

Mardu: Where Lightning Tells Our Story

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Paala never slept well when the storms rolled through. Like all daughters of the steppe, she could sleep through the wind howling like a beast with one leg caught in a trap; could sleep strapped to the back of a moving mount, hands tucked into loops beside the pommel to keep her upright; could sleep while hungry or injured or so cold she feared she might not wake again.

The dragonstorms were something different. Even as they grew more and more frequent, they remained a type of danger that her nerves recognized even when her body didn't. Moreover, her first dragonstorm had heralded such a change that it had scorched her heart, leaving lightning scars where no one could see them. So, when the storms rolled through, she never slept well, instead skating shallowly across the surface of dreams she no more than half-understood.

"Paala!" Her mother ran through their traveling tent, voice frantic with fear, the baby strapped to her hip. They had been accompanying a caravan along the Salt Road, a rare treat for young Paala, who had been gawking at the array of people and steeds since they cleared the boundary lines of Great Arashin City. Much to everyone's amusement, Paala had taken to insisting she was going to be a caravan guard when she was older, not understanding why everyone laughed every time she said that.

No one was laughing now. Outside the tent, the distant roar of a dragonstorm almost silenced the sounds of battle, swords clashing against swords or striking leathered armor with a duller, more terrible impact. Somewhere, a camel screamed, and it was such a despairing sound that Paala froze in her nest of blankets, unable to move as her mother scrambled closer.

Outside the tent, warriors were shouting, their words incomprehensible in the din. No: not only the din. As she did every time she had this dream, Paala realized she could hear them perfectly well but couldn't understand a word they were saying. Their words had been stolen away by the terror of that night, by the roaring of the dragonstorms.

Realization didn't stop or slow the dream—it never did—and her mother crossed the tent to pull her from her nest of blankets, pulling a knife from inside her clothing and stabbing it into the tent wall. Holding Paala close against her, she threw all her weight onto the knife, driving it down, slicing through the leather.

Arm around her daughter, she half-pushed, half-followed her through the opening she'd created, switching her hold to Paala's arm as she broke into a run. Behind them, fires leapt and consumed the tents, as the sounds of battle faded, and her mother pulled her into the night, Refia sleeping soundly through the chaos, Paala only running, running, running from a danger she didn't understand, to save a life that had already ended—

Paala woke with a gasp, sitting bolt upright in the bedding, sending pillows and kittens flying. Refia, curled beside her, made a small, unhappy sound and grabbed at her arm, trying to pull her back down. Paala shot her younger sister a suspicious look.

“Are you asleep, or are you being demanding?” she asked.

“I can be demanding *and* asleep,” said Refia, rolling just enough onto her back to let her crack one eye open and peer up at Paala. “It’s cold. There’s a storm passing by. Lay back down. You’re not supposed to start the Lightning Proving by getting out of bed in the middle of the night.”

One of the kittens mewed unhappily. Refia pushed herself further upright and grabbed it, thrusting it in Paala’s face.

“See?” she said. “You’re making the kittens cry. We’re not supposed to make the kittens cry.”

“They’re kittens,” said Paala wearily. “*Everything* makes them cry. One of them caught a grasshopper yesterday, and he cried because it was too big and it scared him, and all the other kittens cried because they *didn’t* have a grasshopper. I thought Mother was going to send me out with a net just to make them stop.”

“She didn’t because you were supposed to be training for the trial,” said Refia. “She sent me instead.”

Paala blinked for a moment, then collapsed back into the blankets, laughing. Refia joined in, even as she nestled closer to her sister, returning to the warmth. The kittens crept back one by one, sturdy, tawny creatures the size of orc infants, piling themselves around the two human girls until the weight of their bodies pushed Paala slowly, inexorably back into slumber.

The night, and the storm outside, went on.

Their escape had been a narrow one, possible only because the political assassins who were looking for them had the wrong description of their tent. When Paala thought back to their departure from the city, she sometimes thought she remembered her mother stopping to buy a new tent from a dealer near the wall, one who had apologized for only having plain cloth, nothing decorated or prettily patterned to suit a lady of her station. But was that truly a memory, or was she trying to make sense out of the fractured recollections of a terrified child?

