

Bond and Blood

Ari Levitch

From set *Khans of Tarkir*
03. 12. 2014

Anafenza, khan of the Abzan Houses, takes the throne—and her vengeance.



Anafenza, the Foremost | Art by James Ryman

Anafenza always climbed barefoot. Her toes gripped the bark at the base of a sturdy branch, and she crouched there for a moment to steady herself. The leaves of the First Tree gave off a dull minty scent that filled her nostrils. She closed her eyes, and rose to her full height. As she emerged through the cover of the uppermost leaves, the sun's heat was waiting for her. The day was hot, but she enjoyed surveying the city from its highest point. The First Tree grew out of the rooftop plaza of the keep of Mer-Ek Fortress. From Anafenza's position, she could peer down past the keep's massive ramparts to the market below, where merchants scurried about to trade in rumors and wares.

Her gaze drifted beyond the walls that protected the capital. Arid wilderness stretched out in every direction. Into the expanse of dunes and dust, a causeway descended from the rock upon which the capital was built. This was where the Salt Road disappeared into the restless sands of the Shifting Wastes,

where only the rolling fortified caravans of the merchant houses trekked. It was a world Anafenza knew well, for it was her home for most of her life.



Plains | Art by Sam Burley

She turned her face to the wind, the familiar breath of the desert bringing with it so many memories draped in emotions. She followed her own backward-drifting thoughts, and each path led to the same familiar dark place. Her family was gone. All but one member.

She wanted him to remember her as she was almost ten years before. In the morning, she had cut her hair short, and as the hot desert air rushed around her, she became very aware of her bare neck. The only remnants of its former length were the locks that hung from each temple, fluttering wildly when they caught the wind.

But she was not the same, and he would see what had become of her.

“My khan?” came a voice from below.

Khan. The thought might have overwhelmed her if her mouth didn’t yield to her impulse to smile.

“I’m at the top, Kwaro,” Anafenza said. Kwaro was Anafenza’s captain of the guard, and he had taken to his new position most eagerly. Before Anafenza became khan, the aven veteran had led her honor guard in battle when she was a general of the Abzan army. Despite Anafenza’s protests, he insisted in maintaining formalities with the new khan, and every time he addressed her, it was either prefaced or punctuated by “my khan.” It was endearing, to a certain degree. “What news?”



High Sentinels of Arashin | Art by James Ryman

“The heads of the clan houses are gathered, my khan,” said Kwaro.

“All of them?”

“Every single one, my khan.”

The one that matters most, she thought.

The khan descended through the branches of the First Tree. Her first climb had been just two weeks before, when she first entered the plaza with the tree’s namesake, on her first day as khan. Although the branches and footholds were already familiar to her, the First Tree somehow felt different than other kin-trees. Khans were buried beneath it—people not bound by blood, but by duty to the clan. Like all kin-trees, however, their names were etched into its trunk. Like all kin-trees, the spirits of ancestors dwelt within. Like all kin-trees, Anafenza considered, the First Tree grew as a reminder that an individual has a sacred duty to family and clan.

Anafenza lowered herself from a branch until her feet touched the golden-orange seat of the amber throne. The seat of the khan, a solid piece of ornately carved amber, stood on a stone dais that ringed the First Tree’s massive trunk. Anafenza dropped into it, rattling the sword that hung from an arm of the throne. Beside her, brown leather riding boots lay in a heap, and she pulled them on.

As she waited for Kwaro to return, she reclined against the back of the throne. It was a solid chunk of carved amber, and its translucent depths seemed to capture and hold the sun’s light. Absently, her fingers played along the arms of the throne as she scanned the plaza for a moment. It was empty except for her and a dozen of her honor guard. Although outdoors, the entirety of the space was awash in the shade of the First Tree, and Anafenza was struck by the plaza’s illusion of seeming to be both an enclosed chamber, and an open courtyard all at once. The plaza would be dark if not for the various low flames that burned in braziers throughout.

She surprised herself by how calm she was. She was cool and collected, prepared to do what must be done, and for the first time, she felt like a khan.

