with this.” He plucked a sealed scroll from his belt. “He insisted it was urgent. I thought I’d bring it up while escorting our guest.”

“Yes, thank you, Cedric,” said Marcus, taking the scroll from the herald’s outstretched hand. “You may leave us.” The herald bowed and took his leave.

“Before we get back to business” said Marcus, “I must ask: my cousins, Miracel and Torvinus, they are well, yes?”

“They are,” Junayd assured him. “The D’-jarakaí are children of Eremus. We care for our guests as if they were our own *kai*.”

“Your own what?” asked Admiral Sacor.

The admiral was a slender seaman with tanned skin and a head of disheveled dark hair. He was young for a man of his rank but not young enough to excuse such a stupid question; given the role the D’-jarakaí played in securing the empire’s borders, an Aurean commander ought to have been more familiar with Eremukaí ways.

“*Kai*” Junayd repeated, making no attempt to hide his surprise at the admiral’s ignorance. “I suppose the closest word in your tongue would be ‘kin’ or ‘people.’ What I mean to say is that the future emperor and his sister are safe with us.”

“Thanks be to the Makers!” Marcus exclaimed. “And thanks be to *you*, Honored One, for all you’ve done. We’ve all heard about the daring rescue you pulled off at Vere Aureus. Your loyalty and courage will not soon be forgotten, Khaishar D’jarakaí. Please know that, amongst Aureans, you shall never be without friends.” Junayd nodded appreciatively.

“Now let us return to the matter at hand,” said Marcus. “Our reports say that, with a few exceptions, the cities and armies south of the Caelestis have remained loyal. But North of Amicus, many have declared for the traitor. Marthal most likely arranged to have his forces and supporters positioned in the northern provinces before he made his move.”

This came as no surprise. Marthal was no fool; he would not have struck before establishing a stronghold, a bastion from which to build his



strength, and the northern provinces were a natural choice. The territory he now controlled was not as vast as the southern portion of the empire, but holding it would give him control of the Great Channel and more importantly, Vere Aureus, the heart of the empire.

“We have determined the overall troop count of our assembled forces to be roughly fifteen thousand,” Marcus said, “but this was, of course, before our D’jarakaí comrades arrived.”

He turned back to Junayd. “Pardon, Honored One, but I do not have a recent headcount of your riders. How many can you muster? Somewhere near two thousand, I would guess...?”

“Nearly three thousand,” Junayd answered. “Many of our boys came of age in the past year.”

Marcus beamed. “Wonderful! That dog Marthal’s days are numbered. We don’t yet have a definite count of his forces, but the scouts estimate them to be no more than ten thousand, even with his sellswords. Fortunately, *most* Aureans understand loyalty.”

Most of those present seemed pleased with the news, but Emperor Maconith, an aged man with a balding head and a dark, braided beard, stood and shook his head. “Now, now, friends, don’t be thanking the Makers just yet. We have yet even to obtain a definite report of our foes’ strength. There are many whose loyalties are not yet accounted for, and Marthal’s influence is strong. Who knows how many allies he’s managed to gather by now?”

“Tiberius, surely you don’t think me stupid enough to underestimate our enemy,” Marcus said. “I have known the man since I was a boy. I know the serpent’s fangs well and I will be wary of them when my boot heel crushes its head.” The young noble’s words were met with a murmur of approval from the assembly. Even Mahir had to smile.

Imperator Maconith frowned. "I don't mean to say that you're unsuited to face Marthal, my lord. But all the same..."

"Please, Tiberius," Marcus interrupted him, "have a little faith. The men at our side are strong, courageous and loyal. As dangerous as our enemy may be, he's no match for what's arrayed against him."

A handsome young officer with curly blonde hair and striking green eyes rose to his feet. "Well said, my lord. We could not have asked the Makers for a more worthy host. That's why I say we march for Vere Aureus as soon as the men can be assembled." Judging by the youth's handsome features, Junayd guessed him to be Captain Thracius Aurelius Verinus. Despite his young age and lack of battle experience, the captain's good looks and natural charm had enabled him to quickly make great strides in the imperial court.

Verinus hammered the table with his fist. "I'll be damned if I give that worm, Marthal, an extra second on the throne before we tear his heart out!" His zeal was well-received; many others at the table hammered their fists in agreement. Junayd could see how the fine-looking young officer had managed to advance himself so quickly.

Among those who remained silent were Maconith, Marcus, Junayd and Mahir. Marcus looked undecided. Junayd looked skeptical. Mahir looked doubtful. Maconith looked utterly distraught.

"My lord, countrymen, please listen to reason before you go charging over a cliff!" Maconith protested. "Our second wave of scouts has not even returned yet. At best we have a rough estimate of what our enemies' strength might've been weeks ago! It would be folly to confront Marthal's host without further reconnaissance."

“I’m afraid I must agree with the imperator,” Junayd said. “As my father used to say, ‘It is unwise to strike a beast before you know the length of its claws.’”

Marcus scratched his chin, “Your father was a wise man, honorable khaishar. Perhaps it would be more prudent to postpone the march until—”

Verinus cut him off. “Every moment we spend here is another moment Marthal has to prepare! He is gathering strength as we speak. We must destroy him now, while we—”

“Hold your tongue, captain,” a hoarse voice snapped. It had come from a general seated to Marcus’ right. The man’s reddish hair and distinct facial features identified him as an Aurean highborn. He might even have had a few drops of Harsonine blood in his veins. However, the man’s extensive scars, tanned skin, and powerful arms set him apart from the soft, pampered aristocrats that were common in the imperial court.

“How dare you speak to our lord in such a tone?!” barked the general. “Even the simplest Aurean soldier knows to respect his superiors.”

“Yes, sir,” Verinus replied, sinking back into his seat. “My apologies. I meant no disrespect.”

“But of course not,” Marcus said warmly. “I understand your desire for discipline, Sarconius, but our dear captain acted only out of loyalty. All is forgiven.”

“*Sarconius*.” So this was the renowned Imperator Titus Clericio Sarconius. Junayd remembered hearing his father speak of him. If any of what the late khaishar had said was true, the general would make an invaluable ally.

“Of course, my lord,” Sarconius said. “And while I don’t agree with the youth’s manners, I do agree with his strategy. We must be decisive and

press our advantage. Marthal cannot be allowed to build his strength.”

“There is often a slim difference between being ‘decisive’ and being a fool,” Maconith argued. “My lord, let us at least hear the message you received before we discuss anything further.”

“A reasonable suggestion,” Marcus said. “Cedric did say it was urgent after all.” He broke the seal, unrolled the scroll and began to read aloud: “The following is a report from Captain Zeno Merka Larcinius of the Second Fleet. Three days ago our *classis dominum*, Varcon Torelius Mercinius was welcomed aboard his flagship, *The Father’s Eye*. Immediately, orders were given to rally all ships and fleets across our waters to join him at Portus Mundi...”

Marcus’ voice trailed off. His smile faded, and his face darkened. When his eyes had reached the last line of the scroll, he grimaced and tore the parchment in two. “Damn it!” he growled. “Mercinius is dead.” The news triggered gasps and wide eyes from the men at the table.

“How?” asked Admiral Sacor.

“Less than a day after he’d boarded *The Father’s Eye*, his officers and crewmen mutinied,” Marcus snarled. “Most of the Second Fleet did the same. It seems Marthal already had them in his pocket. According to this report, they hung Mercinius from the prow of his own flagship. His admirals were tied to ballast stones and thrown overboard. Anyone who remained loyal met the same fate or, like the good captain who sent this message, managed to secure a ship and flee.”

Sarconius sighed. “Not to spit on an ally’s grave, but I’d be lying if I said this surprised me. That Varcon boy was no more fit to be an admiral than a cow is to be a horse. His subordinates were longing for the chance to be rid of him.”

Maconith nodded. "That oaf's blunders lost us more ships and troops than I can count. Golden Gaze had particular reason to hate him; the little upstart cost the lives of plenty of his men. I'm sure our enemy will be overjoyed to hear of his demise."

"Never mind all that," Marcus barked. "This means a good portion of the fleet is now flying our enemy's colors. Admiral Sacor, I hope you can at least tell me that the First Fleet will remain steadfast."

"As always, the mariners of the First serve House Harsonine," Sacor assured him. "We are at your disposal."

Marcus gave a sigh of relief. "Thank you, my friend. Seeing as we still have formidable strength on land, I'd say it's best that we push our advantage. We must move now and quickly."

"Agreed," said Verinus. "Without the might of the fleet to back us at sea, we must strike quickly and end this conflict."

"The captain's right," said Sarconius. "With all our strength gathered, it would be wise to move and snuff out this fire before it can grow."

"No! Please, my friends," Maconith protested. "We still don't have a credible estimate of our enemies' strength. I beseech you all: wait until we know what we're facing before we make a blunder we'll all regret."

The assembled leaders spent the next few moments bickering over which was the best course of action. Meanwhile, Marcus looked pensively over the city below. After a few minutes of chatter, he whistled for their attention.

"You all know I have nothing but respect for each of you," he said. "By being here today you have proven yourselves to be among the most loyal and honorable men in the empire. I assure you all that I have considered each man's counsel, but I

must do what I believe is best for our people and homeland.”

The strategos nodded to Unaka and the shield-bearer handed him a piece of red cloth. Junayd recognized it as the livery Marthal’s messenger had been wearing, but the garment was now tattered and dotted with dark, wet, crimson blotches. Some of the softer men at the table gasped and recoiled at the sight. “The first of many,” Marcus uttered coldly.

He carried the tunic to a nearby brazier and tossed the bloodstained linen into the fire. He took a few moments to watch the flames devour the golden eye across the chest, then turned back to his allies.

“Our men will be assembled at dawn, fifteen days from now,” he declared. “At noon on the fifteenth day, we march for the traitor’s head!”

## Chapter V

“How many times must I tell you? Three fingers!” Zarif barked.

Miracel fixed her instructor with a scowl. She nocked yet another arrow and using two fingers, drew back the bowstring and released.

The wooden target had been set a mere twelve paces away and yet her closest shot thus far had struck four feet from the center. But this time was different: the arrow flew nearly three feet wide of the target and into the waterskin she had carelessly left there.

Miracel screamed as the vessel’s precious liquid began spewing out onto the sand. “Aggh! No! No!” she wailed, rushing to save her water. She tried desperately to plug the hole with her handkerchief, but only managed to soak herself.

Zarif fell to the sand in a fit of laughter. Dripping wet and trembling with fury, Miracel stomped over and gave the goatherd a great kick in the back. His laughter subsided a bit but did not cease.

“HOW DARE YOU?!” she hollered.

“Don’t you know who I am?”

“Of course,” Zarif laughed. “You’re the girl in need of a new waterskin.”

“I don’t pay you to laugh at me, you worthless, flea-bitten, dune rat!” Miracel spat.

Grinning sheepishly, Zarif returned to his feet. “My dear, you’d have to pay me not to. I’m afraid even our tribe doesn’t have enough water to afford an archer like you. You’d best remedy that if you want to keep learning.”

“*Learning*?! I would have been better off training on my own,” Miracel growled. “I daresay, you have yet to offer so much as a single word worth listening to!”

The goatherd shrugged. "I teach. You just don't listen. If you'd followed the instructions you're paying so handsomely for, you wouldn't have to walk home thirsty today."

"What difference does it make how many fingers I use?" Miracel hissed. "What does the way I breath have to do with how I shoot? And what's wrong with the way I stand? You've taught me nothing but nonsense, you fool!"

Zarif shrugged again. "Then, why not test this '*nonsense*' and show me just how much of a fool I am?"

Miracel shook her head. She supposed there was no sense in haranguing the man any further. "Why not?" she sighed.

She took up her shooting stance once again, this time taking care to align her feet towards the target as Zarif had instructed. She nocked an arrow and lay three fingers on the bowstring with her index placed above the arrow.

"Now breath in as you draw and breath out as you loose," her teacher repeated.

She drew the string back, inhaling as she did so. She took aim and released both her breath and her arrow at once. The shaft zipped across the gap and, to her astonishment, struck a mere six inches from the target's center.

Zarif cocked an eyebrow. "Not bad. Shoot like that when it counts, and you just might live long enough to see the end of this war. Why, you might even live long enough to find yourself a husband...I hope he'll forgive me."

Miracel was too excited to take notice of his snide remarks. Eager to try again, she nocked another arrow. But as she took aim, Zarif walked over to the target, lifted it and set it four paces back.

"What are you doing?" Miracel asked. "I haven't mastered shooting from twelve paces yet."



“I believe in quick learning,” her teacher said. “Again.”

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By the time Miracel returned to the khaishar’s pavilion, the Eremus’ blazing, orange sun had already sunk to the edge of the horizon. Her throat was parched; her misfire during practice had cost her all her water and when asked to share his, Zarif had answered, “But that would ruin today’s most important lesson: spill water out here and you go thirsty. No extra charge for that last piece of desert wisdom.”

Upon entering the pavilion, she went straight to the khaishar’s bronze water basin and splashed the cool, crystal-clear liquid over her face. She dipped a nearby ladle into the basin, lifted it to her lips and gulped down its contents. Now she was beginning to understand why water was so precious to the people of the desert.

Once her thirst was quenched, she tip-toed into the chamber allotted to her and her brother. As she had hoped, little Torvinus still lay fast asleep on the camel-skin cushions. Taking care not to wake him, she crept up to the bed and stroked his rosy cheek.

She felt her eyes moisten. How could anyone be asked to endure what she and her brother had endured, and at such a young age? How could anyone make a child watch...? She stopped the train of thought before the memories of her last day in the palace could resurface.

“Don’t be afraid little gopher,”—she’d always called him that because of the way he loved to tunnel beneath his bedsheets—“We’ll take back our home,” she whispered. “Soon everything will be made right. I promise you.” As she caressed his

cheek, she took a silent vow: no matter what happened, she would not lose Torvinus. The little prince was the only thing left in the world that she truly loved. And nothing, not men, not kings, not armies, not demons, not the Makers themselves, would ever separate them.

She also took a second vow: she would not see her brother grow up in exile. He would not spend his days on the run from the one-eyed monster who had murdered their parents and driven them from their home. He would spend his years safe in their family's palace and grow to become the greatest Aurean emperor who ever lived. Marthal would be punished and her family's birthright regained. She knew this would be so. Nothing else would do.

"I hope I'm not intruding, my lady."

Miracel whirled around to see her host standing in the chamber's entryway. Blushing, she straightened herself. "Not at all, Honored One. I was only making sure my brother was comfortable. We are not accustomed to life in the desert."

Junayd nodded. "If there is anything I can do to make your time here easier, you need only ask."

"You have already given us more than enough, Honored One," Miracel said, "and for that, I am most grateful. What news is there from the war council?"

Junayd was pleasantly surprised by the girl's newfound courtesy. "I'm happy to report that many Aureans have remained loyal," he said with a smile. "Harsonine forces are assembling outside Hortus Magna as we speak. I've returned to ensure that the needs of my *kai* and those of my guests are seen to before I depart. In the morning, I set out to rejoin my riders and the rest of your family's host; we march ten days from now.

“Also, your cousin Marcus sends his greetings. His lordship is glad to hear that you and the emperor-to-be are well. He promises that this conflict will be over soon and to deliver you the traitor’s head when it’s done. On that note, I wish to give you the same assurances.”

“A thousand thanks to you both,” Miracel replied. “And how soon will my brother and I be able to take up residence in my cousin’s palace? It’s not that I don’t appreciate your hospitality. It’s just that ...well, we do not wish to burden you any longer, and I think my brother and I would both be more comfortable in an Aurean bed.”

Junayd bit his lip. “I’m afraid your cousin and I have both agreed that Hortus Magna would not be the safest place for either of you. Marthal’s reach is long and he will have undoubtedly sent assassins. For the time being, we think it best that you both remain under the protection of our *kaí*, out of the traitor’s reach.”

Miracel’s face turned pale. “B-but...” she stammered. “Would we not be safer in a palace than in the desert? It was only a few hours ago that I was almost killed by a serpent on the edge of your camp! I must...”

“Please, my lady,” Junayd pleaded. “All we want is to keep you and our young sovereign safe. Do this not for us, but for yourself and your kin.” He nodded to Torvinus. “I assure you, as long as you reside amongst my people, no harm will come to you nor your brother. We D’jarakaí guard our guests as if they were of our own *kaí*. And as for the serpent you mentioned, I’d advise against straying to the edge of camp alone. The Eremus is dangerous, even for those who know it.”

Before Miracel could protest further, she felt a tug at her robes. She looked down and found herself looking into Torvinus’ light blue eyes; the boy

had been roused by their chatter. As usual, the sight of her brother's innocent face soothed her nerves.

She scooped Torvinus up and embraced him. "Very well then, Honored One," she conceded. "I suppose there is no man I can trust more than the one who saved my life... and that of my brother... For which I am eternally grateful. Forgive me for not saying so sooner."

The young khaishar beamed and bowed. "I only did my duty, my lady. And please, call me 'Junayd'; there is no need for such formality between us. Ahh... and one more thing. To see to your safety and any other needs you may have, I've decided to assign a member of my own *Horlas Ashayat* to you and your brother. They will see to your safety and do all they can to ease your time with us."

He clapped his hands and the twenty-five members of his *Horlas Ashayat* marched in and formed a line. "Mahir and I have decided that Husnah would be best suited to guard the future emperor," Junayd said. A rough-faced man with a bald head and a long, dark beard bowed to identify himself. "He has served my family honorably for twelve years," Junayd explained. "He also has a wife and daughter to help care for the young emperor. I think you'll find him suitable."

Miracel nodded. "I have complete trust in your judgment...Junayd."

"And to ensure that you feel totally safe," he continued, "you may choose the man who will be assigned to you."

Miracel smiled. Finally, a decision that was hers to make. She looked up and down the line of fierce-looking guards.

"May I suggest Abbas?" Mahir said. "He is a proven warrior, as well as a personal friend of mine. He's already saved my life twice." A man

with a handsome face, a short beard, and hazel eyes smiled and bowed.

“Thank you,” Miracel said, scratching her chin, “but if it’s all the same to you, I have another in mind.”

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Zarif whistled to himself as he strolled between his clan’s tents. He couldn’t wait to tell Naziha of his good fortune. With news as good as this, she might even crack a smile. Now that would be a sight to see.

Of course, his new employment also meant he’d have to put up with the spoiled Aurean shrew for some time. But the thought of the reward he’d been promised was just enough to make it worth his while, especially if it kept Naziha happy.

“It’s still quite a bargain,” he chuckled to himself. “A desert woman’s tongue-lashes for those of a fairskin; I’ll take that trade any day.”

As he neared his tent, the sound of a baby’s cries reached his ears. Ordinarily, such a noise would’ve annoyed him, but he recognized these cries as those of his infant son, Anih.

Eager to see his boy again, he raced around the corner of another tent and found Naziha waiting for him in front of their home. Strangely, her face did not have its usual scowl. Stranger still, she was not alone. Beside her stood a tall, tough-looking warrior with a golden-hilted shamshir at his hip and a blue keffiyeh over his head.

Recognizing the warrior’s face, Zarif bowed. “Honor to you, Mahir Jarum D’jarakaí. How may I serve you?”

“By accompanying me to the khaishar’s pavilion,” Mahir answered. “Your khaishar and his guest have a proposal for you.”

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Junayd struggled to put his mind at ease. It seemed only yesterday that he had been a boy learning swordsmanship from his father. Now, it would be only a matter of weeks until he led the D'jarakaí into battle.

Junayd hoped with all his heart that he had made the right decision that day in Vere Aureus. Painful questions still gnawed at his mind: *Would Khaishar Muhib be pleased if he could see his son now? Was he, a boy of seventeen, ready to command his kai's riders? Had he chosen the wrong side after all?* Such thoughts left him tossing and turning across his bed.

Not long after he'd closed his eyes, he heard the patter of approaching footsteps at the edge of his bed. Acting on instinct, he seized the intruder by the arm, yanked a khanja from under his pillow and pressed the blade against the trespasser's throat. Once his vision had cleared, he found himself staring into the shocked, blue eyes of Lady Miracel.

"Forgive me," she gulped. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"P-pardon me, my lady" Junayd said, lowering his knife. "I'm very sorry; you took me by surprise. It's not customary for anyone but the khaishará to enter the khaishar's chamber unannounced." Noticing the girl's embarrassment, he added, "Of course, you couldn't have known."

Miracel nodded. "As your guest, I will do all I can to adhere to your customs."

"Thank you, my lady," he said. "Now that this little unpleasantness is done with, what brings you here? Does something trouble you?"

"I have a favor I must ask of you," Miracel said, tugging at her sleeve. "You and Marcus have

asked that I remain with the women and children during the coming battle... You must reconsider.”

Junayd sighed. “My lady, you know your cousin and I only want to keep you safe,” he explained. “Besides, I mean no disrespect, but I don’t see how you could be of any help.”

“I take no disrespect,” Miracel replied.

“You’re right; I don’t have the experience necessary to be of help in battle. That’s why I only wish to observe. Let me learn the ways of war from afar, so that, perhaps, I may be of help in the future.”

Junayd was unconvinced, but the girl continued. “You may surround me with as many guards as you like. All I want is to witness our combined strength crushing Marthal and his dogs. Let me at least familiarize myself with the art of battle...that I might not become my father.”

These last words took Junayd by surprise. Spoiled and stubborn as the girl may have seemed, he had never expected to hear her speak ill of her late father.

Taking note of his surprise, she explained, “It is no secret that, though my father was a kind and gentle-hearted man, he did not have the makings of a ruler. Had he not been so soft, this war would never have happened, the empire wouldn’t be split in two and my brother and I...” Her words caught in her throat. Junayd could see she was struggling to hold back tears.

“I will not make the same mistake he made,” she hissed through gritted teeth. “I will not be another weak link in my family’s chain. Please, Junayd, give me the chance to be strong.”

It was quite refreshing for Junayd to hear his first name again; in fact, he found it loosened his nerves somewhat. He took a moment to weigh her proposal in his head.

“Very well, my lady,” he said, finally. “You may accompany us, provided you ride with the reserves and never leave the sight of your escorts. Agreed?”

A white smile spread across Miracel’s face. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “A thousand thanks! If the worst should happen, Zarif has already saved my life once; I’m certain he can do it again.”

“He’d better,” Junayd grumbled. “I offer that swine, an unproven twenty-three-year-old goatherd, a place in the *Horlas Ashayat*, and what does he do? He asks for an increased wage! Who does that pompous scamp think he is?!”

“The man’s a fine companion for those who can afford it” Miracel giggled. “Don’t judge him too harshly. He does have a newborn son to feed.”

Junayd rolled his eyes. “Judging by the pay he asked for, that boy must eat more than all my clan’s horses put together.”

“My best wishes to you, Honored One, and I thank you again for your understanding,” said Miracel. Junayd nodded.

Miracel curtsied and strode out of the room. Once she’d left, Junayd flopped back down on his bed. “Wonderful,” he grunted, “another worry to add to the list.”



## Chapter VI

Marthal drummed his fingers on the Imperial Throne's marble armrests. "Assembling are they?"

Before him stood Captain Atticus Brutius Malonius, his most trusted shield-brother. Like Marthal, Malonius had the look of a soldier. His form was well-muscled and his face bore several scars. His raven hair was cut short, and unlike his commander, he sported a short beard.

"Not all our scouts have reported back yet, sir," Malonius answered. "But I have every confidence that our man can be relied on."

Marthal cocked the eyebrow above his remaining eye. "Are you sure it's wise to place such trust in this man? He is, after all, a traitor."

Malonius' eyes narrowed. "He is no more a traitor than any of us. What we do, we do for the empire. We are the true defenders of..."

"Yes, yes, of course," Marthal said. "But this man you speak of has pledged his loyalty to the Harsonines—he says so himself—and yet he serves us. You must never put complete trust in a traitor, not even one you create."

He stood and staggered down the throne's pedestal, struggling to walk with the splint on his leg. The boy Asher had to help him descend the last few steps. "I'm not sure I'd trust this man, but I trust you, my friend," he said, looking his shield-brother square in the eye. "If you say he's reliable, it's so."

Malonius nodded. "Our man would not lie to us. I've served with him; I know him. He's our man."

"Good," Marthal said. "And I trust the necessary arrangements have been made?"

Malonius half-smiled. "Of course, imperator."

“Excellent,” Marthal said. “Assemble the men. Let us make ready to greet our guests.”

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Junayd looked over the Harsonine ranks. When they had first assembled six days ago, he had marveled at how even his herd of fierce Eremukaí riders seemed insignificant next to the Aurean forces. Marching in perfect order with their polished armor shimmering in the noonday sun, the fairskins had looked like a host of angels marching down from the heavens.

Today, the sun was hidden by a thick layer of fog, but the Harsonine army was an impressive sight nonetheless. Hundreds of banners fluttered high above the rows of raised pike heads. The air thrummed with the resounding “*Tuh-tum, tuh-tuh-tum, tum*” of war drums and the rhythm of thousands of marching feet.

The infantry marched in a single great column, like a giant, steel millipede slinking across the earth. The well-armed and professionally trained valtra marched at the head with the archers and lightly-armed levies forming the rear.

Far ahead of the main column rode the Aurean cavalry. Most of the Aurean light cavalry had been chosen to remain behind and guard the southern territories, as Marcus had decided that the D’-jarakaí eliminated the need for light horsemen. Thus, most of the Harsonine cavalry force was composed of cataphracts, Aurean heavy cavalry. Encased from head to foot in heavy lamellar armor, the horsemen and their chargers looked like great, four-legged, metal beasts. Though their fancy armor did make for an impressive appearance, Junayd didn’t see how such cumbersome apparel could be of use in mounted combat.

The cataphracts' insistence on heavy armor had always puzzled the Eremukaí. It had been proven time and again that these mounted forts could easily be picked apart by the lighter, nimbler desert horsemen. Nevertheless, they were somehow effective against most enemies, and Junayd supposed it was not his place to question Aurean tactics.

The Harsonine forces appeared even more formidable with the D'jarakaí riding beside them. The two standards stood side by side, as did the men-at-arms beneath them. To be part of such a grand host filled Junayd's heart with pride. He smiled to himself and savored the moment's glory. History would remember *him*, Khaishar Junayd Jarum D'jarakaí as the loyal warrior who had disposed of the traitorous Oren Marthal and restored the Harsonine dynasty to its rightful place. The Aureans would have *him* to thank for their victory. Emperor Torvinus would owe his life to *him*...

Junayd stopped and shook the cocky thoughts from his mind. He remembered what his father had taught him years ago: "*Arrogance is blindness. It has claimed more lives than any blade.*"

"Nothing's done until it's done," Junayd quietly reminded himself.

Marcus and his Prosidiar bodyguards rode at the front of the infantry column, with Unaka, as always, by his side. Junayd and his *Horlas Ashayat* rode to their left with the D'jarakaí riders at their backs. Miracel rode beside a battalion of cross-bowmen, accompanied by Zarif and her five Prosidiar escorts.

"The Twins, straight ahead," Marcus announced. Through the fog, Junayd could just make out a pair of rocky peaks stretching up to the grey

sky. He had to squint to see the bases of the two watchtowers built into the mountainsides.

“We’ll make camp there tonight,” said Marcus. “Once we’ve manned those towers, we’ll be able to see Marthal coming from whatever hole he slithers out of.”

“I’m not so sure, my lord,” Mahir said. “With this accursed fog, I have to squint just to see the man riding beside me.”

Marcus shrugged. “Yes, it’s the summer fog. Around this time of year, it rolls in from the sea and presses against the Obice. But you needn’t worry. It will dissipate soon, and even this fog can hide very little from a pair of sharp eyes perched in those watchtowers. I’ll have the cavalry move ahead; they can man those towers straight away and start pitching camp on the other side.”

Marcus snapped an order to a nearby rider who rode forward and relayed the instructions to the cataphracts ahead of them. The heavy horsemen galloped forward into the pass between the two mountains and gradually disappeared into the fog.

Junayd surveyed the shrouded landscape. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something move off their right flank. But when he turned and looked, he saw nothing but fog.

“Just a shadow,” he muttered to himself, “or an animal, or some wanderer. Don’t let your head get the better of you.” A strange chill crawled up his spine. Perhaps it was the lack of visibility; riding blind had never been his preference. But something he couldn’t explain left his nerves on edge.

A lone cataphract galloped out of the fog and approached Marcus. “All clear, milord,” said the rider. “No sign of any hostiles. We’ve already sent watches to man the towers.”

“Well done,” said Marcus. “Have you finished scouting the field beyond the mountains yet?”

The cataphract frowned. "Pardon, milord, but we thought that task was left to those sand-dwellers you sent ahead of us. We didn't see any other reason for them to be so far out."

Marcus frowned. "Sand-dwellers?" He turned to Junayd. "Why was I not informed of you sending scouts ahead? As the commander, I should have been consulted first."

"I gave no such order," said Junayd. He and Mahir glanced at each other. Their eyes went wide.

"Those men aren't ours!" Junayd cried.

Marcus frowned. "But then who..."

A shrill blast resonated from the shrouded path ahead. Junayd immediately recognized the roar of an Aurean warhorn, a signal of distress.

The blare was soon followed by panicked shouts and the ring of steel on steel. Next came shrieks, howls, whinnies and the unmistakable sounds of dying men.

"Forward! Advance! Quickly!" Marcus cried. The infantry columns rushed ahead and the soldiers began assembling into their battle formations.

Junayd drew his sword and galloped Scarab toward the pass. The D'jarakaí followed close behind him, unsheathing their swords and nocking their arrows. When they were a mere hundred paces away, the carnage finally became visible.

The area was littered with the bodies of men and horses. Riderless mounts ran frantically about. The remaining cataphracts were being surrounded and swiftly cut down by a mysterious enemy. Lightning-fast riders dashed around and between them, peppering them with arrows and slicing at their flanks. The Aurean banner carriers had fallen, and the only sigils visible amidst the slaughter were the green buzzard of the Alikáí tribe and the red

scorpion of the Torakaí. So Marthal had made new alliances.

“Charge!” Junayd shouted. “Send these demon-spawned jackals into the Abyss!”

Whooping and shouting, the D’jarakaí surged forth, loosing arrows at whatever targets they could see. But as they approached, their foes simply turned and retreated. The enemy horse archers threw taunts and arrows back at the D’jarakaí as they withdrew. Soon they had disappeared into the fog.

Junayd and his kinsmen sent volley after volley into the mist. But before he could call for his men to give chase, warhorns split the air once again. These blasts weren’t calls for help; they were giving the signal to attack. And Junayd knew they weren’t coming from his allies.

Junayd called for his riders to withdraw. Without hesitation, the mass of D’jarakaí horsemen, along with the few remaining cataphracts, hastily turned their steeds and galloped back toward the safety of the Harsonine lines.

“They are at our flanks!” Junayd cried to Marcus. “Make ready.”

Marcus nodded. “And the cavalry?”

Junayd shook his head and jerked a thumb at the small number of winded cataphracts behind him. The Aurean commander lowered his eyes, then looked to his troops.

“Secure the flanks!” he shouted. “Archers to the center. Form the phalanxes!”

The other generals and officers relayed the orders to their subordinates and the Aurean ranks began to assemble into formation. The crossbowmen moved to the center where the infantry could protect them.

The enemy’s bulk materialized out of the fog. Their bristles of pikes lowered as they ad-

vanced. They came in three prongs, one from around each of the Twins and one from the pass in between. Knowing they were outflanked, the Harsonines could only watch the enemy lines close in on them like the jaws of some terrible beast.

One could scarcely make out the enemies' faces through the fog, but it was clear from their cheers and shouts that they were already confident of victory. They hurled taunts at the loyalist lines, daring them to come meet their fate, promising them that this day would be their last.

Junayd only wished he could believe these promises were false. The Harsonine forces had lost most of their heavy cavalry and now they were surrounded. The situation was grim, if not completely hopeless.

"Two can play at this game," Marcus growled. "Khaishar D'jarakaí, you and your riders will go and do to their cavalry what they've done to ours."

"But, my lord," Mahir objected, "there are Eremukaí horse archers among the enemy. If you send us off, your men will be vulnerable. Even if we are able to..."

"You will hold your tongue, sand-dweller, before you lose it!" Marcus snapped. "Dare to question my orders again and the enemy will be the least of your worries."

Junayd and Mahir were taken aback. The Aurean's mind was clearly clouded, but Junayd nonetheless bowed his head and called for his men to follow him.

The D'jarakaí engaged the enemy cataphracts with a volley of arrows. The heavy horsemen turned to charge their pursuers, hoping to run them down, but the D'jarakaí were experts at countering such maneuvers. Rather than engaging the cataphracts head-on, they diverged into two prongs,

surrounding them and softening their ranks with arrows. As they had been taught since boyhood, the swift riders ground the enemy down with their shafts, only coming close enough to slash at isolated individuals along the flanks.

Mahir maneuvered his horse to dodge the lance of a charging cataphract. As his foe passed him, he turned and slashed with all his strength at the chink in the armor at the back of the neck. His blade sliced cleanly through the man's spine, killing him instantly.

Junayd attempted the same maneuver on another cataphract. Though he missed the chink, he did manage to land a heavy blow to the man's helm, knocking him from his saddle. He and Mahir then rejoined the mass of their comrades and continued sending their arrows into the mass of steel-clad enemies.

Soon, the enemy cataphracts were scattered, confused and demoralized. They had managed to run down a few of the D'jarakaí harassing them, but the heavy horsemen's losses far outweighed those of their enemies. Junayd smirked; his task was nearly accomplished. But before he could give the order to close in, the enemy cavalrymen turned and retreated to the safety of their comrades' lines. They were now beyond the D'jarakaí's reach. Junayd cursed and turned to survey the field.

Even an inexperienced eye could see that the battle was going poorly. The loyalists were buckling under the pressure of Marthal's pincer grip. Without the D'jarakaí to ward them off, the Alikáí and Torakaí were thinning their ranks even further. The Harsonine phalanxes did their best to push back, but they were outflanked and under constant fire. Marthal had managed to hide some of his archers on the slopes of the Twins, allowing them to snipe at



the men below. More and more bodies fell as the enemy's grip tightened.

Junayd turned to Mahir, hoping his friend might offer some hope or comfort. The old warrior shook his head; this was no longer a battle they could win.

Junayd reluctantly nodded and pushed his way through the ranks to Marcus' company. The man was scarcely visible through the protective circle his Prosidiars had formed around him.

"The day is lost, my lord!" Junayd cried, struggling to be heard above the din of battle. "We must retreat, or we'll be lost as well."

Marcus' contorted, bloodstained face appeared from behind one of his guards. "Have you lost your nerve already?" he roared. "This battle is not yet over!"

"It will be soon, and so will the war if we don't fall back," Junayd pleaded. "My lord, I beseech you, let us live to fight another day."

Marcus gritted his teeth. For a moment, Junayd was afraid the man had lost all reason. Then his expression softened. He begrudgingly took up his warhorn and blew three consecutive blasts, sounding the retreat.

Trumpeters across the field repeated the signal and the loyalist troops turned southward to withdraw. The D'jarakaí and Harsonine crossbowmen did their best to cover the retreat with their volleys.

A great roar of triumph rose up from the enemy host. Shields, loot and even heads were tossed into the air in celebration. The enemy lines whooped, cheered and chanted, "Marthal! Marthal! Death to all his foes!" Junayd concealed his face behind his keffiyeh.

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“What’s going on?” Miracel screamed, trying to see over the plumes of the Prosidiars around her. “Damn it! I can’t see! Why are they turning around? What’s happening?”

Zarif seized the reins of her mare and began pulling the beast southward. “We have to get out of here!” he shouted. “Now shut your whiny face and let’s go!”

“We can’t run!” she pleaded, looking from face to downcast face. “The Harsonines never yield! Where’s Marcus? Where’s Khaishar D’jaraaká? You tell them I won’t leave this field until—”

“SHUT UP!!!” Zarif roared in a voice that startled even the Prosidiars. “By the Mother’s mercy! Do you want to live?! Then swallow your swollen pride, and for once, do as you’re told!”

Seeing this was not the time to argue, Miracel gritted her teeth and followed her cohorts back down the road they had come by. She looked back one last time and, thanks to a break in the fog, she finally caught a decent glimpse of the battlefield.

It was every bit as bad as she had feared. Her family’s forces were in full retreat and the usurper’s men were jeering at the ranks breaking before them. *How could it have gone so wrong?* She pulled her keffiyeh over her face to hide her despair.

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Marthal hummed a pleasant tune to himself while tapping his foot against the leg of his table. Triumphant songs and chants resonated through the walls of his pavilion. Since the battle, his soldiers had taken only a single day and night to pitch camp, rest, bury the dead and tend to the wounded before engaging in their victory celebrations the following

evening. The men's merrymaking was noisy, but they had certainly earned it.

Marthal closed his eyes, leaned back against his chair and smiled to himself. These were the moments he enjoyed most: the time after a triumph when one could savor the familiar sweetness of victory.

Asher sat on a stool in the corner, polishing his master's breastplate. The lad was now well-groomed and clad in a fine white, woolen tunic. His face, once filthy and ripe with spite, was now rather handsome and full of pride.

"That'll do, lad," Marthal said. "I can nearly see my face in it already." Asher set the breastplate down and bowed.

"Go and make sure our guests' wine is ready," Marthal ordered. "And make sure it's from the right keg. Our friends deserve nothing but the best."

"Aye, Your Grace," the boy replied. He darted off to fulfill his task.

As Marthal sat basking in the light of his victory, his tent's flap opened and Malonius entered, grinning from ear to ear. "The day is ours!" the old veteran exclaimed. "Our foes are scattered to the wind. Their strength is broken. Your Grace, we've won!"

Marthal nodded. "Indeed, my old friend, but we mustn't let the spoils of today's victory keep us from the next. You know as well as I do that the greatest warriors are undone by their own pride."

"Of course, imperator," Malonius said with a quick salute.

Marthal's eyes narrowed. "You forget, I am now your *emperor* not your imperator. You would do well to remember that."

Though taken aback by his old friend's sudden aggression, Malonius knelt and bowed his head. "Yes, of course...Your Imperial Majesty."

"Now then," Marthal said. "Are our guests ready to join me?"

"They are in prayer at the moment," Malonius grunted. "Some of them felt the need to thank the Makers, or whatever gods those heathens pray to, for our victory. Last night the bulk of their hordes left for the Eremus, but the khaishars have remained here to meet with you, as you asked. They should be with you shortly."

"Tell them to come as soon as they're ready," Marthal said. "And have the servants prepare to receive them." Malonius bowed, saluted once more, and left the tent.

A few minutes later, a dozen servants marched in and began setting mahogany chairs around the table. Each place was set with a silver goblet and a plate of fine cheese and grapes.

Asher entered with a jug of fine, spiced wine and filled each goblet. He handled the vessel with extreme care, knowing the value of its contents. The boy made sure that each glass was full to the brim with the priceless liquid before taking his leave. The other servants followed him out, leaving Marthal to his dinner of chicken breast, goat cheese and fine ale.

A short while later, Marthal's allies, Khaishar Salim Soltura Alikai and Khaishar Sharah Maltesi Torakai strode in, each accompanied by five of their retainers. The sand-dwellers courteously left their weapons with the sentries outside, bowed to their host, and took their seats.

Marthal stood and cleared his throat. "My friends," he began, "my beloved shield-brothers, today, a great victory has been won for all our peoples. Though we must move soon to ensure that our

victory is not wasted, let us not forget to savor today's glory."

He grinned warmly and raised his goblet. "*Honor ist vonis*," he recited in Old Aurean. 'Honor to you.' I offer you each my friendship and ask that you raise your glasses with me."

The men seated around him raised their goblets and repeated "*Honor ist vonis!*" They all took gulps in unison.

"Your Imperial Majesty, we are most grateful for your hospitality," said Khaishar Alikai. "And we hope that someday we may be able to repay our debt to you. If fate is kind, such a day will come soon after we've begun reaping our rewards from the land you've promised. I'm sure that all our kin for generations will come to remember this day as the beginning of our glorious friendship."

"Indeed," Khaishar Torakai said with a smile. "Today, fellowship and wisdom have triumphed over the petty quarrels that once separated our peoples. This day, our children cheer and our enemies weep." The khaishar's words drew assenting shouts from the other Eremukai.

"Oh, but I fear, dear friends," Marthal said, "that our arrangement has just been changed. We Aureans do not see fit to share our land with men of the desert. I regret to inform you that the time has come for our friendship to end."

The pavilion fell silent. A few awkward minutes later, Khaishar Torakai forced a laugh. "Our friend has a sense of humor. I must say, I never thought that treating with Lord Golden Gaze could be so...entertaining."

Marthal shook his head. "I would never presume to trouble my guests with silly jokes while we're discussing business. The fact is that many of my people, myself included, have no interest in sharing our lands with barbarians. We'd prefer that

your kind return to the great sandbox you came from.”

Khaishar Alikai’s face turned beet-red. “WHAT NONSENSE IS THIS?! We made a pact! You gave us your word of honor!”

“I’m afraid I must now alter the terms of our pact,” Marthal said, tracing the rim of his goblet. “I think it’s time the Aurean Empire cut its ties with outsiders like yourselves. Our people have no more need of foreign hordes.”

“HOW DARE YOU?!” yelled Khaishar Torakai. “You’ll suffer for this outrage! I swear on my father’s head, I’ll not rest until you and every one of your honorless pawns is—”

The khaishar suddenly gagged and clutched his throat. His face turned a shade of purple and he collapsed to the ground, gurgling and gasping for air. His companions rushed to help him, but a second later, the same affliction overtook them, and the other sand-dwellers as well. They crumpled into gasping heaps, clawing desperately at the table and crawling toward the exit.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Marthal said coldly. “In fact, I’m afraid none of you will last the hour.” He sipped his ale. “One thing I learned from my time in the imperial court: never be the first to drink another man’s wine. It’s a lesson that would’ve served you well, had you learned it a bit sooner.”