What she knew for certain was that they had run into the night, unprotected from the storm overhead, and hadn’t stopped running until the glow of the burning campsite had vanished behind the hills. They had been able to escape with only each other and the single blanket Paala still had wrapped around her shoulders. Everything else had been lost.

She remembered—and this *was* a memory, it had been repeated so many times since that first terrible morning, lost in the steppes, somewhere far from the route they’d been following along the Salt Road—her mother holding her shoulders and telling her that she had to be brave now, she had to be clever and strong, and very, very quiet. She remembered the fear in her mother’s eyes, and the way her fingers had dug into Paala’s arms, until they almost hurt.

She remembered everything except the words her mother had actually used. They were lost to the void created by her fear and would never be recovered.

It had been years before she had the full story, or as much of the full story as her mother was able to provide: her father had been on the wrong side of a political divide within the family. Their journey along the Salt Road had been a diversion intended to get them out of harm’s way until he could solidify

his position. He had known, as had her mother, that if things went poorly, nothing would be solidified. Instead, he would be dead, and his wife and children would be cast out of the shelter of their family.

Things had gone poorly. They had survived, but they had done so with no family to return to, no access to the halls of their ancestors. They were outcasts, and while they might never be told officially, Paala had seen her mother weeping in the middle of the night and knew that her father was dead. It was the only explanation for why he had never come to find them.

They would have been dead, too, after days of wandering the steppes with no food or water and the next dragonstorm drawing closer by the hour, the air turning static-bright with the precursors of lightning, the heavy, reptilian smell of the clouds blotting out everything else. They would have died in that storm, had they still been outside when it struck.

Instead, a Mardu hunting party that had been tasked with scouting and following the storm had stumbled across the three of them, surrounding them in a ring of unfamiliar weapons and equally unfamiliar demands. Unfamiliar to Paala and Refia but not to their mother, who had traveled the Salt Road before, who knew that the art of diplomacy sometimes required meeting people on their own terms, in words they would recognize. Her normally honeyed voice had been curt and halting, hampered by the effort of navigating a series of cultural expectations she rarely observed without preparation, but she had been able to make her situation known, and when the hunting party had returned to the encampment, they had taken Paala and her family with them.

The Mardu had no need for a former Abzan diplomat, but they had space for her, and for her children, and if they were willing to work, they were welcome to stay. For three days, Paala's mother had searched for something that needed her to do it, and then a hunter had taken pity and informed her that one of their manul, the great riding cats who carried them on the high mountain hunts, had been lost. Her kittens needed tending, or they would follow her into death.



ALEXANDER MOKHOV

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Art by: Alexander Mokhov

Paala and Refia had been sharing their tent with litter after litter of manul cats ever since, and half the feline mounts in the camp still sought them out for ear scratches and dried meat when not in harness. It was honorable work, if not as glorious as riding with the hunting parties or the warriors.

Paala woke again, this time to the sound of the camp stirring into life around them, and sat up, sending a kitten tumbling into Refia, who yawned, stretched, and rolled over, going quickly back to sleep. Paala ignored her, getting up and moving quickly to collect her things, then heading to the tent door and stepping out into the bright, bracing light of morning.

Her mother was already up, as was her norm, hauling buckets of meat from the butcher's tent to fill the feeders before she released the adult cats from their night kennel. "Good morning, Paala," she said, politely enough. "Today's the day. Are you ready?"

"I've been ready for the last year."

"You don't have to do this, you know. You'll always have a place with the clan, whether or not you risk your life to prove yourself a Mardu warrior. The cats will always need tending, and the people who know you won't think less of you."

Paala stopped where she was, swallowing back the anger that threatened to overwhelm her every time her mother spoke like that. They were Mardu now, but her mother still acted like the Abzan would welcome them back any day, like Paala would want to go. "Too many of the people my own age already make fun of me for being less than a warrior," she said, voice gone tightly clipped. "The elders say I belong, but the ones who follow Altan, the ones who should be my peers ... they say I'll never be a true part of the clan, because I wasn't born here. They say growing up among the band doesn't make me

Mardu any more than growing up alongside the cats makes me a kitten. I have to do this, or they're never going to believe I belong here."