The massive wooden doors of the Plaza of the First Tree at last swung open behind the strength of four of her guards. Anafenza was standing in front of the Amber Throne to greet the first delegate as the clan's houses entered.

The houses of the Abzan didn't swear fealty to their khan. Rather, they cultivated kinship through blood relations or by binding oaths. Loyalties can change, Anafenza's mother once explained to her, but kinship is a sacred thing.

The houses had elected Anafenza to be khan, and they filed into the plaza, one after the other, to profess kinship either by bond or by blood.

"Anafenza, Khan of the Abzan," began one of the delegates, a captain of the clan's elite Dragonscale infantry, "House Emesh embraces you as a sister before the First Tree and the eyes of our ancestors."

"Marrit of House Emesh, I am your sister, as you are now my sister," Anafenza returned the formality, and the two embraced.

The procession continued in kind. Many delegates were veterans of the armies she led to defend Abzan lands. Some were from the ancient merchant houses that now prospered as a result of the safe commerce along the Salt Road. Most were the supporters who put her on the Amber Throne. Some were the detractors who came to avoid becoming political pariahs. One was family.

The last delegate approached the khan. He was clad in the polished breastplate of an Abzan warrior, its surface scored to resemble the pattern of dragon scales. A pristine white linen cloak fell from his shoulders. As he walked forward, the fabric rippled behind him.

Anafenza waited at the lowest step of dais to receive him. When he stood before her, she looked him over. His hair was gray at the temples, and his face was freshly shaved. When their eyes met, he was smiling. That familiar smile. It was him, and that was the moment she had wanted. The one she craved. The one she fantasized into foregone certainty. As she held his gaze in silence, she waited for it.

His smile faded, and his eye grew wide.

Recognition. Then fear.

Her smile emerged.

"You look well. Prosperous," Anafenza said. "Trade is good?"

The man just stared, his mouth slightly agape.

The khan nodded, and a thick orc stepped behind the delegate. He was the man's height, but twice as wide. At his khan's command, he dropped a heavy hand on the man's shoulder, forcing him to his knees. The plaza was silent, save for the rustle of wind through the leaves of the First Tree.

Anafenza ascended the dais to her throne, and slowly drew her sword, the Khan-Blade, from its scabbard.

"Please!" the man shrieked. Anafenza extended her arm until the point of the Khan-Blade pressed into the flesh of the man's throat.

Dust got into everything out on the Salt Road. Anafenza woke up once again to the lurch of the colossal wheeled fortress as it creaked into motion behind the power of the behemoth that pulled it, and watched the motes of dust play in the sunlight that filled her room. At thirteen, she had spent most of

her life rumbling from city to city throughout the Abzan lands as a member of one of the most prosperous merchant houses in the clan. It was a life built around routine and family. She trained at swords and bows, learned to read the charts and maps that meant survival in the Shifting Wastes, and when in a city, she practiced the art of negotiation and trade, although she lacked the diplomatic finesse for which the rest of her house was known. It was a life infused with dust.



Siegecraft | Art by Viktor Titov

Everyone on a rolling fortress came close to snapping at certain times. The close proximity of family, the winds of the Wastes, the heavy footfalls of the enormous beast that pulled the fortress, and the incessant gritty cracking of sand beneath the fortress wheels all worked constantly to wear down one's nerves. Anafenza learned early on that this was natural, and that everyone had their own release. Her mother would ride out alone in front of the fortress on her ibex when conditions permitted. Her father collected dragon bones and carved intricate designs onto their surfaces.

For Anafenza, cutting her hair was release enough. Dust clung to it, and she hated waking up on hot mornings with her hair clinging to her neck. One such morning, she reached for the scissors and began the familiar work. When the ritual was complete, her hair no longer hung in her face at the front, and it was off her neck in the back. The hair at her temples she left long, and they hung past her chin. They were her outlet for fidgeting, and she knew they bothered her mother.