Khaishar Alikai raised an accusatory finger, determined to use his last breath to curse his murderous host, but within moments he rolled over and lay still. Soon, twelve lifeless bodies lay in the dirt with looks of hate and panic still on their purple faces.

Marthal gulped down the last of his ale and called for Malonius and Asher. The two promptly entered and looked at the sight before them. Malo-

nus merely glanced at the bodies and nodded. Surprisingly, Asher did the same.

Marthal was impressed with his young manservant's hardened nerves. He had expected the sight of the corpses to frighten or at least surprise the boy, but Asher's face was entirely unperturbed.

"Call for these men's servants," Marthal commanded, "and gather their horses. Tell them they'll be our guests for a few more days. Once their hordes are out of our lands, send them and their masters home."

## Chapter VII

Junayd ducked as Marcus hurled another amphora at the wall behind him. “How could this happen?!” the Aurean hollered. “Brought down by a traitor and his cutthroats! How could we have allowed it? How could *I* have allowed it?”

The command pavilion was littered with broken pottery, torn scrolls, overturned furniture and servants cringing from the strategos' rage. The man's face was as purple as the wine he'd spent the last few days drowning himself in.

“My lord, perhaps now is not the time to be numbing our wits with drink,” Emperor Sarconius advised cautiously.

Marcus threw the general an infuriated scowl. “And why not?!” he snarled. “That son of a whore, Marthal has probably gulped down an entire cellar of wine to celebrate that thrashing he gave us. But, you hear me, he'll not have the pleasure again. I swear by the Makers, this is the last time he'll see me turn my back to him. Do you all hear me?! **HE WILL NEVER SEE IT AGAIN!!**” He hurled a clay jug at a cowering servant who just managed to dodge the missile. The vessel shattered against Marcus' own set of armor, spraying red wine across the room.

“Of course we won't allow such a disaster to happen again,” Junayd consoled him, “but if we are to succeed, our minds must be—”

“**OUT!!**” Marcus roared. “Get out and leave me in peace. If I have need of your counsel, I'll send for you. And will someone please find their wits and bring me something decent to drink? I've suffered enough without having to force down this garbage!”

Junayd, Mahir, Sarconius, Verinus, Maconith, Sacor, and Exarch Taronus filed out of the



command pavilion in as much of a hurry as was possible without seeming rude. Taronus shook his head. "No question about it; the man's beyond reason."

"He just needs a bit of time for his head to cool," said Sarconius. "In the meantime, we'd best regroup if we are to salvage whatever hope of victory we have left."

"Come now, friends," Verinus said with an uneasy smile. "The war is not yet over. For now, we'll defend the territory we have. With a little time, we should be able to muster more strength."

"Yes, and you can be sure that Marthal will do the same," said Taronus. "Once word of what's happened at the Twins has spread, I'll wager that a few of our 'loyal comrades' will declare for him. We're sliding down a slippery slope. If we don't find our footing soon, we'll be lying in the dust for good."

"Then what are we to do?" Sacor asked impatiently. "For pity's sake, enough useless prattle about the pinch we're in! Let's have some insight as to how we might reverse our fortunes."

Mahir scratched his chin. "Perhaps we could *purchase* some reinforcements."

Maconith frowned. "You mean sellswords?"

Mahir nodded. "Marthal has stuffed his ranks with mercenaries. I'm sure we can find a few who could be persuaded to fight with us."

"The closest company large enough to make a difference would take months to reach us, even if they started marching today," said Sarconius. "If he makes good time, which he always does, Marthal could regroup and be on our doorstep in a matter of weeks."

"Perhaps not," said Taronus. "My sources tell me Marthal has yet to remobilize. He's been busy dealing with those who still oppose him up

north, trying to consolidate his power there. It may be some time before he turns his attention southward again.”

“Very well then,” said Sarconius. “We must send an emissary, someone of importance. It will be difficult to rally any sword, even a sword for hire, to our cause once word of our recent defeat spreads. We’ll need someone with a powerful voice, someone with influence.”

“Perhaps I might be of service,” a soft voice interjected. The men turned to see Miracel standing outside the pavilion with Zarif at her side.

She was clad in a blue linen tunic and her hair had been styled into a single, long braid. Standing in the light of the noonday sun, Junayd had to admit she was quite a sight. Nevertheless, he felt a surge of anger at seeing her there; both she and her escort knew it had been deemed unsafe for her to leave the D’jarakaí encampment. Junayd glared at Zarif, but the young bodyguard simply shrugged in response.

“As a Harsonine, it is my duty to serve my family and my people in any way I can,” Miracel began. “I believe that serving as the word and will of my house on such an endeavor would be a fitting task for me.”

“I’m afraid that such an endeavor would be unwise,” Junayd said, making no attempt to hide his annoyance. “Even if the roads were safe, sellswords are hardly the most trustworthy of hosts. This undertaking is best left to one of your loyal servants.”

Miracel ignored him. “I have already selected my escorts. They are loyal, steadfast, and perfectly capable of keeping me safe from any danger I might encounter. And to speak frankly, I’ve been kept out of this war for long enough. I am a Harsonine and I’ll not be barred from my family’s affairs.”

Junayd scoffed. "My lady, your cousin will never approve..."

"Do not forget, Honored Khaishar, that I too have Harsonine blood and have now reached my seventeenth year," Miracel reminded him. Her tone was firm but not brash. "I'm sure you and dear Marcus have my best interests at heart, but the choice is no longer yours. If it pleases you, my brother and I will continue to reside amongst the D'jarakaí. But I *will* be undertaking this mission for the good of my family and my people." The men stared at her, then at each other.

Sarconius shrugged. "If our lady sees fit to undertake this journey, then who are we to tell her otherwise?"

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Junayd opened his mouth to protest, but Zarif shook his head and put his finger to his lips; the girl would have her way this time.

"Very well then," Miracel said, beaming. "I'll make preparations as soon as the khaishar and I have returned to the desert. Oh, and that reminds me." She turned to Junayd. "Honored One, I hope you won't mind if Zarif accompanies me. I would feel much more secure with him by my side." Zarif grinned.

Junayd nearly growled his response. "Yes of course... my lady."

Miracel smiled. "Splendid! I appreciate your being so agreeable." She curtsied and walked off through the camp with Zarif close behind her.

As he watched her depart, Junayd felt his annoyance mix with a hint of admiration. He'd underestimated her; she knew she outranked him outside of the Eremus, so she'd moved quickly and taken her stand on Aurean soil. He chuckled. "Clever girl."

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“She did what? She’s going where?” Marcus hollered. The officers gathered in his study exchanged awkward glances.

“Our lady thought it was a task well-suited to her talents,” Exarch Taronus said, sounding almost apologetic. “If you don’t approve, we could dispatch a rider to tell her so, but I...I doubt you’ll change her mind.”

Marcus groaned and rubbed his brow. After several days and nights spent drowning his shame in wine, his mind was finally clear, but this had done little to improve his temper. His drunkenness had left him with a splitting headache to add to the sting of defeat.

“Why was I not consulted?” Marcus asked sharply. “I still command here. Such matters should be brought to me.”

Sarconius shrugged. “Lady Miracel is of age now, and she is the emperor’s daughter. Who are we to stop her? Besides, you seemed...*occupied*, when she approached us.”

Marcus grunted. The commander had a point. “This is an insult,” he said, shaking his head. “But perhaps I’ve earned it. The way I’ve acted in defeat...shameful.” No one in the room bothered to argue.

Unaka put a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. Marcus turned and looked the warrior in the face. Though the Salmakan could offer no words, Marcus felt that somehow, his shield bearer’s wisdom could still rub off on him.

Marcus stood and addressed his men, “I must ask your pardon, shield-brothers. I have not behaved as an *imperator* should. I let my emotions get

the better of me. It will not happen again; you have my word.” The officers in the room nodded and murmured approvingly.

“You are dismissed,” he said to his allies, “all except Verinus and Sarconius. There is one other matter I’d like to discuss with you two.”

Once the others had filed out, Marcus gestured for Verinus and Sarconius to sit in the chairs in front of his desk. “I have a proposal for you, my friends,” he said. “Seeing as our allies in the desert will certainly be invaluable in our struggle against the usurper, it may be wise to take a step toward solidifying the friendship between our peoples. I suggest we ask to dine with Khaishar D’jarakaí and his people...in *their* home.”

Sarconius and Verinus exchanged puzzled looks. “In the desert, you mean?” asked Sarconius. “Is that wise, my lord? There is still much to attend to here. Marthal is gathering his strength as we speak. Perhaps we should stay and regroup.”

“The D’jarakaí are camped just a short distance from the Odos Pass; our trip won’t take more than a week or so,” Marcus said. “I’m sure our subordinates are more than capable of overseeing things in our absence. We’d likely do more good making this courteous visit to our allies than spending another week here.”

Verinus scratched his chin. “Well, I have always wanted to take a ride through the Eremus.”

Sarconius thought for a moment, then shrugged. “I suppose the lads of the Eighth could do without me for a few days.”

Marcus clapped his hands. “It’s settled then. I’m sure the khaishar will be happy to host us, but for the sake of being courtly, I’ll send a messenger to request an invitation. I advise that you gentlemen

be ready to travel in six days' time."

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"Come now, lamb or goat meat?"

Miracel shrugged. "As I said before, I'm sure my cousin and his companions will be satisfied with either."

"Yes, my lady, but which would they like best?" the khaishará asked anxiously. "Which would a noble Aurean prefer? It's not every day our *kai* has the honor of hosting Aurean dignitaries... except, of course, yourself and His Imperial Majesty. You must understand this evening's importance."

Miracel looked at the table set in the center of the pavilion. It was laden with platters of candied dates, goat cheese, magaria fruit, and camel milk mixed with honey. The main course, with which the khaishará seemed so concerned, was currently a roasted lamb, but a pair of servants in the corner also held a platter of goat meat, in case Miracel counseled otherwise.

Every day since receiving Marcus' unexpected request to dine, the khaishará had been buzzing about ensuring that every detail was perfect for her guests. Every moment she wasn't ordering the cooks and servants around, she was pestering Miracel, anxiously asking her what sort of food to serve, whether or not incense was appropriate, which wine to pour, and so on. The khaishará insisted she was woefully unprepared to entertain Aurean nobility and that Miracel's counsel was her only hope.

Miracel tugged at the sleeves of the blue silken gown she was wearing. At the behest of her hosts, she had agreed to postpone her journey to

Balakar until after the feast. It was a choice she was beginning to regret.

“And the cushions, are they all right?” the khaishará asked, indicating the sitting cushions set around the table. “I know you Aureans typically use chairs, but we Eremukaí travel light; what few chairs we could find aren’t nearly elegant enough.”

“I think the cushions will do nicely,” Miracel answered.

“And the spices? You did mention that your cousin likes the taste of cinnamon, but...”

“Mother, please!” Junayd strode into the pavilion, dressed in his best attire. “You’ve done more than the Makers themselves could ask. I’m sure our guests will be pleased.”

The khaishará glared at her son. “Do you want them to think we’re barbarians? As khaishar, you most of all should realize the importance of—”

Junayd raised his hand. “Everything is in order, mother. You’ve done a fine job. But if you’d like to do more, I suggest you go and check on our dessert. Our cooks haven’t much experience with chocolate.”

The khaishará shook her head. “Very well. I suppose it falls to me to protect our houses dignity..” With that, she stomped off to the cooking tent.

Miracel sighed with relief. “Thanks for the rescue,” she chuckled.

Her host rolled his eyes. “I love her, but that woman could fan a fire with that flapping tongue of hers. Stay out of her path when she’s high-strung. I know this better than anyone.”

Miracel laughed. “I know the feeling. If your mother is half as demanding as mine was...” Her voice trailed off and her smile faded at the mention of her late mother.

Junayd quickly changed the subject. "It's good to have found someone who understands my plight. Now, I don't mean to sound like the khaishará, but do you think our guests will be satisfied?"

Miracel nodded. "I was raised in as much luxury as any Aurean, and I've never been dissatisfied with your hospitality."

Junayd smiled. "Let's hope your cousin feels the same way. If Mother thinks otherwise, I fear for us all."

Miracel's laughter was interrupted by the blare of trumpets. They all knew what this meant. Junayd, Miracel, the khaishará, and the *Horlas Ashayat* quickly assembled outside to greet their guests.

The Aurean retinue was led by three mounted heralds who also served as the trumpeters. Behind them rode Marcus, Sarconius, and Verinus. Their Prosidiar escorts were aligned on either side of them. Ekram and Farhat, whom Junayd had sent to serve as guides, brought up the rear.

The ride through the Eremus had left the Aureans' expensive garments soiled by sand and sweat, but Junayd pretended not to notice their disheveled appearance. "Welcome, friends," he said with a bow. "You honor us with your presence." The khaishará and *Horlas Ashayat* bowed along with him, as the Aurean party dismounted.

"The honor is ours," Marcus said, dusting the sand off his purple robe. "Always a pleasure to dine with valued friends, such as yourselves. But if you don't mind, let's waste no more time on greetings. We're famished, and I'm not sure we can endure much more of this blasted desert." The other Aureans nodded and murmured their agreement.

"Of course," Junayd said, gesturing toward the pavilion's entrance. "We hope that our humble



*kaí* can at least offer you a satisfactory meal. Your men may dine with mine; there is a tent with a table set for them already.”

Marcus, Verinus, and Sarconius eagerly filed in with Miracel, Junayd, and the khaishará behind them. Junayd and his mother were relieved to see that their guests did seem pleased by what they found inside. Shortly after they’d all taken their seats, the tribe’s twelve maliqs arrived and joined them. Lastly, Miracel brought out young Torvinus, now nearly five years old, from their room and seated him next to her. The Aureans were unaccustomed to sitting on cushions but remarked that they found them quite comfortable.

“Before we begin,” said Marcus. “Please accept this modest gift.” He clapped his hands and his three heralds entered, each carrying an enormous, bejeweled, silver jug. “These contain the finest wine I could procure,” Marcus explained. “I’m sorry to say that our house’s best wine stores were stored in Vere Aureus, but I hope you’ll accept this as a gesture of our gratitude.” The maliqs cooed with awe; even the empty vessels alone would have been covetable treasures.

“My lord, your generosity knows no bounds,” said Junayd. He called for his servants to carry the jugs to his stores. “May none be more welcome in my home than you.”

The evening began with talk of trivial matters, such as the tribe’s water shipments, the “exotic” taste of the food and the guests’ short but apparently grueling trip through the Eremus. After a few hours of idle chatter, it was the khaishará who finally raised a serious matter: “What news from the western lands? Pardon my ignorance; word travels slowly east of the Obice.”

Sarconius sipped his wine and cleared his throat. “We’ve begun to regroup. It’ll be many

months before we're at full strength again, but our scouts tell us Marthal is preoccupied with consolidating his power in the north. As for his Eremukai allies... I'm sure that by now word has reached you of what transpired between him and the khaishars he called friends. With any luck, our enemies won't make a hard push any time soon."

"I suppose that is good news," said the khaishará. She raised her glass and the others at the table joined her. But even Marcus himself had to force a smile.

"Marthal's only biding his time," Verinus said grimly. "He'll hit us again and sooner than most of us think. I don't mean to say our cause is hopeless, but blind optimism would only be a blessing to our enemies."

"Right you are, captain," said Marcus. "We must take things for what they are, not what we wish them to be. Marthal landed a heavy blow at the Twins; that much is true. But it is one we can recover from. There has been some good news: Admiral Sacor tells me that he and the First Fleet have managed to lift the blockade of Portus Mundi."

"That is welcome news," Junayd said with a smile. "Portus Mundi is vital if we are to control the Middle Sea..."

"Forgive me, Honored One," Sarconius said sternly. "But this war will be won or lost on *land*. Yes, we have had some success at sea, and yes, such victories are a cause for celebration. But the Aurean Empire is the prize we fight for, and the empire is on land. If we win or lose the land, the sea will follow."

"That's funny," squawked a raspy voice from across the table. "From what I heard, this whole fiasco started at sea. Your birdbrained emperor had quite a few slip-ups there, yes? Matter of fact, I've heard it said that losing his grip on the

Middle Sea was the fat man's last step toward losing his head."

Every Eremukaí in the room turned to glare at the source of the voice: Kadin Jarum D'jarakaí—maliq of the Jarum clan and Junayd's great uncle. The old man sat there munching on a mouthful of dates, as if he'd merely been giving the time of day. The maliq must've been growing senile in his old age. Nevertheless, were he not a blood relative, Junayd would've had the man thrashed for his insolence.

However, none of the Aureans, not even Miracel, seemed angered by the old man's words. Rather, they seemed to reluctantly concur.

Marcus sighed. "I cannot deny that there is some truth to that," he said. "You see, twenty years ago, we had the finest navy across the Middle Sea. Under Emperor Justirias, our lands and waters were secure. In fact, by the time of the good emperor's death, the Ylajáns had been all but driven out of the Camaean Islands. But when the crown passed to Hallucar, our enemies started pushing back. I suppose they already knew the new emperor was not his father.

"My father was exarch of Tarkor at the time; I remember hearing him rant about how we could've—should've—been beating the barbarians back...and, you know, he was right. We ought to have been expanding, but in all honesty, Hallucar hardly seemed interested in defending the realm. Ships weren't built. Troops weren't dispatched. Supplies weren't delivered. Everyone who had the emperor's ear—me, my father, the empress, Marthal, Taronus, Sarconius, everyone—we all begged him to bolster our fleets, to shore up our defenses around the islands, but he never listened. And then..." Marcus' voice trailed off.

“Of all the emperor’s blunders, I’d say his biggest mistake was making his idiot brother-in-law *classis dominum*,” Verinus said grimly. “Varcon Torelius Mercinius had scarcely set foot on a ship before, and the fools he appointed his ‘admirals’ weren’t much better suited than he was. But he’d certainly found his way into the emperor’s good graces; the youth was Hallucar’s favorite hunting companion, and the two shared a passion for food and wine.”

The captain lowered his eyes and sighed. “Well, somehow, Mercinius managed to persuade Hallucar to put him in command of the imperial fleets. Within a month, the bad news started pouring in: pirates infesting our waters, convoys being attacked, coastal villages being sacked, our stronghold in Korras overrun by Amaltri. It just kept getting worse. Everyone, even the empress, Mercinius’ own sister, implored Hallucar to remove the fool before he could do any more damage. But the emperor would hear none of it. He was always sure that his brother-in-law only needed ‘a bit more time to master the sea.’” Verinus scoffed and shook his head.

Sarconius took up the story from there. “The worst was yet to come. You see, after about two years of watching Mercinius play about with his ships like a child in a bathtub, the Ylajáns sensed our weakness and decided to press their advantage. Thousands of them landed at on Ralluk and started pillaging their way to Dorma. The empress, Marthal, myself and a handful of others managed to convince Hallucar to reinforce the city. He had Marthal send the Fifth Army.

“Out of all the armies Marthal served with, he always called the Fifth his favorite. He had commanded them personally through most of his career. The Amaltr campaign, the Mar Aureus Insur-

rection, the Siege of Proctarum; he led them through it all. He always said—and I must agree—that their ranks held some of the finest men in the empire, many of whom he counted as his own friends. But this time Marthal was considered too valuable to lead them himself. I was chosen to command them instead.

Sarconius rubbed his brow. “Just an hour or so after we cast off from Vere Aureus, we saw sails on the horizon. We figured they were the escort we’d been promised... We were wrong.” He shook his head despondently. “Ylaján war galleys. Before we could even turn to engage them, they were ramming holes in our hulls and setting ships alight... I remember hearing the men scream as they burned and drowned...” The general put his head in his hands and groaned. “We managed to beat the barbarians off, but no more than half of the five thousand troops I set off with made it to Dorma.”

The room remained in dead silence until Sarconius resumed his tale. “We no longer had the manpower to meet the Ylajáns in the open field, so we prepared for a siege. But we hadn’t counted on the refugees. With their homes plundered and burned by the Ylajáns, the islanders had either to flee to the city or be taken as slaves. So, of course, they came swarming in, whole hordes of them, hungry and penniless. We were forced to shut the gates when it became clear there wasn’t enough food. To make matters worse, the Ylaján fleet attacked again and burned the last of our ships. We sent word to Hallucar, asking for rations and reinforcements. But...well...well...” Suddenly, he went red in the face and brought his fist down on the table. “Neither ever reached us! Dammit!!! That pompous, fat man couldn’t even...”

Sarconius breathed deeply until the red hue receded from his face. “Apologies,” he gasped. “I

sometimes lose my temper when I think about Dorma. When I'm done with the story, you'll understand why."

He took a long sip of wine and continued. "The Ylajáns held us under siege for weeks. We couldn't last long, and they knew it. After four weeks, most of the refugees had starved and the rest of us were gnawing on moss and weeds. We sent word to Vere Aureus, begging for help. Every morning I looked to the eastern horizon, hoping to see Aurean sails, but they never came. I later found out that the emperor had sent a few ships loaded with provisions—not much, mind you, but better than nothing—but that Mercinius and his cabinet of buffoons had failed to protect them from the Ylaján raiders!" The faces at the table exchanged disturbed glances.

"You likely know the end of the story," Sarcinius sighed. "Eventually, the Ylajáns grew tired of waiting for us all to starve and stormed the walls. The men of the Fifth were good soldiers, but by that time, those still alive were so weak they could barely stand. Dorma was sacked, and anyone left breathing was put in shackles. My family managed to ransom me but the others..." He stopped. Junayd could see he was on the brink of tears.

"That was the last straw for Marthal," Marcus explained, his face downcast. "He was already impatient with the emperor's shortcomings, as were plenty of others, but I'd say the loss of the Fifth was what drove him over the edge."

Verinus nodded. "Something changed in him after that. Wasn't long before rumors started springing up about his strange doings: holding secret meetings, bringing in sellswords, using his influence to have certain people moved into or out of the court. His behavior aroused suspicion in the empress though, naturally, not in her husband."

The room fell quiet as a tomb. Then Miracel broke the silence. “My father, though I’ll miss him, was no more a competent ruler than my uncle was a competent admiral; that much is no secret. Though few would dare tell us so, we Harsonines have ourselves to blame for the mess we’re in. My family’s shortcomings have cost all of us deeply, and for that I am sorry.” Her eyes flickered between the faces at the table. “But I swear to you all, we will not repeat the mistakes of our past, at least not while I’m alive.”

There was a moment of silence as her words sank in. Then Marcus grinned and raised his glass. “Well said, my lady. And I make the same promise, with all of you here as witnesses. Heres to a stronger house, a strong empire and a strong *kaí* beside us.”

Kadin’s lips spread into a yellow-toothed smile. “I’ll drink to that,” he said raising his own glass. Junayd, Miracel and the rest of the assembly followed suit and took great gulps.

The rest of the evening passed by rather smoothly. The remaining food on the table quickly disappeared and dessert was soon called for. The chocolate-covered dates the cooks had prepared were quite tasty, despite the D’jarakaís’ unfamiliarity with chocolate. Torvinus was especially fond of them. Smalltalk and friendly conversation were exchanged until the table was bare.

It was nearly midnight when the guests began to leave. One by one, they thanked their hosts for the meal and retired to their beds. Eventually, even the khaishará retreated to her bedchamber, leaving Junayd, Miracel and Torvinus seated around the empty table.

“More chocolate,” said Torvinus, his mouth rimmed with the stuff. “*Mirri*, I want more chocolate.”

Miracel smiled and wiped his face with his napkin. "You've had too much already, little gopher. Any more and you'll get a bellyache."

Torvinus bounced up and down on his cushion. "Gimme chocolate!".

Miracel frowned. "You'd better get off to bed, little gopher. You're forgetting your manners."

"If His Grace is still hungry," Junayd began. "I could ask the cooks to..." Miracel silenced him with a glare.

Torvinus crossed his arms and pouted. Groaning impatiently, Miracel scooped him up and carried him into their bedchamber. A moment later, she reemerged. "I apologize for my brother's behavior. He still hasn't learnt his manners."

Junayd shrugged. "Every lion was once a cub."

Miracel sighed. "I've been trying to teach him to behave. I suppose it falls to me since..." Her voice trailed off. She dropped her gaze, put her head in her hands, and sniffled.

Junayd placed his hand on her shoulder. Her eyes turned up to his. "My lady...Miracel, you are more than enough," he said. "Believe me, I know what it's like to have a great burden suddenly dumped on your shoulders, but you will rise to the occasion. You *have risen* to the occasion. When he's grown, the little emperor will thank the Makers for giving you to him."

Miracel smiled and wiped her eyes. "Thank you...Junayd. I'm so sorry for this...display."

"You needn't apologize," Junayd said, marveling at how pretty she could be when she smiled. "Between you and me," he said with a chuckle. "I'd say you've borne your new burden better than I did,"

Miracel smiled again. "I doubt that, but your kind words are appreciated."



“No one calls hard times like these a blessing,” Junayd said, “but father always used to say, ‘The hotter the forge, the stronger the steel.’”

Miracel looked perplexed.

“He meant it’s these trying times that shape us, make us stronger,” Junayd explained. “No one worthy of admiration ever lived an easy life.”

Miracel smiled. “I wish I’d taken the chance to get to know Khaishar Muhib. He sounds like a wise man.”

She rose from her seat. “I’d best go and make sure my brother is asleep, and get some sleep myself. I do have a fair distance to travel tomorrow.”

Junayd nodded. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

The two bid each other goodnight before returning to their bedchambers. Miracel didn’t see Junayd steal one last glance at her before leaving the room.

### Chapter XIII

Miracel smiled to herself as she fastened the last saddle strap under her mare's belly. Finally, she had found the means to make her own way. This was her mission, her hour, and she would not waste it.

Around her stood her company: eight Pro-sidiars, five attendants and of course Zarif. The party was disguised as a troop of pilgrims to avoid unwanted attention. Miracel herself wore a plain white gown and a purple veil: the livery of a Daughter of the Faith. The rest of the party was dressed in priests' garbs: white, hooded robes and clerical pendants around their necks. The only weapons they carried were concealed in their saddlebags and under their robes.

As Miracel was adjusting her saddle, Marcus, Sarconius, and Verinus approached and bowed. "I wish you luck, cousin," Marcus said. "We've a journey to make ourselves, but it doesn't compare to the one you've dared to undertake. Our prayers will be with you."

Miracel pretended not to notice the hint of disapproval in his voice. "Thank you, dear cousin. But please, when you pray, don't forget to ask the Makers' aid in the coming days. We'll need all the help they can give."

"Very true," she heard Verinus mumble under his breath.

Marcus, Sarconius, and Verinus thumped their chests and recited the traditional Aurean traveler's blessing: "May the mighty fist of the Father guard you and the gentle touch of the Mother guide you, that you may return to us triumphant and unharmed." Miracel thanked them and the three returned to their own retinue.

Once her saddlebags were loaded, Miracel returned to the khaishar's pavilion. It wouldn't do to leave her host without at least a quick farewell.

She found him looking over a scroll in his personal chambers. "Junayd," she asked, "is this a bad time?"

Startled, the young khaishar stood up and brushed the scroll aside. "Not at all, my lady," he replied. "I was only dawdling."

Miracel glanced at the discarded scroll and recognized the lines of one of her favorite poems. "My dear khaishar," she said with a cheeky smile, "I did not take you for a lover of poetry."

Junayd blushed. "Well, I thought it might be useful to read some of your people's works. I hoped perhaps it might make me seem like less of a 'sand-dweller,' my lady."

"*Miracel*," she said.

"What?"

"Call me by my name. If anyone's earned that right, it's you."

"Oh...err, thank you...Miracel."

She drew closer. "I can't thank you enough for the service you've done me and my family," she said. "We are greatly in your debt, myself especially."

Junayd opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word, Miracel stepped over to him and put a finger to his lips. She looked around to make sure they were alone, then whispered, "I may never be able to fully repay you for all you've done, but let me start with this."

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his cheek. After a few seconds that felt like hours, she released him. "Please, look after my brother while I'm gone," she said, blushing. With that, she waved goodbye and slipped out

of the chamber. By the time Junayd found his tongue, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Marthal sat on the Imperial Throne with his feet propped up on a wooden stool. Before him, knelt the quivering figure of a young man, his arms suspended by chains in the hands of two burly soldiers. The youth was bloodied from the beatings he'd received, and his eyes were full of terror at what might come next. To his left stood an elderly *logothete*, the lad's father, weeping and pleading in a miserable, pathetic tone.

Asher stood by the throne holding a platter of fruit for his master. Marthal plucked a pear from the platter and took a ferocious bite before speaking.

"Now, let's try this again," he said calmly. "What treasonous words did you spread during last night's festivities?"

"Please, my lord," the old man whimpered. "I swear, I uttered nothing but praise for the man who freed us from the Harsonine yoke."

Marthal hurled the half-eaten pear into the official's frightened face. "I am not your *lord*, you miserable, old cretin!" he barked. "I am your *emperor* and you will address me as such. Forget that again, and I'll have your tongue for it."

"Y-yes of course, Your Imperial Majesty," stammered the logothete. "But please, I beseech you, do what you like with me, but do not harm my son, my only son! He's done no wrong. Please, do not ask him to answer for my crimes—"

"*Your crimes?*"" Marthal cut him off. "So you admit your guilt."

"Wh-what? N-no! I—"

“You’re a traitor and I’ll hear you confess plain and clear,” Marthal snarled, “or it will be your son who pays the price.”

The man looked at his son’s battered face. Finally, his will was broken. “I-I said... I called you ‘traitor,’” he whimpered. “I said I prayed for the emperor’s return. But these were *my* words, *my* sins. Please, I beg you, let my son go!”

“Certainly,” said Marthal. He snapped his fingers.

Neither father nor son had a chance to utter a sound before the men behind them cut their throats. The two bodies fell to the floor. Their blood spilled across the white marble. Marthal was once again impressed to see that Asher’s young face had remained unperturbed throughout the ordeal.

“Get this scum out of my hall,” he commanded, “and hang the bodies somewhere where other traitors can see them.” The guards saluted and dragged the corpses out the doorway, leaving a trail of blood across the floor tiles.

Marthal turned to Asher. “Send for the captains. I have orders for them.”

Asher bowed and hurried out of the room. He soon returned with Malonius, the newly-promoted Captain Lucinius, and eleven other chief officers. Taking little notice of the blood on the floor, the captains knelt before the Imperial Throne.

“Your Imperial Majesty, what are your orders?” Malonius asked.

“Rise, my friends,” Marthal said warmly. The men stood and saluted.

“As you know, my most loyal shield-brothers,” Marthal began, “there are still traitors in our midst: Harsonine sympathizers and other worms. With the help of my most trusted consultants, I have prepared a list.” Marthal handed Malonius a hefty scroll.

“It holds the names of all those still in the province who refused to participate in our expulsion of the parasites, along with any others whose loyalty has been called into question,” Marthal explained. “I want the head of every bastard on this list hanging from the city’s walls within a fortnight, along with those of their families.”

The officers recoiled at their commander’s words, all except for Lucinius, who saluted and smiled approvingly. “Well done, Your Grace,” said the newly-minted captain. “We’ll have the traitors rooted out in no time.” Marthal smiled. He had always known the young officer to be a brute; brutes had their uses.

“But... Your Grace,” Malonius said, gaping at the scroll’s length, “if we put so many to death... The imperial court is already half-empty. Surely you cannot mean...”

“I do not say what I do not mean!” Marthal snapped. “And you, all of you, will carry out your orders without question, unless you’d like to see your names next on the list.”

Malonius and the captains saluted obediently, though the shock was still evident in their faces. Without another word, they hurried out of the room, though not so hastily as to seem disrespectful.

Before making his exit, Malonius turned and looked his commander in the eye. “Your Grace,” he said, mustering his courage, “my friend, I know you to be an honorable man, a just man. As a shield-brother and loyal vassal, I beg you to remember your righteousness. Do not become a butcher.”

Marthal stood up, leaning on the throne’s armrests to support his useless leg. “Know your place!” he hissed. “As an Aurean soldier, you will follow orders without complaint. If you cannot, I will find someone who can.” With a downcast face, Malonius bowed and took his leave.

Marthal turned to Asher. "I take no pleasure in the shedding of blood," he explained. "All Aureans are my countrymen; their pain is my own." He took a ruby red apple from the boy's platter and let the light glint off it. "But I must pluck the worms from the fruit before it can be red and ripe again." He tossed the apple to the boy, who caught it and took a savory bite. "Such cleansing is an unpleasant business," Marthal continued, "but a man who lacks the strength to do what must be done is not fit to rule. And if a man has the force of will to act decisively the first time, he need only do so once." Asher nodded understandingly.

Marthal winced as another wave of pain surged through his leg. He stared the gruesome wound the young khaishar had dealt him and felt a chill crawl up his spine. As a soldier, he had spent a lifetime learning to master his fear, but since putting his plans in motion, there hadn't been a moment when he felt safe. Everywhere he went, he could feel his enemies skulking around him. He saw assassins behind every corner. Every cup smelled of poison. He sensed a knife aimed at his back every time he turned around.

Marthal steeled himself, as his years on the battlefield had taught him. "Our enemies will not succeed," he said. "Know this, Asher: no matter the price, we shall endure."

\* \* \*

Miracel tucked her dirk back into her robes and waved nervously to the cowherds on the side of the road. Zarif had said it often paid to have a blade ready, but then he'd also said it was best not to be seen carrying anything of the slightest value in a place like Balakar. The dirk was a fine work of craftsmanship, a gift from Marcus; best kept hidden

from greedy eyes. She couldn't afford any mistakes, not now. This was her chance to prove herself, and she had waited too long to waste it.

It had been little over a month since the hired Terrakan ship had ferried her and her retinue across the Great Channel into the northern regions, but she felt as if she'd been in this strange land for years. Instead of the meadows and green groves of the Aurean Empire, she now found herself surrounded by the mountains and thick forests of Balakar.

Though she no longer felt safe in her homeland, Miracel felt even more uneasy wandering through this northern country. And she knew her fear was not unfounded. Unlike the Aurean Empire, where peace and stability were maintained by a powerful throne, Balakar was divided amongst a rabble of clan chieftains and local lords. Though there was never a shortage of those who claimed to be the land's ruler, none had managed to enforce his claim for long.

The country's chieftains, warlords and brigands had been slitting each other's throats for centuries, and the unfortunate Balakan common folk had grown accustomed to cowering beneath one shadow or another. The absence of law and order left the wilderness teeming with cutthroats and bandits. It was a natural habitat for sellswords.

The free company Miracel had come seeking, the *Mongrels*, were by no means the only feared mercenary company in the region. But they were among the few that had managed to build a reputation substantial enough to reach the ears of her family's councilors.

An old free company with a history reaching back many generations, the *Mongrels* currently numbered around two thousand strong. Their ranks were filled with hardened men—there were also



rumored to be a few women—from all manner of backgrounds. By reputation, they were ruthless, effective, and most importantly, true to their word, provided, of course, that they were well-paid.

And as if all that wasn't enough, they were led by a legendary sellsword chieftain, Savaric Longbeard. The commander was known even as far as the Aurean lands as a cunning, dangerous warrior. There were many stories and rumors about him, the sort that sent chills down men's spines. His skills had allowed him to grow older than most sellswords lived to be, and his years of experience had forged him into the most feared mercenary leader in Balakar, which was no small thing to say.

Thus far, the only outposts of civilization Miracel and her party had encountered were lonely villages and fortified towns surrounded by wooden palisades. She and her retinue had spent the last month or so drifting between these settlements, casually inquiring as to where the Mongrels might be found. They were lucky if they found someone willing to share information without a "whisper pittance" for their trouble. They were even luckier if they found an innkeeper who offered them bread free of mold and a bed free of mites. The conditions were so deplorable that Miracel almost found herself wishing she was back under the Eremus' brutal sun, shaking the sand out of her clothes and enduring the stench of camels. Almost.

While traveling on the open road, Miracel couldn't help but feel skittish. Since setting foot on Balakan soil, she had not ridden five minutes without glancing over her shoulder. She might have felt embarrassed by her nervousness if she hadn't noticed that the rest of her company felt the same.

Her Prosidiar bodyguards seemed especially agitated; particularly their commander, Lieutenant Pluto Atticus Metellus. The sound of a bird taking

flight or a startled animal scurrying through the underbrush would have the lieutenant and his men swiveling their heads and gripping their weapons. On one occasion, Metellus had even hurled his dagger into an unfortunate fox, having mistaken the poor creature for a bandit.

The Prosidiars' agitation troubled Miracel. They were all seasoned warriors and experienced travelers. If they sensed danger, it was likely no illusion.

Zarif, on the other hand, seemed as carefree as ever. He rode beside his ward, casually whistling to himself and clicking his tongue to pass the time. Though this fearless demeanor may have stemmed only from youthful ignorance, Miracel took comfort in her bodyguard's cool demeanor.

As the sun sank into the west, the fear in the air thickened. Shadows stretched across the ground and the owls began their eery hooting. It was not long before the silver moon was visible above the tops of the trees. Up ahead the road led into a thick, dark wood that sent chills up Miracel's spine. The party's breathing quickened as the trees began to encroach.

They had only trotted a short way into the forest when a figure suddenly emerged from the tree line and stepped onto the path, blocking their way. The stranger was clad in studded leather armor and an iron helm. A broadsword and wooden shield were slung across his back. A stream of moonlight illuminated a rough, unshaven face with a white-toothed grin that almost seemed to glow.

"Well met, friends," the stranger said merrily. "And just where might your happy gatherin' be off to on this lovely evenin'?"

Metellus and the Prosidiars trotted to the front of the company to address the stranger. "We are but humble servants of the Makers," the lieu-

tenant answered amicably, “on a pilgrimage to *Ericos Santor*, in the north. We seek only peaceful passage.”

“And you shall have it,” the stranger assured them, “just as soon as the toll is paid.”

Metellus’ eyes narrowed. “I’m afraid we have little to spare. We are but simple men of the Faith.”

“Oh?” the stranger smirked. “Well in that case, I suppose I’ll settle for whatever you can give. You see, I’ve got mouths to feed, and I’m sure the Mother will smile on you for your... generosity.”

Metellus frowned. “I would advise you to step aside, stranger.” As he spoke, the lieutenant and his men drew back their robes to reveal their short swords and daggers. Miracel and Zarif produced bows and the rest of the company flashed their long knives. To drive their point home, Zarif casually knocked an arrow and sent it flying just inches past the stranger’s ear.

Startled, the highwayman stumbled backward. For a moment his grin vanished. Then an even wider one crossed his face. He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a loud whistle. A spear flew out from the shadows and planted itself in front of Metellus’ mount. Both horse and rider yelped, and the beast reared up, nearly throwing the lieutenant from its back.

Dark figures materialized from the trees on either side of the path. Scores of torches were lit, illuminating a band of warriors armed with various weapons and clad in boiled leather and crudely-smithed iron. The bandits quickly surrounded the small Aurean party. Their swords and axes were drawn, their spearheads lowered, and their arrows knocked.

“Now then,” the highwayman sneered. “We’ll be havin’ our toll. If y’all decide to be more

agreeable, perhaps we can be persuaded to set this little unpleasantness behind us. But I warn you, we'll get paid either way."

There was a short pause. Metellus grasped the hilt of his sword.

"Hold!" Miracel yelled. Her cohorts froze. Struggling to remain calm, she addressed the bandit, "You will have your toll, provided you do us a service in return." She pulled a purse of silver from her saddlebag and jingled its contents.

The highwayman cocked an eyebrow. "Oh? And what might you require of us?"

"As you may have guessed, our intentions are not exactly as we've said," Miracel explained. "We've come seeking the free company known as the Mongrels. Perhaps you could point us toward them. We'd be most grateful."

The name seemed to strike a chord with the bandits, who began murmuring amongst themselves. The highwayman's grin was replaced by a frown. "And what's your business with 'em?" he asked.

Miracel thought for a moment, then answered, "If you must know, we have a contract we'd like to see their mark on."

The man's grin returned. "In that case, congratulations," he laughed. "You've found us! Please, follow me. The chief is always pleased to dine with a new patron."

\* \* \*

Miracel caressed her dagger and pressed her purse tight against her body with her elbow. The highwayman, who had introduced himself as Sergeant Theobald, or "The Grin," as he was sometimes called, had led them off the highroad onto a rough path through the woods. The Aurean compa-

ny now followed him through the darkness of the forest to the outskirts of the Mongrels' encampment.

The sergeant was careful to hold the torchlight close to his face. "There's not a soul in these woods who'll think of givin' us any trouble as long as they know who I am," he assured them, flashing another of his famous grins. "Tis a little advantage that comes with bein' a Mongrel."

Soon, they came to the camp's edge. Miracel expected the place to be full to the brim with cutthroats and scoundrels, much like Theobald and his cohorts. She wasn't disappointed.

Never before had she seen a scruffier, rowdier band of brutes. To her right, a pair of burly spearmen were busy rolling dice over a pile of coins. To her left, five half-clothed archers were competing to see who could chug the most mead. Ahead of her, a giant of a man dragged a battered figure from one of the tents and hurled the poor fellow into the mud just a few feet from Miracel's horse. The giant eyed Zarif, who gave him a brazen wink.

Miracel wasn't sure whether to be pleased or concerned by the lot surrounding her. They seemed like potent killers to be sure. What worried her was who they were likely to kill.

Theobald stopped at a large tent painted with scarlet stripes and bearing an image of a crimson hound's head: the Mongrels' standard. "Wait here," he said, dusting himself off.

The sergeant slipped inside the tent. A few minutes later, his grinning face reemerged. "Please, come in. The chief is most eager to meet you."

Miracel slid out of her saddle, dusted herself off and started toward the tent. Zarif and Metellus moved to follow her, but she motioned for them to stay. "It's best that I do this alone."

Metellus nodded and stepped back. Zarif hesitated for a moment, then did the same.