"Why do you listen to the voices of children when the voices of those who lead us already speak on your behalf?"

"Because those 'children,' as you'd call them, are the people I'll be riding beside for my entire life. I know the stories. I know how Father's family used to drive the clan away in defiance of territorial lines. They would have had good reason to leave us in the steppes to die. But they didn't, and this is my home now. I need everyone to see that, not only the ones who will one day step aside and leave me to contend with those who remain."

"Your father's family ... they stopped their raids after the change in leadership."

"You mean after they drove us out. I'm sorry, Mother. I have to do this."

"But the Lightning Proving is so ... it's *dangerous*, Paala."

"That means it's dangerous for every young Mardu."

"Every young Mardu is not my daughter!"

"Two of them are. I'm doing this. I'm of age now, and you're going to have to accept that that means I'm allowed to make my own decisions."

"Paala ..."

"I love you, Mother, but I need to prepare."

She strode onward, stomach twisting in a sick knot as she realized that she had just dismissed her mother—her *mother*—like she was nothing more than a stranger, and stepped into the bathing tent, placing her clothes carefully on the bench inside the door.

She had only been allowed in this space since her birthday the month before, and it was still strange to rise to water already boiled and hot, waiting for the rising camp to come and bathe. She was still uncomfortable sharing the communal bathing tent with others and washed quickly, drying herself with expedience and putting her clothes on with equal speed, securing buckles and ties before braiding her hair carefully and pinning it up in the appropriate configuration.

She was fast—she wasn't as fast as the celebrants whose families had been willing to help them prepare for the trial. She emerged from the tent to find them already gathering in the central area that had been cleared for them. Her heart lurched. She wasn't ready. Her mount for the day wasn't saddled, wasn't provisioned—

Was, in fact, being led docilely toward her by Refia, who was still wearing her sleeping shift, hair a wild nest of tangles and snarls. She had selected the largest of the manul who had yet to find a permanent rider, a yearling male whose fondness for the sisters was pronounced enough that it seemed likely he would become Paala's permanently, once she had the status to claim a mount of her own. He was ready for the journey, armor strapped tight around his chest and belly, saddlebags hanging half-empty but as full as love and tradition allowed.

"You are a gift of the storms," Paala said, hurrying to take his lead from her sister.

"I know," said Refia. She looked toward the gathered celebrants. Some snickered at her hair and shift, not bothering to hide their disdain. "Do me a favor? You go out there and you catch a bolt of lightning so big and so bright the spirit dragons would be impressed. Put them all to shame."

“I will,” said Paala. “But I’ll make sure it’s only a little bigger than the one you’re going to catch in a few years.”

“Don’t be silly. *I’m* not going lightning chasing. I have no interest in being a scout or a warrior. I’m taking Mom’s job as soon as I’m old enough. I want kittens more than I want status or a good marriage or whatever. The clan needs people like me as much as it needs people like you. Now go show them all what you can do.”

“I will,” promised Paala. She leaned forward, resting her forehead momentarily against Refia’s, then turned and pulled herself up into her cat’s saddle, steering him toward the other celebrants.

It was time to begin.

“The Lightning Proving is not the most important moment of your lives; only the most important moment of your lives *so far*,” said the captain who had been assigned to lead them out into the mountains. “I hope you have each prepared yourselves to the best of your ability. I’d prefer to come back with the same number of you as I go out with.”

Was it Paala’s imagination, or did his eyes linger on her as he said that? She bristled but held herself still, sitting taller in her saddle.

“Each of you is allowed to bring whatever gifts your family has provided to ease you on your journey,” the captain continued.

Paala forced herself to keep looking forward, not glancing at the saddlebags of the people around her. They were all better equipped than she was, with useful tools for the journey and food more nourishing than dried meat and balls of rice. They also had larger families, capable of bartering for better equipment. She had her cat, her rope, her bedroll, food, and water, as well as a hunting knife she had received from Refia and the lightning jar that would contain her prize.

She’d had enough. She would make the climb as the Mardu had of old, when they had been less prepared and more willing to risk it all for the storm. As Tersa Lightshatter had done, when there were no rules, no precedents, no way to be certain of survival. Tersa had been as willing then as Paala was now. She might have less in the way of support than some of the others, but she had so much more to lose.

