

# Soul of Fire

By Caris McRae

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**To my mother, who has always been my rock.**

**Thank you for being my greatest fan and encouraging me to live my dreams.**

**I love you.**

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## GLOSSARY

**Aliaenar:** Old Court of the High King; secluded fortress of the Hashisins in the Calae Mountains between Pyr and Aro.

**Element:** metaphysical energy of earth, fire, wind and water, created by Sol and Nyx;

**Elementar:** person with an elemental power, i.e. a wind Elementar; channels the energy of his or her element through his soul from the metaphysical to the physical in order to use it. According to the respective soul's capacity to hold energy (weak and strong souls) the energy prolongs the Elementar's life; if the Elementar draws too much energy the soul will burst leading to death.

**Elhrasin:** old language of the High Court; nowadays only used by the Hashisins as their secret language.

**Erudite:** person with the Talent of Knowledge; highly intelligent, curious and focused; are teachers and historians; magenta/orange/yellow sash according to rank; determine a person's talent and strength and are in charge of the law.

**Esendri:** Caste of the 'Vulnerable' (literal meaning: 'prey'), i.e. those without a talent or those with little to no amount of power; are sacrosanct and not to be harmed; usually servants and salespersons; color: violet.

**Hareem:** quarter of pleasure for Warriors and unmated men.

**Hashisins:** elite order of Warriors; the best Warriors of every element; guards of the High King of Quiliaris; non-guard members form the Guild, bringing justice for those who were wronged; leadership: Council of Masters led by the elected Chairman; attributes: *Kri-Amra* (brand of a sword), use of Elhrasin; possession of Searach, color: black.

**Healer:** person with the Talent of Healing; bronze /silver/ gold sash according to rank; can heal every physical injury short of death, as well as injuries of the soul.

**High King of Quiliaris:** elected in times of need by representatives of all four kingdoms to protect Quiliaris and its people; usually the leader of the Hashisins; the last High King was King Damiar An-Pyr 350 years ago.

**House of Aro:** royal family of the Kingdom of Wind; most powerful Wind Elementars;  
name: Cyn-Aro.

**House of Iquis:** royal family of the Kingdom of Water; most powerful Water  
Elementars; name: Iquis-ta.

**House of Pyr:** royal family of the Kingdom of Fire; most powerful Fire Elementars;  
name: An-Pyr.

**House of Ter:** royal family of the Kingdom of Earth, most powerful Earth Elementars;  
name: Di-Tera.

**Idris:** very rare; people born at midnight under a blue moon; also called Nightwalker,  
Shadow Walker, or Children of Nyx; favor food with low 'solar energy', i.e. edibles growing in  
umbra that don't need a lot of sunshine; normal food holds no nutritional value for them  
and can make them ill; highly independent individuals; said to be gifted by Nyx with the  
ability to merge with the shadows and have an affinity for animals;

**Kingdom of Earth:** Ter, rural kingdom in the East; kingdom of farmers and craftsmen;  
Capital: Ter Sentra; color: green.

**Kingdom of Fire:** Pyr, desert Kingdom of the South; kingdom of nomads and travelling  
merchants; consists of several wide-spread camps or minor settlements; the biggest being  
Altahir, the Regent's camp; Capital: Pyras, seat of the King's court and only fortified city.  
Founded by outcasts and rogues of the other Kingdoms after being gifted with Fire by Nyx;  
color: red.

**Kingdom of Water:** Iquis, Kingdom of the West; kingdom of fishermen and sailors;  
provide the only access to the Great Ocean; Capital: Limenis; color: blue.

**Kingdom of Wind:** Aro, mountain Kingdom of the North; kingdom of miners and  
hunters; consists like Pyr mainly of scattered dwellings; Capital: Isburg, color: white.

**Muse:** person with the Talent of Fine Arts; bright, creative people, enjoy pleasing an  
audience; cyan/azure/petrol sash according to rank; muses are dancers, singers, literary  
writers, story tellers, artists and acrobats, as well as Charmers and Illusionists.

**Naru:** 'ordinary' people, opposite of Idris; Children of Sol.

**Nyx:** Goddess of Night; she is the source of death and rebirth and the patron of fall  
and winter; her energy is piercing, forceful and intensive; her element is Fire, her children  
are Idris.

**Quiliaris:** Peninsula in the West of the Great Lands consisting of four elemental Kingdoms; surrounded by Maretiz in the North, Tortaris in the East and Imbra in the South; Treaty of Concord ensures a fragile peace between the four lands.