Miracel took a deep breath and pulled down her hood as she entered the tent. Inside was a small table with two chairs, each set with a plate of bread and a tankard of mead. One seat was empty, presumably set for her. The other was occupied by a burly fellow with a grey beard hanging down to his belt. "Good evening," Savaric said, motioning for her to sit. "Please, join me."

Miracel had long been wondering what the notorious Savaric Longbeard would be like. She looked him over. The man wasn't exactly what she had expected; his look was certainly that of a warrior but not of a brute. His form was well-muscled and adorned with plenty of scars, but something about the aged mercenary's appearance suggested that he was more than just a killer. His thoughtful grey eyes seemed to look past hers and his bearded face reflected intelligence, perhaps even wisdom.

Miracel thanked him for receiving her, took her seat and explained the purpose of her visit. She did her best to appear sincere and confident of her family's victory in their struggle. However, she could soon see that her host was not gullible.

"You have my word as a Harsonine," Miracel promised, "that if you accept our contract, you will be compensated with a hundred thousand golden suns, as well as the gratitude of our house. What say you?"

Savaric drummed his fingers on the table. "That is a tempting offer," the chief replied in his deep voice. "Trouble is, when you say 'if you accept,' I think what you really mean is, 'if you accept and we succeed.' As old and noble as your house may be, I'm afraid it will be difficult to collect our payment from a pile of corpses."

Miracel bit her lip. “Yes, well...” She stiffened her back and cleared her throat. “As I’ve assured you already, we are more than capable of crushing this worthless usurper, especially if you march with us.”

Savaric stroked his beard. “Forgive me, but I’m afraid word has reached me that would suggest otherwise. I am told that you have not only lost the White City but that you’ve also taken quite a thrashing at the hands of this ‘usurper.’ I believe it was at a place called err... *the Twins*, wasn’t it?”

Miracel shuddered. She had hoped that word of their defeat had not yet reached Balakar. As she sat pondering how to respond, Savaric noticed his tankard was empty and walked to a nearby keg to replenish it. “Pardon me for saying so,” he said, watching the frothy liquid fill his cup, “but would it not perhaps be wiser for us to throw our lot in with this Marthal fellow? We could send a messenger his way and offer our services. I’m sure he’ll pay us just as much as you, perhaps even more, and he does appear to have the upper hand in your little squabble.” The mercenary took a swig from his newly filled mug and sat back down across from her. “I suppose the question is this: ‘Why *you* and not *him*?’”

Miracel scoured her mind for an answer. She felt a wave of feverish heat wash over her. She could feel herself slipping into panic; her mother had taught her that to give in to panic was to forfeit all hope of success. She took a gulp from her mug, using the moment it bought her to inhale deeply through her nose, as her mother had taught her. Strangely, the mead’s bitter taste helped drive the fear from her mind. The sting of the concoction hitting the back of her throat brought an odd sense of clarity, like a lightning flash on a dark night.

Once her mind was clear, she clasped her hands on the table and looked into the chief's grey eyes. "There were many who thought as you do. In return for their service, the desert tribes who rode against us at the Twins were promised riches and friendship. Like you, they were brave, fierce fighters. Like you, they believed that Marthal was a man of his word." Miracel allowed herself another sip of mead, grimacing as the acrid Balakan brew stung her tongue. "But, unlike you, they did not learn his true nature until it was too late," she said. "Their ignorance cost them their lives."

Savaric took another swig of mead. His face betrayed nothing of the calculations being made behind his bushy, grey brows.

"Marthal's 'allies' were invited to collect their reward," Miracel went on, "but the usurper offered them nothing but the sour taste of poison." She leaned forward and stared hard into the chief's eyes. "I may be only a budding palace girl, but I can see you are not foolish enough to sell your sword to a murderous oath-breaker. March with us, and see yourselves well compensated by an honorable family." She pulled the contract from her satchel and spread it across the table in front of him.

The sellsword raised an eyebrow and took another swig from his mug. "It seems there's more to that fire-haired head of yours than just a pretty face." He dipped his quill in an inkwell and inscribed his signature at the bottom of the scroll. "With any luck, we can help you keep that head on its shoulders."

Miracel smiled and pressed her family's seal next to the commander's name.



## Chapter IX

Junayd stood on a mountaintop, high above the desert sands. In his left hand, he grasped his shamshir. In his right, he held the D'jarakaí standard. The banner's white horse fluttered in the winds of a raging storm. Thunder boomed and a flash of lightning briefly illuminated his surroundings. No more than ten feet from him crouched a jackal, twice the size of any he'd seen before. Its teeth were bared and a low growl emanated from its jaws.

Junayd and the beast slowly circled each other, each waiting for the moment to strike. Junayd's father stood off to the side, watching as a lion might watch its cub.

"Father!" Junayd cried. "Do something! Help me!"

Khaishar Muhib shook his head. "This is your time, my son."

As the distance between himself and the jackal shortened, Junayd saw an opening. He made a thrust at the animal's thigh. The creature leapt aside and the blade met nothing but air; now it was the beast's turn to strike.

Junayd struggled to regain his stance and retreat, but the jackal had already lunged. Its teeth flew toward him like a mouth full of arrows. "Father!" Junayd screamed.

"My khaishar, Is everything alright?"

Junayd sat up in his bed. His hands were clutching his bedsheets as if to keep himself from being swept back into the nightmare. Mahir stood by the bedchamber's entrance with a look of concern on his dark-skinned face.

"Yes," Junayd replied, wiping the sweat from his face. "Just...just a bad dream."

Mahir nodded. "Forgive me for disturbing you, but the maliqs have requested an audience. They await you outside."

Junayd yawned. "Tell them I'll only be a moment."

Mahir bowed and exited the chamber. Junayd hurriedly dressed, strapped on his shamshir, straightened his posture and strode out of his pavilion with his head held high.

The elders stood chatting idly beside the pavilion's entrance. Upon seeing their khaishar, they fell silent and bowed.

Junayd spread his arms. "Please, brothers, come and dine with me." Glasses of crystal clear water were poured and bread and salt were laid before each of the maliqs. "What troubles you, friends?" he asked.

Sayid of the Brakar clan, Junayd's grandfather, cleared his throat and spoke. "As I'm sure you know, the Alikai have increased their raids on our herds and traders. Worse still, the Torahkai and Sarakai have been picking at us as well. On the outskirts of the camp, one can hardly turn one's back without fear of finding an arrow in it. I think it's time we responded in kind. We may not be at full strength, but these offenses cannot go unanswered."

"Perhaps a few night raids on their camps," another maliq suggested. "They've already struck at us with our backs turned. It's only fair that we return the favor." The others murmured in agreement.

"What say you, Honored One?" asked Sayid. "How and when shall we respond?"

Junayd scratched the scruff on his chin. He already had a solution in mind, one he, Mahir, and his mother had been debating for some time. He wasn't sure his kinsmen would like the idea, but there was a chance it could turn the tide of the war.

“Send a messenger to the Mosakaí, Torakaí, Sarraakaí...and Alikáí” he said. “Tell their khaishars I wish to parley with them at *Sen’an*, thirty days from now when the sun is at its highest.”

The elders looked as though he’d suggested trading their children for chickens. “B-but, my khaishar,” one maliq protested, “they have spilled the blood of our *kaí*. You cannot so much as consider making peace with them until...”

“I intend to pursue more than peace,” Junayd said. “Marthal has made a mistake, a VERY grave mistake; he’s made enemies of the sons of Eremus. If luck is on our side, I might be able to persuade the other khaishars to ride with us. I’m sure the Alikáí and Torakaí will be eager to avenge the murder of their khaishars and the other two might be swayed by the promise gold or water. If not, I can at least ask for peace.”

The chamber fell into an uproar. The maliqs all raised their voices, clamoring against the idea of riding beside the “motherless jackals” who had killed their kin. Several stood and began stamping their feet in outrage. Junayd put his fingers between his lips and whistled loudly to silence them.

“Please, brothers, have faith in me,” he said. “My *kaí* is my life. My kinsmen’s pain is my own. I know our people have suffered heavily, but this is why we must make peace with our fellow Eremukaí. We can’t afford enemies on both sides of the Obice. For the moment, we need friends, not enemies. For the good of our *kaí*, we must call a truce.”

These words seemed to strike a chord with his kinsmen. Many looks of outrage were replaced by sighs of reluctant acceptance. However, Nynok, maliq of the Tarí clan, leapt to his feet and kicked at the edge of the carpet. “Two days ago, my eldest son was killed by those swine!” he roared. “We can’t just—”

“I have spoken!” Junayd snapped. “Remember that I too have lost kinsmen to our enemies’ blades. Know that I do not take this matter lightly. Nothing in my heart is more precious than our *kaí*.” He gestured toward the tent flaps. “Now, brothers, go in peace.”

After a short pause, the maliqs respectfully bowed and left the tent without another word. On his way out, Nynok turned and threw Junayd a vicious scowl. Junayd stared him down and the maliq left with a submissive grunt.

Once the last of the elders had gone, Khaishará Fataya walked out from her chambers. “Well-handled, my khaishar,” she said. “Your father would be proud of the leader his son has become.”

Junayd smiled; her words brought him much-needed comfort. “Thank you, mother.”

He was about to return to his quarters when he heard a trumpet blast from outside. Startled by the sudden noise, he instinctively reached for his sword, but then realized the sound was not from a warhorn. The trumpeter was heralding an important arrival.

He quickly ordered a servant to fetch his *aso’ga* and sent another to summon the *Horlas Ashayat*. In minutes, he and his retainers stood in front of his pavilion, ready to welcome the arrivals.

As the newcomers came into view, Junayd was thrilled to see Miracel riding at the head of the company. He gave her a bow as she slowed her horse to a stop.

“Welcome back, my lady,” he said with a smile. “We are thankful to see you returned to us safely.”

Miracel was still clad in the robes of a daughter of the Faith, restricting garments that made it difficult for her to dismount. Once her feet were on the ground, she pulled off her hood and veil and

cast them aside, happy to be rid of the encumbrance.

“It’s good to be back amongst your people, Honored One,” she said, pulling off her outer robes. “The sons of D’jará are a welcome change from the sort of company I’ve had to endure in Balakar.”

She tossed her robes aside. Now clad only in her white tunic, she put her hands in the air and stretched her slim, taught figure. Once the strains of her journey were gone, she reached behind her head, undid the tresses of her hair and shook it out. Her red locks tumbled down over her shoulders.

Junayd couldn’t help but stare. He remembered the girl he’d met in Vere Aureus; a pale, spoilt, pampered flower ready to wilt at the first gust of wind. He could scarcely believe that the brat he’d so despised had blossomed into the woman he saw before him. Her light blue eyes now shone with strength and determination. Her skin had been tanned to a beautiful hue, and her figure was lean and strong. Looking at her now, he could even say she was...

Junayd snapped out of his trance and gestured for Miracel to enter his tent. “As always, we are honored by your presence, my lady.”

She smiled. “The honor is mine.” She curtsied and strode in through the pavilion’s flap.

Junayd dismissed all but four of his guards, whom he left posted outside the pavilion, and stepped back inside. Suddenly, a hand with a powerful grip seized his shoulder and spun him around. He found himself looking into the stern gaze of Khaishará Fataya.

“Is something wrong, mother?” Junayd asked.

“Our guest has blossomed well, yes?” said the khaishará.

Junayd shrugged. "She's always been a handsome girl."

The khaishará drew her face closer to his. Her sharp gaze paralyzed him. "You've no business looking at her the way you do," she said. "You know your place. You are an Eremukái khaishar; she is a daughter of House Harsonine."

Junayd frowned. "What do you mean? You can't possibly think that I..."

"You know your place," the khaishará repeated. "Do not make the mistake of forgetting it. Men, women, families, dynasties, and even realms have been brought to ruin by such stupidity." She let her eyes drill into his skull for a moment, then slipped outside.

Junayd shook off the sting of his mother's stare and returned to his bedchamber. *What under the Makers was she talking about?* he asked himself. "*She can't honestly believe that I would...*"

He put the khaishará's words out of his mind and quickly stripped off his formal attire. Once he'd changed into his more casual garb, he strode to the entrance of the pavilion's guest chamber. "My lady, may I enter?" he called.

"One moment," Miracel's voice called back. "I'm getting dressed." Junayd waited a few minutes until he heard her voice summon him, "Please, come in."

Junayd brushed through the tent flap and bowed politely. Miracel was now clad in a simple green tunic and her hair fell unbraided down her back. Little Torvinus was bouncing playfully on her lap. "Pardon me, My Lady..."

"*Miracel*," the princess interjected. Her face broke into a sprightly smile. "How many times must I ask you to *call me by my name*?"

Junayd cleared his throat, “*Miracel*,” he began again, “I hope you know how happy I am to see you safely returned. Balakar is a dangerous place.”

She shrugged. “Few places are safe for a Harsonine now.”

“Makers willing, we will right that injustice,” Junayd said. “But first, I must ask, was your trip successful? Can we expect any extra swords?”

“The Mongrels are on their way as we speak,” *Miracel* said proudly. “We’ve hired a few Terrakan barges to ferry them across the channel. They’re not what I’d call... *traditional* soldiers, but I’m confident they’ll do their part.”

Junayd grinned. “Perfect! I’ll wager the traitors’ll be wetting their breeches once they hear we have the Mongrels behind us!” As he spoke, his feet did a small jig, which provoked a chuckle from *Miracel*.

He blushed and took a moment to calm himself. “I am pleased with your success... *Miracel*.”

“I’m glad I could help,” she replied.

“I hope you’ll forgive me,” said Junayd, “but I have one more favor to ask of you.”

“Of course,” she replied. “Anything.”

Junayd tugged at the edge of his tunic. “I’d like you to attend a parley with me, a parley with the other Eremukaí khaishars.”

*Miracel*’s eyes widened. “Y-yes, of course. But are you sure this is wise? Meeting such men face to face?”

“No harm will come to you; you have my word,” Junayd assured her. “It’s true that some sons of Eremus are more honorable than others, but no khaishar has ever violated a parley at *Sen’an*. And, should this become the first time, my men and I will defend you with our lives.”

“You have never once broken your word,” she smiled. “I will follow where you lead.”

Junayd blushed again. “I expect the meeting will be in thirty days’ time. Please be ready to travel three days before then.”

\* \* \*

Looking out over the streets of Hortus Magna, Marcus could already see signs of panic. Citizens were loading their belongings onto camels, horses, and carts, making ready to flee south. Doors were being barred. Shops were closing. Restless inhabitants were shouting amongst each other.

Lately, there had been no shortage of unrest in the city. Marcus knew all too well that the more people were packed together, the easier it was for chaos to spread. The Town Watch had done their best to contain the disorder, but a frightened populace is not an easy thing to control. On one occasion, Marcus had even had to call out the garrison to smother a brewing riot. Despite his efforts, public order continued to deteriorate.

And to make matters worse, the city below wasn’t all there was to worry about. In the months since the disaster at the Twins, Marthal had gone on the offensive. He had already laid siege to Amicus, the northernmost city still loyal to the Harsonines. There had been skirmishes and raids further south, but fortunately, nothing as far as Hortus Magna as of yet.

Marcus rubbed his brow and drummed his fingers on the armrests of his chair. The two men standing before him did nothing to ease his pain. Sarconius and Verinus were both rambling on about the gravity of the situation, as if it weren’t obvious already.



“Amicus is already besieged!” Verinus yelled. “They’ll last a matter of months at most, assuming that they don’t simply defect. We can’t sit here and do nothing! We must make a show of force, take the fight to the enemy.”

“That would be our end,” Sarconius protested. “Even with the sellswords Lady Miracel has brought back, we simply don’t have the manpower.”

“Our allies are in jeopardy,” Verinus insisted. “They have remained loyal. We can’t just leave them to rot.”

Sarconius shook his head. “I know it’s tempting; we’d all like to go charging off for Marthal’s head. But that’s just what he’s waiting for. If he strikes us again like he did at the Twins, it would be a blow from which we would not recover.”

Marcus turned to Unaka, who, as always, stood faithfully by his lord’s side. He looked into the Salmakan’s stoic face, as if hoping for some advice. Of course, Marcus knew that even if his old friend could speak, he would only tell him what was already clear to them both.

Marcus sighed. “I’m afraid Sarconius is right. Our forces would be outmatched, and our cause would not survive a second blunder.”

“You would have us just sit and wait until the usurper is on our doorstep!?” Verinus barked.

“I would have us *survive*,” Marcus replied. “Before we make a move of any sort, we must consult with our allies, *all* of our allies. I’ll send riders to Khaishar D’jarakaí and this Savaric fellow. There may yet be a way to win this war.”

“Khaishar D’jarakaí has gone into the desert,” said Verinus. “He’s holding some sort of meeting with the other the sand-dwellers. I hear Miracel’s gone with him.”

“Miracel?” Sarconius exclaimed. “Who does she think she is, putting herself at risk like that? We can ill afford to lose her. Come to think of it, I’m not sure we could afford to lose the khaishar either.”

“Perhaps I could dispatch a detachment to ensure that no harm befalls them,” Verinus suggested.

Marcus shook his head. “Even if our men could navigate the desert, it would be dangerous to send uninvited guests to an Eremukaí parley. The other dunemen may see it as an intrusion, and such a misunderstanding could end in blood. Have some faith in the young khaishar. He has proven to be a faithful friend after all.” The two commanders still looked troubled, but having nothing further to say, they saluted and took their leave.

Marcus leaned back in his chair and looked out over the city. “Miracel... Junayd...” he muttered, as if they could hear him. “Please, do come back. I’m not sure we could spare you now.”

\* \* \*

Junayd had been raised in the desert; he knew how it could give life, as well as take it. Like any Eremukaí, he also knew that the key to surviving in the Eremus’ harsh sands was knowing where to find water. Each of the Eremukaí tribes guarded their water sources jealously. The laws of the desert held that any man caught unlawfully drinking another tribe’s water would pay for every drop with his blood. This law was enforced without mercy, even if the killing might start a war, which it often did.

However, despite all the blood that had been spilled over water in the Eremus, there was one source in the desert’s center that was exclusive to no one: the small oasis of Sen’an. It was a modest

water source, barely large enough to nourish a single clan, but all were welcome there. Sen'an had served as a symbol of fellowship and community for the divided Eremukaí since long before the D'jarakaí and Harsonines forged their pact.

Junayd had seen every oasis or spring in his tribe's territory. He'd even visited a few outside his tribe's dominion, though he would never dare boast of this. But, of all the oases he'd drunk from, Sen'an was his favorite. The small spring was the one place, apart from his home, where he felt truly safe.

The shedding of blood was strictly forbidden at Sen'an, except, of course, in defense of one's self and one's kinsfolk. This made the oasis a natural place for the sons of Eremus to parley. Junayd only hoped that the other tribes would honor these traditions, especially with Miracel at his side.

He could not help but occasionally glance at the young Harsonine riding beside him. With the sun on her tanned face and her long, light red locks fluttering in the breeze, he had to admit she looked remarkably pretty. His mother was right; the girl he'd met nearly two years ago had blossomed into a beautiful young woman.

Miracel had dressed in desert garb to ease the negotiations. The illusion was surprisingly effective but did nothing to lessen her beauty. Junayd did his best to keep his eyes forward.

"We are nearly there," he told her. "Remember to mind your manners. You may be royalty, but you're not Eremukaí royalty. To them, you're just another fairskin."

"You needn't worry; I've been in the company of dangerous men before," she said with a wink. Junayd smiled.

A few minutes later, the tops of the of the oasis' trees came into view. Soon the glassy surface

of the water and the flora surrounding it were also visible. The pool was encircled by juniper bushes, acacia trees, date palms, and other vegetation it nourished.

The group slowed their horses to a halt in the shade of a large acacia tree. No sooner had they dismounted than four familiar clouds of dust appeared on the horizon. Mahir and another *Horlas Ashayat* named Abbas unloaded a silver bowl and a jug of camel's milk mixed with honey. Zarif and Isam, another of Junayd's retainers, lay down the *Rábla ó Tes* (Table of Truce)—a large intricately-designed carpet with the sigil of each of the Eremukaí tribes woven around the rim. Tradition demanded that parleys between tribes be conducted over such a "table" and the day's negotiations were more likely to succeed if tradition was heeded.

Soon, the approaching riders entered the oasis. Junayd took a quick headcount to ensure that the khaishars of the Alikáí, Torakáí, Mosakáí and Sarrakáí tribes had also honored the terms of the parley. Fortunately, it appeared so; none was accompanied by more than four men, and each had brought their own peace offerings. The arrivals dismounted and moved to stand by their places at the table.

As the khaishar who had called the meeting, Junayd took his seat first. He planted his shamshir in the sand and sat cross-legged behind the D'-jarakáí sigil of a white horse. Miracel sat beside him and his *Horlas Ashayat* stood at his back. The other khaishars did the same, planting their shamshirs in the sand and taking their seats behind their respective sigils: Khaishar Alikáí behind the green buzzard, Khaishar Torakáí behind the red scorpion, Khaishar Mosakáí behind the black cobra, and Khaishar Sarrakáí behind the orange sun.

Junayd noticed that the Torakaí and Alikái leaders were no older than himself; this was unsurprising given the recent deaths of their predecessors. They likely felt as he once had, frightened by the sudden weight of their aso'gas. He found it strangely comforting to be among others who understood his burden.

"Please, friends," Junayd said, "accept my hospitality. Drink from the wealth of my people, that we might find peace." Abbas and Mahir placed the silver bowl in the center of the table and poured in their tribe's jug of milk and honey.

Khaishar Alikái, a strong-looking young man whom Junayd guessed to be close to his own age, stood and answered, "I, Haytham Zarak Alikái, khaishar of the sons of Ali, accept your hospitality and ask that you accept mine." Two Alikái cohorts added their tribe's milk and honey to the bowl.

Then Khaishar Torakaí, a boy no older than twelve, cleared his throat and said, "I, Shadin Jul Torakaí, khaishar of the sons of Torah, accept your hospitality and ask that you accept mine." Two of his guards added their offering to the bowl.

Next, Khaishar Marwan Nasim Mosakaí, an elderly but well-muscled man of about sixty years, and Khaishar Muta' Kardal Sarrakaí, a short, swarthy man of about fifty, accepted the hospitality of the other khaishars and added the final contribution to the bowl. In accordance with desert tradition, the bowl was passed around the table and each Eremukaí drank from it. Miracel took a sip as well, so as to avoid being seen as an outsider.

"Now then, Honored Ones," Junayd began, licking the honey from his lips, "please hear my proposal." He spread his arms as if to embrace all those present. "Though we may hail from different *kaí*, we mustn't forget that we are all still sons of Eremus. Eremukaí never forget a debt of blood, and

many of us are owed debts long past due. Many of us here have lost kin to the usurper, Oren Licinius Marthal, and those who haven't ought to expect to soon."

He looked at the faces around the table as he spoke. "It's true that our peoples have not always been friends. There has long been strife between our *kai*. We and our forefathers have fought and fought well. No man here need be ashamed of the courage of his ancestors." The Eremukaí nodded their agreement.

"I appeal to your honor; let us put the past aside and turn our swords against our common enemy!" Junayd finished.

His words did not have the effect he'd hoped for. The khaishars remained silent and exchanged glances. "Marthal's hands are stained with the blood of your kin and mine," Junayd continued, gesturing towards the Alikai and Torakai chiefs. "Honor demands that we see that blood repaid, but none of us can attain that alone."

He turned to the other two khaishars, "And as for the sons of Sarrá and Mossá, you know the usurper is no friend to any Eremukaí. If Marthal has his way, any hope of peace with the Aureans will be lost, trade with them will become a distant memory, and any son of Eremus west of the Obice will suffer terribly at the traitor's hands. None of us can rest while he's alive."

In truth, Junayd was not entirely certain that *all* Eremukaí had reason to fear Marthal. But Mahir and the khaishará had advised that he would have to make this assumption if he was to sway the other khaishars. Much to his chagrin, the tactic did not seem to be working.

"Honored One," said Khaishar Alikai, "I'm afraid you've forgotten something: the blood of our ancestors is also on Harsonine hands," He glared at

Miracel. “not to mention those of your own *kaí*. I don’t see why the sons of Alí should care which fairskin sits on a throne a hundred leagues away. It’s true—we would see the death of our beloved *khaishar*, my father, avenged, but it would be shameful to ride with those who have slain our kin.”

The other *khaishars* and their retainers muttered amongst themselves. The young chief had a point.

*Khaishar Mosakaí* spoke next. “Our people have not been wronged by this ‘usurper,’ but the *Harsonines* and their *D’jarakaí* attack dogs spilled plenty of our *kaí*’s blood in the Desert Wars, not to mention long before and since then. You lot are more of an enemy than *Marthal*, and yet you ask us to ride with you?”

“I can find no flaws in the honored *Khaishar Mosakaí*’s logic,” *Khaishar Sarrakaí* said with a shrug. “It seems to me that you need *us* a great deal more than we need *you*.”

*Junayd* bit his lip. He couldn’t find the words to respond. He had hoped that, at least, the younger and less experienced *khaishars* would be easy to sway, but he now saw that his hope had been in vain.

*Miracel* chose this moment to come to his rescue. “I, *Miracel Larissa Harsoninus*, give you each my solemn word that, should you choose to help us, your aid will not go unrewarded,” she said, speaking the Desert Tongue flawlessly. “Any who joins us will receive a sum of twenty thousand golden suns *and* all the water that twenty of your strongest camels can carry.”

This had a more profound effect than any of *Junayd*’s words. Such a reward was substantial to any man, but, to a man of the desert, it was all but irresistible. The *Eremukaí* exchanged glances, weighing the choices in their heads. For most, it

seemed that the scales balanced even. Junayd knew it was time to play their final card. “To those who would join us, we also offer one last token of our gratitude,” he said.

He gestured to his *Horlas Ashayat*. Each guard removed a wrapped parcel from his horse. Junayd gave the order to unwrap the bundles and their contents flashed in the desert sun. The other Eremukaí, even the khaishars, gasped at what they saw.

Each of Junayd’s men held a shamshir, the likes of which none of the other chiefs had seen before. The hilts and scabbards were forged of gold, adorned with intrinsic designs and inlaid with precious gems. One scabbard bore rubies, another bore emeralds, the third, diamonds, and the last, ambers, each arranged into the sigil of one of the four tribes. The weapons’ glamour was enough to make young Khaishar Torakaí coo with wonder, and the other khaishars looked no less impressed.

Junayd suppressed a smile. “The blades were forged by Eremukaí smiths, and the scabbards by Aurean craftsmen,” he explained. “Let them serve as a symbol of the friendship that, should you accept, will be forged between our peoples. We hope you will accept our gifts and agree to ride with us for the good of all our *kaí*. What say you?”

After a short pause, Khaishar Sarrakaí was the first to answer. “Your offer is fair and generous,” he said. “The sons of Sarrá will ride beside you.”

Miracel smiled. “You have our most sincere thanks.” Zarif presented the chieftain with the amber-encrusted sword bearing the sigil of a rising sun.

After conferring with his older companions, the young Khaishar Torakaí was the next to reply. “The sons of Torá accept your generosity. Our swords are yours.”



“Please accept our gratitude,” Miracel said. Isam presented the young chief with the ruby-encrusted shamshir. The boy seized the blade and caressed it as one might a new toy.

Next, Khaishar Mosakaí gave his response. “Your kin and mine have never called each other friends...but your generosity helps us to forget the past. The sons of Mosá are with you.” Miracel thanked the khaishar and he was presented with his diamond-encrusted sword.

Finally, Khaishar Alikáí gave his answer. “I too can see that you are a generous people, but regrettably, I must decline.” Miracel’s smile faded.

“Keep your sword,” the khaishar continued. “I would not have it said that a pretty trinket persuaded me to shed my *kai*’s blood for our enemies.”

Junayd frowned. “And what of the coin we offer you? What of the water? Could your *kai* not make use of them? When your people are thirsty, will they not ask why you refused our generosity?”

“It’s true; water is precious to us,” the young chief answered, “but I cannot spill my kin’s blood in service of those who have already spilled so much of it themselves. Did your father not also teach you: ‘*Only blood is thicker than water*’?”

Junayd had been taught those words since the day he learned to speak. It was one of the pillars that governed the Eremukaí way of life; in the desert, ties of kinship were the one thing even water could not outweigh.

Junayd sighed. “Very well, but can I at least persuade you to bring an end to the bloodshed between our tribes? Both our kinsfolk have suffered enough already.”

The young chieftain nodded. “I would have it so.”

Junayd stood and bowed respectfully. “Should you reconsider, please send a messenger as

soon as possible.” Abbas sheathed the last shamshir and strapped it back to his horse’s saddle. The khaishars stood and bowed to conclude the meeting.

Once all the necessary diplomatic formalities had been seen to, the Eremukaí began setting up their small encampment, pitching their tents and watering their horses. As tradition dictated, they would all spend a night in each other’s company, under each other’s protection, before returning to their tribes.

A small fire was built for the men to warm themselves, and a tarp set with barley loaves and mutton was laid out beside it. Much to the delight of the Eremukaí, Miracel had also procured a jug of Aurean wine for the occasion.

Though he enjoyed fine wine as much as any man, Junayd’s throat was parched from the day’s journey and he knew only water could truly quench thirst. He went to the oasis’ pool and dipped his waterskin to fill it.

As he lifted the vessel to his mouth, a Torakaí standing beside him suddenly yelled, “Look!” and pointed west, toward the setting sun. In the dim light of the sunset, Junayd saw a strange shape creeping towards them. At first, it resembled a giant caterpillar slinking across the sands. A closer look revealed it to be a string of camels inching over the dunes. When the line of beasts was close enough, Junayd could see an aged Eremukaí hunched on the back of the lead camel. A younger figure, most likely the driver’s son or grandson, was riding the rear camel. Both riders were so exhausted they could barely keep their heads up.

As the string of beasts drew nearer, the lead rider lifted his head to look upon the refuge he so desperately needed. When he saw the men clustered around the oasis, he began waving his arms and shouting with joy.

The sight of the newcomers drew groans from the Eremukaí gathering. They had no desire to share their food; they would need their rations for the journey home. But they were bound by the law of *dakheel*: If an Eremukaí were to find anyone, even a stranger, in danger of succumbing to the Eremus, it was that Eremukaí's duty to take the newcomer as his guest. And it was a host's duty to nourish his guest with his last drop of water, feed him with his last ounce of food and defend him with his last drop of blood. It was through this ancient code that life in the unforgiving desert was made bearable, and no Eremukaí would dare violate it.

The men of all five tribes reluctantly spread out a tarp for the weary newcomers and lay what food they could spare across it. When the old man finally reached them, he leapt off his camel with surprising speed for a man his age and threw himself at his hosts' feet. His young companion rushed to his side and did the same.

"Thank the Makers!" the old man said, fervently kissing Khaishar Aliká's feet. "We've been lost for nearly two days now. We feared the Eremus would swallow us up, but now we find ourselves in the company of decent men. A thousand blessings to all of you!"

"Please, dear guests," Khaishar Aliká said, gently pushing the old man back with his foot, "rest your tired bones and share our food."

The famished travelers didn't need to be told twice. Without hesitation, they began devouring the bread, milk, water, and honey laid out across the tarp. Junayd guessed them to be from a minor tribe, as they did not seem to recognize any of the khaishars present.

"Who are you, strangers?" Junayd asked. "And what misfortune caused you to lose your way in the Eremus?"

“I am Ayman Hazim Sarulkaí,” the old man replied between mouthfuls, “and this is my son, Ayfar.” So the two belonged to the Sarulkaí, one of the weaker *kaís* that roamed the Eremus in the shadow of the more powerful tribes. “We were on our way to the Torakaí camp to sell our wares,” Ayman mumbled, spraying crumbs across the tarp. “Then the winds picked up and we were struck by a sandstorm. We rode blind for hours. After the winds died down, we blundered about looking for anywhere or anyone that might give us shelter. By the Mother’s grace, we found you.” He took Khaishar Sarraká’s hand and began planting kisses on every finger. “A thousand thanks to you all!”

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Two hours later, the sun had all but sunk beneath the dunes. The fading daylight cast a soft red hue over the sands.

Ayman and Arfan had fallen asleep after cramming down their hearty meal. The newcomers’ camels had been watered and were now resting on their bellies, letting the earth bear the weight of the hefty canvas bags they carried. Miracel could only guess as to the bags’ contents. Ayman had said only that they contained his “wares.”

Having completed the preparations for their journeys home, the other Eremukaí had found various ways to pass the time. Some warriors took target practice at the hanging fruit of the oasis’ date palms, while others simply chatted idly amongst themselves. A handful of them, including Mahir and Zarif, were gathered around the cooking fire, fussing over the mutton being roasted for supper. Oddly enough, Miracel detected none of the usual hostility between the tribes. Strange how this place, Sen’an, seemed to cool the Eremukaí’s hot blood.

Miracel joined in the men's game of date-shooting. The dunemen were a bit surprised at seeing a woman handling a bow, but she didn't let that stop her. She had been training with Zarif every day since he'd agreed to teach her. After all her hours of practice and the gargantuan sum of coin Zarif had extracted from her, she'd been looking forward to showing off.

She chose five dates as targets and managed to hit three, a rather impressive feat given the size of the fruits. Her marksmanship was sufficient to earn praise from her peers and even a smile from her teacher.

Even Junayd seemed impressed, which pleased her especially. Ever since becoming his guest, she had been searching for opportunities to prove herself to her host. She was grateful for all he had done, but it sometimes seemed that, like every other man in her life, he saw her only as a helpless, delicate creature, a prize to be protected. She was determined to show him otherwise.

After knocking down a dozen more dates, she finally tired of the game. She retrieved her arrows, along with the fruit she had won, and went to rinse her hair in the pool. She had not had a chance to wash her hair in weeks—even the D'jarakaí considered their water too precious to allow frequent bathing. Now she understood why most desert women covered their heads.

She removed her keffiyeh and shook out her hair, grateful to be free of the suffocating garment. She set down her bow and arrows, knelt by the pool and dipped her head in. A wonderful feeling of cold refreshment washed over her. She threw her head back and let the cool water droplets trickle down her face as she wrung out her hair.

"You were impressive today," said a voice behind her.

She turned to find Junayd smiling at her. “Forgive me,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Miracel blushed. “Oh no. It’s quite alright. I was only rinsing my hair. I don’t often have that luxury these days.”

Though she’d had her disagreements with the young khaishar, she had grown to enjoy his company. His handsome face exuded a friendly warmth and his words were almost always kind and caring. If there was one good thing about life in the Eremus, it was her host.

Junayd cleared his throat. “I only wanted to say that...well...your negotiation skills were remarkable today.”

Miracel smiled. “I’d say it was yours that carried the day.”

“I only wish we could’ve done better,” said Junayd. “But I suppose it was unrealistic to hope that Khaishar Alikai could be swayed so easily after all that’s happened between my *kai* and his. Anyway, let’s not dwell on what might’ve been.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I was also impressed with your archery skills. I see Zarif’s lessons have been sinking in.”

Miracel gasped. “You know?” She began wringing her hair anxiously. “Junayd...” she stammered. “I’m sorry. You see, I...”

Junayd laughed. “I’ve known about your ‘arrangement’ with Zarif for some time. That rascal’s not nearly as good at keeping a secret as he thinks he is. Not to worry; if an Aurean woman wants to learn to use a bow, who am I to stop her?”

Miracel sighed with relief. “You’re not angry then?”

Junayd shrugged. “Why should I be? I like a woman who can look after herself.” Miracel blushed again.

“In fact, if you like, I’m sure Mahir wouldn’t mind giving you some training as well,” Junayd added. “You know, it was he who taught me when I was a boy. He’s too modest to say so, but no one’s better with khanjas than he is. And don’t worry; any fees are on me.” He chuckled.

Miracel laughed and nodded. “Thank you. Zarif has already given me a bit of training with knives, but I’d be grateful for lessons from a master.”

“Won’t you join us for supper?” Junayd jerked a thumb toward the rest of the men, who were gathering around the tarp laden with food.

“In a minute,” Miracel replied. “I’d like bit more time to enjoy the water while I can.”

Junayd smiled. “Of course. Just don’t be too long, my la—I’m sorry—*Miracel*.” He bowed and left to join the others.

Miracel smiled at the young khaishar, then turned her attention back to the water. Darkness descended as the sun sank behind the dunes. She ran her fingers through her hair and prepared to dip her head once more.

Suddenly, a hand with an iron grip clamped over her mouth, stifling her scream. Her dirk was pulled from her girdle and she felt the cold, steel blade press against her throat.

“Not a sound,” a familiar voice whispered.

The body holding her turned her around to face a hunched figure: the newcomer, Ayman. The old merchant nodded satisfactorily and she felt her captor, whom she deduced to be Arfan, nod back. The hilt of the youth’s khanja poked painfully into her back, but she didn’t dare squirm.

Smirking through his grey beard, Ayman produced a pair of acacia sticks from inside his robe. Miracel watched as he walked slowly up and down the row of camels, softly clicking the sticks

together, “*tap-tap, tap-tap.*” As he did so, the bags slung over the beasts began to stir.

What Miracel saw next nearly stopped her heart: blades poked out from within the shifting bundles. Slowly and quietly, each blade slid down through the canvas, creating long, vertical slits. Once the first blade had cut down to the sand, a dark figure emerged through the opening. He didn’t make a sound as he stood and stretched his long arms.

The man was a Salmakan, but Miracel could only tell by the braid of coal black hair hanging down his back. His entire body was painted to match the color of the sand, and his only clothing was a pair of leather tights.

The Salmakan turned and locked eyes with Miracel. She recognized the sneer on his face; this was one of the mercenaries she’d seen on her last day in the Imperial Palace. The sellsword seemed to recognize her as well. He flashed a cold smile and pressed a finger to his lips. “*Shh...*”

Another twenty or so figures also emerged from their bags and pulled short swords, dirks and throwing knives from the camels’ packs. Miracel struggled to keep from panicking as the crouched figures fanned out and began creeping towards the oblivious Eremukaí.

“*How could they have known?*” she thought. “*Only a trusted few were privy to this meeting. How could they have known we’d be here?*”

Her mind raced. She had to warn the Eremukaí. She couldn’t just let the Salmakans slit their throats. But she could feel the dirk pressed against her windpipe. One stupid move and she’d never move again. She could only look on as the sand-colored figures neared their unwary targets.

As she watched, she felt a drop of sweat, which she knew was not her own, slide down her



neck. Her captor was nervous. Perhaps he was not as experienced as he seemed. Perhaps this was his first time on such a mission. Suddenly, an idea came to her.

She swiveled her head; not hard, but just hard enough to break his grip on her mouth. As soon as her lips were free, she whispered, "Your friends are already dead. But, let me go now, and I might let you and the old man live."

Ayfar hesitated. "Really?" he scoffed. "And I suppose if I don't, you'll slap us all to death."

Miracel could still sense the fear in his voice. "Not me," she whispered, "the men around you."

Ayfar paused. "What in the Abyss are you prattling about?" he snapped.

"We have spies in the palace," she lied. "We knew about this little plot, likely before you and your friends did. Our men are hidden in the sands around you."

The youth's quickening breath told her his nerves were being strained. "Lying bitch!" he snarled through gritted teeth.

"A bitch, maybe." She shrugged. "I've been called that before, but I'm no liar. You'll find that out shortly."

"Shut up!!" Ayfar growled.

"If you don't let me go, you'll be as dead as those bastards you carried here," she warned. "You've got say...ten seconds to decide."

She could feel the hand holding the knife start to tremble. This made her nervous as well; one unfortunate slip and she'd be dead. A camel behind them let out a whine and the lad's nerves finally gave way. He spun around and waved Miracel's dirk at the beast.

Miracel wasted no time. She plucked Ayfar's khanja from his belt, and with all her strength,

thrust the knife into his chest. For a moment he just stood and stared at the hilt protruding from between his ribs. Then the sensation sank in. He let out an agonized howl, splitting the night's silence. Every head in Sen'an looked up and turned toward Miracel and her fallen captor.

"They're here!!" Miracel screamed, shoving Ayfar to the ground. "They're here! Ready yourselves!"

The Eremukaí saw the assassins and immediately realized what was happening. With cries of alarm, they took up their arms and made ready to defend themselves. Miracel grabbed her bow and nocked her first arrow.

Seeing that their trap had been sprung, the Salmakans changed their pace from a crawl to a sprint. The Eremukaí formed a defensive circle with their arrows nocked and swords drawn.

Miracel was the first to loose an arrow. She turned her body sideways as Zarif had taught her and exhaled as she released. The shaft flew over the sands and into the neck of the nearest Salmakan, who as it happened, was the sellsword she'd recognized from the palace. The assassin yelped and collapsed to the sand.

No sooner had Miracel loosed her arrow than the Salmakans and Eremukaí began drawing blood. One Salmakan produced a throwing knife and, in a single fluid motion, flung it into the throat of a Torakaí, who crumpled into a gurgling, bloody heap. Another assassin, wielding a short sword in each hand, charged Mahir. As their swords clashed, a pair of Salmakans confronted Abbas. One shuffled back and forth in front of him, jabbing at his chest, while another sliced the hamstring on the back of his leg, bringing him to his knees. The first assassin seized the old warrior by the hair, allowing the other

to slit his throat. Abbas fell forward and lay lifeless in the sand.

But the Salmakans were taking their share of losses as well. Three of the knife throwers crumpled with arrows lodged in their guts. After a lengthy exchange of blows and parries, Mahir managed to slash through his opponent's abdomen. The man's mouth gaped in agony as his belly opened. Mahir smiled and beheaded him with one smooth strike. Khaishar Alikai and two of his guards cut down a trio of Salmakans with a flurry of sword strokes. Making use of his left-handed dexterity, Junayd dispatched another enemy swordsman with a blow to the neck.

Bodies were dropping on both sides. Miracel did her best to pick off the attackers but found it difficult to get a clear shot with the Eremukai and Salmakans in such close quarters. Despite the challenge, she managed to dispatch two more assassins. As she reached for another arrow, she suddenly felt a body slam into her, knocking her flat on her back. An iron grip tightened around her throat. Her attacker's face was so contorted with rage that she could just barely recognize him: *Ayman*.