Altan, son of one of the band’s best hunters and one of the loudest voices raised against her participation in the proving, shot her a venomous look from the back of his own racing falcon. Paala swallowed but didn’t meet his eye.

“Not content with stealing food from the true children of our band, now you have to steal our challenges as well?” he hissed, voice low. “You shame the proving by your participation.”

“There is no shame in choosing to turn back now,” said the captain. “If you do, you will have one further chance to try, and you will not be regarded any differently.”

The storm thundered in the distance, punctuating the captain’s lie. Those who stood down from their first trial for reason of injury or illness were forgiven, but those who showed cowardice in the face of the storm were judged, always and endlessly. Those who’d been born to the band might get a second chance. She wouldn’t.

“You’re only going to fail,” said Altan. “Back out now, before someone gets hurt.”

None of the celebrants moved, but they kept watching the captain with expectant eyes.

“Very well,” she said. “Your trial begins.”

The group surged forward. This part of the trial wasn't a race but more a test of how well the aspiring warriors understood their mounts. Some were already pushing far too hard and would exhaust their beasts before they reached the mountains. Others were riding in ways better suited to other species, trying to control a racing falcon like it was an armored skink or pushing a manul faster than the cat was willing to go. Altan was one of those who didn't seem to understand the beast he rode, and she left him quickly behind, determined to avoid him for the duration of the trial.

Paala leaned forward on her own cat, scratching him behind the ear. "Go, then, as the wind goes," she said, and he broke into a quick lope.

Young manul were easier to convince to run without prey or threat nearby. They could be encouraged to see it as a game. Paala whistled and her cat picked up his pace, until he was running outright, racing to the mountain. Some of the other celebrants had managed to coax the same out of their own mounts. Most of them were on beasts they had trained since birth, even as she was, and a few shot her appreciative glances as she passed them, nodding their approval. She could ride. The people who would be her peers could appreciate that, even if they might still question her place among the band.

The main camp had been erected only a day's ride from the base of the mountains. They'd all been waiting over a week for the next dragonstorm to roll in. Once it was time for the trials, they couldn't just move around and trust that they'd be near a mountain when it was time to catch the lightning. They needed to stay where the candidates could reasonably hope to succeed.



Art by: Danny Schwartz

As the day stretched on, Paala saw the other candidates only rarely. Sometimes they would pull ahead of her and vanish into the grass; other times, they would be off in the distance, watching their

surroundings for signs of a challenger. Thunder rolled more and more frequently as the day went on. The storm was almost overhead, and the long fingers of the afternoon were clutching at the land when the gentle slopes of the mountain foothills began appearing around her, rippling the ground and making her slow her manul. Even the fleet-footed cats could be knocked off balance if ridden too quickly, and, so, she chose caution over foolishness on her initial approach.

Because she was moving more slowly, she was able to pull her manul to a hard stop when Altan's riding falcon came racing for her seemingly out of nowhere. She brought her mount up short, not moving into the expected position, and stared as the falcon raced through the place where she had been.

Altan hauled hard on his own reins, wheeling his mount around to face her. She scowled, making no effort to hide her disdain. They were in the proving now. They were equal in every way. He had said that to allow her to participate was to shame one of their most sacred rites, and while very few people had agreed with him, the fact that he'd been willing to say it at all still gnawed at her. How could *he* claim to be the better Mardu when he was unwilling to put the band's needs above his own?

"You are arrogant to have come this far where you're not wanted," he snarled, drawing a blade from inside his boot. It was short and viciously curved, one of the grass-cutting knives they used to gather provisions for the grazing animals before they moved into rockier territory. It could still do wicked damage to flesh, and Paala knew better than to get within striking range.

"I was given permission to ride by our leaders," she called back. "I'm of age, and I've been with this band almost as long as you have. None of us are wanted by the shadow of the storms, but that's why we ride to claim what's ours by right. I ride to claim what I've fought for. Stand aside."

"No," he snarled, urging his bird forward.

Altan's mother was an incredible hunter, but she had never been a trainer, and Altan was clearly a less-experienced rider than he believed he was. He was pulling too hard on his bird's reins, which kept it from properly responding to his commands. She turned her cat deeper into the foothills, fleeing.