"There she is," her cousin said, greeting her with a smile as she entered the fortress's cramped study. There were always people there, poring over maps and ledgers, trying to determine the most efficient and profitable trade route. Her cousin, Oret, was the house's cartographer, and since his return from his travels, he had become a fixture there. He was almost ten years older than her, and he had an endless supply of stories from the lands beyond the Abzan. He was also easy to talk to. "Hair's gone, huh?"

"It was time," said Anafenza. Oret smiled from behind a thick dark beard.

As always, a map was spread out on a table in front of her cousin. Each time she came to visit him, he insisted that she locate their current position on the map. She was good at it, most of the time.

“We’re two day’s from Arashin by way of the Salt Road out of, uh, what city were we just at?” Anafenza twisted up her face and closed her eyes in concentration. All the cities blurred together for her during long trade expeditions.

“Kavah,” came a low gravelly voice that didn’t belong to her cousin. “Two days from Arashin by way of the Salt Road out of Kavah.”

Anafenza didn’t have to open her eyes to know who spoke, but she did, if only to roll them. Gvar Barzeel. The name grated on her. It always had. Gvar was a krumar, which meant he was not born in the Abzan. Rather, he was the leftover of an Abzan battle against the Mardu clan, where the Mardu were the losers. Custom dictated that the Abzan care for the children of enemies killed in battle. Gvar, accordingly, returned home with one of Anafenza’s uncles after the battle where his son, her favorite cousin, was killed.

“Kavah’s where I bought these,” said Gvar. He held out a bowl of grapes to Anafenza, who pretended she didn’t notice. Gvar and Anafenza were close in age, and therefore, they were expected to be friends.

“Very good, Gvar,” came Oret’s approval when he place a carved wooden model of the fortress correctly on the map.

To Anafenza’s relief, she didn’t have to listen to Gvar open his mouth again, because the trio in the study turned their attention to the arrival of Anafenza’s mother, father, and one of her many uncles. They were in the middle of a deep discussion.

“Are we not in the business of trade? We should go where business is good,” said Anafenza’s mother, her voice thick with exasperation.

Her uncle held up his hands to playfully shield his face from the assault. “We’ve already conceded,” he said.

“Let us just consult our cartographer,” her father added.

“About what?” said Oret, clearly amused at his elders’ display.

“A rider arrived. She told us that a shipment of dyes has arrived back in Kavah. I think it’s worth our effort to go back for it, especially because the capital is our next stop.”

“I see.” Oret looked over his map, his smile fading. “You know that Arashin is only—”

“Two days away!” Anafenza threw in.

“Two days away,” repeated Oret. “Dust storms look to be building behind us. I must insist we continue to the capital.” It was not the answer Anafenza’s mother wanted to hear, and the room erupted in argument. Anafenza and Gvar were ushered out.

Anafenza winded her way up through the interior of the fortress until her steps brought her to the rooftop plaza, where her family’s kin-tree grew. Gvar followed behind.

“Do you think we’ll go back to Kavah, cousin?” Gvar asked.

Anafenza whirled around. “We’re not cousins, Gvar! We’re not even family! My cousin died fighting your clan! You’re only here because there was no one left from your family to care for you, and the Abzan aren’t savages.”

“Then we have something in common.”

“What are you talking about?” Anafenza threw her arms up in frustration.

“Neither of us chose the families we’ve got.”

Anafenza looked him in the eye, said nothing, and turned away. She kicked off her boots and scrambled up the trunk of the kin-tree. *Her* kin-tree. Gvar watched her ascent, but she didn’t care. She’d be at the top, and he’d be out of sight.

The rumble of the fortress’s wheels along the road resonated through the branches, but Anafenza had done the climb countless times, and she made it easily to the upper branches.

Leaves rustled below her position.

“Gvar?” said Anafenza.

“Not Gvar,” came a whisper. A face emerged. It belonged to Hakrez, the kin-tree warden. In a tradition typical of the Abzan, Hakrez, the family’s most skilled warrior, became the kin-tree warden. She was responsible for protecting the tree from harm and preserving the ancestors. She was fearless, fierce, spoke only in whispers, and—to Anafenza—she was equal parts terrifying and amazing.