"My...my...MY SON!" he wailed. "My boy! Ayfar! You've taken my son from me! I'll have your life for it. I swear by the Father's justice!"

He pressed his thumbs into Miracel's windpipe. She gasped and struck at him, but her blows had little effect. She tried with all her remaining strength to pry his fingers off her throat, but his grip was as firm as his son's had been. She felt her strength fading. Her vision grew dark. Then she saw only black and knew no more.

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Miracel awoke to the wonderful sensation of cold water on her face. For a moment, she wondered if, perhaps, she had died and ascended to Paradise. But when her vision cleared, she saw the Eremus sun blazing down on her; this couldn't possibly be Paradise.

She squinted at the sun until a dark-skinned face moved to block it. "Praise the Makers!" exclaimed Mahir. "She's alive."

She felt another splash of cold water against her skin. The sensation returned some of her senses, and she examined her surroundings. She saw Junayd's handsome face looking down on her with a relieved smile. Zarif stood grinning beside him, and more Eremukaí surrounded her. The corpses of their twelve fallen comrades were laid out across a linen tarp. The bodies of the slain Salmakans were piled up next to an acacia tree.

"It appears we all owe you a debt," said Junayd. The other heads around her nodded in agreement.

"You have our gratitude Lady Miracel," said Khaishar Sarraakáí. "Were it not for you, those Salmakan bastards would've slit our throats before we could draw a single sword."

Khaishar Alikáí stepped forward and leaned over her. Suddenly, his hand moved to the hilt of his shamshir. The D'jarakaí reached for their own blades, but the Alikáí's sword was in his hand before they could unsheathe theirs.

For a moment, Miracel feared for her life. Then she noticed that the sword the young chief was holding was not the one he had brought with him. It was the shamshir that she and Junayd had offered him during their negotiations.

The young khaishar brandished the blade, appreciatively letting the sun glint off the polished steel. "My father taught me that only blood is thick-

er than water. Only the saving of blood can bring forgiveness of its shedding.” He sheathed the blade and smiled. “You saved us all tonight, my lady. My kinsmen and I owe you our lives. The sons of Ali will ride beside you.” Dozens of Eremukaí voices broke into exultant laughter.

With her windpipe still sore from Ayman’s grip, Miracel struggled to force a reply out of her throat. “My...thanks.” Khaishar Alikai and Junayd took her by the hands and pulled her to her feet.

Khaishar Mosakaí turned to Junayd. “Please, grant us one favor.” He pointed to a nearby date palm where a beaten, bloodied Ayman was bound and gagged. “Give us this *káisin*. This son of a jackal has violated the sanctuary of Sen’an, not to mention betrayed our hospitality. It would be an utmost pleasure to punish him.”

“We’ll handle his interrogation, as well” another Mosakaí added coldly. “By the time he meets the Makers, he’ll have no secrets, I assure you.”

Junayd looked at the prisoner whimpering through his gag, then at the Mosakaí, then at Miracel, then at the bodies of Abbas and the other slain Eremukaí. “He’s yours.” Ayman hung his head and moaned.

“We will require your presence at our next war council,” Mahir told the other Eremukaí, “Hortus Magna. Noon. Thirty days from now. You will, of course, be treated as honored guests.” The Eremukaí bowed and began preparing for their departure. The bodies of their comrades were loaded onto Ayman’s camels.

Zarif helped Miracel into her saddle. “Your aim wasn’t so bad for a fairskin,” he said. “Perhaps you’ll learn to keep your waterskin after all.”

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“Forward!” Malonius barked. He and his company of cataphracts trotted their horses down the quiet, empty street. Two years ago, the streets of Vere Aureus would’ve been bustling at this hour. Now, the city’s inhabitants were confined to their homes from dusk until dawn.

Malonius and his men had been charged with enforcing their new emperor’s curfew. They had spent the last few months making short work of anyone defiant or careless enough to disobey the decree. For those found in violation, chastisement with a cane or whip was considered lenient.

Malonius did not enjoy the rule of martial law any more than the citizens he enforced it on. He had once been able to walk through the city with his head held high, basking in the reverence of his fellow Aureans. Now, he could scarcely look them in the eye. He could feel his countrymen’s gazes, full of hate and fear, drilling into the back of his head every time he turned his back to them. It was difficult to believe that Oren, his old friend and shield-brother, the man who had once cut through five Amaltri to save him, was the man behind all this.

Staring at the shuttered windows around him, Malonius pondered what was and what had been. It was true that Hallucar had been a poor ruler, and Marthal had certainly not been alone in wanting the old fool off the throne. It was also true that, since his ascent, Marthal had worked to bring about some of the changes he had promised. He had established patrols to clear the northern waters of pirates and the roads of highwaymen. Within his dominion, governors, nobles, and ministers who had grown insubordinate under Hallucar’s feeble rule had been put in their place or executed. Regular taxes were paid without fail throughout his territory. None could call the new emperor weak or indecisive.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to justify the wounds Marthal had inflicted to forge his new order. Thousands who had refused to bend the knee had been executed or worse; their families and friends sometimes suffered the same fate. Worse still, many victims of these bloody purges had been convicted based on nothing more than rumors or gossip. Anyone reported uttering a word of disrespect toward the new regime or having the slightest sympathy for the Harsonines was made an example of. An untold number of innocents, including a few of Marthal's most loyal supporters, hung from the bridge towers of the *Vincio Aureus*.

Much of Vere Aureus' Town Watch had already deserted. Some had reportedly even joined the Harsonine armies. On top of all this, was the civil war that continued to tear apart the realm. Marthal had promised a quick victory, but two years later, the fighting dragged on.

Malonius heard rows of shutters slam shut as the company turned a corner onto another street. About halfway down the street, a small dog ran out in front of his horse. The charger whinnied and came to an abrupt halt. A small boy darted out of an alley and scooped the pup into his arms. The lad looked up and his eyes met Malonius'. The boy stared and Malonius stared back, sensing the terror in the child's young face.

"Jorah, get back here!" A woman in a white gown and apron rushed out of a nearby house and grabbed the boy by the arm. She turned to Malonius, throwing the boy behind her. "Please, good sir," she pleaded. "He was only out looking for his pup. He meant no harm. It won't happen again."

Malonius paused, then nodded toward the house's open door. "Thank you, kind sir," said the mother. She and her son flew back into the safety of

their home. The door was slammed shut behind them the moment they'd entered.

"Pardon me, sir," a young cataphract piped up, "but the lad did disrupt a patrol, and he and his mum were both out past curfew. Doesn't that merit at least a light caning?"

Malonius turned and removed his helmet to show the young soldier his scowl. "I'll be giving the orders here," he snarled. "If you'd like to question that, you'll get a good deal more than just a light caning." The youth backed down without another word.

The company continued down the street, letting the pitter-patter of rain on their helms lull them half to sleep. The following morning, they would ride out to crush another small insurgency in the countryside. Of course, they had all known from the start that conflicts with their countrymen were inevitable, but most of them had hoped things would have settled down by now. The new regime's iron grip had begun to backfire, and reports of riots and small uprisings had started flowing in.

As the unit turned another corner, they came upon a sight that had grown disturbingly familiar: a fresh corpse. The body had been hung from a ledge outside a newly closed bakery; it swung like a puppet in the wind. The shop had been boarded up and the word "*traitor*" was painted in bright red across its door.

Perhaps the unfortunate baker had been a rebel. Perhaps he had been a Harsonine sympathizer. Perhaps he'd been caught spying for the enemy.

On the other hand, perhaps he had done nothing at all to deserve this fate. Perhaps a relative of his had been the culprit, and he'd been hung for no fault of his own. Perhaps he was only the victim of a deadly rumor. Who could say? All that was certain was that there was one less baker in the world.



Malonius hung his head and trotted onward. It took some effort, but he turned his mind back to his duties and away from what lay behind him.

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Upon their return to the D'jarakaí camp, Junayd, Miracel and their party were met with the warm welcome to which they'd become accustomed. Junayd's mother, the maliqs, and the *Horlas Ashayat* stood outside the pavilion, waiting to greet them. Smiles of relief spread across the welcomers' faces when they noticed the four missing shamshirs; the meeting had been a success.

Junayd dismounted, tied Scarab to his post and called for servants to fill the drinking trough. The others tied up their mounts by the same trough before going to greet their loved ones.

To everyone's surprise, little Torvinus walked out of the pavilion, one hand clutching that of Husnah's wife, Alacra, and the other reaching out towards his sister. "Miracel!" the boy exclaimed gleefully. "You're back!" The little emperor's sister hurried over and took him up in her arms, laughing and planting kisses on his rosy cheeks.

"Husnah gave me a new set of wooden warriors yesterday," Torvinus said excitedly. "Come and see them."

"Let's go then," Miracel giggled. The pair disappeared into the tent. Junayd couldn't help but smile.

Mahir, Dabir, the maliqs, and the khaishará followed Junayd into the pavilion. "Was your trip productive, Honored One?" Dabir asked.

"Very," Junayd replied proudly. "Each khaishar has pledged his support, even Khaishar Alikeí. There was some trouble, but thanks in no small part to Lady Miracel, we emerged victorious."

He recounted the story of the ambush they had survived. He was sure to give special respect and condolences to the maliq of Abbas' clan.

"I'm shocked to hear that any Eremukaí would take part in the shedding of blood at Sen'an," the khaishará said grimly. "But it troubles me even more that our enemies knew of the meeting. Someone has betrayed our trust."

"Yes, and we will find out who before long," said Mahir. "Only a small number of people were informed of the parley. We'll sniff out the traitor soon enough."

"Forgive me, but there is another matter that requires attention," Junayd's mother interjected. "You have reached your nineteenth year, my son, and as painful as it is for me to say, this war puts your life at great risk."

Junayd frowned. "Yes, mother but it is a khaishar's duty to put himself at risk for the honor and well-being of his people. You yourself taught me this. What else would you have me do?"

The khaishará sighed. "If you fall, your father's bloodline ends. It's time you chose a new khaishará and gave our house an heir."

Junayd's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't given thought to this matter since before the conflict began.

"Now?" he said, almost laughing. "Are you serious? We're at war! With so much that needs attending to, so many questions that need answering, you want to trouble me with this *now*?"

"This is more important now than ever," the khaishará replied. "The continuation of our bloodline is vital, not only for the future of our family but for that of our *kaí* as well. Seeing as there is much on your mind already, your trusted advisors and I have already taken the liberty of selecting some suitable matches." Before Junayd could say a word,

his mother turned toward the pavilion's shrine and called, "You may now present yourselves."

A line of Eremukaí young women filed out of the chamber. Each maiden was clad in her clan's finest silk and jewelry with her hair braided with gold and silver. The girls' families had done all they could to beautify their daughters, and not without success.

Junayd was too stunned to speak. He was at least relieved to find that he recognized some of the girls from his boyhood.

"Each maiden will now present herself," said the khaishará.

A pretty, young girl dressed in red silk stepped forward. "Honored One, I am Abal of the Mithsah clan. It is a privilege to be in your presence."

"The...err...The privilege is mine," Junayd replied.

Next, a girl in blue with a creamy complexion stepped forward. "I am Johara, of the Turí clan, Honored One. It gives me great pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," Junayd replied.

The formal introductions ended mercifully after ten minutes. Once the last of the maidens had presented themselves, Junayd's mother announced, "In accordance with our customs, the khaishar will court the maidens for forty days. At noon on the forty-first day, he will announce his choice and join hands with his new khaishará."

"You are all fitting brides," Junayd said, forcing a smile. "I look forward to enjoying your company in the coming days."

Junayd's mother and the maliqs all joined in reciting their tribe's traditional courtship blessing: "May Mother Ursha fill their hearts with love. May Father Talis make them faithful and true. May their

union strengthen our *kaí*.” Each of the maidens bowed and filed out the door, followed by their maliqs.

The moment the last of them had left the room, Junayd threw his mother an enraged glare. “Now!?” he hissed. “This hardly seems like the time for such things!”

The khaishará shrugged. “Our house has been incomplete for too long. I’d hoped you’d see to this matter yourself, but after two years as khaishar, you haven’t even spoken of the subject.”

Junayd’s fury burst forth. “You could’ve at least consulted me first instead of setting up this ridiculous ambush, you poisonous old viper!”

The instant the words left his lips, Junayd regretted them. He expected to feel a hard slap across his face, but his mother just sighed and said, “My son, your anger is understandable. Our matchmaking traditions never made sense to me either, nor to your father. But they are, nonetheless, our traditions, our *laws*, and, as Khaishar D’jarakaí, you must honor them. Your father and I were united in the same way. We were nearly strangers when we joined hands, but love soon came to us, and so did you.”

Junayd stared at his feet. “Yes, I understand, but I...”

“I know none of the girls you saw was the one you wanted,” said the khaishará. Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not blind. I’ve seen the way you look at *her*, and the way she looks at you. You know as well as I do that what you desire is impossible.”

Junayd didn’t bother denying it. There was no fooling his mother. He simply averted his gaze.

The khaishará placed her hand on his shoulder. “The world we live in is not an easy one, least of all for those who carry a khaishar’s burdens,” she

said. “But my son bears it well. I know he will make the right choice.”

Junayd nodded and turned to retire to his bedchamber. Of course he knew his mother was right; it was painfully clear that a union between himself and a Harsonine was impossible. The D'-jarakaí clans expected him to choose from amongst their daughters, and in the realm of Aurean politics, for a Harsonine to wed a sand-dweller, even a D'-jarakaí, was unthinkable. And even if joining hands with Miracel were remotely plausible, he couldn't ask her to abandon her home and family for a life in the desert.

With a deep sigh, he began disrobing for bed. He knew a life spent with Miracel was nothing but a juvenile fantasy, but all the same, in the time he'd spent with her, watching her grow from a spoilt palace brat to the brave, strong-hearted young woman she'd become, she had found a place inside him. When she was near, he felt whole and happy. He almost wished for the war to drag on so she might stay with him a bit longer.

He smiled at the memory of her scooping little Torvinus up in her arms and her pretty face kissing him tenderly. He didn't know who his bride would be, but he knew she could never fill the hole Miracel would leave in him. He hoped she was not cursed to feel the same way about him.

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Miracel sat up on her silk mattress and pulled the wool blankets over Torvinus to shield him from the cold. It was beyond her how the desert could be so hot by day and so cold by night. Even wrapped in both her night robe and her blankets, she could always feel the chills of the night air.

Her brother was fast asleep, curled up next to her like a foal beside its mother. Fearing that the night would be even colder with only one body in the bed, she lay two extra blankets over him and then slipped off the mattress. She planted a kiss on his cheek before creeping out of the chamber. She had no desire to leave Torvinus, but there was somewhere else she needed to be that night.

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Junayd had only just settled into his bed when he heard the flap to his chamber open. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Mother, you know I’m not to be disturbed—”

His voice caught in his throat. He was staring into Miracel’s light blue eyes. She was clad only in her white dressing gown and her long, red hair tumbled unbound down her back.

“M-Miracel,” Junayd stuttered, “Is there some way I can serve you?”

“You have already done far more than I could ever ask of you,” Miracel replied, drawing nearer to him as she spoke. “There is only one thing I must ask of you now.”

Junayd felt his heart quicken. “Say it, and it’s yours.”

They locked eyes for a moment, bracing themselves. Warm tears trickled down Miracel’s face. She opened her mouth to speak but couldn’t find the words.

Junayd stood up and gently wiped the tears away with his thumb. “You have it,” he whispered.

“As do you,” she smiled.

The princess tentatively undid her robe and let it fall from her shoulders. Junayd felt her body tremble as they embraced.

“We... We shouldn’t be doing this...” he said.

“No,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He held her close, as their lips found each other. The two flopped down on the soft mattress and Junayd pulled the blankets over them.

“You’re still trembling,” Junayd whispered. “Are you afraid?”

“A little.”

“Please, don’t be.”

As their bodies pressed together, Junayd put his lips to Miracel’s ear and whispered, “*Kal bayluk.*”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

Junayd smiled. “It’s an Old Eremukaí saying. I can’t remember the exact translation, but I believe it roughly means, ‘My heart is yours.’”

Miracel smiled back, “*Kal bayluk.*” They kissed again.

## Chapter X

Marthal sat in his oaken chair, his stern face focused on the map in front of him. He winced as another wave of pain shot through his knee. The damned wound hadn't stopped giving him grief since the day it was dealt, but he had learned to hide his discomfort. It wouldn't do to show any sign of weakness in the presence of his followers.

Around him sat the officers, advisors, nobles, governors, and courtiers of his inner council. It was they who had made his ascent possible, and he knew he would still need their support if he was to avoid a long, deadly fall from the throne he had risen to. His years in the imperial court had taught him a lesson that many of history's rulers had learned too late: there was no such thing as absolute power. If even the mightiest sovereign grew careless or arrogant, there was always a knife waiting to cut his reign short and another brow ready to wear his crown.

Marthal looked up from the map and addressed a young officer sitting to his left. "I trust the rebels in Cartos have been dealt with."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty," the soldier replied, "but I must report that the executions you ordered did not have the effect we'd hoped for. When we carried out the hangings, the crowds did nothing but curse us and pelt us with whatever they could find. On our way out, they hurled so much dirt and dung we thought we might be buried alive."

Marthal grunted. He had feared as much; his attempt to stomp out the fire was only spreading sparks.

"Pardon me, Your Grace," said a strident voice from across the table, "but I think it's time we saw to the cleansing of our lands."



The voice belonged to Larras Uran Harrosal, Strategos of Teratum and the Torrasan Province. Harrosal was so short he could've been stuffed upright into a wine barrel, that is, if his bulging gut could be squeezed in with him. But, as humorous as the governor's appearance might've been, Marthal knew better than to treat him coarsely. The little fat man was one of his most powerful supporters, one whose loyalty was not expendable.

"Please, Larras. Action has been taken, as I promised," Marthal said. "The new taxes have already been levied, the new laws enacted. If you're dissatisfied, we can address the matter further once the war is done with."

"Your Grace, imposing new taxes on outlanders and barring them from civil service won't save our empire," Harrosal barked, his face darkening. "We mustn't leave the job half-done. You promised to purify the realm. For too long, we've had to share our homeland with barbarian scum. I've had to see good Aurean blood mixed with that of foreigners hordes. Heaven and earth, we've been forced to welcome desert-dwellers into these very halls!"

The strategos jumped out of his chair. His face didn't sit much higher when he was standing, but it almost glowed beet-red. "It's unthinkable! Terrakans and their halfbreed spawn are snatching up land in my province. Amaltri are doing the same up north. And I don't even have to tell you how the desert-dwellers have infested the western lands. Why, in the Harsenosum province there are nearly as many desert-dwellers and *mitzclah* as there are true Aureans! The Aurean Empire belongs to those of Aurean blood; we cannot let the barbarians steal it from under us."

A handful of heads in the room nodded in agreement. Not all Aureans shared Harrosal's sen-

timent, but those who did carried enough influence that Marthal was obliged to agree with them.

"Patience, friend," Marthal said. "We can concentrate on purifying our realm once the whole of it is pacified."

"Your Grace, I cannot bear the shame any longer," Harrosol ranted on. "You promised us action. Why, if I didn't know better..."

Marthal's icy stare cut him short. "Go on. *If you didn't know better... what?*"

Harrosol's face went from livid to ashen. "Well...umm...nothing, Your Grace. Pardon my manners. It won't happen again."

Marthal nodded. "Of course it won't, old friend. You're not the sort to make the same mistake twice." Harrosol sank back into his seat. "Now then," Marthal said, turning his attention back to the map. "Let's get back to business."

He was about to inquire about the siege at Amicus when the chamber doors swung open and Asher marched in. "Pardon, Your Imperial Majesty," the lad said, "but a message and an accompanying gift have arrived from the east. The messenger claims they are meant only for your eyes and those of your council."

"Do not interrupt us with such trivial news," Marthal barked. "Such things can wait. We have more important matters to attend to now." His eyes fell back to the map.

"But Your Grace," Asher persisted, "the message is from the Salmakans you dispatched weeks ago."

Marthal lifted his gaze. "Bring them in."

Asher whistled and two servants entered the room carrying a wooden chest and a scroll tied with a purple ribbon. Marthal grinned; after a successful mission, it was customary for Salmakan assassins to deliver their victims' remains in such a chest.

“Read the message, if you please,” he said to Asher. The boy unrolled the scroll, cleared his throat, and read aloud. “Our dear friend, Oren Licinius Marthal, we thank you for the entertainment you provided. The guests you sent us were welcomed most warmly. Their company proved quite enjoyable...” —Marthal frowned— “Please know we shall return the favor soon. In the meantime, we ask that you accept this gift as a token of our gratitude.”

“Well, open the damn box and be done with it,” barked one of the exarchs. “We have important business to discuss.”

The servants lifted the chest’s lid. Realization dawned on Marthal, just as it opened. “No wait —”

Too late. Once they’d had a look under the lid, the servants screamed and recoiled, dropping the chest. The box fell and its contents spilled out onto the floor.

Cries of shock filled the room as twenty Salmakan heads rolled across the tiles. Marthal glowered into the lifeless eyes of one of his assassins. He silently cursed his scouts for failing to notify him of his plan’s failure; had he been informed sooner, he could have been spared this embarrassment.

Seeing his councilors bumbling about like a flock of startled sheep, Marthal banged his cane against the floor. The resounding crack brought instant silence. “We’ll not be spooked by this...*savagery*,” he roared. “Pull yourselves together and act like men!” The men in the room obediently calmed themselves and returned to their seats.

“If those pompous Harsonines want blood, they’ll have it,” Marthal barked. “Sooner than they think, they’ll have it.”

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Hortus Magna had been tranquil that day. The chaos of the previous weeks had finally subsided, and the city's inhabitants were calmed. The streets were safe again.

Some might have hoped for this peace to last, but Marcus was not so naive. Looking out the window of his bedchamber, he prayed to the Makers that word would not soon come of another enemy march. He knew such news would shatter the peace like a stone striking the surface of a stagnant pond. If his prayers were answered, Hortus Magna and her people could at least have a bit of respite before the war reached them.

Marcus looked up at the night sky. The stars glimmered like diamonds woven into a sheet of dark, blue velvet. The beauty of the earth's ancient veil never failed to soothe him.

"Is something wrong?" asked a soft voice behind him. Marcus turned and found himself looking into the pretty, young face of his wife, Petronilla.

He took comfort in the familiarity of her voice. "No, dearest," he said with a smile. "I was only admiring the Makers' work. It's somehow soothing to think that The Mother and Father made everything we see and more, and yet they still cared enough to make me."

"Beautiful words, dear husband," Petronilla said. "I've an even better idea of how to calm your nerves; we should host a banquet! It's been so long since we've had any real celebration in this palace. I can't think of a better way to lift everyone's spirits."

Marcus groaned. Of course Petronilla would be thinking about her next party. Though he was fond of his young wife, she seemed to have no mind for anything but fashion and festivities. She seldom

turned her attention from her parties, her wardrobe and her reputation amongst the other highborn ladies.

Noticing that her suggestion had failed to ease his mind, Petronilla approached her husband and planted a kiss on his forehead. "When I was a child, my nurse used to say, 'Don't let tomorrow's clouds ruin today's sun'," she said softly. "Come to bed. You've been absent for far too long." Marcus smiled. His wife did have an innocent sweetness about her that he had come to adore.

Just then, the herald Cedric burst huffing and puffing through the door. Exhausted from sprinting, the fat man placed his hands on his knees and gasped to catch his breath. "Mi...milord," he wheezed, "I have news."

Marcus knew the herald would not have strained himself so for any small matter. "Well, out with it," he demanded.

"A rider has come from one of our watch-towers on the outskirts of the province," Cedric gasped. "He brings urgent news: Marthal's banner was spotted less than three days ago. The usurper approaches our lands!"

Petronilla gasped. Marcus heaved a deep sigh. So the enemy was making his next thrust. "How many?" he asked.

"The rider did not bring a precise headcount," Cedric answered, "but he did say that Marthal has certainly regrouped and augmented his forces." The herald gulped. "And I'm afraid the scouts have brought more bad news: Amicus has fallen." Marcus put his head in his hands.

Having finally recovered his breath, Cedric stood at attention. "What are your orders, milord?"

Marcus turned to his wife. Somehow, he had always been able to find strength in her innocent, brown eyes. He gathered his wits, straightened him-

self and spoke in the clearest voice he could muster. “Bring me Verinus; we’ll need to summon our forces in the province to garrison the city. Send word to the rest of our armies: they are to mobilize and converge outside Hortus Magna, as soon as possible. Also, be sure to send a rider to my cousin and our allies in the desert. Tell them the time has come.”

\* \* \*

The Mongrels’ camp, pitched on the southern bank of the Great Channel, was as full of noise and debauchery as it had been in Balakar. As before, Miracel was nervous and Zarif seemed as comfortable as if he were in his own home. Miracel watched her bodyguard twirling his khanja on his finger and whistling cheerfully to himself. The man’s capacity to dance through any sort of danger never failed to astound her.

Despite her nerves, Miracel knew she had no reason to be afraid. The Mongrels might have been a dangerous lot, but they would never raise a hand against one who was paying them...unless, perhaps, someone had offered them more. Miracel shuddered and put the notion from her mind.

She turned her thoughts instead to Junayd. She had always felt grateful towards him, even when she didn’t show it, but she had never expected to feel the way she did now. Two years ago, when her father had proposed that she spend a sliver of her life living with the young khaishar, the thought had made her sick to her stomach. Now there was nothing she wanted more than to spend the rest of her days with him.

As much as she yearned for it, she knew she couldn’t stay by his side forever; the world they lived in wouldn’t allow it. But that hadn’t stopped

them from enjoying each other's company while they could.

Miracel and Junayd had shared a bed many times since their return from Sen'an, secretly, of course. They both knew the disgrace that would befall them if word of their relations were to spread. All the same, Junayd was always overjoyed to see her enter his chamber, and she had never felt happier than she did in his arms.

She dismounted in front of Savaric's tent and tied her destrier to a nearby post. She was glad to see that the sellswords kept their distance from their chief's residence. His tent was one of only two in the camp not surrounded by refuse and hairy cut-throats, the other being a strange black structure pitched a few paces away.

Miracel looked at this peculiar second tent and frowned. Oddly enough, she didn't recall seeing any such thing on her visit to the camp in Balakar. Odder still, she noticed that the Mongrels, who seldom showed the slightest respect for anything that wasn't paying them, took considerable care not to encroach on the structure. Even Theobald, who was presently strutting toward her, skirted it like a plague house.

The mercenary gave Miracel one of his famous white-toothed grins and a bow that was surprisingly poised for such a man. "We are honored by your presence, milady. The commander is expecting you."

Miracel nodded and turned to Zarif. "Await me here, please." Zarif bowed, and Miracel walked through the pavilion's flap.

Savaric sat on the far side of a circular, oak-en table. As Miracel entered, the commander bowed and gestured for her to take a seat. "Hail, Commander Longbeard," she said with a curtsy. "I trust the

first half of the gold has been delivered, as promised.”

“It has, milady,” he answered. “It’s always a pleasure to serve a client who keeps their word.”

“And I trust I can count on you to keep yours?”

“But of course. The Mongrels are yours whenever you call upon us.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Miracel said, “because that’s exactly why I’m here. Our enemy is on the move. We’ll be needing your swords.”

Savaric cocked an eyebrow. “So soon? I was hoping to enjoy more of this splendid Aurean wine before we marched. No matter. This Marthal bastard has no idea what’s coming his way.”

Miracel smiled. “I’m glad you fight with us.”

“As am I,” Savaric smiled back. “It’s not every day I get gold, wine, and a pretty face all in one bargain.”

Miracel couldn’t help but blush. “I look forward to seeing your men at work on the field.” She stood up and started for the exit.

Before she could reach the tent flap, a page-boy burst into the room, swept past her and whispered something in Savaric’s ear. The commander’s smile was replaced with an unsettled, perhaps even fearful, look. “One moment, milady,” said the sell-sword.

Miracel stopped and turned back to him. “Is there something else?”

“Forgive me,” he said, “but there is one in our camp who requests an audience.”

Miracel frowned. “I don’t have time to meet with every...*warrior* in your camp. I have duties that need attending to, now more than ever.”

“Milady, you don’t understand,” Savaric insisted. “The one who would speak with you is no



warrior; not for many years anyway. He's more feared than any warrior here, myself included."

Miracel frowned. "What do you mean?"

"This man is not what you'd call a warrior," Savaric explained. "Some say he's not a *man* at all. But he's not the sort that anyone with any sense would risk offending. If he wants a word with you, I must insist that you see him before you leave."

"Very well..." she said hesitantly. "Give me his name and where I can find him."

Savaric pushed aside the tent flap and gestured for her to follow. "You'll find him just a few paces from where we're standing. As for his name, most of us call him '*L'Sömnü*.'"

"'*The Shadow*,'" Miracel translated.

Savaric nodded. "He appeared in our camp just before we left Balakar. When he asked to travel with us, no one dared refuse."

Miracel walked out into the sun, her head full of questions. By the pavilion's entrance, Zarif and Theobald were hunched over a barrel, watching anxiously as the latter rattled a wooden cup. Theobald turned the cup over, and three dice rolled out. Upon seeing the results, the sellsword cursed and hammered his fist on the barrel's lid.

Zarif leapt with joy, and his face broke out in a smile that put even his opponent's famous grin to shame. He snatched a bag of coins from the center of their makeshift table. "Seems the Makers smile on me today."

Theobald's eyes narrowed. "One more round," he snarled.

"As you wish," Zarif said, still grinning. "Shall we lower the stakes? I'd hate to bankrupt you and ruin our friendship."

Theobald kicked the barrel aside. "Now listen here, you stinking son of a camel's—"

“Sergeant!” Savaric barked. “You will behave with dignity while in the presence of our patron.”

“What—” his eyes fell on Miracel. “Oh yes, of course, sir.” The sellsword bowed. “A thousand apologies, milady.” Miracel stifled a giggle.

“Milady, our guest awaits you,” Savaric said, gesturing to their right. Miracel shuddered; he was pointing to the strange, dark tent she had noticed earlier.

A closer look at the mysterious structure revealed even more disquieting features. A skull that Miracel guessed had once belonged to a wolf or jackal hung over the flap. When she approached the flap, she noticed that the fabric was perfectly opaque with odd symbols woven into it. Even the tent pegs were carved with strange runes.

“It’s alright, milady,” Savaric assured her. “He does not summon those he means to harm. Go on in. But please...mind your manners.”

Miracel slowly pushed aside the tent flap and ducked inside. All around her she could see nothing but pitch black.

“I was told you wanted to see me,” she said. “Is anybody here?” For a moment or two, there was no answer.

“*Come.*”

Miracel shuddered. The voice was scarcely audible and came with a slight hiss, like the sound of the cobra she’d been unable to forget. She could only just make out the words she heard.

She swiveled her head, searching anxiously for the voice’s source. All she could see were shadows. She felt a chill crawl up her spine. Shadows in dark places had frightened her since girlhood, but never so much as when she heard one of them speak: “*Here.*”

Miracel jumped back and nearly screamed. The figure she had at first mistaken for a mere shadow stood motionless in a corner. It was difficult to make out its exact shape, but from what she could see, it was scarcely human.

A set of candles ignited, illuminating the room. Miracel gasped. The one called “*L'Sömn*” stood no less than seven feet tall. His form was gaunt to the point of emaciation and covered by a great, hooded cloak of the same dark fabric as the tent. The only part of him not concealed was his face, which was what shocked her most of all. His skin was deathly pale. His eyes were scarred, white, pupilless, and clearly blind. His nose had been severed, leaving only an empty nasal cavity. For a split second, Miracel thought she was being addressed by a disembodied skull.

The cloaked figure extended a long arm and a gnarled, pale hand gestured for her to approach. She forced her feet to move and began shuffling toward him.

“*You have summoned the winds...of change,*” said the creature.

“What?” Miracel whispered. “Pardon me. I don’t understand.”

“*For the first time in many years, the sands of the east and the soil of the west have been joined,*” the creature continued. “*This union will bear fruit. This fruit will bring either sweet nourishment or bitter poison to the two worlds it is born from.*”

Miracel frowned. Had this strange figure, feared even by the Mongrels, sent for her only to speak in riddles? “I’m afraid I still don’t take your meaning.”

She nearly jumped with fright as she felt a bony finger touch her neckline. The finger’s long, untrimmed nail traced down from her collar to her

chest and stopped at her belly. *"The seed is planted here."*

Miracel gasped. "You mean..."

*"The fruit of your union will bring about a new age for both your peoples. Whether this age will be one of glory or of darkness remains to be seen. The future lies with the fruit you bear."*

Miracel's mind was flooded. She had a hundred questions, but the most she could utter was "What?"

*"You now know that which you must,"* the pale face hissed. *"Go."*

Miracel nearly ran to the exit, eager to distance herself from the strange figure. As she stumbled back into the light, she pondered what she'd been told.

Zarif, looked up from the dice he and Theobald had been rolling. "Milady, is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure yet," she mumbled. "Get the horses. We're leaving."

## Chapter XI

The past few years had been the most trying of Junayd's life, but it was still hard to remember a decision as difficult or unfair as the one he faced now. He had known this day was coming since the moment he donned his father's aso'ga. But he hadn't given it much thought. That is, until his mother had forced him to. Now his forty days of courting were spent; it was time for him to choose a wife.

He sat on his bed, wringing his hands, dreading what was waiting outside his quarters. For most young men, this day would have been a happy one, but Junayd would've given anything to escape it. He would have his pick of all the young women he knew, except the one he wanted.

He heaved a great sigh and strode out of his quarters into his pavilion's central chamber. A line of twenty-six veiled young women awaited him with their kinsfolk standing behind them. As usual, the clans had spared no expense in making their chosen daughters look as lovely as possible. The maidens were all dressed in white silk laced with gold, and their eyes were rimmed with wax and glitter.

"With your permission, Honored One," said Dabir, "the ceremony can now begin."

Junayd nodded. "Let us proceed."

The steward unrolled a scroll and read aloud. "The Sarbah clan presents their most beautiful daughter, Adara Sarbah D'jarakaí; seventeen years of age."

The first of the young women bowed and removed her veil. Her face looked even prettier than

when Junayd had courted her. "I can think of no greater honor than standing beside you as your khaishará, Honored One," the maiden said sweetly. "I vow that, should you see fit to join hands with me, I will be as kind, dutiful, and faithful a khaishará as has ever lived."

"Of that I have no doubt," Junayd replied. "Your beautiful face will be impossible to forget." The girl blushed and stepped back into her place in line.

Dabir continued, "The Jorak clan presents their daughter, Ghazal Jorak D'jarakaí; eighteen years of age."

Another young maiden with dark brown eyes stepped out from the line and removed her veil. Her face would have been pretty, had she not attempted to make it more so by convoluting it with makeup. "I can think of no greater honor than to become your wife, Honored Khaishar," she said, "and there is no woman here who desires this honor more. I pray you will choose me. We would both be deeply satisfied with the match, if I may be so bold as to say so."

Junayd forced a smile. "I'm sure we would." The maiden gave a haughty smile, flipped her hair, and stepped back into the line.

The ceremony dragged on for another hour. One young woman after another was presented, as if Junayd had somehow forgotten the women he'd spent forty days courting. Each looked lovely, but unfortunately, that was all the appeal he could see in them. The line of maidens reminded him of a shelf of dolls; pretty and dressed to perfection with false smiles painted on their faces.

Finally, to Junayd's relief, the last maiden's turn came. The senseless ceremony was nearly over.

Dabir cleared his throat. "The clan of Jaron presents their most beloved daughter, Karam Jaron D'jarakaf; seventeen years of age."

The last girl stepped forward and removed her veil. She wasn't much prettier nor less so than the others, but her face brought Junayd a slight feeling of comfort. He had known her since before was old enough to ride, and during the days of courting, Junayd remembered feeling just a bit more at ease in her company.

Like the maidens before her, Karam began reciting the speech that had undoubtedly been prepared by her elders: "Honored Khaishar, I regret that I am allowed only a few words, but I will do my best with the few moments I have. I know you carry a heavy burden. The fate of many peoples rests on the edge of your sword. This cannot be easy." The girl's kinsmen exchanged surprised glances; she had strayed from the words they'd composed for her.

Karam continued. "You and I are more alike than you think. Not long ago, I too lost my father. He fell at The Twins.—" This shocked her kinsmen even more. "—I have shed my tears for him, but I am proud that he died fighting by your side. And I would be proud to stand beside you as he did and share your burden."

Junayd could not hide his surprise. The customary practice for bridal candidates was to try and win the suitor's favor with a few courteous words, usually prepared by their elders and thoroughly rehearsed. Such a candid expression as that given by this maiden was rare, to say the least.

Junayd cleared his throat. "I thank each and every one of you. I will announce my choice tomorrow morning." The maidens and maliqs took their bows and filed out of the pavilion.

“A usual ceremony for the most part,” Mahir remarked. “If I may, I’d like to suggest the one from the Sarbah clan. They’ve given us some of our best warriors. It would only be fair to reward them with this honor.”

“You are not wrong, Mahir,” Dabir said, “but I find the Larrah girl to be the most suitable. Our tribe’s most prosperous traders hail from her clan; a union between their daughter and the khaishar could be quite profitable.”

“My son would be wise to choose the maiden he believes to be the wisest,” said Junayd’s mother. “No one is closer to a khaishar than his khaishará and a wise woman is worth a hundred horses and twice as many swords. Only a fool chooses a wife based only on the beauty of her face or the size of her father’s purse.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Zarif sighed, shaking his head remorsefully. “No one understands this better than I. Whomever the khaishar chooses, I hope for his sake that she’s easy to please. Take my word for it, Honored One, the Abyss holds no agony like a shrew’s wrath.” Junayd’s mother glared at the young man, but none of the men in the chamber could disagree.

“My friends, I appreciate your counsel,” Junayd said, “but I have only a few hours to choose the woman who will stand beside me until I die...” He dropped his gaze.

“It’s rather unfair, really,” he barked. “So I’d prefer to be left in peace while I ponder my choices.” With that, Junayd turned his back on the assembly and stormed into his quarters.

He had indeed been eager to leave the assembly, though not to consider his choice for a bride. He had chosen already.

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Táim Jarum D'jarakaí, abdul of the Jarum clan, lifted his arms to the sky and recited: "We, the children of D'jará, have gathered here this day to witness the union between two of our most beloved *kaí*. Let us ask that the Makers bless them and the fruit of their union."

Before him stood the young Khaishar D'jarakaí and his bride. The khaishar was clad in a white silk tunic with a gold-colored sash, his blue keffiyeh, and his golden aso'ga. His bride was dressed in her clan's white wedding robes with her face covered by a traditional veil. The rest of the tribe was gathered in a great mass around them, all clad in their finest garments for the occasion.

"Truly, this is a blessed day for our *kaí*," said Táim. "Today, before Ursha, the ever-nurturing Mother, and Talís, the Righteous Father, we join two of our kin in holy union. Be it Their divine will, this everlasting bond will strengthen our people and bring good fortune and happiness to us all." His words drew an assent of cheers from the crowd.

Táim waited for the cheers to subside, then continued, "Let our blessed kinsfolk take their vows before the Makers, that by Their divine will, they shall be eternally bound in Their eyes." Táim motioned for the Khaishar to begin.

Junayd looked into his bride's dark eyes and recited his vow. "I, Junayd Jarum D'jarakaí, pledge myself to you, heart, body, and soul. I pray you will accept my undying love and loyalty. May the love of the Mother fill our hearts and the strength of the Father keep us true."

His bride removed her veil to reveal her pretty, beaming face. She cleared her throat and said in as steady a voice as she could manage, "I, Karam Jaron D'jarakaí, gladly accept. And I pledge myself to you, heart, body, and soul. I pray you will accept my undying love and loyalty. May the love of the

Mother fill our hearts and the strength of the Father keep us true.”

Junayd grinned. “With a heart full of joy, I accept.”

“Do you swear, before the Makers, to forever honor one another, as well as the vows you have taken this day?” the abdul asked.

“We swear it,” the two said in unison.

“And do you also swear to honor and uphold the laws of our *kaí*, as well as those of the Makers?”

“We swear it.”

“Then, by the divine judgement of Father Talis and the unending grace of Mother Ursha,” said the abdul, “I bind you as man and wife.” He reached into his urn and sprinkled a dash of blessed water over the couple’s smiling heads. To complete the ceremony, Khaishará Fataya approached and placed her own silver *aso’ga* on Karam’s brow. The crowd erupted into a roar of applause.

“Our khaishar may now take our khaishará as his own,” the abdul said. Junayd drew Karam’s smiling face to his and pressed his lips to hers.

The onlookers cheered as Junayd took his new khaishará in his arms and carried her to her new home. Among all the faces in the crowd, only one, a fair face with long, red locks, was streaked with tears. Miracel had to struggle to keep from sobbing as she watched Junayd carry his bride to their pavilion. What would she tell him now?

## Chapter XII

It was an hour past daybreak when the first of Marthal's columns appeared on the horizon. Every day since receiving warning of their approach, Marcus had watched from the window of his study, hoping that, somehow, the inevitable would not come. But, of course, his hope had been in vain.

For days he'd watched Hortus Magna fill to the brim with soldiers and refugees from across the province. He knew the defenders were heavily outnumbered, but with a little luck, the city's sandstone walls would help even the odds.

Once the enemy became visible, the city's bells began sounding the alarm. Marcus had Cedric summon the Prosidiars while he and Unaka strapped on their arms and armor. His guard unit joined them on the way to the walls.

Marcus looked out over the parapets. The rising sun glinted off the approaching enemy battalions. He could hear the rhythm of war drums drawing nearer.