"Come back here!" he shouted. "I'm not going to hurt you badly. Just enough to make you see sense and go back to where you belong."

Paala didn't want to be hurt at all. She rode on, urging her cat higher and higher, away from the flatter ground where his bird could have the advantage. The riding raptors could run like a flash fire consuming the grass, outpacing almost anything else with a saddle, but they weren't built for climbing. It was almost ironic: the birds were worse at heights.

Altan followed. His bird was well-trained; while his hand was heavy on the reins, it was trying to do as it was told, and it scrabbled up the side of a low rise where the stones were only shallowly set into the earth, claws digging deep and flinging dirt in all directions as it pursued. The rocks began to roll under its talons, audibly clattering as they tumbled down the slope.

Paala looked back and twisted in her saddle, throwing out one hand like she thought she could reach him across the distance between them. "Altan! Look out!" she shouted.

He scowled at her, pulling again as he urged his bird to clear the rise. It tried, even spreading its wings to improve its balance, but it was too late. Altan's eyes widened in surprise as a large rock turned under his mount's foot, and they both went tumbling down the rise. He yelped as they went down, and Paala heard the thud and crack as they hit the ground.

She jumped from her cat's saddle, rushing to look down at her fallen pursuer. "Rival" felt like too grand a word: beyond his openly stated dislike of her place in the band, they had never competed for anything.

He and his bird were tangled together at the bottom of the rise, his legs half-covered in fallen rocks. It looked like half the hillside had collapsed on top of them, pinning the pair in place.

“Wait right there!” she shouted, needlessly, and ran a few feet farther along the rise, sliding down it on the sides of her shoes. When she reached level ground, she ran toward Altan, bending to begin rolling rocks off his legs.

He winced but held his tongue for the first two. When she tried to shift a rock larger than his chest, he made a sharp gasping noise and held up his hands, signaling her to stop.

“This isn’t going to change my mind,” he said. “You have no place in this band. I won’t decide otherwise just because you move a few rocks.”

“I think your leg is broken,” she replied, still moving rocks. “If I leave it trapped, the muscle could be damaged and start to swell. You might lose the leg. This is better.”

“Why would you help me? I hate you.”

She looked at him and shrugged, answering simply, “It’s the Mardu thing to do.”

He watched as she continued moving the rocks and, when she was done, sat up as much as he could, leaning on his hands. She turned away, walking toward her manul.

Altan pulled the knife he’d been brandishing before, throwing it to land harmlessly in the grass beside her feet. Paala looked back, startled.

“Take me with you to the summit?” he asked.

She bent to retrieve the knife, sliding it into her belt. “I will,” she said, turning to climb back up the rise.

She looked back as she climbed onto her cat’s back. He wasn’t visible through the stone of the mountain, but she knew he was there, and she knew he would ride with her to the summit. There was no turning back now, if there ever had been to begin with.

The manul were bred to cover long stretches of ground at a steady pace, and they didn’t care much whether that ground was level or at an incline. Her cat carried her higher and higher. She saw other candidates at a distance, specks of motion on the mountainside, and she kept her path well clear of theirs. Altan’s attack had been entirely allowed by the rules of the trial: any candidate could attempt to disarm or incapacitate any other. Many of them could claim the lightning, but only one would win, would bring back the brightest bolt and claim their war-name as the favor of the storm. They all wanted it to be them. A little competition only encouraged them to try harder, climb more quickly, and have less fear.

She was questioning whether that was true when an arrow flew past her head so close the fletching brushed her cheek. She jerked around, scanning the surrounding hills for signs of her attacker, and narrowed her eyes as she saw the light glinting off a buckle in the near distance. An archer atop a riding lizard was drawing back their bow for another shot.

Paala dropped low against her manul’s back, releasing the reins and digging her hands into the thick fur of his ruff. “We both get names if we make the summit,” she informed him, voice soft. “I get my clan name, and you get your own name, because I will be a warrior, and I will claim you as my own. Now save us both and win your name, my brave boy.”