As Hakrez climbed, her eyes never went to the branches. She knew the tree better than anyone. Her eyes stayed on Anafenza. When the two were level, Hakrez began to speak, and Anafenza had to lean close to hear her over the wind.

“Where are we?” the kin-tree warden asked.

On the road from Kavah, two days from Arashin, she would have blurted had it been anyone else asking. Instead, she said nothing.

“It’s not a trick. Where are we?” said Hakrez.

“In a tree.”

“Our kin-tree.”

“I’m sorry. Our kin-tree,” Anafenza corrected herself.

“Which is what?”

Anafenza suddenly had the feeling she had done something wrong. “The tree of our family.”

“The tree of our *kin*, Anafenza. Blood-kin *and* bond-kin. This tree belongs to all of them.”

Anafenza knew that kin-tree wardens had a special connection to the ancestors’ spirits, and that always seemed to give their word an added dimension of wisdom, like the words were somehow passed down through the ages.

Hakrez left Anafenza to dwell on her words. Anafenza stayed there for hours, watching the scores of Abzan soldiers march beside the fortress.

She realized the fortress hadn’t altered course. They were still on the road to Arashin, and she smiled at the prospect of stretching her legs in the markets there.

She peered out across the dunes that hemmed in the caravan fortress. Desert stretched out in every direction, and it struck Anafenza that even that close to a city, there was no evidence of civilization. As if to punctuate that, they approached a row of gigantic rib bones jutting out from the sand to the right of the fortress. It was not an uncommon sight in the Shifting Wastes, where the sands swallowed up entire villages, or receded to reveal scoured relics of dragons felled by Abzan ancestors many centuries before.

She was watching the ribs as the fortress rolled alongside them when two of the ribs moved. Sand fell away. The dune looked to be collapsing in on itself at first, until Anafenza saw that something was

rising out the sand. Matted, black fur emerged, and Anafenza's jaw hung open, her gaze fixed on the rising shape. She was frozen with dread.

Not dragon ribs.

Tusks.

An enormous head followed, its skull only half-covered by strips of rotted flesh. And then a trunk. Anafenza was not the only one to notice, and shouts of warning could be heard throughout the height of the fortress. Below, the infantry escort fell into a defensive position.