Trumpets blasted throughout the city, calling the garrison to arms. Harsonine colors were raised on every tower. The archers took their positions on the battlements. The gates were barred and the portcullis lowered. The ropes and beams of the ballistas creaked as the mechanisms were wound and loaded. Within a half-hour, the city's defenses were ready.

A half-hour later, the enemy battalions came to a halt about six hundred yards from the walls. The enemy host fanned out across the field below, giving the defenders a good look at the superior size of their force. With the golden eyes on their banners

fluttering above them, the mass of attackers looked like some thousand-eyed demon come to devour the city.

Although the situation was unnerving, Marcus was relieved to see proud looks of courage on the men beside him. He contemplated his soldiers' faces. "*These men chose to remain true,*" he thought. "*They did not forget their loyalty.*" The thought gave him much-needed comfort.

Three riders rode forth from Marthal's ranks, one of whom carried the white flag of truce. Marcus groaned impatiently. This would be the customary attempt at parley. Both sides already knew both the proposal the messenger would offer and the answer he would receive, but it was a necessary formality if one was to maintain the appearance of a civilized ruler.

"Let's get this over with," Marcus grunted. "I don't want to converse with one of these bastards any longer than I have to."

He, Unaka, and his Prosidiar guards descended the wall's steps to the street below. There, they mounted their chargers and spurred them toward the gates. A valtra battalion was already standing at attention by the gatehouse.

Marcus motioned for the gates to be opened. Soon the bars were lifted and the doors swung open to let the three riders in.

The messenger himself was a handsome young officer who looked to be in his mid-twenties. His cohorts were both green recruits who couldn't have been more than twenty years of age.

When he saw Marcus, the emissary bowed his head. "Hail, my lord. I am Captain Maro Tarus Lucinius, proud servant of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Oren Licinius Marthal of Vere Aureus. His Grace sends his greetings. I've been charged with delivering his terms to his worthy adversaries."

“I’d advise you not to refer to your master as ‘*emperor*’ again,” Marcus said sharply. “We don’t take kindly to pretenders here. Now, speak quickly. I don’t enjoy wasting time with traitorous scum.”

The man called Lucinius kept a straight face as he proceeded. “His Grace is a kind ruler and offers a peaceful alternative to war; House Harsonine and all its followers will be forgiven if they will but ask his pardon. Simply acknowledge His Grace as your sovereign, open the gates, lay down your arms, and no more good Aurean blood need be spilled.”

Marcus scoffed. “I suppose that rabble your master’s brought with him is supposed to frighten me into agreeing to his grandiose demands. Even if I were impressed with his pack of glorified thugs, does he really expect me to trust the word of a traitor?”

“His Grace can be most gracious in victory,” said Lucinius. “He gives you his word of honor that no harm will come to you, nor your family, nor your people, provided you accept his mercy. What say you?”

“What say I?” Marcus asked. He thought for a moment. “I’ll make one request of you and your comrades,” he said.

Lucinius frowned. “Oh? What might we do for you?”

“I ask that you have the decency to wash your asses,” Marcus shouted for all to hear. “We’d rather not have to stare at something filthy while we watch you flee!”

A rumble of laughter rose up from the surrounding soldiers. The looks of the messenger’s two escorts had turned to scowls, but the disciplined officer’s face remained expressionless.

“Very well,” said Lucinius. “Our mercy has been extended and refused. Now, our swords will do what our words could not,” With that, the emissary

and his cohorts turned their mounts and galloped back out through the gates.

Within minutes, the defenders were back at their posts, bracing themselves for the assault. The grips tightened on every sword and pike. Every crossbow was wound. Fear and determination were etched into every man's face.

To Marcus' surprise, the columns on the field below moved back from the walls they had come to seize and began fanning out further. They were moving to surround the city. The attackers weren't planning to storm the walls; they were laying siege.

As Marcus watched from the parapets, he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or afraid. If Marthal intended to carry out an extended siege, there would be time for Harsonine reinforcements to arrive from the desert and southern provinces. But Marthal certainly knew this as well, and "Lord Golden Gaze" was nowhere near stupid enough for such a blunder. No doubt he had something planned.

Marcus was grateful for the moment of safety, brief as it might've been, but he knew he wouldn't rest easy until he knew his adversary's scheme. He knew better than to let his guard down when a man like Marthal was near.

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Any other man might have been furious at having to face bad news on the morning after his wedding night, but in recent years, Junayd had grown accustomed to such unpleasant surprises. And so he was able to remain calm when he awoke to find a distraught courier carrying Marcus' pleas for help.

His new khaishará, on the other hand, was making her displeasure abundantly clear. "On our

first day?!” Karam wailed. “Why now? Can’t we have just a few days together before you go galloping off to war?”

“I’m in as much pain as you are, my khaishará,” Junayd fibbed. “But when an ally calls for help, every second until you’re by his side weighs heavily —”

“But, *today*?!” she moaned. “It’s our first day as khaishar and khaishará. We have a right to spend it together.”

“I take no more pleasure in leaving than you do in seeing me go,” Junayd insisted. “But, if I didn’t, you would be the wife of a dishonorable coward. Surely when you agreed to marry me, you understood I’d still have my duties —”

Karam hurled one of her pillows at her husband’s head. Junayd ducked and raised his hands defensively as his wife picked up another linen missile. But, rather than throw it, she put her face in it and began sobbing pitifully. “But today?” she moaned. “I’ve dreamed of this day since I was a girl. Can’t we at least have our first day together?”

“Please, don’t cry,” Junayd pleaded, tying his sash. Karam continued weeping.

Junayd was saddened by the sight of his new bride’s tears, but there was no time for pity. He hardened his heart and said in a firm tone, “I am truly sorry, my love, but I cannot allow my own desires to keep me from my duty. In the meantime, I must ask that you do not allow anyone to see you in this state. As Khaishará D’jarakaí, you ought to be an example of strength and courage. I cannot have my wife disheartening our people with her tears.” He bowed. “Farewell, my khaishará.” He turned and marched out of the pavilion, leaving Karam with her face still buried in the pillow.

Outside, his *Horlas Ashayat* stood ready to ride with him. The D’jarakaí host was assembling

around them and a large party of tribal elites had gathered to see them off.

Dabir, Mahir, and even Junayd's mother looked astonished at the callous farewell they'd overheard. In truth, Junayd was already regretting it himself, but it was too late to worry about that now.

He mounted Scarab, drew his shamshir and shouted, "Brothers, ride with me!"

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The Odos Pass, which just a day earlier had been occupied only by mountain rams and kites, was now nearly paved with men-at-arms in marching formation. Miracel and the Mongrels were the first to arrive, as they had been camped closest to the pass. They had waited there for a day or so until they saw what looked like a massive sandstorm galloping towards them. Some of the more superstitious mercenaries feared they were being set upon by demons; it took a bit of shouting and a few light thrashings to keep them in order.

The Mongrels' fear turned to awe when they saw that the mass approaching them was, in fact, a great host of Eremukaí riders. All were glad to hear that these new arrivals were allies.

The riders came to a halt a hundred or so paces from the Mongrels, and an enormous tarp was rolled out for a brief war council. With Savaric and Zarif beside her, Miracel rode out to take her place. The khaishars of the D'jarakaí, Torakaí, Sarrakaí, Alikeí, and Mosakaí bowed as she approached.

"Gratitude to you all for your presence" Miracel began. "Each of you has proven his worth by honoring our pact here today. Let me assure you that we Harsonines will see your loyalty handsomely rewarded." The others in the small assembly smiled and nodded their approval.



“We face a dangerous foe,” Junayd said.  
 “True, we’ve assembled an impressive host, but let’s not forget our enemy’s talent for deception. We have already underestimated Marthal once and paid dearly for it. If we do so again, I’ll wager my best horse it’ll be for the last time.” He gave his words a moment to sink in before continuing. “Speed will be everything over the next few days. I promise you, if Marthal gets into Hortus Magna, getting him out will be all but impossible.”

“Then our lady was wise to choose the Eremukaí to ride with her,” Khaishar Alikai said with a smug grin. “From the world’s eastern corner to the sun’s resting place in the west, you’ll never find a horseman who can outride an Eremukaí.”

“There’s no denying that,” said Savaric.  
 “You lads can take the lead, and we’ll follow quick as we can.”

“It may be a better idea to wait until all our forces can converge and attack at once,” Khaishar Mosakaí suggested. “A united host is stronger than a divided one.”

“On any other day, I’d agree,” said Mahir.  
 “But today we can’t afford to let these Balakan footmen slow us down. If Marthal gets into Hortus Magna... Well, you know what that would mean.”

“We’ll be there beside you before you know it,” Savaric assured them. “You’d be surprised how fast a sellsword can march when there’s enough coin to persuade him.”

“In that case, tell your men they may earn a bonus if their haste impresses us,” Miracel said.

Savaric smiled. “Certainly, milady.”

Khaishar Alikai sprang to his feet. “Enough talk. Let’s get moving! I’ll wager a barrel of water it’ll be an Alikai who gets there first.”

“You may come to regret that,” Junayd jeered.

The council dissolved without further delay, and the ground soon shook beneath thousands of hoofbeats.

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The night was dark, peaceful and silent as a corpse. The only light shining over Hortus Magna was a tiny sliver of moon that sat in the heavens like the fingernail of some great sky god. The city lay quiet. There wasn't a soul to be seen, save the handful of sentries on watch.

This was just the way Corporal Isaias Marra Trusan liked it. He enjoyed the quiet, particularly on a night like this, when the stench of fear and anticipation hung in the air.

He let out a long yawn and looked out over the parapet. Putting his weight on his pike, he surveyed the land below. A faint rustle drew his attention, but such things no longer alarmed him. Every night since the start of the siege, he and the other sentries had been jumping at shadows and noises, only to find they were caused by some rabbit or a certain stray cow that had become a particular nuisance. He felt sure tonight would be no different.

Isaias' suspicions were confirmed, when a loud "*Moo*" bellowed up from below. He gave an angry grunt. *That damned cow!* The beast had set off his nerves so many times that he'd had to restrain himself from putting a crossbow bolt in its gut.

Listlessly walking his rounds, Isaias nearly bumped into a mitzclah crossbowman shuffling in the opposite direction. He recognized the archer: his friend, Umayr.

"What're you doing here?" Isaias asked. "I thought you were s'posed to be relieved hours ago. And where in the Abyss are the others? The lieu-

tenant said a whole 'nother company was s'posed to be patrolling this section with us."

Umayr yawned. "Aye. The Eighth Company was s'posed to be here too, but I heard they was just now redepl...redeplo...moved. Sarge says it's just us on the wall tonight."

Isaias scratched the scruff of his chin. "I didn't hear nothin' 'bout it. Whose orders?"

Umayr shrugged. "I dunno. I don't ask much, see. Just go where they say, when they say."

Isaias groaned and rubbed his eyes. "Well, that's a bit odd idn't it? They expect a couple dozen of us to man the whole western wall on our own? I'll have to ask the lieutenant 'bout this."

The men were startled by a clatter from the other side of the turret tower. "D'you hear that?" Isaias asked, suddenly alert.

Umayr waved dismissively. "Probably just some bored lad trying to make music by drumming with his pike. I'm so bored myself, I can hardly blame him."

"It wouldn't hurt to check," Isaias said, the unease clear in his voice.

Umayr rolled his eyes. "If it'll keep your britches dry, I'll go take a peek. I'll be back in a second." The mitzclah slipped through the tower's doorway and out onto the next section of the wall, slamming the door behind him.

Isaias waited a second ...five seconds...a minute...two minutes, five minutes.... "What's going on over there?" he shouted. He was about to have a look for himself when the tower door finally swung open. Umayr's stocky figure stood in the doorway.

"Damn it!" Isaias barked. "What took you so long? I was half a heartbeat from raising the alarm." Umayr didn't answer.

“Well, c’mon. Let’s get back to our rounds then,” said Isaias. The archer neither moved nor spoke. A gust of wind caused the torchlight to flare up, giving Isaias a glimpse of Umayr’s face. It was ashen and wide-eyed as if the man were staring at a ghost.

“What’s the matter?” Isaias asked, gripping his pike. “Did you see somethin’?”

No answer.

“Well, open your damn mouth!”

Umayr complied. His mouth opened and a long blade, red with gore, slid out between his teeth. The mitzclah gurgled, spewing blood, as the sword he had been skewered with was jerked back out of his skull. His assassin gave him a kick in the back, knocking his lifeless corpse flat at his friend’s feet. Isaias recoiled and screamed at the top of his lungs.

Two burly assailants stepped out from the tower. They wore light armor, painted black to blend into the night. Isaias stumbled backward. The attackers gritted their teeth and charged.

*“The alarm,”* Isaias thought. *“I’ve got to raise the alarm!”*

Fortunately, the nearest bell tower was no more than a stone’s throw away, but Isaias wasn’t sure he’d make it even that far. He sprinted toward the tower as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. He dared not look back, but he could hear his pursuers’ footfalls just behind his heels. He bolted through the tower door, slammed it shut, and barred it with his pike, just in time to stop the nearest attacker.

No sooner was the pike in place than he heard the crash of an axe blade tearing at the door. Isaias grabbed a mallet from a nearby shelf and ran up the stairs to the tower’s bronze bell. He took a deep breath and mustered all his strength for the swing that might save him and the city.

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Rather than spend the nights in his bed-chamber, Marcus had elected to sleep in the officers' barracks for the duration of the siege. There, he would be closer to the wall and able to respond quickly, in case Marthal made his move in the night.

He was enjoying a dream full of comely women and white sand beaches when a harsh clanging roused him. At first, all he felt was annoyance. Then his senses returned, he recognized the sound of the city's warning bells, and his irritation turned to alarm.

He sprang out of bed faster than ever before. The men around him were busy arming themselves and shaking their comrades from their slumber. Cursing that there were no attendants there to assist him, he began strapping on his own armor.

The instant he'd buckled his last strap, Marcus began yelling, "To arms! To arms! Let's go lads! We've got a fight to win!"

He rushed to the nearest doorway and out into the street. Unaka was already waiting with a charger and a contingent of mounted, battle-ready Prosidiars. Marcus hauled himself into the charger's saddle, turned to his men, and shouted, "If they want this city, then, by the Makers, we'll make them pay for it—every brick!"

The troops answered him with a great "Hurrah!"

Marcus gave his charger a sharp kick, and he and his cohorts set off galloping toward the western gate, the source of the alarm. It wasn't long before the bell fell silent. No doubt the intruders had finally managed to silence the brave soul who'd been ringing it, but that was of no consequence now. The city was awake, and the battle had begun.

Like ants swarming toward a breach in their mound, defenders rushed from all across the city to the western gate. No longer concerned with stealth, the attackers clambered up their ladders and packed into the gatehouse. The gates had already been forced open, and the portcullis was being raised. The intruders consolidated their foothold, hoping to keep the gateway open long enough for their comrades on the other side to march through.

A handful of militiamen attempted to force the gates shut, but the raiders had nailed strange braces into the hinges to hold them open. The militiamen were driven off by a barrage of javelins, crossbow bolts and stones from the murder holes above them.

Marcus and his Prosidiars galloped to the embattled section of the wall. The defenders greatly outnumbered the raiders, but Marcus knew they were up against more than ordinary killers. For such an operation, Marthal would have chosen only his most dangerous followers, hardened veterans who had survived many battles and cut down many men in their time.

A company of the Town Watch reached the gatehouse first and swiftly ascended the battlements to confront the intruders. But the militiamen were no match for the professional soldiers that awaited them. Soon their screams echoed in Marcus' ears and their bloodied corpses were tumbling off the walls to the street below.

Fortunately, two battalions of valtra reached the wall shortly after and hurried up the towers to join the fight. Well-trained and well-armed, these soldiers would perhaps be able to challenge the raiders. Even so, Marcus knew the outcome rested on the point of a needle. Hopefully, he and his cohorts would be the push needed to tip it in their favor.

He and his company galloped toward the gates, yelling for bystanders to clear the streets. They pulled their horses to a halt before the gateway and his guards slid from their saddles as quickly as their heavy armor would allow.

Before dismounting, Marcus turned to the men around him, brandished his broadsword and gave a ferocious howl. In the torchlight, his polished armor shone like a candle in the dark. He trotted his horse back and forth, ensuring that his men got a good view of their commander. Once he was satisfied with the spectacle, he dismounted and followed his guards up the gatehouse's wooden staircase.

Marcus knew the gates were all that mattered now. If the attackers managed to hold them long enough to let their comrades in, the city would fall before the sun rose.

Marcus and his cohorts rushed up the staircase into the chamber housing the portcullis' opening mechanism. The chamber floor was littered with the bodies of friend and foe alike, but the thirteen attackers still guarding the crank had held their ground. Their painted-black armor was splotted with the blood of the brave men who had tried to push past them. Marcus clenched his teeth and led his men in a charge.

From the moment Marcus' blade met his enemy's, he knew he was outmatched. His blow was easily deflected, and a powerful counterstrike forced him backward. His opponent advanced slowly with a smug smile on his face.

Marcus gathered his courage and charged once more, hoping some stroke of luck might save his life: an error on his foe's part, help from one of his comrades, or even a bit of divine intervention. He raised his sword and swung down at his enemy's neck. The raider stopped the blade with his cross-

guard and shoved it off to the side. Marcus stepped back and raised his sword to parry his opponent's overhead strike.

Sparks flew as the blades clashed. Marcus staggered under the force of the blow. He made a desperate stab at the raider's knee, but the more experienced fighter easily sidestepped the attack and proceeded to bring his boot down on the broad side of the blade. Marcus' sword was torn from his grasp. There was a loud clang as it slammed against the stone floor, pinned under his enemy's foot.

His opponent smiled triumphantly and slowly approached him as a lion would a wounded sheep. Marcus looked desperately to his cohorts, but the Prosidiars had their hands full with the other raiders.

He threw up his arms in a futile effort to shield himself. His foe gave him a kick to the abdomen, causing him to trip backward over the corpse of a fallen militiaman. His ankle was twisted, but his heart was racing so fast that he hardly noticed the pain. He whispered a quick prayer to the Makers, pleading for their help and making his peace in case they refused. Still smiling, the raider drew back his sword and aimed the point at Marcus' throat.

There was a flash of steel and the smiling face was gone. A small crimson geyser sprung up in its place. The decapitated body went limp and collapsed, spilling blood across the floor like wine from an overturned urn.

Unaka stepped over the corpse he'd made and pulled his friend to his feet. Marcus knew he ought to give his shield-bearer all the thanks and praise in the world, but the only words his reeling mind could find were, "G-g-good one." Unaka smiled.



Four of Marcus' twenty guards lay dead and four more wounded, but they had managed to dispatch the last of the raiders guarding the mechanism. A Prosidiar cut the mechanism's rope, and the portcullis fell back into place.

Another group of raiders appeared in the doorway at the top of the next set of stairs, but this time the defenders were ready. Unaka drew his bloodied scimitar and twirled it through the air, so it looked like ten blades. The Prosidiars aimed their pikes towards the narrow doorway and awaited the enemy charge. A handful of crossbowmen filed in behind them and stood at the ready with their weapons wound. When the intruders saw what awaited them below, most conceded defeat and withdrew. Those who did not were quickly cut down.

Within a half-hour, what few attackers remained had decided to cut their losses. To their credit, they withdrew in a disciplined manner, never turning their backs on the defenders and carrying out as many of their wounded as they could manage. Those who were able slid back down the ladders they had come by. These men ran back to the battle lines of their comrades, who had assembled and approached the wall in hopes of gaining entrance. The archers sent a few volleys after them, but their black garb made them difficult targets in the darkness.

Those too wounded to retreat dropped their weapons and fell to their knees. These were brusquely shackled and led off to the stockades.

Marcus leaned on Unaka's shoulder as they descended the tower stairs. His wits slowly returned as they walked. Two sentiments occupied his mind. The first was relief and jubilation at the victory they had gained. The second was revulsion at the spectacle around him.

He'd never thought he'd see so much butchery, at least not in such a small space. He and Unaka had to be careful not to trip over mutilated corpses. The gatehouse stairways were nearly paved with gore. The blood dripping down the side of the wall was so thick that it seemed the stones were painted red.

In spite of the carnage, Marcus knew fortune had favored them. If Marthal had penetrated the walls, they could never have held him back. Tomorrow, he would have to visit the temple and thank the Makers for seeing the city through.

Unaka helped his lord into his saddle. Marcus looked to the troops and raised his fist. "Well done brothers!" he cried. "We've sent them running. The day is ours!"

As the men cheered, Marcus turned and belted over the wall, "Is that the best you can do, bastards? Come, have another go! This time we'll show you a real welcome!"

That last taunt took what was left of his strength. Luckily, Unaka was quick enough to catch his friend by the shoulder before he slid off his horse.

### Chapter XIII

It was just past the break of dawn when the walls of Hortus Magna came into sight. Junayd immediately sent a rider ahead to confirm that they had not come too late. He was overjoyed at the news the rider brought back: Marthal had been repelled and retreated back to the north. The other chiefs were equally pleased, except for Khaishar Torakaí, who had been hoping the day would end in glorious battle.

Once Miracel and Savaric arrived, they joined their Eremukaí allies and made their way to the city gates. The sentries were willing to admit Miracel and the D'jarakaí, but it took a frustrating shouting match and direct orders relayed from Marcus to get the gates open for the others.

Verinus was waiting on the other side with a dozen Prosidiar escorts. Naturally, Marcus had chosen the handsome captain to greet his guests; the young officer's good looks and natural charm made him ideal for treating with dignitaries.

Upon seeing the newcomers approach, Verinus raised his hand and said, "*Murhad Sadyequn!* Welcome, friends!"

A few Eremukaí chuckled, leaving Verinus perplexed. Junayd would have liked to tell the poor Aurean that his Eremukaí was flawed—the correct phrase was, "*Mirhaid Sadyaqun*"—but he didn't want to embarrass the captain further by correcting him in front of the others.

Verinus brushed off his chagrin and invited the arrivals to accompany him to the palace. Junayd noticed the other Eremukaís' awe at the city around them. This didn't surprise him; this was likely the first real city they had laid eyes on.

Young Khaishar Torakaí pointed at the temple minarets. "Look at that!" he squealed. A Torakaí

cohort quickly pushed the boy's arm down and whispered something in his ear, most likely advising against such childlike behavior.

"It is quite a sight," Khaishar Alikai remarked.

"I must say," said Khaishar Sarraikai, "these fairskins may be second-rate horsemen, but they do know a thing or two about building."

Khaishar Mosakai scoffed. "Bah! It's only a few piles of rocks and wood. My kinsfolk and I could turn it to rubble in a matter of days."

This last remark seemed to irk the Aureans in the company. Verinus opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it and remained silent.

Meanwhile, many of the city's inhabitants looked perturbed at seeing the armed Eremukai within their walls, but fortunately, they had the sense to keep their feelings to themselves. The group made their way directly to the strategos' palace, where the rest of their allies awaited them in the rooftop garden.

They found Marcus and his council seated around their usual table. Upon seeing his cousin's smiling face, the young noble hobbled over and embraced her warmly. From the way the strategos walked, Junayd guessed he'd suffered a minor injury, perhaps a twisted ankle, in the recent battle. Luckily, he seemed to be in otherwise perfect health.

Marcus turned to the rest of the arrivals. "I bid you all welcome," he said, struggling to bow with his injured ankle. "Please, come and enjoy yourselves. It's always an honor to extend our hospitality to valued friends."

Each seat at the table was set with a plate of grapes and a goblet of the finest white wine in the province. A platter of pastries was also laid in the

center. After having been away from her homeland for so long, Miracel found the Aurean delicacies irresistible. However, she was careful to remember her decorum; she took only a single pastry and a sip or two of wine.

Aside from Junayd and Mahir, the Eremukaí guests refrained from touching their food; they simply sat and stared awkwardly at their plates. Khaishar Torakaí reached for a pastry, but his cohort gave him a slap on the wrist.

Marcus frowned. "If you prefer something else, I can certainly have it fetched."

"No, no, my lord," Khaishar Sarrakaí insisted. "It is only that, well..."

It struck Marcus like a brick. "Of course," he smiled. "Please allow me to ease your minds." He plucked a pastry from the platter and took a large bite. He then shuffled around the table taking a small sip from each man's goblet and a grape from each of their plates. "It is our tradition, after all, that he who provides the wine should taste it first."

Looking relieved, albeit somewhat embarrassed, the sand-dwellers thanked their host and helped themselves. "I hope you'll forgive our distrust," Khaishar Alikeí said, spraying crumbs from his mouth. "We meant no disrespect, but..."

Marcus waved dismissively. "No need for apologies. I'd expect nothing less, given what our enemy's *'hospitality'* has cost you. I only hope you'll come to see that not all Aureans are like him." He took his seat at the head of the table and raised his goblet. "Let us drink to our new friendship...and to our enemy's coming end. May traitors' blood soon stain our swords!" He ended his toast with a gulp from his wine glass.

Every goblet at the table was raised to join his toast and those who still had enough wine left took swigs as well. Then they sat down, and the de-

liberations began. Marcus took pleasure in recounting how he and his men had repelled Marthal's night raid. Sacor and Maconith inquired as to the strength of the Eremukaí hosts, while the khaishars were anxious to hear how many men the Aureans could muster. Savaric was more interested in the strength of their enemies and what weaknesses there might be to exploit.

The chatter continued until every cup at the table was empty. Taking note of this, Marcus refilled his goblet before speaking further. "Marthal has withdrawn, for the moment," he said, taking a sip from his newly filled glass, "but we'd be fools to think his back will be turned to us for long. We'll be seeing him again soon, and we'd best be ready when we do."

"He's got more to fear than us," Khaishar Mosakaí scoffed, pouring himself another cup of wine. "With nearly ten thousand Eremukaí warriors coming for his head, the bastard's probably wetting his breeches as we speak."

"Marthal always has a card to play." Imperator Sarconius entered and took his seat. "Forgive my tardiness. I was overseeing the training of our new recruits. Now, about Marthal, I've served with the man all throughout the Amaltr campaign and against the Lower Kingdoms a few years back. I must say, those wits of his saved our necks more than once. Even when I was sure we were doomed, he could always procure some trick to save us."

"He's a coward who relies on treachery and deception," Khaishar Mosakaí snarled.

Sarconius shrugged. "He used to say 'War is deception,' and he's one of the greatest deceivers I know. Say what you will about Marthal; he's always been the one left standing."

"New conscriptions were issued a few months ago," said Maconith. "If we can allow just a

little more time for their training, we'll have a fresh crop of troops to march with us."

"Marthal will have done the same by then," said Miracel. "And every day we delay is another day loyal Aureans are under his yoke."

"How right you are," Sacor agreed. "I'm sure that by now you've all received word of the '*cleansings*' he's been conducting..." The admiral shuddered. "Marthal was never one to shy away from bloodshed, but I never would've thought him capable of the massacres I've been hearing of. The sooner he's dead, the sooner decent Aureans can sleep safely."

"I say we move the moment we can," Savaric suggested. "Marthal's not expecting an attack just yet, and together, we have the numbers to strike him. Believe me, I've been in this business long enough to know; in moments like these, you mustn't wait and hope for a better chance. It won't come. Never does." The others at the table scratched their chins and knit their brows.

"I am, of course, only a servant, milord," the mercenary continued, "but I pray you'll heed my advice. If you don't mind, the lads and I would rather live to spend the payment we've been promised."

Khaishar Sarrakaí laughed. "I'll drink to that." He took a deep swig from his goblet. There was a round of chuckles around the table, and many joined in the khaishar's toast.

Marcus drummed his fingers on the table. "Are we in agreement then? Shall we move now?" There was a murmur of affirmation. "I suppose it's decided then," he said. "We'll march as soon as our forces are assembled. I look forward to riding beside you all."

Khaishar Alikeí raised his hand. "One last thing, my lord; with your permission, it might be

best if we Eremukaí to ride ahead of the rest of you. I don't mean to boast, but the sons of Eremus are the fastest riders on either side of this war. We can snap at our enemies' heels, soften them up. It'll make the job that much easier when we engage them for the final battle." The Eremukaí present clamored in agreement, except for Khaishar Sarrakaí, who didn't like the idea of having to gallop harder and longer than necessary.

"I must agree with the khaishar," said Miracel. "Desert riders can outride any horsemen within a thousand leagues from here. It'd be stupid to waste that advantage."

Marcus nodded. "Very well then. Oh, and I almost forgot; newcomers, as a final token of our friendship, a room has been prepared for each of you in our guest quarters. I think you'll find them most comfortable."

The Eremukaí exchanged uncomfortable glances. Marcus frowned; he'd thought dunemen would welcome the chance to spend the night in Aurean luxury.

"Pardon, my lord," Junayd said. "You honor us with your hospitality, but such an arrangement would not be proper for an Eremukaí chief. An honorable khaishar sleeps and rises with his people whenever he can."

Marcus smiled. "Ah yes, I understand. You are, of course, at perfect liberty to come and go as you please." Relief settled over the Eremukaí, and they began taking their leave with amicable bows and farewells.

Marcus took up his goblet and clinked it against Savaric's. "To victory!"

"To victory," the sellsword agreed. Both men took savory gulps.

Marcus flopped back down in his wicker chair only to have its willow weaving collapse be-



neath his weight. He tumbled over with his rear through the chair's bottom, spilling wine across the floor. Khaishar Torakaí stifled a giggle and even Junayd found it difficult to keep himself from laughing. Marcus put his weight on the table and hauled himself to his feet, forcing a smile.

The incident also had an effect on Savaric, but his expression was one of intrigue. He stroked his beard pensively. "Milord, may I speak with you a moment, before you retire for the night?"

"Certainly," Marcus answered, glad for the excuse to slip away. "Let's talk in my study."

Junayd and the rest of the Eremukaí made their way down the stairs and out to the palace's outer gate, where the stable boys were waiting with their horses. A Prosidiar unit had also been sent to escort them out of the city.

Junayd breathed a sigh of relief. He was sure he had not been alone in feeling nervous about the meeting. The "dunemen" of the Eremus and the "fairskins" of the west seldom looked upon each other with favor. Even now, the shopkeepers, peddlers and other bystanders in the streets around him were giving the party uneasy looks.

The Eremukaís' faces relaxed as they exited through the city's southern gate. The khaishars and their retainers made their way to their respective sections of the massive camp the five tribes had formed outside the walls.

Maliqs of every *kaí* had protested vehemently against this close arrangement of separate tribes' encampments. One elder had likened the layout to "putting a candle next to spilled palm oil, in a straw hut." Nevertheless, the khaishars had decided that this would be the safest course of action, both for their peoples and for the local Aureans.

Each of the five khaishars had given strict orders against any violence towards the adjacent

tribes and made promises of retribution if those orders were violated. Nonetheless, the atmosphere among the tents was rather uneasy. Shouting matches and heated quarrels were already prevalent along the camp's borders. Whatever cause may have united the Eremukai, whatever reward they'd been promised, cooling desert blood was all but impossible.

As Junayd undid his sash, he whispered a quiet prayer, beseeching the Makers to let the fragile peace last the night. He brushed through the flap to his chambers and leapt back in surprise; he was not alone. Sitting on his bed, wrapped in a silken cloak, was Karam.

The khaishará smiled. "I've been waiting for you, my dear khaishar."

It took a moment for Junayd to find his tongue. "Karam!?" he stammered. "How-? When-? What-?"

"I could not bear to be apart from you," she explained. "Not after having spent so little time by your side. Forgive me for not informing you of my coming, but I know you have much on your mind and didn't want to trouble you."

"*Really?*" Junayd thought. *"And you thought the best way to ease my mind was to sneak unannounced into my chamber, in a camp liable to become a battleground?"*

"I am glad to see you," he finally said, "but I thought I made it clear that—"

"Your words were as clear as pure water," Karam interrupted him. "You said we could not be together because you were forced to depart. You said nothing of whether or not I was to depart as well."

Junayd scratched his head. She was right. He had never specifically told her to stay home, but he'd expected her to all the same.

When a *kaí* went to war, it wasn't unusual for a few noncombatants to reside in the warriors' camp; many of the Eremukaí riders were presently accompanied by their wives or eldest sons. However, a *khaishará* traditionally remained with the rest of the tribe to oversee it in her husband's absence.

"Well, err..." he mumbled. "No, I suppose I didn't...say so exactly...But how did you—"

"Not long after you left, I set out with five of my clansmen," she answered. "We arrived a few hours ago. There's no need to worry about our *kaí*. I've left your mother in charge; I'm convinced she'll look after things far better than I ever could. This is *our* time."

Karam approached him with long, swift strides. Before he could utter a word, she planted a gentle kiss on his lips. "I hope my presence doesn't upset you, my noble *khaishar*. I have never meant to be anything but a comfort to you."

Junayd stared into her honey-brown eyes. In spite of himself, he smiled. "No more of this '*my khaishar*' nonsense. You are my *khaishará*. To you, I am '*Junayd*.'" He wrapped his arms around her and returned her kiss.

"That's a lovely cloak," he remarked, eyeing the purple garment draped over her. "Is it new?"

"The little emperor's cousin, Marcus, sent it to me as a wedding gift," Karam explained. "But perhaps I could do without it for now..."

Her breath quickening, she slowly slid the silk from her shoulders. Junayd was surprised, albeit somewhat pleasantly, to see that it was all that had been covering her. The candlelight cast a soft shade across her dark skin and reflected beautifully in her amber eyes. Junayd's smile widened. He pulled off his shirt, lifted his bride off her feet, and carried her to their bed.

\* \* \*

Miracel had been dreading this moment for weeks, but she knew it had to come sooner or later. Junayd would have to find out sometime. It might as well be now.

At first, she had hoped that *L'Sömnü's* words were false, but a trusted doctor had confirmed the truth of the creature's words. It would not be long before her condition was beyond concealment.

The only one she trusted enough to confide her secret to was Zarif, and so only he now accompanied her. When they reached Junayd's pavilion, she hesitated, struggling to summon her nerve.

Zarif put a hand on her shoulder. "Courage, dearest. For all we know, he might take this as a blessing. Now that I think about it, perhaps you should too."

Miracel's lips curved into a slight smile. One of her few comforts was that, if she were to have an illegitimate child, at least it would be with one whom she loved.

She was about to brush through the tent flap when a din of shouts rose up from the edge of the camp. Men emerged from nearby tents and rushed toward the source of the noise.

Intrigued, Zarif turned to his ward. "Would you permit me to have a look?"

Miracel nodded, and her bodyguard darted off toward the commotion. He returned a few moments later with a look of distress on his face. "The khaishar had best see this."

Zarif slipped into the pavilion. A minute later, Junayd emerged, still hastily pulling on his shirt and tying his keffiyeh over his disheveled hair. He immediately noticed Miracel and gave her a hasty bow. "Pardon, but this matter cannot wait." He darted off through the tents.

Miracel and Zarif followed him. The site of the ruckus was at the border between the Alikai and D'jarakai camps. A crowd was gathering on both sides.

The Desert Tongue was not Miracel's first language, and she found it difficult to make out the exact words being shouted. But even an idiot could've gleaned that they were not friendly. Many in the crowd already had hands on their swords.

When he saw Junayd approaching, Mahir called for the crowd to make way and stood at his khaishar's back. Khaishar Alikai was already there with his own cohorts. His face looked grim indeed. As Miracel drew closer, she saw why.

The crowd was circled around four bloodied corpses. One had an arrow in his eye. Two had their throats slashed open. The fourth was lying on his belly with an arrow through his thigh and two knife wounds in his back. This last one's arm was still outstretched; he had spent his last moments trying to crawl away.

There was a fifth man, apparently unhurt but forced to his knees and restrained by two Alikai. From the onlookers' chatter, Miracel gathered that two of the corpses were Alikai and the other two, as well as the restrained culprit, were D'jarakai. The khaishars of both tribes looked forlornly at the bloodshed. They both knew what this could mean for their alliance.

Before either chief could speak, a young woman burst from the Alikai crowd and knelt by the body with the outstretched hand. "Diya!!!" she screamed. "Diya, speak to me!"

To everyone's surprise, the man called Diya lifted his head and looked into the woman's red-rimmed eyes. "Fatima..." he mumbled weakly.

"Yes, yes! I'm here," the young woman said, a flicker of hope crossing her face.

His lips curled into a half-smile, "Fatima..."  
 "Stay..." she pleaded. "Stay with me! It's not your time yet!"

Diya struggled to open his mouth one last time, "I... I..." The young Alikai's head went limp and his body took on the terrible stillness of death.

"No!" Fatima sobbed. "Stay! Stay with me! You belong here! Don't you dare leave me!"

No one, not even the murderous D'jarakai, made a sound to interrupt the woman's wailing. She shook her husband's shoulders in a vain attempt to wake him. She had even resorted to slapping his face by the time two of her kinsmen pried her off.

The widow struggled against the arms holding her, hardly able to breathe through her sobs. Then her eyes fell on the culprit.

A bloodcurdling shriek rose up from her throat, unnerving even the bravest of those present. She tore herself free of her kinsmen's grasp and, before anyone could stop her, seized her late husband's shamshir and made a run for his killer.

She likely would have hacked the man to pieces, had Khaishar Alikai's guards not intervened. It took two of them to wrest the blade from her hands and three to haul her kicking and screaming back to their camp.

For a few long minutes, not a word was spoken. Finally, Junayd stepped forward. "Who can tell me what happened here?" Three witnesses, a D'jarkai woman, a young Alikai, and a D'jarakai with a long beard, stepped forward to testify.

The woman pointed to the Alikai corpse with an arrow through its eye. "That one was blabbering on about a raid they carried out on us a few years ago. He kept on fluffing his feathers. Kept bragging about how many of ours he'd killed." The restrained culprit spat spitefully on the sand, and the

female witness jerked a thumb at him. “Arhul here overheard some of what they said.”

The Alikai witness spoke next. “This ‘Arhul’ didn’t much like what he heard. He started yammering about how many of *our* kinsmen *he’d* killed. And he promised he’d kill more before the Makers called his name. Then the other two came over and joined in the game.”

The D’jarakai with the long beard gave the last testimony. “The air was getting hotter and hotter with all the fire they were breathing. Wasn’t long before one man threatened to kill the other. Can’t remember who made the first threat, but that one... err... *Arhul*, was the one who loosed the first arrow. That there’s his handiwork.” He pointed to the Alikai corpse with an arrow through its eye. “Quite a shot, by the way. That ‘Diya’ turned out to be pretty quick with his sword. When Arhul’s friends here —” He indicated the two corpses with slashed throats. “— came at him, he made short work of them. Too bad he wasn’t quite quick enough to dodge an arrow. Arhul finished him off with his *khanja*.”

“Do you all swear, on your honor and that of your *kai*, that all that has been said is true?” Khaishar Alikai asked the witnesses. The three nodded. “And you,” he said, turning to Arhul, “Do you deny murdering my kinsmen?”

Arhul refused to meet the *khaishar*’s eyes. “I don’t answer to you.”

“You *will* answer him!” Junayd snapped.

“They’d have done the same sooner or later,” Arhul snarled. He turned his gaze to Junayd. “I only hit, before they could. Any warrior with half a brain would’ve done the same. Besides, those bastards had killed plenty of *our* kin. It’s only fitting —” one of the Alikai restraining the man silenced him

with a blow to the jaw. Arhul grimaced and spat blood in the dirt.

The khaishars exchanged looks. After a moment of silence, Khaishar Alikai finally spoke, "This man must be punished; blood for blood." He drew his shamshir and started toward the prisoner.

Arhul turned to Junayd. "My khaishar! My honored khaishar, you cannot allow this," he pleaded. "I am of your blood. You cannot stand by and watch these jackals kill one of your *kai*! I beg you, be the khaishar I know you to be, the khaishar your father was. Defend your kin as he would have!"

Junayd stiffened at the mention of his father. He thought for a moment, then drew his sword. He rushed to Arhul's side and stopped Khaishar Alikai's sword stroke before it could reach his kinsman's neck.

The Alikai chief's face flushed red, and men of both tribes reached for their weapons. "How dare you!?" the khaishar roared. "This swine has murdered one of my *kai*! You offer us your friendship, yet you would deny us justice?"

"This 'swine' is right," Junayd answered. "He is of my blood. It is not your place to harm him." Arhul's lips curled into a bloody smile. "I'll execute him myself," Junayd finished.

Arhul's jaw dropped; his eyes went wide. Junayd took his position and raised his shamshir above the killer's head. The two Alikai holding the culprit pressed his shoulders forward to expose his neck.

"M-m-my khaishar, what are you doing?" Arhul stammered. "You can't do this to me! Not for *them*!" Junayd tensed himself for the swing.

A look at Junayd's eyes told Arhul he was doomed. The killer's face turned from ashen to livid. "You worthless bastard! The Abyss has a special place for those who kill their own—"



Junayd swung his sword. Arhul's curses stopped. Junayd looked down on a sight that had grown disturbingly familiar: a man's head rolling across the earth, leaving a crimson trail to its body.

He wiped his blade on the dead man's tunic. His sun-scorched face held neither pride nor remorse as he walked back through the crowd. No one of either tribe deigned to make a sound.

\* \* \*

Miracel followed a short distance behind Junayd. She loathed having to tell him now, but she was afraid this would be her last chance. She followed him into his pavilion and, just before he could enter his quarters, tapped him on the shoulder.

The young Eremukaí turned and smiled at her. "Miracel! It's so good to see something beautiful in this dunghill," he said.

Miracel had only just summoned enough courage to speak when a pretty, dark-skinned, girl strode out of the khaishar's bedchamber and took him by the arm. "Dearest, who is this?"

"Mira—My lady, I don't believe the two of you have met," Junayd said. "I am pleased to introduce my beautiful bride, Khaishará Karam Jaron D'jarakaí." He then turned to his wife. "Dearest, I'd like you to meet Lady Miracel Larissa Harsoninus, daughter of Emperor Hallucar Tarpal Harsoninus."

The young khaishará's eyes went wide. "Oh my! My lady, your presence honors me."