The manul didn’t recognize the words their trainers used, apart from a few clear and simple commands, but they understood tone, and this cat had been working with her for his entire life. Her body was

angled slightly toward the archer, and so he took off in that direction, running as fast as he could across the uneven hillside, his belly so low to the ground that Paala's toes brushed the rocks. He didn't slow or stop.

The archer, pulling back a second arrow, froze for a few precious seconds. Targets weren't supposed to launch themselves at you like frightened hares, and hares didn't have the teeth and claws of a well-bred riding manul. She lowered her bow and grabbed for her lizard's reins, trying to turn away, but the manul had speed on his side and was already well into his run.

Paala removed one hand from her cat's ruff as they streaked toward the archer, reaching up to grab the bow, which dangled loose in the other woman's off-hand. A hard yank, and it came free. Paala pulled her mount to a hard stop, both panting. The other rider shifted her grip on the arrow she'd been readying, holding it like she was about to stab Paala.

"What? You're so determined I shouldn't make the summit that you'll defy clan law by attacking an ally? Why? You've never opposed me as some have. What purpose does this serve?"

"Only one of us can win," snapped the rider. "Everyone else will capture lesser shadows of the storm. I meant to eliminate as much of the competition as I could."

"Do you have another bow?"

"No."

"Well, then, I suppose you'll have to resort to hurling rocks at people like some clanless bandit," Paala responded. "I'm not giving this back."

The rider glared at her. "That's not fair!"

"Neither is trying to shoot me when I did nothing to you."

The rider jolted suddenly forward, trying to stab Paala with the arrow she still carried. Paala blocked the shaft with her forearm, then grabbed it and snapped it between her fingers, leaving the other woman unarmed. She gaped at Paala for a moment, then sagged, removing the quiver from her back. "If you're going to rob me, you may as well take it all."

Paala eyed her warily, waiting for signs that this was a trick. None came. She reached over and took the quiver, slinging it over her shoulder. "There's always next year. Maybe by then, you won't feel the need to cheat."

"Maybe," said her dispirited opponent. She turned her lizard back toward the base of the mountain, riding slowly toward the band waiting in the distance.

Paala watched her go, waiting for her to reverse directions and charge, to reveal this as some sort of a trick. When she didn't, Paala gripped her manul's reins and turned the great riding cat back toward the summit, moving onward into the mountains.

The storm rolled ever closer, turning the air electric and making the hairs on the back of Paala's neck stand on end. She watched the sky warily as she rode. It would be a cruel joke to find herself struck by a stray bolt of lightning before she could reach the summit and challenge the storm in earnest.

Something rustled in the patchy grass ahead. Paala pulled her mount to a stop then slid down, moving cautiously forward. The sound repeated, and she pulled an arrow, using it to part the grasses and reveal the ground where a nest of vipers writhed, scales scraping over one another. She recoiled.

The snakes had every right to the mountain. They lived there and had done nothing wrong. Still, she didn't want anyone getting hurt during their ascent. Pulling a second arrow, she drove them into the ground to either side of the nest, marking the spot for whoever followed her. Nesting vipers were unlikely to move without cause; they had probably laid their eggs there and were guarding them with their proximity. Satisfied that the nest was well-marked enough that no other candidates would stumble into it unintentionally, she returned to her manul and slid back into the saddle, taking hold of his reins and turning him away from the peacefully gathering vipers.

The mountain's summit was in view, and the storm was closing quickly, black clouds laced with multicolor bolts of spirit lightning sealing over the sky. Paala urged her mount on as fast as she dared under the conditions, hurrying for the peak where victory would become possible, not just another legend.

The terrain had been chosen to be challenging, not impossible. The clan understood that it was essential for young warriors to prove themselves, but still, they wanted most of their children to survive. Hauling on the reins, she turned her cat upward, and he did his best to obey her command, dragging himself slowly and awkwardly up the final feet of the mountainside.

The storm was a heavy woolen blanket, illuminating itself as the lightning writhed within, occasionally breaking free and lancing down to slam into the stone. Paala slid off her panting mount's back, pulling the lightning jar that would allow her to claim her prize. She eyed the clouds, hungry and wary at the same time, and began to step into the center of the flat area that had been prepared for them.