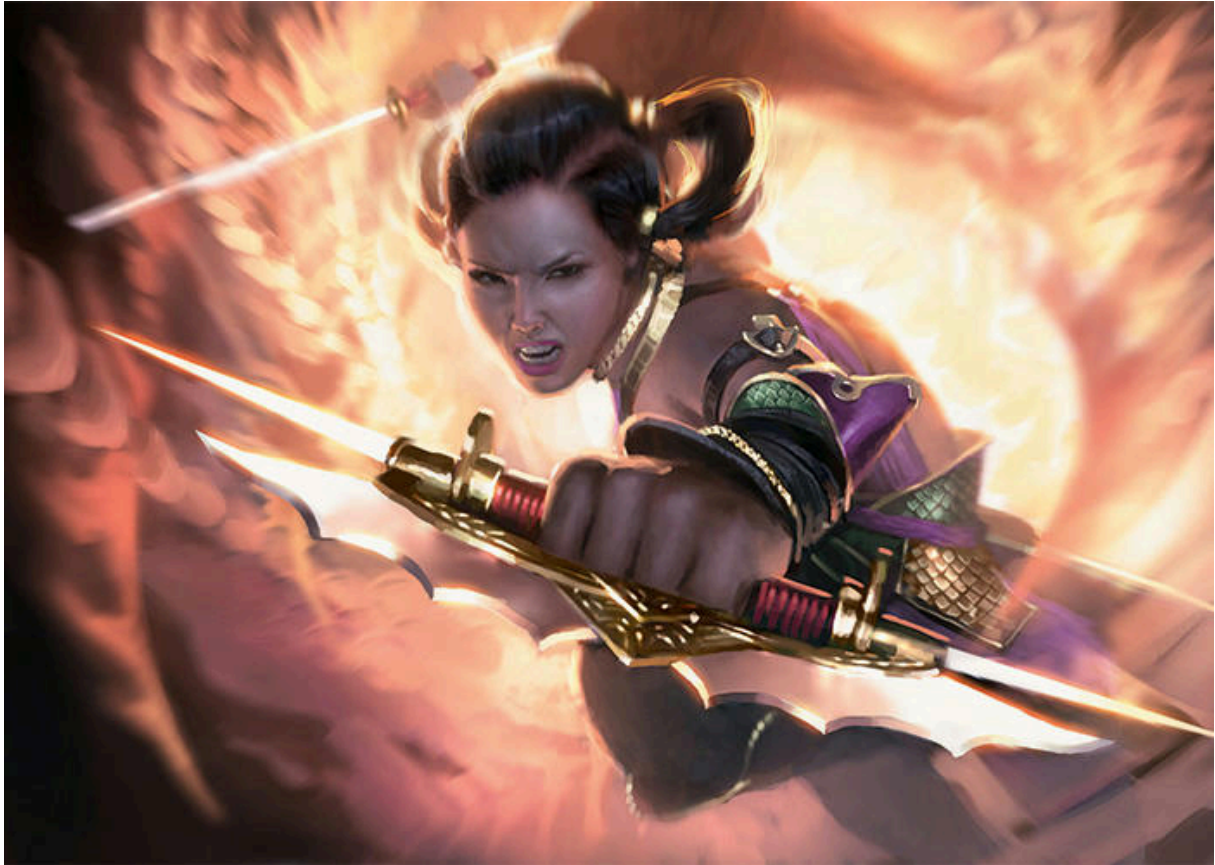


Rotting Mastodon | Art by Nils Hamm

By the time the animated corpse of the mastodon rose to its full height, three more were rising from the sand. The stench of death must have spooked the behemoth that drew the fortress, because it bellowed and stomped.

Then chaos erupted.

The sand between the mastodons seemed to burst into flame in dozens of places at once. Spheres of light with trails of orange energy skimmed the surface of the sand down toward the fortress. The spheres gave way to reveal countless warriors who descended upon the frightened behemoth.



Ruthless Ripper | Art by Clint Cearley

“Ambush!” came a voice from the plaza below the kin-tree. “A Sultai war party!” Anafenza saw dozens of archers take positions at the parapet. Arrows flew from their bows, and the Sultai warriors dispersed to avoid the volley.

The mastodons lumbered toward the fortress, and the soldiers below were forced to scatter. In the kin-tree, Anafenza felt a sudden whoosh of wind. Dust whirled about before settling into the shape of three humans, clad in the heavy armor of the Abzan. *Ancestors*. They acknowledged Anafenza with a nod, and streaked toward one of the massive shambling undead horrors, tearing into it with their spirit weapons.



Kin-Tree Invocation | Art by Ryan Alexander Lee

The mastodon collapsed, but the others were at the fortress. The first one slammed into a wall with enough force to split its own skull. Anafenza was almost thrown from the kin-tree, but she was able to cling to the branches and balance herself just before the next mastodon crashed in. The world shook. Another impact. Anafenza couldn't focus, everything went sideways, and the Salt Road rushed up to toward her.

A moment later, Anafenza was sprawled out on the sand. She lay there dazed. A heartbeat before, she towered over the sand, and now her face was buried in it. The sounds of violence rang in her skull. She willed the muscles in her neck to turn her head, but searing pain flashed across her cheek as it slid across the gritty sand. She reached up to soothe the pain, and her hand came away sticky and red.

She rolled onto her back and looked down at the tops of her bare feet, which were cut up the way she imagined her face must have been. Beyond, the fortress lay on its side, and beside her were the shattered remnants of the kin-tree. The jolt of the fall had torn it free of its soil, and it split upon impact. Broken branches and broken soldiers were scattered all around. Beneath a heavy bough, Anafenza recognized the lifeless body of Hakrez, the kin-tree warden, whose breastplate was caved in. Anafenza's mind raced to parse what had happened, and she remembered the mastodons.