**Sol:** God of the Sun; he is the source of life and the patron of the spring and summer. His energy is warm, generous and fertile; his elements are earth and water and wind; his children are called Naru.

**Talent:** area of an Elementar's greatest aptitude; divided in four classes: knowledge, fine arts, healing, protection; every Elementar with a certain amount of power has a Talent.

**Warrior:** person with the Talent of Protection; highly protective instincts, excels in all things martial; crimson/indigo/ black sash according to rank; the best Warriors are allowed to try for the Hashisin at the age of 16.



## Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever Gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.

*William Earnest Henley*

## Chapter 1

“Burn, burn, burn,” the frenzied mob demanded.

“Burn her,” the high pitched voices of children fell in.

The air thickened with aggression and blood lust as the incited horde of spectators started to close in on the little girl standing helplessly in the middle of the camp’s gathering place.

The butcher, a heavy round man, spit in her face; another man threw foul fruits at her, and the cook, a plump and common woman, managed to hit the girl’s face with a rotten egg – an easy hit as she just stood there transfixed, staring blankly at the mass. The only outward sign of her distress was a slight trembling of her hands under her black, loose robe.

Since she couldn’t take any more abuse, ten-year-old Sheba An-Pyr decided to withdraw deep into the recesses of her soul, trying to find the calm, peaceful place where her innate power dwelled. She wrapped herself in the comforting, quiescent darkness that allowed her to pretend that everything was good and no one was throwing rotten food at her.

Why would the people of Altahir think she would steal something? She had never done anything like that, and she certainly wasn’t going to; it wasn’t befitting for a princess. But then they would have to trust and believe her, hard to do though when they had already dubbed her as weird, strange, and a freak. How often had she heard someone whispering that it would have been better to cull her at birth or that she was a disgrace to the House of Pyr? They didn’t even know her name, only ever called her “the girl”. Sheba sometimes wondered if even her uncle, the Regent, did.

Maybe these biased people got their wish now and she would be gone for good, because she was pretty sure she would die today. Although she had accepted that fact, she wished she could have left her mark on the world in some ways. It made her sad that no one would mourn her after she was gone, not her uncle, not her twin brother Tarek – her only family left. She was well aware of the fact that they secretly agreed with the general opinion

of her, and that they most likely wished her gone, too. But, alas, such was her life – even before her parents had died.

At least her father had cared some for her, her mother too preoccupied with Tarek, but that had lasted only until her brother was old enough to start soldier training. Then even Maris An-Pyr, the great King of Fire, had forgotten about her. The forgotten child: that was who she had been and always would be. If it hadn't been for the Hashisins back home who had allowed her to follow them around, nobody would have ever noticed that she existed at all.

Suddenly the shouting and derogatory comments quieted down to a whisper. Consul Ari Ben Alhar's steely voice cut through the noise, and the people stood back to let the imposing figure part.

"What's going on here?" the man demanded to know with a dangerously low tone after he had taken in the girl's deranged attire and the foul smell, and looked at the girl in disdain. "What did she do to warrant such treatment? Where is her guard?"

The cook answered derisively, "She stole some of the fresh oranges and exotic fruits for the Regent's Welcome Dinner and then refused to admit the deed. Everyone knew she was a disgrace to the House of Fire, and now she proved us right, the lying, thieving freak."

The bystanders murmured their consent and added a few insults of their own.

The Kingdom of Fire didn't have many rules, as their people's nature was independent and self-serving, but those they had were sacred – as was their code of honor. If there was one thing worse than theft, it was being a coward and to not own up to your mistakes. You could keep what you found even if you knew the owner, as the loss of property indicated weakness, and the cunning and wily were revered, as it was seen as a sign of intelligence; but violating the strict code of honor that ensured the peaceful co-existence of very different people was a capital offense. Any breach of the law was punished by either immediate death or by becoming an outcast. No exceptions – not even for children.

"What's your proof? She might be a freak, as you so eloquently put it, Cook, but no one here is sentenced without trial. She might be Esendri and have strange manners, but as the Regent's niece and the prince's sister, she is a member of the royal line and under protection," Alhar told her.

The accusations didn't really surprise him as the girl was not well liked and more often than not the target of cruel jokes, and generally ostracized. But as he had said, she was a member of the royal family, so he had to tread carefully – the Regent would not be pleased when he heard about the incident. If the accusations were wrong and the girl would be hurt, it would mean not only his death but that of those too hasty in their judgment, too. If she *did* steal though, then that might be their only chance of getting rid of her for good, Alhar thought excited.