A rock struck her in the back of the knee, and she stumbled, whirling around. There, climbing the mountainside on foot, a riding goat behind her, was another girl her own age. "Emina," she said, voice both weary and flat. "What are you doing?"

"You'll never be Mardu," said the other girl. "Altan tells us clan is born, not chosen."

"That isn't what the rest of the clan says, or what the elders say, or what your parents say," said Paala. She drew the knife she had taken from Altan, even as Emina pulled back her sling. "That isn't what the mountain says." On the mountain, she'd been armed by a member of her clan, had marked the dangers for those who came behind her, showing her dedication to the survival of the whole; lightning in her hand or not, she had proven herself Mardu in mind, body, and spirit. The storm was only the final step.

Emina flung another stone. Paala jogged to the side then charged forward, aiming for the straps on the sling as she slashed down. Emina wrapped the sling tight around Paala's knife and jerked back, pulling it out of her hands just as the electric bite of the storm slammed down all around them. It danced along their skin, setting them alight with a fire that had nothing to do with heat.

Paala heard the screams of dragons in the distance, the crackle of fires and the clash of swords. She forced her eyes to open against the rainbow brilliance of the clouds surrounding her, and everything was light, like staring into the heart of a prism. It refracted and scattered all around her, impossibly beautiful, impossibly dangerous.

In the light, the lightning writhed like vipers, nesting and confined. This was their home; this was their nest in the grassy soil. She couldn't see Emina anymore, couldn't hear or feel her. There was only the storm, and the viper-headed lightning that coiled nearby.

The true test was suddenly clear. If she approached without true love for her clan in her heart, the vipers would know, and they would strike her where she stood. The venom of a storm must be beyond comprehension.



JOSIAH "JO" CAMERON

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Art by: Josiah "Jo" Cameron

Reaching out with hand and heart at the same time, she offered her palm to the snakes. They tickled it with their tongues, writhing in their tangles, and, one by one, turned away, until only the largest regarded her with anything like interest. It bumped its nose against her hand, slithering forward, and she closed her fingers around it, pulling the snake—seizing the lightning—from the storm.

The world lit up, brighter than anything she had ever seen, and then it was gone.

Paala woke to the smooth pacing of the manul beneath her, opening her eyes. Her hands were tied to the pommel of her saddle, and Emina rode ahead of her, accompanied by Altan and the archer. Altan's leg was splinted, and he, too, was tied in his saddle, but they rode tall and proud, as befit the Mardu.

They were almost to the base of the mountain where the rest of the band had gathered to see them succeed or fail. Emina continued forward, pulling Paala and her cat along.

Paala closed her eyes, digging the fingers of her bound hands into her manul's ruff. No—not hers. *He would never be hers. He would be given to another, and his name would roll from another's lips, never from her own. She would never be a warrior. She would never—*

One of the elders appeared beside her, untying her hands and easing her down from the saddle. She slid to the ground, standing unsteadily, and could only stare as the elder held out her lightning bottle, holding it gently.

"Emina tells me this is yours," he said. "Does she speak the truth?"

"I—yes?" she said.

“Your peers tell a fascinating story,” he said. “They say they challenged you on the mountain, reopening wounds they had no business worrying at, and that they denied your claim to our clan—to your own clan. They were wrong, and they say you both defeated and offered them aid before you continued into the storm. You treated your clan with kindness when they offered you none.”

Paala said nothing.

“Paala was the first to reach the summit,” said Emina, moving closer. “She seized the lightning from the storm. My own bolt was weaker, and incapacitated me for nowhere near so long.”

Paala looked down, tears burning the corners of her eyes. Her mother pushed through the crowd, reaching for Paala’s blistered hands. “What do we call you now?” she asked. “Some great, bold name, full of bravery?”

Paala shook her head. “I am here because I was shown kindness, and showed kindness in return,” she said. “I will be Paala, clan’s aid, and here’s where I belong.” A wave of weariness washed over her, and she leaned back, against her manul’s side. “As a warrior of the clan, I can claim a mount. This one is mine. He served me well on the mountain, and I would have failed without him. This is Lightning.”

Cheers broke out around her, and her sister slammed into her like an arrow, arms going around her waist as they both laughed, and Paala finally began to feel like she was home.