The blare of a horn brought Anafenza back. Her muscles surged with energy, and she rose to her feet to see the Sultai retreating beyond the dunes. Cheers did not follow the horn blast, however, and the air remained thick with the sounds of slaughter.

Anafenza circled around the fallen fortress to find the commotion, hoping to see the soldiers of her house finishing off the last of the mastodons. There were screams, though. Human ones, and she approached carefully.

When she came around a corner, her world fell to pieces. The scene that unfolded before her was a violation against nature. There was a wrongness in it that pricked at both her flesh and her guts. She saw Abzan butchering Abzan.

People were trying to scramble out of the fortress through its narrow windows, but before they could get clear, Abzan soldiers were cutting their kin down with sword, axe and halberd.

“Mother! Father!” she screamed. “Oret! Please!” Eyes wide, and streaming with tears, Anafenza knelt to scoop up the sword of a dead soldier. When she rose once more, a figure, silhouetted against the sun, loomed over her.

“Your parents are dead. As is my bond-father.” Through clouded vision, Anafenza recognized Gvar, who bled from a gash at the corner of his eye.

Anafenza ignored the orc, and pushed past him.

“Anafenza! We were betrayed.” Gvar stepped in front of her again. “We have to get out of he—”

The word caught in the orc’s mouth, as he suddenly lurched forward, nearly knocking Anafenza to the ground. He fell to one knee, and Anafenza saw the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from his shoulder.

More arrows fell around them.

“Ancestors damn you, Gvar!” Anafenza grunted as she helped lift him to his feet. “Let’s go!”

They made for the cover of the Shifting Wastes and kept going.

For the better part of the day, they walked in silence. Each step through the sand was an effort, but they continued onward away from the carnage behind them. The hot sand scorched the soles of Anafenza’s bare feet, and the sword that rested on her shoulder seemed to get heavier with each footfall.

“Want one?”

“What?” said Anafenza, her voice cracking as the word left her parched mouth.

Gvar’s big fist opened to reveal a small mound of crimson grapes. “Eat some,” he said.

Anafenza stopped and stared in disbelief at the fruit, and then at Gvar. The orc shrugged his shoulders, wincing slightly at the pain. “I know, I know. Just take them.”

“Thank you,” she said between grapes.

Gvar smiled and tossed the last grape into his mouth, and the pair resumed their march. As they crested each dune, they hoped to find some indication of civilization. On the road, they were two days from the capital. But across the Shifting Wastes, there was no certainty.

“Do you still admire the Abzan?” Anafenza’s voice was tinged with bitterness. “Is it the Mardu who are the savages?” She looked at Gvar, who didn’t answer. He kept his eyes forward, shielding them from the dust.

“Gvar?” Anafenza insisted.

“You know,” Gvar said at last, “I am Abzan because when I was a child, an Abzan warrior—your uncle—killed my blood-parents in battle, and left me with nobody. Your uncle took me into his house and raised me. Had it been the other way around—had I been born Abzan, and Mardu warriors killed my Abzan parents, I would have been killed with them.” He turned to Anafenza. “Our house was betrayed, but our clan will demand justice.”

They walked until the sun hung low in the cloudless sky. Wind began to pick up, and sand beat mercilessly against any exposed skin.

Another dune.

At the top, Anafenza peered into the quickly dimming haze. Through squinted eyes, she was able to make out a vague, but unmistakable straight horizontal line that ran parallel to the ground. “A wall!” she blurted. “Gvar, look!”

“Your ancestors must love you.” Gvar was already striding down the dune toward the wall, and Anafenza was right behind.



Brave the Sands | Art by Dave Kendall

The wall surrounded an abandoned village, and by the time they passed through a crumbling gate, the edge of the sky was a brilliant orange. The village was nothing more than a handful of dilapidated sandstone dwellings arranged in a circle.