Miracel blushed. "The honor is mine."

"How may I serve you, my lady?" asked the khaishará.

Miracel's eyes flew back and forth between Junayd and his wife, her mind and heartbeat racing. She turned to Zarif, hoping for some form of rescue, but her friend only shrugged helplessly.

The young khaishará frowned. “My lady, is something wrong?”

“I...I only wanted to ensure that all is well with...with my dear friend and his *kai*,” Miracel stammered. “It’s clear I had no reason to worry. May the Makers watch over you both.” She curtsied and darted out of the pavilion with Zarif close behind her.

“Wait!” Junayd tore his arm free from Karam’s embrace, nearly yanking her off her feet in the process. The khaishará squealed in alarm, but her husband hardly seemed to notice. He rushed to Miracel’s side and seized her by the shoulder. With one foot still in her horse’s stirrup, she turned and looked into his dark brown eyes.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else?” he asked. Before she could answer, he leaned in and whispered, “If you’d like, I could ask that she return to the desert...where it’s safe.”

Miracel shook her head. “A man should be with his wife, especially in times like these.” She mounted her mare and began trotting toward the edge of the camp.

She looked back. Junayd was watching her go with a concerned look on his dark-skinned face. Behind him stood Karam, flustered and with the unmistakable embers of jealousy in her eyes.

As Miracel trotted out of the camp and onto the high road, she and Zarif were rejoined by the five Prosidar escorts that Marcus had insisted accompany her. The men did seem relieved to see their ward return to them—convincing them to wait for her at the camp’s edge had not been easy.

Zarif sighed. “You know, you can only keep it from him for so long.”

“Do you expect me to tell him in front of his bride?” she hissed. “That would be a fine wedding gift indeed: a new *mitzclah* bastard to add to your

household!" She was sure to keep her voice low enough that the escorts behind them didn't hear.

Just as Zarif opened his mouth to speak, an angry shout from the side of the road drew their attention. In an olive orchard off to the left, an old man clad in a wool tunic and straw hat was yelling at four burly figures, who were busy stuffing a sack with fruit from one of the trees.

Judging by his simple attire and the shovel he was carrying, Miracel guessed the old man to be the orchard's keeper. Based on their longswords, leather armor, and furry garments, Miracel identified the four ruffians as Mongrels.

"Last chance!" the old man barked, his temple bulging. "Gimme that there bag! You bandits won't be making off with my harvest. Give it here, I said!"

"Relax, windbag," said one of the Balakans. "We're your emperor's men. We'll just be trimming off a bit of fat to make sure we've enough vittles to —"

"I don't know who you are, and I don't care neither," snapped the keeper. "What I do know is that I've already paid this month's taxes and you've got no right to take what's mine. You want my olives? You can trade for 'em, like any other man."

"Oh, a trade?" snarled another Balakan.

"How 'bout this: we take your olives, and in return, *maybe* you get to keep your withered old teeth."

"You think I'm afraid of you?!" growled the farmer. He raised his shovel defiantly, but the sellsword swatted the tool from his hands and gave him a heavy kick in the belly. The old man fell flat on his back and lay there, gasping for breath.

His attacker stood over him. "Perhaps you're right," the sellsword sneered, drawing a dirk from his belt. "Maybe those rotten teeth ain't worth

quite enough for these fine fruits here. Maybe I'll let you keep your eyes and ears too."

"Enough!" Miracel yelled. She jumped her destrier over the orchard's fence and galloped to the farmer's side.

The ruffian with the drawn dirk turned and spat on the ground in front of her. "You'd best be off, pretty one. This is nasty business. Just be grateful it's not yours."

Before Miracel could respond, one of the mercenary's cohorts gave him a clout on the ear. "Dammit, Vrax! Yer lucky the chief ain't here." He turned and knelt to his patroness. "Pardon 'im, Lady Miracel. He just didn't recognize you is all."

Upon hearing her name, the other three Balakans fell to their knees. "I beg your pardon, milady," the one called Vrax pleaded. "I never would've spoken so if I'd known it was you; I swear by the Makers and the Old Spirits and all the gods I've ever known."

"What's going on here?" Miracel demanded. "Why are you troubling this man?"

The orchard keeper, who had only just managed to recover his breath, pulled himself to his feet. "Milady! Thank the Makers you're here. I caught these bandits pinching fruit from my trees and—"

"*'Pinching?'* *'Bandits?'*" barked one of the Balakans. "I mean no offense, milady, but I'd hardly call it robbery to *requisition* an olive or two to fill our bellies. Especially when we're risking our hides in *your* people's war. Back in Balakar, we were always free to requisition what we needed from the folks we were protecting, and we never heard a squeal 'bout it." The other Balakans nodded in agreement.

Miracel frowned. "It seems there's been a misunderstanding then. This is not your homeland.

All loyal Aureans are under my family's protection, and we do not allow our servants to rob them with impunity. I'll have to ask that you either return what you've taken or pay this man his price."

The Balakans looked ready to argue, but by then Zarif and Miracel's five Prosidiar guards had trotted up behind her. Sergeant Herthal, the guards' chief, unsheathed his sword. "If these barbarians are being troublesome, my lady, it would be our pleasure to deal with them." Zarif and the other Prosidiars drew their own blades.

The Mongrels looked at the orchard keeper, then at Miracel, then at her escorts. The Balakans' reputation for stubbornness was not unfounded, and it was unlike them to back away from a dispute empty-handed. But this time they could see they had little choice.

Vrax grunted. "As you wish, milady." He tossed the sack of olives at the farmer's feet, and he and his cohorts set off down the road.

Miracel turned to Zarif. "We'd best pay the Mongrels a visit tomorrow tonight. I'm supposed to be responsible for these curds and I can't have them pillaging the countryside. I'll have to remind Savaric to keep his men in line."

Zarif grinned. "Welcome news! A few more wagers with those oxbrained barbarians could make me rich."

\* \* \*

They found the Mongrel camp exactly as they expected: buzzing with debauchery and angry brawls. However, though Miracel was accompanied only by Zarif—she had dismissed her Prosidiar escorts for the evening—most of the mercenaries seemed to recognize her and kept out of her path.

She took pleasure in seeing the scruffy, loutish fighters make way for her.

She lifted her chin and looked straight ahead, letting her pride show. She casually glanced from side to side, inspecting the men. Their condition was as good as could be expected, for an army of former (and current) brigands and cutthroats.

She found Savaric in the center of the camp, sitting in a circle of his men around a roasting deer carcass. The mercenary chief looked up to greet his employer. “Ah, milady. We were not expecting the pleasure of your company tonight, but please, join us for a pint.” Miracel dismounted and two of the men in the circle moved aside to make room for her.

“If you don’t mind, milady,” said Zarif, “could I be dismissed for a bit.” Miracel nodded and Zarif walked off, smirking and juggling a pair of dice in his hand.

Miracel turned to Savaric. “My faithful commander. I am here to inform you that there seems to have been a lack of discipline amongst your men...”

Savaric cut her off. “Yes, yes, Vrax and Bart told me all about that little incident. Just a slight misunderstanding is all it was. Our patrons usually make up for lack of funds by permitting us to *requi-sition* what we need from the common folk, but you’re paying us handsomely enough that we shouldn’t have to. You needn’t worry. All four rascals got a licking for it. It won’t happen again.”

“Ah, I’m pleased to hear that,” Miracel said. She was indeed pleased to have the issue resolved so quickly. “I’ll leave you to your festivities then.” She rose and turned to leave.

“Please milady, don’t fly from us so soon” Savaric insisted. “Sit down. Have a drink or two.”

Miracel was hardly eager for the company of drunken sellswords, but she knew it would be

folly to show them disrespect. She sat and drank deeply from the mug of mead passed to her. The harsh liquid was scalding to her delicate Aurean tongue, but she forced it down and passed the cup to the man next to her. After swallowing her last gulp, she released a slight belch, which was met with a round of laughter.

“Milady couldn’t have picked a better time to join us,” Savaric said. “She’s about to hear a tale from a true master storyteller.” His bearded face broke into a smile. “You know, they say I could’ve been a bard if I wasn’t so good at cracking skulls; I’m not too bad of a singer either, am I lads?” The men looked at him as one might look at an old crone who had inquired about her beauty.

Savaric grunted and waved dismissively. “Well, I’m a decent storyteller, anyway. What tale would you like to hear tonight, milady?”

One of the younger men in the circle piped up. “Say Chief, tell us about that time in Avanstead!”

Savaric frowned and shook his head. “I err...don’t recall any stories about Avanstead, and anyway, it’s the lady’s choice.”

A few of the older men in the circle motioned for the youth to shut up, but the lad took no heed. “C’mon now, Chief,” he rambled. “Remember? The time when the baron caught ye in bed wit’ wanna ‘is daughters, and ye had to spring for the gate in nuttin’ but yer—”

*Twang!* Savaric’s dirk flew from his hand and planted itself between the youth’s legs. The lad’s breath caught in his throat; his eyes fell to the blade quivering just a few inches from his groin.

Savaric fixed him with a stern gaze. “I think that story’s best left for another time, boy. Don’t you?” The youth gulped and nodded.

“Now then,” Savaric said, his smile returning, “what tale would you like to hear, milady?”

Miracel thought for a moment. The northern lands were famous for tall tales and legends, and she had heard many stories that stirred her curiosity. But there was one subject she’d been dying to hear more about. “I am intrigued by that odd creature you call *L'Sömnu*...”

The circle fell as silent as an abbey at prayer hour. Every eye turned and fixed on her as if she’d just sprouted horns and wings.

Even Savaric looked uneasy. “Well, eh... very well then,” he said. “I s’pose there’s no harm in telling what I know. But please try not to speak his name if you can help it. They say he can hear a whisper from miles away and I’d rather not risk offending him.”

The mercenary stroked his beard. “I know only what I’ve heard. All the stories are a bit different, but I’ll try to string together the parts they agree on.”

The smoke and flames cast eerie shadows across the ground as he began. “They say our friend, you-know-who, was once known as ‘*Gneikó*,’ the name his mother had given him. He lived in a hamlet in the far north. You know the type: little village surrounded by nothing but trees and home to men with nothing better to do than hunt and fight. ’Twas a humble place, not unlike the town I grew up in.”

He took a swig of ale and went on. “But you see, even then, this *Gneikó* was no ordinary lad. He was a giant of a man, born with chalk-white skin and blood-red eyes.” Miracel felt a shiver crawl up her spine as she remembered the ghostly face from the black tent.

“As you can imagine, *Gneikó* didn’t win many beauty contests,” Savaric said. “Life in the



Balakan woods is never easy, but for him, it was especially tough, looking the way he did and all. Some say even his parents hated him. Of course, no one dared try to harm him; a giant like that could crack heads together like walnuts, not that that helped make any friends. But, as dark as this poor fellow's life was, the Powers did send him one little light. That light's name was Margot."

Miracel nodded. She understood better than most how even a single person to care for could be precious in a life of loneliness.

"Some say she was as radiant as the dawn," Savaric explained. "Others say she was ugly as a leprous toad. But all say that she was the sun, the moon and the stars to Gneikó, and she loved him just the same. They had two twin daughters. As I recall, the two girls were only six or seven when it happened..."

"When what happened?" Miracel asked.

Savaric took another sip from his tankard. "Like I said, Gneikó was no ordinary lad, and in more ways than one. You see, he may not have been a pretty fellow, but he had two great gifts. One: he was big and strong as an ox and quite handy in a fight. Two: he was a *seer*, which was how he earned his keep."

"A 'seer'?"

"Where we come from, we've got plenty of folks who dabble in strange arts they call 'magic': seers, magicians, sorcerers, soothsayers, witches, wise men... They go by many names and all have their own little tricks. Of course, most are nothing more than phony conjurers of cheap parlor tricks, but I can give you the names of a few who are both feared and sought after. Gneikó was one such seer. Folks came from all around with questions for him. They say that the Old Spirits spoke through him,

that they showed him the truth: past, present, and future.”

Miracel shuddered. She put a hand on her belly as Savaric went on.

“Now, the village was ruled by a local clan chief, and that chief had a son. This son had always been hungry for glory, always eager to please his father. The trouble started the day this galavanting youth came to pay our friend Gneikó a visit.” Savaric’s face turned grim. He took another gulp of ale before continuing. “The youth wanted to know what glory he’d win for himself and his family. He wanted to hear that the bards would sing of his deeds for generations to come, that he would grow to become the greatest chieftain the land had ever known. But apparently, he didn’t hear exactly what he was hoping for. As I recall the prophecy went something like, *‘Your vanity will bring dishonor and destruction, first to yourself, then to your kinsfolk,’* or something to that tune.

“Anyway, the chief’s son didn’t like that one bit. He started calling the seer a fraud. He called him a beast. He even went so far as to call dear Margot a tramp and curse her for having married a ‘monster.’ Now, Gneikó was no stranger to scorn, but he wouldn’t hear anything against the woman he loved. He and the stupid lad and got in a scuffle. The fight ended with a crushed skull and a chief’s heart bleeding for the loss of his first-born.”

Savaric gulped down the remaining liquid from his mug and went on with the story, though clearly taking no pleasure in it. “The chief vowed revenge, but he didn’t dare face Gneikó honorably. Instead, he and his kin concocted a cowardly scheme to make our friend pay. That night, the chief, his brother and two of his nephews, crept into Gneikó’s home. They fell upon him in his bed, beat him senseless, dragged him outside, and tied him to

a tree. I've heard it said that they made him watch while they locked his wife and daughters inside the house and put a torch to it. Some say his screams drowned out the wolves' howling that night." Miracel's trembling hand nearly dropped the mug of mead being passed back to her.

"It wasn't until the house and everything inside was ashes that they turned their attention back to Gneikó," Savaric continued. "They took him into the woods, thrashed him, mutilated him, cut off his nose, blinded him, and gutted what was left. They returned to the village bragging that they had taught the fellow a 'valuable lesson'."

Miracel shuddered as the morbid scene flooded her mind. "By the Mother's mercy..."

Savaric nodded. "This tale would be enough to keep me up at night, even if that were where it ended. But it goes on, and you've yet to hear the most chilling part.

"See, the next day, some of Gneikó's cousins went out to recover the body. They couldn't find a trace of it; no bones, no meat, nothing."

Miracel felt another chill crawl up her spine. "Were the chief and his men sure he was dead when they left him there?"

Savaric shrugged. "Beats me, but I doubt they would've taken any chances. Whatever the case, it was on that very night that the chief's brother was taken."

"*Taken?*" Miracel whispered.

"Someone heard a noise in his room. When they went to check on him, he was stone dead. He'd just gone to bed as healthy as a spring blossom, yet they found him lying there cold and stiff. There were no wounds or marks on his body, but he had a look on his face like he'd just seen a devil."

Having drained his tankard, Savaric dispatched a youth sitting next to him to refill it. "The

next night, one of the chief's nephews went into the woods to see if poor Gneiko's body really had disappeared. That lad never came back. No one knows what became of him. The night after that, they found the other nephew just like his father: stone dead with a face like he'd died seeing his worst nightmare."

Despite the fire's warmth, Miracel felt quite chilly. "And the chief?"

"As you might expect, by the following night, the chief was wetting his britches with fear," Savaric went on. "He'd locked himself in his hall with his remaining kinsfolk around him. He'd also procured some so-called 'sorcerer' to protect him. That was the night, *he* finally came."

Savaric's voice acquired a foreboding tone. "Some say the moon turned red as the 'dead' giant's eyes that night. When it reached its highest point, *he* came from the forest, clad all in black, with only his ruined face showing. They say his eyes were soulless; there was no trace of pain or anger or anything. It was as if Gneikó's soul had passed on but his flesh had been sent on some sort of errand before being allowed to die."

Now the night air felt very cold indeed. Savaric's description matched precisely what Miracel had seen in the tent.

"Our friend made his way from the forest to the chief's hall. No one dared try to stop him. No one dared make a peep. The townsfolk barred their doors and prayed that he hadn't come for them. Can't say I blame them.

"He walked up to the hall and knocked on the front door. Nobody'd had the guts to sound any kind of alarm, so some unsuspecting wench went and opened the door for him. The poor lass must've thought it was a servant bringing firewood or some late-night visitor.

“When she opened the door, the poor girl was too frightened to even scream. She just stood there petrified while our friend walked past. A couple of the chief’s kinsmen found the courage to try to stop him. All our friend had to do was look them in the eye, and, one by one, their strength left them. They just fell to their knees.

“At this point, the ‘sorcerer’ supposedly lost his nerve and leapt out a window. I don’t find that last bit surprising. More than likely, the bastard was a quack who hadn’t expected to find any real danger.

“Anyway, our friend walked up the stairs to the bedchamber where the chief had been cowering. When the door finally opened... Well, accounts differ on what happened next. Some say the chief had already died of sheer terror. A few sources say he fell to his knees begging for mercy while our friend sucked the life out of him. Some even say our friend destroyed him with a ball of fire. All I’m sure of is that the chief didn’t last the night.” Savaric stopped and the circle fell quiet, save for the crackling of the fire.

“And after that?” Miracel asked.

“Our friend left the way he came, just disappeared into the woods,” Savaric answered. “The townsfolk never saw him again, but in the following years, he started appearing here and there. Always providing prophecies, or warnings, or, if you believe children’s stories, snatching naughty boys and girls from their beds and gobbling them up.”

“And h-how did you find this... *‘friend?’*” Miracel asked in a shaky voice. “Why bring him here?”

“You don’t find him,” Savaric explained. “He finds you. He appears when he has something to say or do and then disappears once it’s said or done. The night after you and I had our first meet-

ing, he came out of the forest and walked right through the camp. I'll never forget the first glimpse I caught of him."

"What did he say?" Miracel asked, wiping her clammy palms on her tunic.

"Not much," Savaric replied. "He said he had a task to complete where we were traveling, and we were to take him with us. We didn't dare refuse him, so here he is. He's our 'welcome guest' for as long as he pleases."

"Milady," Zarif's voice suddenly chimed in. The Eremukaí growled and kicked the dirt as he approached. "If your business is concluded, I think it's time we left. *My* business is certainly concluded."

"Did your luck finally fail you?" Miracel jeered, happy to have something to laugh at.

"*Luck* had nothing to do with it!" Zarif snapped. "I was cheated! Savaric, I believe one of your men needs disciplining..."

"I think your friend should leave," Savaric advised, "or else I might soon be telling *his* story, and there won't be a happy ending."

"I've had enough storytelling to last me for quite a while," Miracel said. She and Zarif mounted their horses and departed with the Eremukaí still cursing the Mongrel who had 'swindled' him.

The pervasive odor of sweat, stale mead, and unwashed bodies gradually subsided as they rode out of the camp. Miracel took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air and the absence of the encampment's suffocating din.

Once they were clear of the camp, she noticed a great shadow blocking her path. She jerked back on her reins so hard that Zarif's horse nearly collided with hers. Not knowing who or what they had encountered, her bodyguard gripped the hilt of his shamshir.

The shadowy figure drew nearer. Its lifeless eyes fixed on Miracel. “Well, met *L'Sömnü*,” she said.

She heard Zarif gulp. For the first time in the two years she had known him, Miracel thought she could see genuine fear in her bodyguard’s face.

The phantom’s soft hissing voice carried like the wind. “*There is a snake in your garden. Tread carefully.*”

“What’s he talking about?” Zarif asked sharply.

One glance from the figure’s pupilless eyes, and the duneman fell silent as a stone. *L'Sömnü*’s gaze turned back to Miracel and the voice continued. “*Within you grows the future. Beware; your enemy will move an unseen hand against you and those you hold dear. Know your troubles will not end with him. You and your bloodline will face many foes before your ultimate glory or doom comes to pass.*” With that, the creature departed into the night. He seemed to glide through the darkness before melting into it.

Miracel gathered her wits and urged her mount forward. Zarif eagerly followed, and they galloped off toward the crescent moon.

Miracel cursed *L'Sömnü* and his infuriating riddles. *What sort of troubles had he meant? Had he been talking about some sort of enemy trap? A traitor in their midst? Another scheme?* All she knew was that she hoped he was somehow wrong.

## Chapter XIV

“Heave!” barked the sergeant. On his command, the men thrust the battering ram forward and struck the gate with a loud bang. The splintered, wooden doors quivered violently but refused to open. “Heave!” The soldiers swung the ram back for another strike.

Marthal drummed his fingers on his chair, glaring impatiently at Portus Mundi’s stubborn walls. For weeks the city’s defenses had held out against every siege engine or strategy he could procure. It would only be a matter of days until the bulk of the enemy forces arrived, and he had hoped to take the city beforehand. If he didn’t, he would be forced into open battle with the Harsonines and their allies.

Though he was capable of winning such a battle, he was in no hurry to face Balakan sell-swords and a host of angry Eremukaí. The latter worried him most of all.

He rested his right arm on his crutch, lifted himself to his feet, and strolled through his army’s encampment. His years of experience as a leader allowed him to appear tall and proud, despite the concern on his mind. His soldiers saluted him as he passed and he returned the gestures with respectful nods. He thanked the Makers that he at least could depend on his men.

As he moved to inspect one of his onagers, a young voice piped up behind him. “Pardon me, Your Imperial Majesty, but I’m afraid you’ve neglected to take your medicine again.”

“Asher...” Marthal sighed, turning to face his young manservant, “I told you, I don’t need any more of that damned doctor’s pig shit!”

Asher frowned. “Pardon me, Your Grace, but your health is of more value to me than my own.



Surely you aren't suggesting that I would procure a doctor who peddles 'pig shit'?"

Marthal groaned. "No, of course not, my boy. I simply don't need any more of the stuff. The aches are all but gone."

"Then I implore you to ensure that they remain so," Asher insisted. He started off toward the command pavilion and motioned for his master to follow him.

Marthal sighed and did his best to keep pace with the boy. As they made their way through the camp, Marthal marveled at how far young Asher had come. Since they had met, the little street rat with a spark in his eye had blossomed into a handsome, clever, and loyal young man with the flame of potential clearly visible within him.

Marthal's wife, Serra, had died in childbirth, along with their firstborn, and so he had never had any children of his own. But Asher was everything he could have hoped for in a son.

Marthal had always taken great delight in molding raw materials, and Asher may very well have been his masterpiece. He had taken a personal interest in grooming the boy, providing him with an education, some basic martial training, and personal mentorship. He looked forward to watching his young star rise when the lad came of age.

The two entered the tent and Marthal took a seat at his table, resting his crippled leg on a stool. Asher sprinkled the prescribed medicinal powder into a glass of wine. As Marthal gulped it down, Asher noticed the uneasy expression on his master's face.

"Something troubles you, sir?" the boy asked.

Marthal sighed. "My boy...Truth be told, I'm beginning to wonder if it can be done; all I'd hoped for, I mean. Everything seemed to be going

so well at first, but now... So many have died for my vision. When I set things in motion, I knew there'd be blood, but I never wanted... *this*. Sometimes I worry that my plans for the future are simply no longer possible."

Asher smiled encouragingly. "Have faith, Your Grace. If Emperor Oren Licinius Marthal cannot accomplish them, we'll know for sure that they are impossible." Marthal chuckled and smiled back.

A helmeted head poked in from between the tent flaps. "Pardon, Your Grace, but there's a rider approaching.

"Can't it wait, corporal?" Marthal grumbled.

"I'd say he's come with urgent business," the corporal answered. "He's galloping in like there's a demon on his heels."

Marthal groaned. With Asher's help, he returned to his feet and left the tent.

Sure enough, a scout was galloping toward them at breakneck speed. He pulled his horse to a halt just a few feet from his commander, spraying dust over everyone present. "Imperator!" the rider gasped.

"This had better be good," Marthal grunted, wiping the dust off his face. He noticed that the rider was alone. This was odd, as scouts typically traveled in groups of at least five.

"Where's the rest of your unit?" Marthal asked. "My scouts know better than to ride out of camp alone."

"There were seven of us when we set out," the rider gasped, struggling to catch his breath. "I'm all that's left. The dunemen... we couldn't outride them."

"*Eremukai?*" Marthal seized the man by the shoulder and locked eyes with him. "How far?"

"They're nearly upon us, sir," said the scout. "There must be thousands of them."

Marthal scratched his chin. "We can't make our stand here. We'll have to fall back."

He turned to the corporal. "Summon riders at once. Our forces must assemble and mobilize. Send word to all our allies; the time has come. Oh, and find one of our fastest riders, preferably one who speaks the Desert Tongue, and have him report to me directly."

The corporal frowned. "The Desert Tongue, sir?"

"Just do it!" Marthal snapped. The soldier saluted and hurried off.

Marthal turned to young Asher. "You may be in luck," he said. "It seems you'll soon be getting your first taste of battle."

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The sun over the western regions was not quite as brutal as the blazing ball of fire that hung over the Eremus, but it was still hot enough to exact a heavy toll from Marcus and his allies. Even some of the Eremukaí were affected.

The long march to the fields outside Cartos had taken eight days, and the preparations for the battle had taken two weeks more. Now that Marthal's host had finally arrived, the files of soldiers on both sides of the field were assembling into their battle formations.

As predicted, Marthal had gathered his strength and marched to Cartos where the Harsonines awaited him. The usurper hoped to crush his enemies before they could gather more strength. With any luck, he would not succeed.

Marcus watched the battle lines unfold across the field. Under his own command were seven thousand seasoned valtra, three thousand levies, and six thousand crossbowmen. Reinforcing his

right flank were the Mongrels, numbering a little over two thousand. On the front lines, the valtra had formed their famous phalanxes and the Mongrels were organized into their dense Balakan shield wall. The levies and archers stood behind the front lines, ready to reinforce them when necessary.

Beside Marcus were Khaishar D'jarakaí, Khaishar Alikeí, Savaric, Sarconius, Maconith and a handful of other Aurean officers. "Savaric," Marcus grumbled. "Makers forgive me for letting you talk me into this insane plan of yours. This had better work."

Savaric smiled. "Have some faith in an old trapper's snare. It'll bring good meat; I guarantee it."

Convincing the other commanders that Savaric's "snare" was worth the risk had been no easy task. The extra days needed to prepare it had kept them from making a move on Cartos; the enemy was now between them and the town. Worse still, even Marcus had his doubts about its effectiveness. "Sellsword, If this goes awry, I'll have your sorry hide," he snarled.

Savaric shrugged. "If that should happen, Marthal will have all our hides soon enough."

"*Fair point*," Marcus thought.

He nodded to the assembled chiefs and commanders. "You all have your orders. If everyman does his part here today, I know the Father will grant us victory."

Not every face looked convinced, but they bowed their heads and moved off to their posts. As they departed, Marcus barked orders to his officers. Soon his forces were organized into their battle formations.

The crossbowmen and Balakan bowmen had taken up their standard positions behind the lines. Five hundred cataphracts and seven hundred light

cavalry were positioned just behind the right flank. The D'jaraí and Alikáí were deployed far off the left flank, awaiting the signal to intervene. It had been decided that the Sarrakaí, Torakaí, and Mosakaí would remain hidden off the field for the start of the battle. These tribes would wait in reserve and be ready to attack when it would hurt Marthal most.

The enemy force facing them numbered over thirty thousand. Marthal had regrouped and called for reinforcements from every city and town loyal to him. Given how the war had progressed thus far, it was not surprising that many had been all too eager to answer his call. He had even shipped in new allies: lancers from the Lower Kingdoms; it was anyone's guess what he'd had to promise such men to convince them to ride under an Aurean's command.

Additional Salmakans had also been called from their homeland. This time, Marthal had imported at least two thousand of their javelin-wielding light horsemen.

Marcus noted that a large portion of Marthal's force was composed of cavalry. The usurper had come prepared to counter the Eremukaí.

Even with the desert riders, the situation seemed daunting. Marcus could see that the enemy line stretched farther than his own. He looked toward the sky and prayed to the Makers that the few advantages he did have, or perhaps the scheme Savaric had concocted, would be enough to carry the day.

The two sides stood facing each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. The tension built for what felt like hours, until finally, Marthal's lines began to advance. The enemy cataphracts were massed off their left flank with the Salmakan riders and light cavalry riding beside them. Evidently,

Marthal would not commit the folly of sending his heavy cavalry to confront the Eremukaí alone. The enemy archers quickened their pace to move out to the front. Marcus shouted for his men to raise their shields.

The bolts and javelins soared across the gap and thudded into the shields and flesh of Marcus' forces. The losses were minimal, but enough blood had been drawn to evoke cries of pain. The dead and wounded were cleared away with professional efficiency, as Marcus' own archers raised their bows and crossbows to answer the enemy volley.

As the two lines exchanged fire, a mass of D'jarakaí and Alikeí moved in. They quickly chased the enemy archers back to their own lines and began buzzing about Marthal's flanks like flies on a bull. The riders sent a barrage of arrows into the enemy ranks while keeping clear of their pikes and swords. Marthal's crossbowmen and Salmakan javelinmen managed to shoot a few of them down, but the quick-moving riders were not easy targets.

Marthal ordered his cavalry forward to chase the Eremukaí off. They managed to drive the dune-men away, but the horse archers had already managed to exact a bloody toll.

Marcus watched the spectacle with satisfaction, until a rider rode up and pulled a parcel from behind his back. "My lord, I have news, a message from Khaishar Mutá Kardal Sarraakaí."

Marcus frowned and motioned for his Pro-sidiars to let the man through. "The khaishar sends this," the rider said, handing over the parcel. "He said it was for your eyes only."

Marcus tore away the cloth surrounding the khaishar's package and frowned at what he found underneath. It was a shamshir of brilliant design. The blade was sheathed in a golden scabbard, decorated with ambers arranged in the shape of a sun-

rise: the friendship offering the khaishar had been given at Sen'an. Wrapped around the sheath was a roll of parchment, which Marcus snatched and unrolled.

Before he could glance at the words written across the scroll, a Prosidiar shouted in alarm and pointed to the battleground. Thousands of Eremukaí had ridden in from their position off the field and were galloping through the expanse between the two armies. Their banners bore the image of an orange sunrise, standard of the Sarrakaí tribe.

Marcus was dumbstruck. The Sarrakaí were supposed to be in reserve. He hadn't given the signal to attack yet. What could they be doing here?

The Sarrakaí nocked their arrows and, to Marcus' amazement, sent their shafts flying into the Harsonine lines. They launched volleys into the masses of D'jarakaí and Alikáí as well.

At first, none knew how to respond. They stood there, baffled at the sight of their "allies" bombarding them. Many men had already fallen before the D'jarakaí, Alikáí, and Harsonines began to return fire. But by then, the Sarrakaí were retreating to the safety of Marthal's lines. The enemy ranks cheered the arrival of their new comrades.

With a shaking hand, Marcus unrolled the parchment: "*Forgive me. His offer was better.*" Trembling with fury, Marcus tore the note to shreds and threw them to the wind.

Sensing that his friend's rage was overcoming him, Unaka rode up and gave Marcus a hard slap on the back. Marcus threw the shield bearer an infuriated scowl, as if he were about to knock the Salmakan from his horse. But the sight of his friend's face returned some of his sense and his rage began to subside. "A pity," he gasped, breathing deeply to recover his wits. "I suppose we'll have about three thousand more enemy graves to dig."

With Marthal's cavalry packing off the Alikai and D'jarakai, the enemy lines began to advance. Once the two sides were within fifty paces of each other, they lowered their pikes and braced for the bloody clash. A minute or two later, the pike-heads had met. Then they were scraping against each other's shields. Soon men on both sides began to fall. Some crumpled and lay screaming, clutching their wounds. Others dropped and lay still. Cross-bow bolts, arrows, and javelins flew in both directions across the field.

The Harsonine forces put up an admirable struggle, but Marthal's lines were longer and soon began to envelop them. Sensing that they were in danger of being overwhelmed, Marcus motioned to the buglers, who blasted a three-note call.

Hearing the signal, the Mongrels broke their shield wall and charged forth with a chorus of blood-curdling screams. The sellswords washed over Marthal's right flank like a great wave breaking over a fishing boat. Burly, hairy bodies flung themselves at the enemy ranks hacking, slashing and stabbing wherever they could.

Marcus turned to Unaka. "It's good to see our gold hasn't been wasted," he jeered. His shield bearer nodded.

The Mongrels continued their press against the enemy line, but the effect of their shock attack soon wore off. Once the enemy soldiers had recovered, they began pushing back. The Harsonine lines were slowly losing ground; it would be only a matter of time before they were routed.

Marcus reluctantly raised his right hand and his buglers sounded the signal to fall back. It was time to play his final card.

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Marthal watched as his enemies turned their backs to retreat. A triumphant roar rose up from his own lines, and Asher, who was mounted beside him, gave a joyful howl.

Even Marthal himself cracked a smile. He wasn't one to take pleasure in victories not yet won, but it did seem that the day would be his.

His smile faded when he saw that the Harsonines hadn't fled the field. They'd only fallen back and reformed about three hundred paces from his lines. The D'jarakaí and Alikeí returned and assembled beside them.

"Imperator," Malonius piped up. "The cavalry awaits the order to charge."

Marthal's first instinct was to scold his officer for such a foolish suggestion; even the stupidest of soldiers knew better than to launch a frontal assault against a phalanx. Then he saw that the enemy archers, not their infantry, had taken the forward position, far ahead of the pikes that would have protected them. The Harsonine cavalry had moved further off their left flank, too far away to intervene. The entire force of enemy archers was exposed, meat on his table.

*"What game is this buffoon playing at?"*

Marthal asked himself. He had never considered young Marcus Leo Harsoninus to be the empire's most capable military mind; he'd always seen the youth as a pampered prince whose prestige was due only to his pedigree. But even Marcus couldn't be stupid enough for a blunder like this.

"Shall I give the order sir?" asked Captain Lucinius. Marthal's cataphracts and lancers had already assembled in front of the phalanxes. The heavy horsemen were fired up and overjoyed to finally face an enemy that could not simply ride away. The Sarrakaí, Salmakan horsemen and other light cavalry amassed beside them, looking equally

excited. Meanwhile, the enemy archers were preparing to launch a volley.

Marthal gritted his teeth. The enemy seemed to be offering easy meat; he had never trusted easy meat. However, he could not pass up a chance for such an easy gain, not in front of his men. He nodded to Lucinius who grinned and called for the buglers to give the signal. A split-second after the last note had been sounded, the cavalymen spurred their horses forward.

The Harsonine archers had been busy setting their bolts and arrows alight, most likely an attempt to dishearten their enemies, but they never got the chance to use them. As Marthal's cavalry approached, the archers threw their flaming missiles to the ground and turned to fall back to their own lines. They sprinted toward their comrades like men with demons on their heels, but anyone could see that they would soon be overtaken.

Over ten thousand sets of hooves thundered across the terrain, shaking the earth beneath them. The lancers and cataphracts lowered their spears for a deadly shock attack.

Marthal had always enjoyed the rhythm of charging hoofbeats. The noise was welcome, so long as it was charging toward his adversaries, of course. Marthal put aside his worries and let the sound intoxicate him. *Rumble, rumble, rumble...*

It all happened in the blink of an eye. The sound of the hoofbeats suddenly ceased, replaced by a noise like that of a wooden bridge collapsing. At first, Marthal was sure his eyes must have been deceiving him. Surely he couldn't be seeing what he thought he saw.

The ground gave way beneath the horses and riders, breaking, snapping, collapsing like a crushed wicker basket. Horses and men screamed in terror as they tumbled down into an enormous

trench filled with flames and sharpened stakes. It was as if some massive, fiery beast had opened its jaws and was chewing them with its horrible, wooden teeth.

Marthal's troops gaped in horror, as the grisly scene unfolded. Most of the Harsonines had begun cheering, but those positioned close enough to the carnage to have a good view of it remained silent. The Harsonine archers loosed volley after volley into the burning, bloodied mass to finish off the survivors.

Marthal tore off his helmet and cursed the heavens. Almost all his cavalry, nearly half of his entire force, had been snatched away in minutes. Now, the rest of his army would be fodder for the Eremukaí horse archers.

The desert riders seemed to know this as well. They quickly closed in and began picking away at his ranks. To make matters worse, thousands more of them appeared from behind the hills and approached to join in. Marthal's soldiers huddled their shields together, but that offered only so much protection against the barrage of arrows raining down on them.

Asher tapped his master's shoulder. "Your Grace...shall we retreat?"

Marthal sighed and shook his head. The odds were no longer with him, but he had little choice. How could he claim to be a strong ruler, if he retreated after one cheap trick?

"We'll take the fight to them," he shouted. "Advance!"

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Marcus was unsure whether to feel pleased or appalled. Savaric's trap had worked perfectly. The archers had dropped their flaming missiles at

just the right time and in just the right places. The pitch beneath the pit's wicker covering had been ignited, and the enemy cavalry were no more.

Marcus was now confident that he and his comrades could prevail. He only wished they could have secured the battle without such an act of savagery. The butchery was enough to make those closest to it vomit. The anguished screams from the pit could have been heard from leagues away.

"I suppose I asked for this when I agreed to a Balakan's plan," Marcus muttered.

Lieutenant Metellus, who was mounted next to him, leaned over and said in a trembling voice, "It s—seems the s—sellsword was worth his price after all." The sight of the massacre had turned the Prosidiar's face pallid, but he managed to keep his composure. "It was wise of him to advise that we not inform the khaishars of our plan."

Marcus nodded. Savaric claimed to have a gift for sensing treachery, and after meeting his new allies in Hortus Magna, the Balakan had remarked, "I wouldn't trust any of this lot with my shoddiest bootstrap." After the Eremukaí had been dispatched ahead of the army, the mercenary chief had suggested keeping the trap secret from all who didn't need to know. Marcus was grateful for the old sell-sword's wisdom; had the Sarrakaí traitors been told, the enemy would have been warned. Savaric might have been a brute, but he was a clever brute—the sort you want on your side.

The Harsonine host stood awaiting Marthal's next move. Would the usurper attempt to flee or press a final attack? The question was answered when the enemy lines began to advance.

Marcus forced a smile. "So the bastard would prefer to die sooner rather than later. Let's oblige him."

He snapped an order to the buglers, who sounded a short signal. Heeding his call, the archers fell back and took up their positions behind the infantry, who had formed their phalanxes two hundred paces from the wicker trap. Marcus was careful to keep the trap directly between himself and his enemies, so as to ensure that his foes would have a good look at what had become of their comrades.

The tactic worked. Hundreds of Marthal's soldiers stumbled out of formation to retch and vomit as they marched around the horrendous spectacle. Many combat-hardened faces, once firm with determination, turned ashen when they saw the butchery in the pit.

It wasn't long before the enemy phalanxes were formed and the lines clashed once more. The air rang with the sound of steel on steel. Screams of the wounded and dying echoed in Marcus' ears. The pikemen thrust their spearheads against the enemy formations. Swordsmen and axemen charged forth, hacking wildly. The Eremukaí peppered the enemy ranks with arrows.

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Marthal flinched as an arrow whizzed just over his head and planted itself in the chest of the man behind him. The unfortunate soldier yelped in pain, fell on his back and lay still. The Eremukaí were exacting an even heavier toll than anticipated.

He turned back to the field and surveyed the battle. His men were fighting valiantly, but they were dropping too quickly.

"Damn every single sand-dweller!" he howled. "Damn the filthy camels they were spawned from! Damn the air they breathe! To the Abyss with all of them!!!" Khaishar Sarrakaí, who

now sat beside his new paymaster, turned and frowned, but Marthal ignored him.

“Imperator...?” Malonius asked.

Marthal took a deep breath and a moment to calm himself. “My friend,” he sighed, “we can’t afford to let those sand-eating bastards pick at us any longer. Tell the archers to turn their fire towards the Eremukaí. Tell them each man owes me at least two dead dunemen before the day’s out.”

Malonius nodded and turned to relay the order. He froze and his face paled.

“What are you waiting for?” Marthal barked. “We need those bastards gone now!”

“M—my emperor...” Malonius stammered pointing behind them.

When Marthal turned to look, he knew hope was lost. An entire tribe of Eremukaí, the Torakaí from the looks of their banners, had surrounded, decimated, and routed the battalions left to guard the archers. With their sabers drawn, the horsemen were swooping down on the now-exposed cross-bowmen and javelinmen. And to make matters worse, the Harsonine cataphracts and light cavalry were approaching to join in the slaughter.

Against a cavalry attack, unguarded archers were about as sturdy as tall grass. Marthal’s cross-bowmen and Salmakans were quickly ridden down and butchered. Little more than a hundred survivors managed to reach the temporary safety of the infantry lines.

Marthal hung his head. He looked at the men around him, pondering how he could have let things go so wrong. Finally, he uttered a single word: “Retreat.”

“Fall back? Now?” Lucinius cried. “Imperator, we haven’t lost yet. If we hold together we can still—”

“IT’S OVER!” Marthal roared. “We’ve either to fall back now or fall dead later, so we withdraw! Now!”

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Marthal’s buglers sounded a short, despondent signal and his lines assumed their defensive formations to pull out. Shouts of jubilation, the likes of which Junayd had never heard before, rose up from the Harsonines and their allies.

Once the enemy was in full retreat, triumphant soldiers threw their helmets to the ground and shouted to the sky with joy. Men from every unit, even the Mongrels, dropped their weapons and embraced one another. Only the Torakaí and Mosakaí refrained from celebrating; they were busy grinding down what was left of their foes.

Junayd twirled his bloodied shamshir and hurled a shout of triumph at the setting sun. His *Horlas Ashayat* pranced around him, praising the Makers and thanking them for the day’s victory. Marcus struggled to control his overjoyed soldiers, as well as his own excitement. Even Mahir joined in the festivities, dismounting and dancing with a large, bearded Mongrel.

The euphoria died down when the men began tending to the task of collecting the dead and wounded. Like any great victory, the day’s triumph had come at a heavy price, but there would be ample stories of valor to lift the victors’ spirits that night.