“We’ll stay in one of these for the night,” said Anafenza.

“One that won’t collapse on us, preferably,” said Gvar. “See what you can find. I’ll look for the well.”

Anafenza walked between two of the dwellings, giving both a cursory inspection. Emerging on the other side, she came upon the village’s tiny main square. In the center, around which the meager structures had been built, rose a gnarled tree, left pale and stripped of bark by the battering sand. With each gust of wind, its leafless branches clattered.

The sight of the abandoned tree against the darkening sky was too much. Anafenza ran over to it, letting her sword drop before collapsing in the sand that had gathered in a pile, obscuring its roots. All she could see was her kin-tree, splintered and dead. Her family was gone. She pressed her forehead

against the trunk and stifled a scream in the crook of her arm. Tears came, and they stung her wounded cheeks as they slid down her face.

She stayed there until the sun was gone. Until she heard Gvar's shout.

"We were followed!" He yelled. "Go!"

"Gvar!" Anafenza was on her feet, sword in hand.

"I'll be right behind you!" He was struggling. Anafenza could hear it in his voice. And then she heard running. In the darkness, she saw Gvar's wide frame come into view from around a corner. He was breathing heavily, his legs pumping, and he wasn't alone. Two figures were close behind, and Anafenza caught the glint of steel on them. She said nothing, but silently pulled herself into the tree.

She watched Gvar fly past beneath her. The pursuers followed. Two humans—and she saw the familiar outline of Abzan heavy armor. Her eyes narrowed, her grip tightened on the hilt of her sword, and she dropped behind the traitors. One of the men turned in time to receive the point of Anafenza's blade below his breastplate. Steel bit into flesh, sinking deep into the man's belly. Some incomprehensible protest gurgled from his mouth, and he collapsed.

Gvar and his pursuer spun around to see Anafenza slide her sword free. The remaining attacker raised his own blade, but before he could bring it down, Gvar had him around the neck from behind. The two wrestled to the ground, and the orc rolled onto his back so that the attacker was pinned to him, facing away.

Anafenza pressed her bloodied sword against the throat of their incapacitated enemy. "If you struggle, you will die."

The man went limp in Gvar's arms.

"You will tell us who planned this. All of it," Anafenza said, her voice cool and clear.

The man was silent.

Anafenza pressed. "If you don't give us a name, we're going to believe it was you. And we plan to hurt that person. Badly." She leaned close to his face to look him in the eye. "So try again."

"It was a member of your house," the man managed. "He hired the Sultai."

"You can do better," she said. "Who?"

"Oret. It was Oret."



Sandsteppe Citadel | Art by Sam Burley

With the fierce eyes of the veteran of countless battles, Anafenza looked down at her cousin. He looked so small at Gvar's feet. "It seems your maps held secrets only you knew," she said, her voice was cool and unwavering. "But even you must come out to swear kinship to a new khan, Oret."

Barely audible, Oret managed, "You were dead."

"I am the khan."

"Please," Oret resumed his plea.

The khan held up a hand to silence him.

"Please!" he tried again. "We have found each other again. I am the last family you have!"

Gvar erupted. "You dare?"

Anafenza looked past Oret to the orc, and her face broke into an amused smile.

"Oret, *you* are not my family."

The khan flicked her wrist, and the blade flashed. A red line appeared at the side of his face from ear to chin, and Oret screamed. His blood clung to the tip of the Khan-Blade, and she held it over one of the lit braziers at the base of the dais. The blood popped and sizzled in the heat. She turned the sword edge skyward, and she proceeded to drag her own hand along its sharpness. Without shifting her gaze from Oret, she held her fist over the flame and squeezed. Blood dripped out, hissing when it hit the burning coals.

"Before the First Tree and the eyes of our ancestors, I disown you, Oret. You are no longer of my blood. I declare you my enemy. If we should meet on the battlefield, you will not leave it. Your spirit will be rootless, wandering alone in agony for all time. Now Gvar, my brother, show him out."