## Chapter XV

The walls of Vere Aureus conjured up many memories for Junayd; some pleasant, others painful. He remembered his first time standing in the shadow of the great battlements. He remembered laying eyes on Miracel for the first time. He remembered returning to the city with his father's aso'ga on his brow. He remembered the day an old and mighty dynasty had been threatened for the first time in centuries. He remembered the walls and the city within dripping with blood. He remembered riding for his life as Marthal lowered the repulsive banners that still hung from the parapets - though hopefully not for much longer.

Standing once again in the city's great shadow, these memories came flooding back. He grinned to himself; he was laying siege to a city he'd once been chased out of.

Zarif and Mahir chatted idly behind him. "I'll wager twelve gold suns that Marthal's wetting himself as we speak," Zarif smirked.

"The tide has turned in our favor," Mahir said, "but don't let arrogance cloud your mind. A beast is most dangerous when cornered." He narrowed his eyes. "And you will address me as 'chief.'"

"Noted, *chief*," Zarif said. "Now, how about that bet? Twenty suns says he dies with a wet spot on his pants."

"Isn't there a lady you should be guarding?" Mahir grumbled.

"She is here," a soft voice answered. Miracel emerged from behind a nearby tent, clad in her white dressing gown with the two knives Zarif had given her tucked into a scarlet girdle. Her hair hung in a long braid down her back.



The men bowed. "My lady," Mahir said, "your presence honors me, but it is not advisable for you to be so close to the walls without protection."

"I appreciate your concern," she replied, "but I have learned to take care of myself in my time amongst your people. I have you lot to thank for that." Zarif beamed and Junayd could have sworn he saw Mahir blush.

She turned to Junayd. "If you wouldn't mind, Honored One, I would like a word alone."

"Most certainly," Junayd replied, trying not to sound too eager. "Zarif, Mahir, meet us at the pavilion." The two nodded and departed.

Once they were alone, Miracel took Junayd by the arm. "Could we walk a bit, Junayd?"

He smiled. "Nothing would make me happier."

They strolled slowly through the camp. Not knowing who might be watching, they were careful not to display their affection. However, they made no attempt to hide the pleasure they took in each other's company. Junayd did his best to make her smile at every opportunity; he doubted she knew how much joy her smiles brought him.

The pair chatted happily until they came to Junayd's pavilion. Junayd dismissed his servants, leaving only Zarif and Mahir on guard outside, and flopped down on a satin cushion. He smiled and gestured for her to join him. Miracel took a deep breath and sank into the cushion beside him.

Junayd frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Miracel looked around the room. "Are we alone? Where's the khaishará?"

"We are alone," Junayd assured her. "Karam is attending a feast with her clansmen tonight." He chuckled. "The Jarons claim they're celebrating our impending victory, but I think they're just looking for an excuse to enjoy some more Aurean wine."

Miracel sighed. "There is something I must tell you..."

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Mahir could scarcely believe what he'd heard. "You're sure?" he asked. "It's the khaishar's and no one else's?"

"I've been by her side every day since I met her," Zarif answered. "No one else has touched her." There was an awkward pause. "Should we inform the khaishará?"

"We answer to the khaishar first," Mahir replied. "It's his place and his alone to inform her of...such things."

"I'm no expert on women, marriages or anything of the sort," Zarif said. "But, if the worst should happen and our khaishar falls in battle—"

"You swore to die before allowing that," Mahir snapped, "so you oughtn't be concerned with what comes after it."

Zarif shrugged. "And perhaps we'll both have the chance to keep our oaths. But there's no sense denying that our khaishar is as mortal as any other man. If he dies without telling our good khaishará, she'll have to hear the news from someone else."

Mahir sighed; the young warrior had a point. "Yes, well... It's up to him all the same. Besides, once I'm over the walls, I intend to make sure that the fighting is short-lived and that our khaishar comes out of it unharmed."

"I'll drink to that," said Zarif, taking a swig from the wineskin on his sash.

Mahir smiled. "By the way, I think I'll take that wager you offered."

“Excellent!” Zarif exclaimed. “Twenty gold suns says the usurper dies with his pants wet.” The two shared a hearty laugh.

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“Damn it, you motherless fleabag!” Marthal cursed. The clumsy servant trembled so violently that he nearly dropped the jug of water he'd spilled in his master's lap. “Get out!” Marthal yelled. “If I see you again, you'll hang!” Without hesitation, the servant flew to the nearest stairway.

Sitting in a sentry's chair atop the wall, Marthal gazed down at the army surrounding him. He knew his enemies didn't yet have the strength to storm the city's defenses, but they were quickly gathering reinforcements. Day by day his foes' numbers were swelling.

And to make matters worse, some of his former “allies” were already flocking to their side; Exarch Sarnos of Tarkor and Townmaster Jorras of Cartos had thrown themselves at the Harsonines' feet the moment they received word of the “*Battle of Wicker Fields*.” Their betrayal hardly surprised him—he had always known both men to be cowards—but the news was nonetheless unwelcome.

He had committed nearly all his forces to the battle outside Cartos. The defeat he'd suffered there had left him without sufficient strength to lift the siege. Amicus and Teratum were besieged as well, and the meager garrisons he'd left there could not come to his rescue.

Vere Aureus was surrounded—both the southern district and Alta Turre on the far side of the *Vincio Aureus*. Most of Marthal's ships had deserted him, allowing Admiral Sacor and the Harsonine fleet to blockade the city's ports on both sides of the Great Channel. The gates were barred, but they

wouldn't keep the enemy out forever. The defenders knew they were trapped.

Marthal looked at his soldiers' faces. He recognized many of them from his past campaigns. They were steadfast and loyal, as always, but behind their discipline, he could see fear. He only wished he could tell them it was unfounded.

He took a deep breath. As bleak as things looked, he still had one card left to play. He had never thought such an underhanded ploy would be necessary, but he had no other option. After coming this far, he wouldn't lose everything for fear of how history might judge his actions.

He turned to Asher, who was standing nearby. "Some papyrus," he commanded.

He then turned to Lucinius. "Signal our man; I have new orders for him. He may very well win this war for us tonight."

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Since losing his father, Junayd had faced more fears and dilemmas than he cared to count, but none of them had shaken him quite so violently as what he'd just been told. "Are you...are you certain?" he stammered. Miracel nodded. Junayd paced about the room, struggling to process the news she'd given him. "Are you sure that... well...are you sure it's mine?" he asked tentatively.

Miracel gave him a hard slap across the face. "Do you think I'm a whore!?"

"Sorry," he replied, rubbing his cheek. "I just..."

Miracel sank back into her cushion, put her head in her hands and began to sob. Junayd felt a pang of guilt. This news had certainly caused her as much pain as it had him; probably more, given that she was the one carrying the evidence in her belly.

“Well...if the child is ours, we ought to be joyful,” he said. Miracel looked up and nodded. Junayd could see hope returning to her face. “I promise you, I will love our child...but I cannot claim him. You know as well as I do the shame and dishonor this would bring on both our families...and on the child. The scorn would be unbearable.”

“I know,” Miracel said with renewed strength. “I’m not the first Harsonine to conceive before her wedding day, but I will be the first in history to have bred with a sand-dw — an Eremukaí. If the truth became known, the child would have no place in our world.”

Junayd sighed. “Worse still, our child would never be safe. If it’s a boy, and anything should happen to your brother, our son would be the lawful heir, and there are plenty of powerful Aureans, even some of those marching with us, who —”

“I know,” Miracel said. “They would never tolerate a half-blood heir.”

Junayd nodded. “You understand then. For the child’s sake as well as ours, I cannot claim it as my own. But...” Junayd paused for a moment. “This will be a secret shared only between us and those we hold closest. I can’t raise our baby as my father raised me, but the child *will* know me as a father nonetheless.”

Miracel sighed. “It will be risky, but for the baby’s sake...”

“Miracel...” Junayd whispered, his eyes moistening, “I know none of this is fair to you. Please know that —”

“You needn’t burden yourself.” Traces of a smile had returned to her face. “We might suffer for it, I know. But the truth is, I regret nothing we’ve done together.” Junayd felt his heart throb.

“Before I met you, I was a shadow,” she continued. “I grew up being told I was the most en-

viable girl alive, but in truth, I knew nothing of the finest things in the world. In my time with you, my eyes were opened.”

Junayd felt a tear trickle down his cheek.

“*Kal Bayluk*,” he whispered.

“*Kal Bayluk*,” Miracel reciprocated.

They drew close to embrace but quickly pulled away when the tent flap was pushed open. To their surprise, young Emperor Torvinus burst in and wrapped himself around his sister’s legs. A trio of Prosidiar escorts followed him, along with Husnah, Mahir, and Zarif.

“Forgive me, Honored One,” Husnah said, “but the young emperor insisted on seeing his sister.”

Junayd smiled. “No apology needed, my friend.”

Torvinus bounced about like a dandelion puff. “C’mon, Miracel,” he laughed. “Husnah is teaching me to ride like a duneman. Please, come and watch. Pleeease!” Husnah shrugged and smiled sheepishly behind his beard.

Miracel gave her brother a warm hug. “I would love to come and watch later, but you should be resting now,” she said. “Just think, soon our home will be ours again. When we have our victory parade, everyone will be watching you ride back through the gates.”

The boy pouted. “I’m the emperor. I do what I like.”

“You are also a little boy,” Miracel said, “and boys need sleep to grow into wise rulers.”

Lieutenant Metellus, the ranking officer amongst Torvinus’ Prosidiar guards, stepped forward. “Forgive my intrusion,” he said, “but I’m concerned that this pavilion is too close to the walls for His Imperial Majesty’s safety. In all honesty, I

don't think His Grace should be outside the command pavilion at all until the walls are taken."

Miracel nodded. "A wise counsel. Please, escort my brother back to my cousin." Torvinus' bodyguards bowed and took up their protective positions around the pouting young emperor.

Before the company could leave, the pavilion's flap was thrown open again, and a grinning face on a lean, strong body strode in. "Sorry to disturb you, milady, and err...Honored Khaishar... *Juneed*," Sergeant Theobald said with a bow, "but I've got news that I think you ought to hear."

"It's *Junayd*," Junayd corrected him sharply. "And please, give us this news quickly so we can be done with your rude interruption."

Paying no mind to Junayd's scolding, the sellsword recounted, "A little over an hour ago, we caught a man trying to sneak out of our camp. He said he was one of us, but when we took him to the company he claimed to be from, no one recognized him. He kept on trying to convince us he was a Mongrel, but after a bit of... *persuasion*, we managed to squeeze the truth out of him. His name was Corporal Vero Barca Terconius, one of Marthal's errand boys." The faces in the room lit up with interest.

The sellsword continued. "Apparently our friend had just delivered a message directly from Marthal. He said he'd left it in the branches of an olive tree for someone to collect, someone already amongst us. We checked the tree, of course; the message had already been taken."

"And do we know who this *someone* is?" asked Metellus.

"Dear Terconius didn't know exactly who, —trust me, we'd have gotten it out of him if he had —but whoever they are, they'll be making a move on the emperor tonight."

Upon hearing this, Torvinus ran to his sister and wrapped his arms around her knees. Miracel bent down and held the boy close as if to shield him.

“Why do you come here with this news?” she asked Theobald. “If there’s a threat to the emperor’s safety, the proper course of action would be to inform my cousin. He’s in charge of His Imperial Majesty’s security.”

Theobald shrugged. “Contract has your name on it, not your cousin’s, so it’s you we report to. Besides, it’s a much longer walk to your cousin’s pavilion, and I’d rather not be late for supper. The cook’s promised us roasted pork tonight; that’s one of the few dishes the bloke can make that’s a good deal better’n starving.” The sellsword bowed. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll take my leave.” Miracel nodded and the sergeant slipped out, whistling a Balakan tune to himself.

Torvinus had begun sobbing and clung even more tightly to his sister’s skirts. “Don’t let them get me. You won’t let them, will you?” he moaned.

Miracel patted his back. “Of course not, little gopher. You’ll be safe with our cousin.”

She turned to Metellus. “My brother will be most vulnerable on his way back to the command pavilion. I want the escort doubled—tripled! Fetch a commander, someone we know to be loyal, and have him bring a contingent of his most trusted men. We will take no chances in ensuring that His Grace remains safe tonight.”

Metellus bowed and hurried out. The atmosphere in the room grew tense; every hand was gripping a weapon, and every eye and ear was alert. When the flap opened again, Junayd jumped and drew his blade half-way out of its sheath. He was relieved to see Verinus enter with a score of valtra at his back.



The captain bowed. "I was told I was needed. What's the situation?"

"Someone wants to get me," Torvinus sobbed.

"We have received word that His Imperial Majesty is in danger," Miracel explained. "It seems there is a traitor amongst us. You are to take him to my cousin's pavilion. He'll be safe there."

Verinus nodded. "That he will. We'll escort him there at once. Will my lady be accompanying us?"

"Yes, of course," Miracel answered. "You have my utmost trust, captain, but I will not be leaving my brother's side tonight."

"My men and I will be coming as well," Junayd announced.

"Thank you, Honored One," said Verinus, "but I don't think that will be necessary. His Grace is perfectly safe with us."

"I don't doubt it," Junayd answered, "but, as long as His Grace is among my people, he is under my *kai's* protection, under *my* protection. I will not let him out of my sight while he's in danger."

Verinus nodded. "We'd best be going then." The valtra and Prosidiars took up their positions around Miracel and her brother. Zarif stood by Miracel's side and Husnah by Torvinus'. Mahir and Junayd followed close behind them. With their sword arms ready, they made their way through the tents.

As they neared the edge of the D'jarakai camp, Verinus turned and asked, "Do you have any suspicions as to who the traitor might be? I'm certain it can't be one of my men. I'd trust any of them with my life."

"There is no way to be sure," Mahir answered. "Theobald only said that—"

“Theobald?” Verinus sneered. “You trust the word of that Balakan dog? It wouldn’t surprise me if *he* were the traitor.”

Miracel shook her head. “Sergeant Theobald may not be what we’d call a *perfect* soldier, but he’s loyal to Savaric, and Savaric has been loyal to us. Besides, if he were the traitor, it wouldn’t serve his purpose to warn us.”

Verinus shrugged. “I suppose not. But how did the Balakans find out about this...snake in our garden?” Miracel shuddered as she remembered *L'Sömnü* using the same words.

“The agent sent to carry the traitor’s instructions was caught trying to sneak back to his master,” Junayd explained. “They wrung some answers from him, but he’d already left the message at the drop point.”

“You have, of course, checked the olive tree, just in case the instructions haven’t been collected yet...” Verinus said.

Junayd nodded. “Of course. Theobald told us —” He stopped in his tracks.

Verinus turned and fixed him with his bright green eyes. “Something wrong?”

Junayd’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t recall anyone mentioning anything about an olive tree...”

Verinus frowned. “What do you mean? You just told me —”

“No,” Junayd shook his head. “I said he left it at a drop point. I said nothing of where that point was...”

The party fell silent. They turned their eyes to Verinus, waiting for his response. The captain thought for a moment, then gave it: “Now, lads!”

No sooner had he said it than the valtra drew their weapons and fell upon the others. The Pro-sidiars and *Horlas Ashayat* tried desperately to defend themselves, but the valtra were too quick.

Verinus seized Torvinus, lifted him under his arm and hauled the wailing boy toward a nearby group of horses. Miracel screamed and struggled to pull her brother from the captain's grip, but the traitor snarled and struck her to the ground with the back of his hand.

Before Junayd could draw his sword, he felt a heavy blow to the back of his head. His vision went black, and he knew no more.

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Junayd awoke to the familiar sting of his face being slapped. The pain came again and again, until his eyes finally opened.

Miracel's tear-streaked face was looking down at him. "They took him," she sobbed. "They took my brother."

Junayd sat up and looked around. Lifeless, bloodied corpses were strewn across the ground around him. The bodies of the Prosidiars lay unmoving with their swords still in their hands. Only Metellus had somehow emerged with only a set of flesh wounds and bruises. The corpses of several of Verinus' traitorous valtra lay beside them. Husnah lay motionless, his throat slashed open by a sword thrust.

A number of D'jarakaí had heard the commotion and come to help pack off the traitors. Several of these brave men lay among the dead and wounded. Their comrades stood over them, tending to their wounds and saying their farewells to the fallen. The entire scene was grisly, but the sight that struck Junayd deepest lay right beside him: Mahir lay crumpled in a growing puddle of his own blood.

Junayd sprang to his feet and bolted to his friend's side. Mahir was still drawing breath, but it

came in hoarse, ragged gasps. The man's strength was quickly leaving him.

Mahir's amber eyes turned to Junayd and his lips curled into a smile. "My khaishar, you're alright," said the old warrior. "The men and I saw the bastards off...but it looks like they managed to take a piece of me with them."

"Stay with us, old friend," Junayd pleaded, his voice trembling. "It's only a scratch. I've seen you get up after much worse." He looked up and shouted for a healer.

Mahir chuckled. "I've cheated Death a few times already... It looks like he's finally come to collect his due."

"No!" Junayd barked. "You are still needed here. Death'll just have to wait a bit longer."

Mahir shook his head. "You no longer need me. Perhaps you never did. You're already as great a khaishar, as good a man, as I've ever known." Mahir coughed, spraying blood across his linen tunic.

"A man is what his teachers have made him," Junayd whispered, refusing to let tears past his eyes.

"Just grant a man one last favor on his deathbed," Mahir wheezed. "Actually, I'd like two, if you don't mind."

"Of course, my friend," said Junayd. "Anything."

"First, stay the man you are, no matter what you find on the path ahead," Mahir coughed, spewing more blood. "And lastly..." Junayd couldn't stop the tears welling up in his dark brown eyes. Mahir's lips spread into a blood-stained grin. He plucked his khanja from his sash and offered it to Junayd. "Find that son of a whore Verinus, and give him this."

Junayd tucked the knife into his sash. "I'll make sure he knows it's from you," he promised in a breaking voice. "Good bye, old friend."

Mahir smiled. His eyes finally closed. A moment later, his breathing had stopped, and his head went limp.

Still denying the sobs that threatened to burst from his face, Junayd rose to his feet. His friend's blood flashed red across his white tunic.

Calling on every inch of his willpower, he suppressed the weeping boy within him and called for those around him to prepare funeral pyres for his fallen comrades. As he gave the order, he allowed himself but a single tear.

## Chapter XVI

Junayd had never understood how anyone could look at rain with dismay. To feel annoyance at precious water falling from the sky made no sense to him, nor to any other Eremukaí. Nevertheless, the sky's gift pattering against his face did little to ease his anguish at the moment.

He sat atop Scarab with Farhat and Ekram by his side and the great bronze gates of Vere Aureas before him. On his left, the allied khaishars and their retainers sat mounted on their horses. On his right, Marcus, Sarconius, Miracel and six Prosidiar guards were waiting astride their destriers.

It was clear that the rain brought the Aureans no comfort. Their faces were ashen, which was, of course, understandable. Miracel, however, somehow still managed to maintain a strong appearance. Her face looked far from happy, but she maintained her composure. Her self-control was impressive, considering she had just watched her only brother fall into the same hands that had killed their parents.

Junayd looked up into the falling rain and pondered how everything could have gone so wrong so quickly. How could they have let this happen? How could *he* have let this happen? After almost three years of fighting, victory had finally been within their reach. They had gotten their grip around Marthal's throat, and at the last minute, the traitor's slimy fingers had snatched away the one thing they couldn't afford to lose.

*"This is my fault," Junayd thought. "I underestimated him. I let my guard down, and now we'll all pay the price."*

After a few minutes that passed like hours, the gates finally swung open and a party of two dozen riders trotted out over the muddy cobblestones to meet them. As they drew nearer, Junayd's

sharp eyes were able to make out their faces. He was surprised to see Marthal's unmistakable, scarred features and his even more conspicuous golden eye on the shoulders of the lead rider. It wasn't like Marthal to expose himself to his enemies, but Junayd supposed the usurper felt safe with his new hostage.

Junayd recognized the tough-looking officer to Marthal's left as Captain Malonius, one of the usurper's most trusted commanders. The fat, nervous-looking Eremukaí behind him was, of course, Khaishar Sarraaká; so the turncoat had survived the battle. And the handsome face to Marthal's right...

Junayd gritted his teeth. It took all his willpower to restrain himself from reaching for his bow or unleashing the string of obscenities that had suddenly flared up in his throat. "*Verinus*," he hissed. The traitorous captain smirked at his former comrades, not even bothering to avoid their eyes.

The opposing company slowed to a halt twelve paces away, and Marthal cleared his throat. "Greetings, respected adversaries," he began. "I am glad to see that, though we've had our differences, we can still parley like civilized men."

"Civilized?!" Marcus snapped. "What sort of 'civilized' man kidnaps children in the night? Although, I suppose I should've expected as much from a murderous, cowardly worm like yourself!"

Junayd could see in Marthal's eye that Marcus' words had pricked him. Nevertheless, the usurper continued without the slightest trace of pain in his voice. "It is unfortunate that we find ourselves on opposing sides, but time has taught me that even the bitterest of enemies can come to a reasonable agreement. If we are prudent here today, we will take our beloved empire into a new age of glory and prosperity. Not a drop more of blood need be spilled, so long as—"

“Enough of this rambling!” Marcus snarled. “Say your words and be quick about it. I don’t suppose a lowlife like you could possibly understand the shame a loyal soldier feels at having to treat with the dog holding his emperor captive, but please, understand that I wish our talks to end as soon as possible.”

“*Captive?*” Marthal feigned surprise at Marcus’ words. “Surely you don’t think I bear any ill will toward my guest. A son does not choose his father; Torvinus bears no guilt for the injustices of the late emperor. While he’s in my care, he shall want for nothing, and he certainly needn’t fear me nor any other...so long as we can reach a reasonable agreement, of course.” Marcus spat on the ground between them.

“Perhaps you should be happy for him,” Marthal went on. “After all, the boy has finally been allowed to return home.”

Junayd listened to Marthal’s silken words with dismay, but at least the man had refrained from gloating. He doubted he could have endured that.

“I have spent the afternoon in prayer and contemplation,” Marthal said. “And I believe the Makers have blessed me with a solution that will suit us all and bring peace to this embattled realm.” Marthal hung his head. “Every drop of Aurean blood spilled is a terrible waste and—”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT, YOU BASTARD?!” Miracel screamed. Her composure had finally broken. The outburst shook members of both parties, but Junayd was hardly surprised. Had he been in her place, it likely would have come sooner.

Marthal went on without giving her so much as a glance. “Here is my proposal: we put the past behind us and restore the Harsonine dynasty. Torvinus will remain safe in the palace and all present



will retain the positions they have rightfully earned.”

Marthal turned and gave Miracel an inviting smile. “I am prepared to take the beautiful Miracel Larissa Harsoninus as my bride. Together, we will guide the Aurean Empire toward peace and progress.”

Junayd was sure he must’ve heard wrong. Not even Marthal could be capable of such an unthinkable proposal. But as great as the shock in Junayd’s face may have been, it was nothing next to Miracel’s. Her face was contorted to such an extent that she was hardly recognizable.

“I...I...” Miracel’s chest heaved as she spoke. “I would rather spend an eternity in the Abyss than a single day with you!!!”

Marthal nodded. “I feared you might feel so, but I do hope you will come to see reason for the sake of our people...and of your brother.”

Miracel’s face remained twisted into a hateful scowl, but her light blue eyes began to soften into despair. As loathsome as Marthal and his words may have been, her brother was all she had left. Junayd knew she couldn’t go on living if she allowed any harm to befall him.

Seeing that his words had produced their desired effect, Marthal nodded courteously and gave his farewell. “I think we’ve discussed all there is to speak of for now. Please, give my offer some thought. I pray you will have the sense to see that it is to our mutual benefit.” With that, he turned his horse and trotted back to the city gates with his retinue close behind him.

Before following his master, Verinus turned and glanced at his former comrades, who glared silently back at him. The traitor smirked, gave them a boyish wink, then rode off toward the gate.

This taunt was more than Junayd could bear. A howl sprung loose from his throat. He yanked his khanja from his sash and pulled the blade back to hurl it at Verinus' pretty, golden head.

A firm hand seized his wrist. "No, my khaishar," Ekram hissed, tightening his grip. "You must not. You came here to parley; the terms of the truce must not be violated. Please, think of the emperor!"

Junayd's first instinct was to chastise his guard for laying a hand on him. But once his rage had passed, he saw that the man had saved him from dishonor. He nodded and slid his blade back into its sheath.

\* \* \*

The council held that night was the most turbulent, agitated gathering Junayd had yet seen, which was no small thing to say. The moment the allied leaders took their seats, the air exploded into a torrent of shouts and accusations.

"What sort of fools can't keep their own chief safe?" Khaishar Mosakaí hollered. "Mind you, that's *two* emperors you fairskins have lost!"

"Watch your tongue!" Marcus snapped. "You dunemen have no right to speak to Harsonines in such a way."

"Oh really?" The khaishar sneered. "Because at the moment, if you offered me your house's precious throne, I'd tell you to keep it. Nothing personal; I'd just prefer to keep my head is all."

Marcus sprang to his feet. His blue eyes flashed. "In that case, I suggest you learn some respect!"

"Perhaps the man we should be talking to is the one who let Marthal's little fingers into our purse," Sacor sneered, turning to Sarconius. "Veri-

nus was your man, your subordinate. You assured us of his loyalty.”

The general shrugged helplessly. “Forgive me. I never would have allowed him within a hundred miles of the emperor if I’d heard any indication of him being untrue.”

The young admiral raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps it’s our fault for putting our trust in a man who was nearly overrun by a band of northern thugs.”

“You go too far!?” Sarconius snapped. “You know as well as I do that what happened at the Northern Watchtower was not my fault. You try holding a crumbling excuse for a fort, with only a pack of green recruits, against two thousand Amaltri warriors, and then you can—”

“Shut it!” Miracel’s voice rang out. She banged her fist on the oaken table. “Stop your yammering, all of you! My brother, our emperor, was snatched right from under our noses last night, and all you idiots can do is bicker like a pack of hagglers?” The power in her voice was enough to dissuade anyone from trying to speak over her. “Sit down, and let’s discuss this like civilized men,” she hissed. The assembly sank obediently into their seats.

Silence reigned for a few painfully long minutes. It was Savaric who finally found the courage to break it. “It seems the beast has our arm in its jaws,” he said somberly. “If we are to escape its grasp, we must cut the arm free, no matter how painful it might be, or be devoured.”

Miracel scowled. “What are you saying?”

Marcus took a deep sigh. “As long as you survive, my lady. So does the royal bloodline. This choice weighs heavier on my heart than I had ever thought possible, but if we must choose between giving in to that devil’s demands or...”

“If you’re suggesting what I think you are,” Miracel fumed, “I should have you flogged here and now!”

Marcus was taken aback. He had always been wary of his cousin’s temper, but he’d never expected to hear his own family threaten him so.

Miracel took a moment to calm herself before speaking again. “You know I care for you deeply, cousin, but if you or any other man here utters a word about sacrificing my brother...I swear by the Father’s justice, that man will regret it.” The heads at the table nodded understandingly.

Suddenly Sarconius rose to his feet, a glint of hope shining across his hardened face. “There may be a chance, however slim, to bring His Grace to safety,” he said. All eyes turned and fixed on the general.

“I remember one day, while I was stationed in the palace, during the reign of Emperor Justirias,” he recounted. “A group of Ylaján galleys had been spotted a few leagues from the port. It was almost certainly just a passing convoy; no one considered it a cause for worry, except His Imperial Majesty. He called me and a handful of others into the council chambers and gave us a plan of action, in case Vere Aureus were attacked.

“Of course, there was no sense in this. Even if the Ylajáns had meant to hurt us, they never could’ve penetrated the city. To be perfectly honest, I’d say the emperor was growing paranoid in his old age, but that’s not important now. What is important is what he told us.”

Sarconius leaned forward. “He told us of a secret passage from the palace to the outside of the wall; a tunnel running under the city. If the Ylajáns somehow made it to the palace, His Grace said we were to use it to evacuate himself and the royal fam-

ily.” Many of those at the table gasped at this new sliver of hope.

“I’ve lived in that palace my entire life,” Miracel said, “and I’ve never seen nor heard of such a passage.”

“His Grace said it was built over a century ago, just after the Siege of the Dark Sun,” Sarconius explained. “After the siege was lifted and the Ylajáns were driven off, Emperor Tarquis wanted to make sure that he and his family would never again be trapped in their own city. He commissioned the construction of a secret passage that ran from the palace pantries through the cisterns under the city. Supposedly it leads out to a villa called...err...what was it?... ‘*VillaStacalla*’, outside the walls.”

“Then there’s a chance,” Junayd exclaimed. “A small party might be able to slip into the palace by night and snatch His Grace out from under Marthal’s nose.”

“That would be a risky move,” Admiral Sacor said. “If this party were detected, and there’s a fat chance it would be, there’s no telling what our enemy would do. It could be that the brave souls sent to save our emperor might instead provoke Marthal into cutting his throat.”

“Marthal would never dare harm His Grace, unless he was sure he was doomed either way,” said Marcus. “The usurper is many things, but he’s no fool. With the reinforcements that arrived this morning from Portus Mundi, we now have the strength to storm the walls. The bastard knows his new hostage is the only thing standing between him and the Abyss.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” advised Savaric. “When a beast is wounded and cornered, there’s no telling how or when it’ll lash out.”

“We must try,” Miracel said decisively. “As undesirable as this course may be, it’s the best op-

tion we have.” With a bit of grumbling, the assembly accepted her verdict.

Sarconius turned and called five of the sentries posted outside into the pavilion. Their sergeant saluted the general, “Orders, sir?”

“A mile or so north of the highroad, you’ll find a small villa called ‘VillaStacalla,’” Sarconius told him. “We believe a tunnel entrance is located there. Search the place until you find it.”

The sergeant frowned. “Pardon, sir. *A tunnel?*”

“Yes, a tunnel!” Sarconius barked. “A passage! A shaft! Just find it and quickly.”

“Well... err... At once, imperator,”. The soldiers saluted and hurried out.

Sarconius turned back to the assembly. “Now, of course, there is the question of who to send on this little...expedition. No more than a handful could sneak in unnoticed. I’d recommend sending...say...twenty or so.”

“I’m sure plenty of loyal soldiers will be clamoring for the chance to rescue their emperor,” Marcus said, “but we’ll send only our very best.”

“If I may,” said Savaric, “Some of my lads are perfect for this sort of business. In Balakar, it pays to be able to move about unseen...and to familiarize oneself with a few...*unconventional* tactics.” Marcus and Sarconius nodded understandingly.

“I’ll be going as well,” Junayd said. The heads in the room turned and stared.

Having overheard their chief from their posts outside, Ekram and Farhat burst into the room. “Honored One, please, don’t,” Ekram protested. “You needn’t put yourself at risk. Our *kai* needs a *khaishar*.”

“Allow us to go instead,” Farhat pleaded, “I swear to you that—”

“Outside immediately!” Junayd snapped. “And do not deign to question my word again.” Seeing this wasn’t the time to argue, the two reluctantly bowed and returned to their posts.

“I *will* be joining this expedition,” Junayd went on. “His Grace was under my protection on the night he was taken. I am bound by my honor, and that of my *kai*, to ensure he remains unharmed.”

“Very well,” said Marcus. “Are there any further suggestions?”

Miracel sprang to her feet, but Marcus cut her off before she could speak. “My lady, your courage is admirable and your strength of will equally so, but we simply cannot risk losing both you *and* the emperor. You *must* be kept safe.” The heads at the table nodded in agreement.

“You would deny me the chance to rescue my own brother?!” Miracel hissed. “Please understand,” Marcus continued, “if we lose your father’s line entirely, it would be a blow from which our house might never recover. You must stay out of harm’s way, for the good of your family, your empire, your people, and us, your loyal servants.”

Miracel’s moistening eyes flickered between the faces around her. She opened her mouth to protest further but could find no words to deny her cousin’s reasoning. With a downcast face, she sank back into her seat.

“I will bring him back for you, my lady” Junayd promised. “I swear on my father’s blood, I will bring him back, even if I have to cut through a thousand men to do it.”

\* \* \*

“I’ve already promised a thousand times: all will be well,” Zarif insisted, strapping on his shamshir, “In a matter of hours, I’ll be back with

your brother on my shoulder. And, Talis willing, I'll soon drop Marthal's head in your lap."

"I have no doubt," said Miracel. "You've always been loyal and faithful to me. You've been the friend I needed." She placed her hand on his shoulder. "I need something from you now and I want your word that, just this once, you will do as I ask without question."

Zarif thought for a moment, then nodded. "Just this once."

Miracel took a deep breath and gave him her request.

\* \* \*

"But why *you*?" Karam wailed. "There are thousands of D'jara*kaí* warriors who would be honored to go. Why do you, our khaishar, my husband, have to put your own life at risk?"

"My love, I told you," Junayd said. "The emperor was my guest and under my protection. I owe—"

"You owe these fairskins nothing!" Karam snapped. "You've given them more than enough already. You've poured out the blood of our *kaí* like sand fighting *their* war. You've put yourself in danger far too many times. You've torn yourself away from your home, away from me, all for *them*. You owe them nothing more."

Junayd tucked his khanja into his sash. "Karam, please," he said. "Don't think, even for a moment, that I want to leave you. But I have no choice. My honor and that of our *kaí* would be forever tarnished if I didn't."

"You'll leave me a widow," Karam moaned, "a widow at only eighteen."



Junayd caressed her face and brushed away her tears. "I want to be with you as well, and when this is over, nothing will keep us apart."

Karam's face hardened. Her eyes narrowed. "Please...let's both stop pretending we don't know the real reason you insist on undertaking this. It's for *her*, I know"

"I...I don't know what you're talking about," Junayd lied.

Karam slapped him. "Damn you! Do you think I'm blind? I've seen the way you look at her, the way she looks at you." Junayd could not bring himself to deny her words. "I don't care what happened before we joined hands," she said, "but you are *mine* now, just as I am yours. Have you forgotten that?"

Junayd turned his eyes from hers. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have to go now."

As Junayd turned to leave, Karam placed a hand on his shoulder. "Wait...My love, I am with child."

Junayd turned and looked into her amber eyes. For a moment, he could not find the words to speak. "You're certain?" he said at last.

Karam nodded. "I hadn't wanted to give you the news until after the fighting stopped, but..."

"Praise to the Makers!" Junayd cried, "Once I've returned and our victory is secured, we will have yet another blessing to thank Them for."

This wasn't the response Karam had been hoping for. Noticing her disappointment, Junayd embraced her and held her tight. "You'll see me again, I promise."

## Chapter XVII

The passage's entrance was harder to find than anticipated. When asked about the tunnel, the villa's master, an old coot called Varo Marconius Stacalla, claimed he'd no knowledge of any such thing near his home. More than likely, the old man was still unsure of the war's outcome and didn't want to risk aiding the wrong side. The searchers had half-ransacked the villa by the time Stacalla finally "remembered" a doorway concealed behind a spice shelf in his cellar.

The passage was wide enough for four to walk abreast, three comfortably. Their small party of twenty-two would be able to pass through with relative ease.

Twelve loyal, experienced, and eager Prosidiar volunteers had been chosen for the operation. Lieutenant Metellus had been chosen to lead them after promising to fall on his sword if denied a chance at redemption.

Savaric had selected six of his men, including Theobald, for the job. Though they did have a dangerous look about them, these weren't the largest or burliest of the Mongrels. Rather, these men had the looks of thieves and cutthroats, scoundrels adept at moving unseen, perfect for the task at hand.

Junayd had allowed Ekram and Farhat to accompany him. At Miracel's behest, he had agreed to take Zarif as well.

The Prosidiars were clad in the livery of Marthal's valtra, even going so far as to have the usurper's sigil painted on their forearms. The Mongrels wore the garb of royal servants, with their dirks, throwing knives and other small weapons concealed beneath their tunics. They'd also been

forced to shave their beards, a command against which they'd vehemently protested.

Junayd and his men were clad in their traditional garb with their faces hidden behind keffiyehs. They hoped to pass for some of the surviving Sarakaí that Marthal had taken to garrison the city.

At midnight, the party assembled at *VillaS-tacalla*. The men accepted well-wishes from their comrades and offered prayers to whatever gods they followed. Marcus had even summoned a string of priests to appeal properly to the Makers. The clergymen uttered a chant in Old Aurean, swinging their ceremonial brass censers to waft their aroma to the heavens. Though Junayd could not understand their words, he found them strangely comforting.

Once the prayer was finished, the torches were lit, and forming rows of three, the men marched into the blackness of the tunnel. Theobald took the lead. Neither he nor any of the Mongrels seemed to mind the soggy muck they were forced to trudge through. The rest of the men, however, were rather queasy.

Fortunately, the more experienced Balakans had been wise enough to suggest that they all wear footwraps over their boots, so as to avoid having to explain scum and refuse coating their feet. But, unfortunately, the wraps did nothing to stifle the awful stench that filled the air.

The slime and the acrid smells it produced grew thicker as the party progressed further into the tunnel. The city's cisterns were composed of several dingy chambers with a vaulted ceiling supported by stone pillars. The ooze and dirty droplets dripping from the walls suggested that they had recently been full from yesterday's rainfall, but luckily, the water was low at the moment. Junayd tightened his keffiyeh around his face to shield his nose from the

odors and did his best to keep his mind off whatever he was stepping in.

The cistern's legion of rats mostly kept out of the torchlight, but they made their presence known with their incessant squeaks, the sound of their scampering, and the glow of their beady eyes. Junayd had never been bothered by rats before, but then, the elusive rodents of the desert were nothing like the horde of furry bodies that now surrounded him.

Each little creature seemed to be watching him. Junayd waved his torch at a cluster of beady eyes, and the little beasts scattered into the shadows.

Theobald flashed one of his famous grins. "Don't care much for the little varmints, eh?"

"Forgive me if I don't enjoy being surrounded by a pack of filthy, disease-ridden, vermin," Junayd grumbled.

"Aye, they're not the most handsome creatures," said the sellsword. "But, believe it or not, there are times when even these little varmints can be a welcome sight. I remember once when we were besieged in Bortal; after a few months, we finally got hungry enough to give 'em a taste."

Junayd's jaw dropped. "You ate rats?!"

Theobald shrugged. "Rations were gone and it was gettin' harder to find moss to pick from the walls. It was either eat what you could find or starve. Besides, it wasn't as awful as you might think. You should try a grilled rat some time." Junayd retched.

After trudging through miles of sewage, the torchlight finally illuminated a small stairway leading up out of the cisterns. The men pushed and shoved amongst themselves, eager to get out of the muck.

Junayd looked up at the passage and felt a surge of fear; he was about to walk right into the

grip of his enemies. He looked down at the slime at his feet; he would have almost preferred to remain there, surrounded by the stench and filth, than go on and face what he was about to attempt. Almost.

The stairway was a bit wider than the tunnel they had entered by; there was room for five to walk abreast. This could make an ideal escape route if they ever got far enough to use it. The passage ended with a crude wooden stairway leading to a hatch in the ceiling. This was it.

The men doused their torches and began making their final preparations. Some offered up brief, last-minute prayers. Others examined each other's disguises, scanning for any overlooked detail that might give them away. The Balakans seemed the most at ease. They simply checked their weapons to ensure that they could slit any throats that needed to be silenced.

"Everyone ready?" Theobald asked. The men nodded and exchanged glances. "Very well then," the sellsword said with another of his famous grins. "Just think, a hundred years from now, they'll be singing songs about us. Of course, I can't say whether they'll be singing of the heroic lads who rescued the Aurean emperor or of the bumbling idiots who got themselves killed trying to pull off a harebrained scheme. But either way, we'll be making history today."

Theobald lifted the hatch and stepped into the faint candlelight above. He swiveled his head and suddenly sprang off to the left. Junayd heard a muffled scream followed by a faint gurgling. He rushed up through the hatch and saw Theobald standing over a servant with a slit throat. The mercenary cleaned his blade on his victim's white livery and checked to ensure that no blood had stained his own.

“That hardly seemed necessary, sellsword” remarked Metellus, who had just emerged behind Junayd.

“‘Couldn’t have him singin’ out, now could we?’” Theobald rebuffed. A few of the Prosidiars scowled, but Theobald stared them down. “You can judge me later, if we last the night, but you’ll find that heavy baggage, like some fancy ‘code of honor’ or a squeaky clean conscience, can weigh you down on a job like this. I’ve been doin’ this sorta work since I was sixteen. You think I’d have survived this long if I didn’t know how to get my hands dirty?” The men exchanged uneasy glances. Theobald shrugged. “Like I said, you lot can judge me later. Now, let’s get moving.”

Ekram tossed the unfortunate servant’s corpse down the hatch, closed it and covered it with the room’s carpet. The men filed up the stairs, out of the cellar and into the palace kitchen, which fortunately was vacant. They crept into the dining hall, which was empty as well, allowing them to easily slip, one by one, into the hallway. They encountered a few guards and palace staff members walking along the corridor, but Junayd was relieved to see that the party’s disguises seemed to be working. The servants and guards passed them without a second glance.

As the group turned a corner, Junayd heard a familiar voice approaching. He quickly made sure his keffiyeh was wrapped tight around his face.

“I don’t think you understand,” Khaishar Sarraakáí said. “Your western grain is not suitable for an Eremukáí horse. Our mounts must be given special rations if they are to be kept healthy.”

The stable master walking beside the khaishar grunted. “Your beasts get the same as ours. Truth is, we don’t have much left to give our beasts.

If I were you, I'd be grateful they're eating instead of being eaten."

"Outrageous!" barked the khaishar. He turned and pointed to Junayd. "You there!"

Junayd froze. He could feel beads of sweat dampening the cloth of his keffiyeh.

"Any Eremukaí knows that desert horses require a special diet. Isn't this so?" Junayd nodded.

Khaishar Sarraakaí turned back to the stable master. "There, you see? Anyone with the slightest knowledge of desert horses knows that special beasts demand special feeding." The stable master grunted and shook his head as he and the chief walked off down the hall.

Junayd his companions sighed with relief. They took a moment to wipe the sweat from their faces before continuing up the hall. Soon they came upon a small broom closet: just what they needed. The men paced back and forth, feigning idle chatter while remaining near the door, waiting for their opportunity.

It came in the form of a lone officer strutting down the corridor. Theobald and two other Mon-grels began rifling through the closet, giving the impression that they were nothing more than servants looking for tools.

The young officer stopped and frowned at the disguised Prosidiars. Suddenly remembering the role they were playing, the men snapped to attention and saluted. Junayd silently cursed their stupidity; forgetting to salute a superior officer was uncharacteristic of an Aurean soldier of any rank. That sort of carelessness could get them all killed. But, to everyone's relief, the young officer merely rolled his eyes and continued down the hall.

The moment the unsuspecting youth passed the broom closet, three pairs of hands reached out

and seized hold of him, covering his mouth and restraining his limbs. His eyes bulged with shock as he was jerked back in through the doorway, which was then kicked shut behind him.

Junayd could make out only a few whispered words of what was being said behind the door: “*where...*,” “*hurt...*,” “*emperor...*” “*please...*,” all accompanied by pained moans and whimpers. A few minutes later, the door opened and the three Mongrels walked out. The unfortunate youth’s body had been shoved into a burlap sack and tossed into a pile of clutter.

“Well that didn’t take long at all,” Theobald said, shutting the door behind him. “The poor fellow sang like a bird once we applied a little pressure in the right places.”

The sellsword pointed to a great staircase at the end of the hallway, “Our boy’s in his old bed-chambers. There’ll be only two guards, and their shift doesn’t change for more than an hour. Let’s get movin’.”

The company moved quickly, though not so quickly as to draw attention. At the base of the staircase, Theobald turned to the rest of the group. “Only two of you Aureans go on from here. We can’t all go at once. If they see a whole line of us, someone’ll smell a rat.”

Metellus selected Ennius and Albus, two of his best men, to proceed. Theobald pointed to Junayd and Zarif. “You two follow ‘em. A few bowmen might come in handy if there’s a scuffle. The rest of us’ll stay here until you get back.”

Ennius and Albus ascended the staircase with Junayd and Zarif a few paces behind. At the top of the stairs, the two Prosidiars directed them through the corridors to the royal bed chambers.



“This is it,” Junayd whispered to Zarif. “If all goes well, we’ll be out in an hour, and the war will be over soon after.”

Zarif nodded. The man’s keffiyeh concealed his face, but Junayd could sense his unsettled nerves through the linen.

They didn’t need the Prosidiars to identify Torvinus’ bedchamber. The door was carved of mahogany and inlaid with gold. Even the arched doorway was plated with silver. As expected, two sentries were posted outside, though both looked as if they’d been standing there for far too long.

Junayd nodded to Ennius and Albus. The two casually approached the guards, doing their best to appear at ease.

Ennius cleared his throat. “We’re here to relieve you.”

The two sentries turned to face them. The news was clearly not unwelcome, but they did seem a bit perplexed.

“Relieve us?” one asked. “I was told we were to remain here ’til sundown.”

“New orders,” Ennius replied. “You’re to report to...to the throne room.”

The other guard scratched his chin. “What would they want with us there? The Imper—...I mean, *His Imperial Majesty*, isn’t there now; no one is. The throne room is only for important business.”

Ennius shrugged. “I don’t ask. I just obey.”

“And who gave this order?” the guard asked.

“Err...” Ennius didn’t have an answer ready, but he did the best he could. “Well... it was...His Imperial Majesty, of course.”

The sentry’s eyes narrowed. “His Grace wouldn’t give an order like that, to one of us, in person. Who are you two? Who’s your commander?” Ennius didn’t have answers for those questions either.

“Come on now. Spit it out!”

Ennius and Albus exchanged glances. A look of mutual understanding passed between them.

“Looks like our emperor will be explaining the situation to you himself,” Albus said, bowing to the empty hallway. “Hail, Your Imperial Majesty.”

The moment the sentries had turned their heads, the Prosidiars’ hands flew to their sword hilts. With expert speed, they drew their blades and struck. There was a flash of steel and spouts of blood burst from the guards’ throats. For a moment, the two sentries simply stood in shock. Then both collapsed to the floor, gaping like fish as their strength bled away.

Albus plucked a keyring from one of their belts. “Sorry, lads. Mum always did say it was a bad idea to ask too many questions.”

The two Prosidiars kept watch while Junayd tried each of the keys in the door’s lock. Finally, one clicked and the door swung open.

Little Torvinus sat huddled on the velvet sheets of his bed, rocking back and forth with tears streaming down his cheeks. His eyes were red, puffy and still moist from crying. When he saw his rescuers, he mistook them for Marthal’s lackeys and pouted.

Before anyone could utter a word, Zarif shoved his way past Ennius and Albus and darted to the boy’s side. “It’s alright,” he said. “Come here, little gopher. It’s time to go.”

Junayd and the Prosidiars fixed their eyes on Zarif. The voice they’d heard wasn’t his. The accent wasn’t Eremukaí. It wasn’t even a man’s voice.

The young duneman undid his keffiyeh and let it fall. Every eye in the room went wide.

Junayd barely stopped himself from yelping in shock. “M-Miracel!!!” he stammered. “What in the Ursha’s name...? How did you...? Where...?”

The young emperor was the first to recover his senses. His pudgy face broke into a grin, and squealing gleefully, he bounced off his bed into his sister's arms. Miracel held him close, and tears of joy welled up in her light blue eyes. "Time to go home now," she said.

Miracel shielded her brother's eyes as Ennius and Albus dragged the guards' corpses into the room and hid them beneath the bed. Junayd and Theobald mopped up the blood with the emperor's bed sheets and tossed the soiled cloth under the bed as well. Once they were satisfied with their cleanup, they locked the bedroom door behind them.

Miracel tied her keffiyeh back around her face and took her brother's hand. "Don't be afraid," she whispered. "Just come along, and don't make a sound."

As they made their way back down the hall, Ennius and Albus walked on either side of Torvinus to give the impression that he was still under guard. Fortunately, the pathway to the staircase was clear and they made it there without further incident.

From the moment he saw the floor below, Junayd knew something was wrong. Instead of their companions, a single figure was waiting at the base of the stairway. He was dressed in a scarlet tunic and armed with a short rapier. His handsome face was crowned with blonde curls. The figure looked up at Torvinus and his escorts as a wolf might look at a cornered sheep. Junayd felt his blood boil.

"My dear comrades, it gives me such joy to see you again," Verinus laughed. "I hadn't thought we'd be reunited so soon. The Emperor will be so very pleased."

Junayd and Miracel nocked arrows. But before they could take aim, Verinus whistled, and his trap was sprung.

Dozens of guards filed out of the doors around them, pikes, swords and crossbows at the ready. Two dozen more surrounded Verinus, forming a protective wall with their shields. Junayd knew they were hopelessly outnumbered, but all the same, if it hadn't been for the shields protecting the captain, he would have taken the shot.

"Relieve our guests of their arms," Verinus ordered. A guard held out his hands and the four of them helplessly handed over their weapons. The guards formed a line behind them and prodded them with their pikes to force them down the stairs.

"Come now, don't be rude," Verinus said. "Let's see your faces. I'd like to know just who I'm entertaining." When Miracel and Junayd made no move to comply, the captain motioned for the guards to remove his prisoners' keffiyehs. His eyes went wide upon seeing their faces. "My lady! Khaishar D'jara!ai!" he exclaimed with a wide grin. "I must say, this is a pleasant surprise; I hadn't expected to see you *both* here. With all that's been happening lately, I'm so glad to see my friends safe and sound."

"Please," sobbed Torvinus. "Don't hurt my sister."

"Not to worry, little one," Verinus said tenderly. "These are our guests. We would never dream of harming them, so long as they heed our rules. Your sister is a very clever girl. She won't do anything stupid." He turned to Miracel. "Will you?" She shook her head despondently.

"Marvelous!" he exclaimed. "Let's go then; I don't want to keep His Imperial Majesty waiting. He'll be overjoyed to receive you."

"Traitor!" Ennius hollered. "I fought beside you at The Twins. You were one of us! And now you've—"

Verinus pointed at Ennius and snapped his fingers. In an instant, the man crumpled to the floor, his throat cut by the guard behind him.

The captain heaved a heavy sigh. "I suppose I owe you a bit of honesty: I was never one of you. I've been serving our new emperor since the day he took the throne." He turned to Junayd and Miracel. "I'm sorry you had to find out the way you did. I've actually grown rather fond of you both, but you see, a good soldier follows his master's orders; I've always done just that."

Junayd wasn't sure how much longer he could contain himself. The little worm had called himself their friend, sworn to be their shield-brother, then betrayed them, murdered Mahir, and kidnapped Miracel's brother. Now the bastard was standing there, smiling, just two paces away.

As if trying to stoke Junayd's temper, Verinus stepped forward, planted a welcoming kiss on his *'guest's'* cheek, and turned his own for Junayd to do the same. Junayd could restrain himself no longer. He seized a handful of Verinus' curls and sank his teeth into the Aurean's ear.

Verinus shrieked and howled in agony. Four guards attempted to pry Junayd off, but he only sank his teeth deeper. Finally, the two were pulled apart, but so was the captain's ear.

Junayd plucked the tattered earlobe from his teeth and threw it at Verinus' feet. Moaning in pain and reeling from the shock, the captain pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to what remained of his ear.

He took up the severed lobe and hissed through gritted teeth, "Damn you, you putrid desert dog!!! I swear I'll see you pay for that. And I'll take more than an ear; you remember that!"

Verinus' rant was interrupted by a sudden racket from the western hallway. Loud yelling, the

ring of steel on steel, and the clatter of shattering pottery emanated from the corridor. The noise was so excessive that one might think someone was causing a ruckus just for the sake of doing so.

Four men in bloodied servants' garb appeared beneath the arched doorway. One flashed a wide, sparkling grin. "You think this is over? Come and see," Theobald dared. "We've got more than a few surprises in store for you."

"After them!" Verinus barked, still clutching his ruined ear. "I want their heads!" Two or three dozen guards drew their weapons and charged after the Mongrels, who quickly retreated but didn't stop bombarding their pursuers with taunts and dares.

"Let's get a move on," Verinus hissed. "A little nuisance like those scum oughtn't keep the emperor waiting."

His eyes turned to Junayd. "We'll continue our business later," he said coldly. With that, he turned and led them down the north hall toward the throne room.

As Junayd and Miracel followed, they heard a subtle "*Psst*," from the line of guards to their right. When they turned to look, a surge of hope rose within them.

## Chapter XVIII

Marthal straightened his back against the marble throne and sank his teeth into the peach in his hand. He had waited years for this moment: the moment he finally held all the cards. At long last, his victory was complete.

Young Asher stood by his side, clearly sharing in his master's joy. Of course, the boy had plenty of reason to be pleased as well. He rose and fell along with Marthal, and Marthal was now rising to the top of the world.

The throne room's great doors swung open and Verinus entered, followed by five prisoners and two dozen guards. Marthal smiled as he beheld the downcast faces of Khaishar Junayd Jarum D'jarakaí, the still sobbing Torvinus Mercellus Harsoninus IV, and...

*Could it be!? Lady Miracel Larissa Harsoninus had actually come herself!* He had expected the young khaishar to attempt a rescue, on account of the humiliation he and his kaí had suffered, but not the Harsonine girl. He had never thought her, nor any of her family, to be particularly clever, but he'd never imagined that even she could be as reckless as this. The D'jarakaí khaishar and both Harsonine children were in his grasp. He couldn't have hoped for more.

Verinus knelt before the throne while still keeping pressure on a wound on the side of his head. "Your Imperial Majesty, our guests are here," he said in a trembling voice. The young officer was holding a handkerchief to his left ear, which appeared to be bleeding profusely.

"A shame," Marthal thought. *"The pain will pass, but his face will never be quite as pretty as it once was."*

“Well, done, captain,” said Marthal. “I see you are wounded. Not too seriously, I hope?”

“It’s but a scratch, Your Grace,” Verinus replied, wincing from the pain.

“My personal physician will tend to it, as soon as our business here is concluded,” Marthal promised.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Verinus said. The captain saluted and took a seat in a chair to the right of his master’s throne.

Marthal rose to his feet, using the throne’s armrests to lift himself and his crippled leg. “I’m so pleased to see you,” he boomed to the captives below. “I do hope you’ve had time to reconsider my most magnanimous offer.”

Miracel gurgled saliva in the back of her throat and sent a long stream at her captor. The spit quite didn’t reach him, but the message was clear.

Marthal shook his head. “A pity. I had hoped there would be no more pain, no more bleeding, no more suffering for us or our peoples. Can you not see the mutual benefit of my proposal?”

Miracel looked ready to scream a string of obscenities. Then, her face softened, and she thought for a moment. “Wait...” she said. “Given the circumstances...perhaps a truce is for the best after all.”

Marthal smiled. The proud brat’s will was finally broken.

“But before we discuss the terms,” she added. “I have a few requests.”

Marthal cocked an eyebrow. “Certainly, my lady. How can I make you more comfortable?”

“I’d like a chair for starters,” she said. “I won’t be spoken to like some petty criminal on trial.”

Marthal snapped his fingers and a guard hauled an armchair from the side of the room and



placed it in front of the throne. Miracel sat down and turned up her nose at her “host.” Marthal didn’t mind her rudeness. They both knew he had already won.

“Khaishar D’jarakaí will have a chair as well,” she demanded. Marthal shrugged and snapped his fingers once more. The guard placed another chair beside the girl’s, and the khaishar took his seat.

“To ensure that our friend is comfortable,” Miracel said, indicating the young khaishar, “he will speak to you in his native tongue.”

Marthal frowned. “A strange request. I have found no faults with Khaishar D’jarakaí’s Aurean and my mastery of the Desert Tongue is not what it once was.”

“A man, especially a duneman, is most at ease when speaking his native tongue,” Miracel countered. “But I am a Harsonine; translating for you is beneath me. I saw two of your Sarrakaí lack-eyes outside this very room. Bring them in and let him speak through them.”

“I *would* prefer to converse in my own tongue,” Khaishar D’jarakaí confirmed.

Marthal thought for a moment. Speaking through translators would be an unnecessary inconvenience, but then granting the brat’s wishes might help speed the day’s business along. He shrugged and dispatched Asher to fetch the two Sarrakaí.

“I have one final request,” Miracel said.

“Yes?” Marthal asked, making no attempt to hide that his patience was waning. “I don’t enjoy discussing imperial business with those who are not of noble birth,” Miracel said. “You have more guards and servants here than you need. She pointed to a cluster of guards standing behind them. “See them out.”

Marthal's eyes narrowed. *Was this girl just being her usual, spoiled self, or was there something more going on in that red-haired head of hers?* "I assure you, my lady, my men are trustworthy. They know better than to peep about any matters of state they might overhear."

"The negotiations begin when my conditions are met and not a moment sooner."

Marthal sighed and nodded to the men she had indicated. "You lot, leave us. The rest of you stay."

The soldiers seemed reluctant to leave their commander with his enemies, even if the intruders were few and disarmed. But nevertheless, they obeyed without question.

When Asher returned with the two Sarrakaí Miracel had requested, Marthal ordered him to leave as well. The boy reluctantly did so, and the doors were shut behind him.

Marthal looked around the chamber. It was now occupied only by himself, Verinus, Lady Miracel, her pet duneman, a third captured intruder, the two Eremukaí translators, and about two dozen soldiers.

"Is everything to your satisfaction, my lady?" Marthal asked, tapping his foot impatiently.

Miracel examined her surroundings. Her lips curled into a smile. "Everything is as accommodating as I could've hoped for."

"Splendid!" Marthal exclaimed. "Then let's get down to business."

"By all means, dear host, let's begin our business at once." Miracel stood up, turned to the guards, and hollered, "Let's get right to our bloody business!!!"

Even as she spoke, half of the soldiers drew their weapons and fell upon their dumbstruck comrades. At the same time, the two Eremukaí transla-

tors produced bows, nocked arrows, and began planting arrows in the guards' backs.

Most of Marthal's men-at-arms were cut down in moments. A few managed to ready their weapons, but it made no difference. Once the last of the loyal guards had fallen, the rogues raced to the exits and bolted them shut with their pikes. Little Torvinus' sobbing ceased. Instead, a look of confusion came across his face.

Years of soldiering had taught Marthal to recover from shock almost instantly, but even so, he felt as if his head were spinning. Dumbfounded, he slumped back down in his throne and watched the scene play out in front of him. The khaishar and the girl reclaimed their weapons from the bodies of the slain guards and began slowly approaching the throne.

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Miracel could hardly believe this moment had finally come. Marthal, the monster who had murdered her mother and father, driven her and her brother from their home, robbed of them of their birthright, stolen her life away, kidnapped Torvinus, and so much more, was at her mercy. She breathed deeply, savoring the sweet satisfaction to come.

She could see that Junayd was just as eager as she was. He brandished his shamshir and slowly advanced toward Verinus, staring coldly into the traitor's frightened green eyes.

Metellus and his Prosidiars stood over the men they had slain. Albus had been released and given his sword. Ekram and Farhat stood behind Junayd with arrows nocked in their bowstrings.

Miracel thanked the Father that Verinus hadn't seen through her comrades' disguises and for giving them the good sense to wait for the right

moment to strike. When this was over, she'd have to remember to reward each of her companions with a palace position, or perhaps a fiefdom.

It took a few moments, but Marthal eventually found his tongue. "You fools! How do you hope to get out of here alive? You've only signed your own death warrants!" As if deaf to his words, Miracel and Junayd continued to approach.

"It needn't be this way," Marthal said. "It's not too late to make amends. We could still come to an agreement. Let's try to be reasonable." The traitor's words had as much effect on the two as dry leaves against a stone wall.

"Ev...even if you kill us," Verinus stammered, yanking his rapier from its scabbard, "you have nowhere to go. This city is still ours."

"Not for long, I'm afraid," Metellus said pulling off his helmet. "Just a few minutes ago, the Balakans sent a runner back out the way we came. Soon, our men will be banging down your doors."

"And what makes you so sure your forces will prevail?" Marthal sneered. "My defenses are ready. My men are strong and loyal."

Miracel drew her khanja and twirled it around her finger. "Do you think they'll risk their lives for a dead man?"

Marthal heaved himself to his feet and cast his cane aside. If today was his last day, he wouldn't die leaning on some piece of wood. He pulled a long dagger from his belt and prepared to defend himself.

Verinus brandished his rapier. "Bastards!" he cried. "You'll not see me die on my knees!" To his credit, Verinus planted himself between his lord and the approaching khaishar. What the young captain didn't understand was that Marthal's wasn't the head Junayd was after.

Verinus lunged, thrusting his blade at the Eremukai's heart, but the captain's combat prowess had never been as impressive as his charm. Junayd easily deflected the blow and sidestepped to let his opponent stumble past him. With one well-placed strike, he slashed the back of Verinus' knee, slicing the tendons.

The captain yelped and fell to his knees. His rapier clattered against the marble floor. He reached to recover the weapon, but his adversary pinned it down with his foot.

Junayd seized Verinus by his blonde curls and yanked his head up to face him. The two locked eyes, conveying their mutual spite one last time. "Rot in the Abyss, you flea-bitten son of a desert dog!" Verinus snarled, wincing from the pain.

"After you," Junayd replied. He plucked Mahir's khanja from his sash. "From my friend!" With that, he sliced open the traitor's throat.

Blood spilled down Verinus' scarlet tunic and onto the white marble floor. His green eyes rolled back, and the color drained from his handsome face. Junayd let the body fall and spat on it.

Marthal looked somberly at the remains of his servant, then up at his assailants. He stepped down from the throne, struggling to descend the steps without his cane. "Very well," he said, gripping his dagger. "I have always served our people and our realm. If my duty demands my last breath, I will gladly give it. But you will not take it easily."

The Prosidiars behind Miracel stepped forward, but she gestured for them to stay where they were. With a khanja in each hand, she approached Marthal. For a moment, she stared at him in silent loathing. Then she lunged.

There had been a time when Marthal could have dodged or parried any blade that was thrust at him, but his age and leg wound had taken their toll.

He swerved and seized the girl's forearm, but Miracel still managed to nick him in the left armpit.

Marthal winced, but his grip remained firm. He hurled Miracel down against the marble pedestal and moved to press his advantage. Junayd and the Prosidiars moved to aid her, but she again motioned for them to hold their ground; no one had more right to this man's blood than she.

In a surprising show of agility, Miracel sprang back to her feet and readied her knives as Zarif had taught her. Marthal took a swing at her, but she parried the dagger and counterattacked with another thrust at his armpit. This time Marthal didn't have time to react. Her blade plunged into the soft flesh, sinking all the way to the hilt. Marthal howled and swung wildly at her, but she ducked under his blows, leaving her knife protruding from under his arm.

Blood poured like a faucet from Marthal's wound. He attempted to strike again but lost the strength to maintain his balance and fell flat on his back.

Miracel walked to his side and kicked his dagger away. Accepting his fate, Marthal lay there and waited for her to finish it.

She stood over him, and the two locked eyes. Marthal could see the pain and hate burning in her. But, surprisingly, that was not all; he could see courage and traces of wisdom as well. The young woman standing over him was nothing like the spoilt brat he had seen cowering in his shadow years ago.

Miracel looked down on Marthal's face. She saw a traitor, a murderer, the man who had killed her family and plunged her homeland into war. She saw vanity, ambition, self-righteousness...but for a moment, she thought she also detected a hint of remorse in his eye as it shifted between her and her

brother. She took up the usurper's own blade and knelt beside him.

"Fitting that this all should end in the very room where it started," Marthal remarked.

Miracel nodded. "The end is long overdue."

Marthal chuckled. "That's one thing we can agree on. It seems you've won your family's throne back. Perhaps you do have the makings of an Aure-an ruler after all."

Miracel drew back the dagger, and with a howl of uncompressed rage, plunged the blade through Marthal's remaining eye. He gave a brief grunt as the blade sank in. Then his body went limp.

Slender-hilted and without a crossguard, the dagger had been driven in so deep that only the golden pommel was visible. It remained there in Marthal's socket like a second gilded eye.

Miracel rose and turned to Torvinus. All this time, the boy had remained silent. She nearly cursed the Makers. "*What sort of gods would allow a boy to see such things before he'd even reached his sixth year?*" She expected to see her brother burst into tears, but the boy's eyes were dry; the fear in them had subsided.

She turned to the others in the room. "It's done then." Junayd and Metellus nodded.

They heard pounding against the chamber doors. "Your Imperial Majesty," a voice called. "Is all well? Why have the doors been sealed?"

When the voice went unanswered, more pounding followed. Soon the noise was replaced by a much more powerful crash, and the doors began to shudder. The pikes barring them were holding, but there was no telling for how much longer.

"We'd best move quickly," Miracel said.

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Malonius leaned against the palace gate, savoring the salted pork he and his men were munching. Their battalion had been charged with keeping watch over the streets outside the palace, but they had enjoyed little rest over the past few weeks, or even the past few months; the least they deserved was some leisure time to enjoy a decent lunch. After all, one could still have a pleasant meal without neglecting one's duties.

Just as Malonius opened his mouth for another bite, a chorus of bells and trumpet blasts sounded from every corner of the city. He knew what this meant. There would be no more waiting, no more torturous anticipation. The Harsonines had begun their assault.

The city sprang to life. Soldiers rushed to their posts. Civilians barricaded themselves in their homes and began praying for safety. Defensive ballistas were wound and loaded. Archers lined the walls.

Malonius dropped his half-eaten pork and turned to his men. "This is it, lads!" he shouted. "Let's show these dogs how big a chunk 'Marthal's fangs' can tear off. To the walls!"

As the guards assembled, one of them pointed to the cupola at the top of the palace dome. "Sir, look there."

A strange figure had emerged from the structure. Malonius couldn't see its face, but he could tell the figure was female. The mysterious woman's right hand lifted something high for all to see. At first, it was difficult to make out exactly what the object was, but Malonius could see the glint of gold.

He shuddered. "No...It isn't...It can't be..." Every eye around the palace turned and fixed on the figure holding its prize above the city. Once she was satisfied with the audience she'd attracted, the maiden, whom Malonius now recognized as Lady



Miracel, slid down the dome and stood atop the facade.

Now there was no denying what she held in her hand. She shouted something Malonius couldn't make out, then hung her prize on a rope from the arch above the palace's bronze door.

Malonius, his men, and a small crowd of spectators gathered to look at the grisly spectacle dangling over the threshold. Some had tears in their eyes. Others had looks of somber acceptance. Others just looked relieved. Marthal's golden eye, still in his scarred face, stared back at them.

## Chapter XIX

Once word spread of Marthal's demise, the battle came to quick end; there was little point in fighting for a dead man's cause. The city's defenses collapsed shortly after the Harsonine forces reached the walls.

Bereft of their commander, many defenders dropped their weapons and threw themselves at the attackers' feet. Others stripped off their livery, hoping to disappear into the city's masses. Still, valiant few tried to resist, but these didn't last long.

In a matter of hours, the last pockets of resistance were extinguished. The banners bearing Marthal's sigil were torn down and replaced with the entwined roses of House Harsonine. Fortunately, the brevity of the battle and the lack of resistance meant that the damage to the city was minimal. Though a few houses and buildings were damaged by stray onager shots and overzealous troops, there had been little looting and few civilian casualties.

Cheering crowds poured out to greet the conquerors as they marched into the streets. Marcus, Sarconius, the three khaishars, Savaric, Admiral Sacor, and the other top lieutenants led columns of troops in a triumphant march to the newly liberated palace. The triumphant commanders rode at the head of the procession, clad in polished armor and astride beautiful parade chargers. Marcus held his head high and beamed at the crowds around him.

As per Aurean tradition, the city's inhabitants had procured roses to celebrate the victory; red ones as a symbol of the sacrifices made in the struggle and white ones to symbolize the peace to follow. The flowers were hung from doorways, ledges, shop signs, even soldiers' pikes. Red and white petals were scattered across the streets' cobblestones.

Junayd and Miracel stood on the balcony of the palace facade. Though they had replaced their bloody attire with fresh garments, they had been unable to cleanse themselves of the memories of the day's carnage. Nevertheless, they smiled and did their best to look merry for the populace.

As the pair waved to the happy faces below, they both felt a tug at the tails of their tunics. They turned and saw Torvinus standing patiently behind them. The two of them smiled, this time in earnest. They each took one of the little emperor's arms and lifted him up for the people to see. The sight was met with a roar of applause.

The crowd parted as Marcus and the other dignitaries approached. Seeing that the time for public pleasantries was over, Miracel and Junayd put the little emperor back on his feet and returned to the council chamber to await their allies.

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Asher watched as the palace's outer gates opened to admit the victors. He had never been the sort to cry easily, but for the first time in many years, he could feel tears welling up in his eyes. In the last few hours, the only real father he'd ever known had been murdered and all his hopes for the future extinguished. This morning he had been rising on the shoulders of the most powerful man in the realm. Now he was waiting to be thrown back to the street he had come from, assuming the victors were kind enough to let him live.

The roar of the crowd outside grew louder as the bronze doors swung open. Asher peered around a marble pillar and watched a young noble with auburn hair and piercing blue eyes cross the palace threshold. The fellow strode through the doorway like a captain walking onto his new ship.

This noble made his importance obvious with the Harsonine sigil emblazoned across both his polished breastplate and his bright purple cloak. He'd left his escorts several paces behind him, most likely so that he could be first to set foot in the newly retaken palace.

As the Harsonine strutted across the hall, Asher noticed a dark figure crouched in the shadow of the bronze doors. He immediately recognized the figure's grief-stricken face: Malonius, a man who had just taken the same fall as himself. The defeated captain had stripped off his armor and now wore only his crimson tunic and the unmistakable look of a man with nothing left to lose. His hands clutched a long dagger to his chest.

In an instant, Asher could see what was about to happen. A thousand thoughts flew through his head: *Should he intervene? What would his father have wanted? Surely Marthal would have desired revenge, but would this have satisfied him?*

*No.* Even if Malonius succeeded, it would be nothing more than a jab at the Harsonines' heels. If Asher was to truly honor his father's wishes, he would have to deal them a deeper wound. This might be his chance.

As the young noble made his way into the hall, Malonius crept up behind him and prepared to pounce. Asher seized a ceramic vase from a nearby table and rushed toward them. Malonius raised his dagger and lunged at his still oblivious target.

Asher hurled the vase with all his might. The vessel spun through the air and shattered against the would-be assassin's face. Blood and ceramic shards sprayed across the marble floor. Malonius yelped and fell flat on his back. The young noble spun around, his eyes wide with shock. Asher sprinted forward and pounced on the captain before he could regain his senses.

Without hesitation, Asher snatched up the long dagger and plunged it into Malonius' heart. The unfortunate soldier recovered a fraction of his wits just in time to stare in bewilderment at his killer's face. Then his body shuddered and he lay still.

The Harsonine's Prosidiar escorts rushed to their ward's side. A Salmakan bodyguard pinned Asher down against the marble floor and wrenched the dagger from his grip.

"Enough!" barked the young noble. "Unaka, is this any way to treat the lad who saved my life? Let him up." The Salmakan released his grip, and the Harsonine gestured for Asher to approach. "What's your name, boy?"

"Asher, my lord."

The noble smiled. "Well, Asher, I am Strategos Marcus Leo Harsoninus, and I seem to have found myself in your debt." He scratched his chin. "Now, what would be a fitting reward for my young savior?"

The strategos thought for a moment, then smiled and placed a hand on Asher's shoulder. "I do believe I could use a lad like you by my side. For now, you'll be shown to your new quarters, here in the palace. In the morning, we'll discuss your new place in the imperial court. I promise, neither will disappoint you."

Asher smiled and bowed. "Thank you, my lord."

Marcus clapped his hands and an attendant came from the procession to lead his young rescuer away. Asher did his best to show nothing but joy as he followed the servant down the hall. But before entering the eastern corridor, he turned and glanced at the corpse he'd made. "Sorry," he whispered.

He had taken no pleasure in killing his father's friend, but the man's death had served a

greater purpose. Besides, Malonius had already wagered everything he had and lost; his life hadn't been worth much anyway.

Asher was Marthal's only surviving legacy and he intended to see that legacy grow. He would rise as high as his father had wished of him, and one day, he would finish Marthal's work.

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Wearing a grin that rivaled even Theobald's, Marcus threw open the door to the council chamber and marched to the head of the marble table. The khaishars, Savaric, Sarconius, Exarch Taronus, Strategos Raconi, and Sacor followed him, along with a small retinue of lower-ranking officers and officials.

"My friends and comrades," Marcus laughed. "The war is won! Today is a day for merrymaking and thankful prayers. But first, to business." He and the other council members took their seats. Miracel lifted her brother onto her lap.

"His Imperial Majesty needn't suffer through our deliberations yet," Sacor said, nodding to Torvinus. "Today has been a trying day for him. Allow him some rest."

"No," Miracel said. "It's his throne that was won back today. He could not witness the war, but he should at least witness the day's affairs." No one dared question her reasoning.

Marcus cleared his throat. "Now then, we must decide what is to be done about the late usurper's remaining followers. Strategos Harrosol and the Teratum garrison are still holding out, and Emperor Uros still hasn't given up Amicus. But they'll most likely be throwing themselves at our feet once they hear that their 'emperor' has lost everything from the neck down."

“If I may,” Savaric said, “We Balakans have a saying: ‘If a wolf bites you today and you only wound him, you can expect a much worse bite tomorrow.’”

Marcus frowned. “Meaning?”

Junayd stiffened. “He thinks we should show no mercy; kill all those who sided with the traitor.”

Savaric shook his head. “That would only be wounding the beast. You’ve got to finish the job. Round up anyone even suspected of supporting the traitor, along with their families, their friends, their families’ friends, and their friends’ families. Arrange public executions. Mount their heads up somewhere high for all to see.”

The proposal was met with wide eyes and horrified gasps. “By the Mother’s mercy!” Marcus exclaimed. “Do you want to flood our streets with blood? Haven’t we seen more than enough already?”

Savaric shrugged. “I understand if you soft-hearted Aureans don’t have the stomach for it, but my experience has taught me that fear is the best armor a man can have. Where I come from, the ones who learn to instill fear are the ones who last.”

“We are not monsters!” Miracel snapped. “We will not render our victory meaningless by becoming worse than the creature we fought so hard to defeat.”

“Agreed,” Sarconius said. “A crimson tide won’t do the realm any good. However, the sell-sword is right about one thing: treason must be answered with blood. I suggest that the treasonous ringleaders—officers, nobles, officials, governors, generals, anyone who gave our enemies support—be weeded out and brought to trial. They’re likely in hiding, but give me a few months, and I’ll have them unearthed.”

“If an Aurean is truly guilty of treason,” Sacor said, “execution is the lawful penalty. But what of his family? I agree that killing them would be an act of savagery, but on the other hand, leaving their wives, brothers and sons alive would only create a fresh crop of enemies.”

“Perhaps exile,” suggested Miracel. “We could banish the traitors’ kin from our lands. It will be bloodless, but also ensure that there are no worms left in our orchard.” The assembly seemed to approve of the idea.

“An excellent plan, my lady,” Sarconius remarked.

Marcus nodded. “I agree. Is there anyone here who disapproves?” The table was silent. “Then it shall be so,” he concluded. “Execution for the rebels. Banishment for their kin.”

“What of our *‘newest allies’*?” Savaric asked in a sarcastic tone. “I’m speaking, of course, of Marthal’s former lackeys, the ones who came to us after the Wicker Fields with their tails between their legs.”

Marcus drummed his fingers on the table. “Sarnos, Jorras and the rest of them...Of course, they’re nothing more than a pack cowards; I care little for their excuses. But we promised to spare their lives if they offered their support, and that they did.”

Savaric scoffed. “What good is a promise to a traitor? Each of those swine swore fealty to the late emperor and his house, did they not? They didn’t keep their word; no need for you to keep yours.”

Sarconius shook his head. “They may be swine, but we ought to be the better men.” He looked each of the other council members in the eye. “You know, after Marthal made his move, he sent a messenger to my camp outside Mar Aureus.



His offer was generous: He would've named me second-in-command of his forces, made me a Strategos once the war was done with. I answered your call instead. Why? Because I did not think as he did. I still believed there was honor amongst House Harsonine, and those who serve it. I do hope I was right."

Miracel nodded. "Well said, imperator. We Harsonines keep our word, even when dealing with those who do not. The cowards will be spared, but they will be forever barred from any position that might offer even an ounce of power or prestige. Also, a substantial sum will be seized from their personal holdings and those of their families. These funds will be used to repair the empire they helped tear apart, pay for the war they helped start, and perhaps reward those who proved more honorable than they. I'd say that's certainly in order, wouldn't you agree?"

The proposal was a met with a roar of approval, particularly from the Aureans at the table. "That's quite a fitting solution," Marcus remarked, "and a merciful punishment, if you ask me."

"And what if some of Marthal's followers continue to fight?" Junayd asked. "True, they don't have much to gain from it. But then...not much to lose either."

"Any rebels who insist on fighting shouldn't be much more than a nuisance," Sarconius explained. "I've already dispatched a few dozen companies to bolster our forces around Amicus and Teratum. The adder's been beheaded; it won't be long before the coils stop wriggling."

Miracel stood and turned to Savaric and the khaishars. "As for you lot, you've all served my family well. You've honored your ends of the bargain and House Harsonine shall do no less. I assure each of you that, within three months' time, you

shall receive all you've been promised." The men smiled and nodded approvingly.

"And what of the one who betrayed us?" Khaishar Alikáí demanded. "That Sarrakaí *kaísin* gave us his word. He called us friends, pledged himself and his people to our cause and then stabbed us in the back! We are all owed his blood and that of his *kaí*."

Sarconius waved a hand dismissively. "We've already captured most of the Sarrakaí within the city. The prisoners say their khaishar fled the palace when he heard the walls were taken. The coward is likely holed up somewhere in the city. He won't get far."

"Excellent," said Khaishar Mosakaí. "And when you do find him, you will turn him and the other captured Sarrakaí over to *us*. Eremukaí traitors deserve nothing less than Eremukaí justice."

"No!" Junayd rose to his feet. "I agree the khaishar must die, but, friends, I implore you to spare the other Sarrakaí. Killing them all would mean another blood feud, and the sons of Eremus have lost rivers of blood already. Please, let us stop the bleeding."

For a moment, the khaishars remained silent. Then Khaishar Alikáí sighed and stood up. "Our sword-brother is right. The sons of Alí have bled enough already. We can settle for just one head if it means an end to the bloodshed." After a brief exchange of words, the Mosakaí and Torakaí khaishars reluctantly agreed.

"I will see to it that the khaishar receives his justice," Marcus said, addressing his Eremukaí allies. "It should be easier for you lot to make peace with the Sarrakaí if an Aurean sword does the deed. Besides, he wronged us just as much as he did you; I'd even say more so." The khaishars nodded their agreement.

Marcus drummed his fingers on the table. "And now to the most important matter at hand." His eyes flickered between the Aureans at the table. While I'm sure His Imperial Majesty will make a fine ruler someday, he is not yet of age. Someone must govern until His Grace reaches his seventeenth year. For the good of the empire, we must choose a regent, here, today."

The moment he'd finished speaking, the room filled with a clamor of squabbling voices. Each Aurean had his own ideas of who should fill the role, and each was anxious to be heard. Some called for Marcus to fill the role. Some called for Strategos Maconith. Though, naturally, most advocated themselves.

Sarconius had to bang his gauntlet on the table to finally win the assembly's attention. Our laws are clear," he said. "As long as one of Harsonine blood is fit to rule, they will serve as regent until the true emperor comes of age."

"Our friend is right," Marcus said, struggling to contain his excitement. "That leaves only myself and..." He turned to Miracel. "Dear cousin, I hope you'll allow me to bear this burden," he said hopefully. "I have a great deal of experience in such matters. You needn't trouble—"

"Thank you, dear Marcus" Miracel cut him off, "but I have no desire to make the same mistakes as my father (Maker's rest his soul.) I will not place our empire in the hands of another."

Marcus had the look of a runner who had tripped just before the finish line. "B-but..." he stammered, "cousin, I mean no disrespect, but you may lack the necessary experience. Also...well...our laws forbid a woman from sitting on the throne alone."

"I'm aware," Miracel said. "I do not intend to govern alone."

She stood, set Torvinus down in her seat, and made her way around the table. The eyes in the room remained fixed on her as she walked. She finally stopped beside Sarconius and placed her hand on the emperor's shoulder.

"My dear friend," she said, flashing a pretty smile, "you have always served my family faithfully. You have proven yourself a wise and capable soldier and a loyal servant of the empire. Would you do me the honor of becoming my husband and ruling by my side until my brother comes of age?"

The chamber fell silent as a tomb. Several jaws dropped, though none lower than Junayd's. It wasn't that Sarconius was an unsuitable match, but the idea of an Aurean woman, even a Harsonine, choosing her own husband in such a way was quite unheard of.

Junayd felt the urge to cry out, to ask Miracel to change her mind, to tell Sarconius that her heart could never be his. But these foolish thoughts quickly faded; that Miracel would take a husband was inevitable, and he knew it could never be him. He clenched his jaw and held his tongue.

A moment later, Sarconius recovered his senses. "M-My lady...you do me a greater honor than words can describe. I...accept. I hope I can prove to be a worthy husband."

Miracel smiled. "Of that I've no doubt."

Marcus opened his mouth to protest but then thought better of it and slumped back in his seat. The disappointment in his face was almost enough to make Junayd pity him.

The last hour or so consisted mostly of discussions over more trivial matters. The Aureans bickered over who deserved credit for each of the war's victories, who was to blame for the defeats, and most of all, how the rewards would be distributed. A great deal of time was spent discussing

how to divide up the lands and holdings of Marthal's former followers. The incessant haggling made the chamber seem more like a marketplace than a council room.

Junayd was almost ready to jump from his seat by the time the negotiations finally ended. He instructed Ekram and Farhat to meet him outside, gave the assembly a quick bow, and went, nearly sprinting, down the corridor. As they had planned, Miracel soon joined him outside the door to her room.

"We need to talk," he said. Miracel nodded. They slipped through the door and Junayd kicked it shut behind them.

"I..." Miracel began, "I hope you know my feelings for you haven't changed."

"Nor mine for you," Junayd replied. "I will always love you," she said softly. "But it's time we accepted the world we live in. You have a wife and a people lead. I have my brother to look after and my own duties to attend. Sooner or later I'll need a husband and Sarconius...well, he's a fine man."

"That he is," Junayd said. "But what about...?" He patted her belly.

Miracel sighed. "Sarconius...*Titus* has a kind heart; he'll understand. Besides, I plan to give him many children of our own. His family has a villa in the countryside. I can stay there until the birth."

Junayd dropped his gaze. "Neither of us will be able to claim the child...at least not for many years."

Miracel's eyes moistened. "I know," she said in a breaking voice, "but I intend to watch my child grow all the same. We'll say it's the child of one of our servants, or perhaps the orphan of an Eremukai warrior who did me a service. All that matters is that I'll be able to keep the baby close. Damn what

the world might think! Nothing will keep me from my child.”

“Nor I,” said Junayd. “I’ll come to see you both every chance I have and don’t you dare try to stop me.”

Miracel smiled. “I wouldn’t wish it any other way.” As she spoke, tears welled up in her beautiful, blue eyes.

Junayd took a deep breath and walked out to the room’s balcony. The sun had sunk down to the horizon. Its soft, orange glow shone splendidly over Vere Aureus’ white stonework. He savored the sight, letting the beauty sooth him.

Miracel took his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. Junayd smiled, turned his head and pressed his lips to hers.

They closed their eyes and embraced. “*Kal bayluk*,” Miracel whispered.

Junayd smiled. “*Kal bayluk*.”