The girl was a nuisance and needed a fully trained soldier as her own guard; though it wasn't that she had no power, she didn't have enough for a Talent in any of the four areas. She was bright, but lacked the patience and focus of a real Erudite; she could dance and play the flute, but didn't have any interest in the Fine Arts; she couldn't heal small cuts even on herself; and, as a girl, she certainly wasn't a Warrior despite spending most of her time watching the soldiers. What she did have was a knack for animals, which made her a good stable hand but nothing more. She should have been put in with the Esendri, most of them servants without any power to speak of, but being the Princess of Pyr unfortunately gave her immunity.

Well, if nothing else, the Regent, or, later her brother, could marry her off and use her as a bargaining chip for alliances, as she was promising to be a beauty when she was of age. With her shiny pitch-black hair, her unusual cerulean eyes, her olive complexion, and her sleek, slender body, she looked like female version of her father. She even had inherited his height, being almost five-foot-ten at the age of ten; almost eleven now, he remembered. Too bad she didn't get his power; King Maris had been considered one of the most powerful fire Elementars ever to be born. However, seeing as the girl didn't have that kind of power, it must have been the prince who had gotten it, as that kind of elemental power was always passed on to the next generation.

Anyway, their little princess would have to start talking to capitalize on her looks. Although a docile and meek wife was considered a prize by most, being a mute was not; no one wanted a defective queen by his side. Yet another mystery of hers: nobody knew why she refused to say more than "thank you" and "please", not even her brother, who insisted that she had been perfectly capable of speech – before.

The cook had it right; a mute Esendri was a disgrace to her House. The royal families ruled, because they were the most powerful Elementars and, thus, the most dangerous and most capable of them all. An Esendri princess let them appear weak and invited ridicule.

“So I ask again, where is your proof? Because, if you accuse her falsely, you will be the one to receive the intended punishment,” he addressed the woman again, who appeared to be the spokesperson of the vicious crowd.

“You see, Sir, today the goods from the city were delivered and put in the pantry tent for storage. The fruits were set aside in baskets in front of the tent as we needed them for pastry right away: seven red star apples, ten sun fruits and five green seed fruits. I went to pay the merchant and then to oversee the unpacking of the rest of the food.

When I came back a couple of hours later, a sun fruit and two red star apples were missing. I asked if anybody from the cooks had taken them, but they didn’t have them. Then, I asked people around if they had seen anything; one of the soldiers mentioned he saw a bunch of children playing there, but they were already gone, so I searched for them. It turned out that the only ones around were the little ones and none of them had any traces of fruit on them.

But on my way back to the kitchen tent, I passed the Hareem and there I saw *her* sitting in front of Sita’s tent eating a red star apple. As I came closer, I even saw the light yellow stains typical of sun fruit on her robe. But, what was worse was that the girl wouldn’t give me the red star back and then pushed me so hard away that I almost fell,” she shouted, pointing a finger at the silent girl.

“She even had the audacity to say ‘No’ and tried to run. But by then I already had her by her robe, asking where she had hidden the other apple, and the chit just shook her head and said ‘No’. So I ruffled her a bit in the hopes it would fall out of her robe, but it wasn’t there. She just stood there and said no over and over. I took her back to the kitchen and asked if anyone had seen her near there, when some of the older boys came back from training. And before I could do or say a thing, Safi, your own son, Master Consul, asked her if the sun fruit was to her liking. Apparently they had seen her eating near the corral. That was proof enough for me. But that unworthy girl still denied the charge,” she huffed.

“After that we decided to publically disgrace her as is fitting for a thief. But I will admit that the situation might have gotten a bit out of control. Still, she deserved everything

she got for her misdeeds,” the cook ended her tirade enraged, but with a decidedly smug air to it.

“My own son saw her, you said?” Alhar asked pensively. Hm, that development could be good or bad: good, because his son was a reliable witness; bad, because he was known to play pranks on her and to get her in trouble on a regular basis.

“Where is he? I need to hear what he has to say and so do all of you. And where is the girl’s guard? Why is he not here?” he shouted angrily. “Someone go find Safi and Warrior Kalani, and fast!” Two soldiers of the camp guard left to do his bidding and find the witnesses.

Alhar just hoped that the situation wasn’t as severe as it presented itself. If the cook’s accusations held true, the girl would be lucky to end up with the Esendri and not being thrown out into the desert without any supplies like an outcast – something that would mean her certain death. Only Quiliaris’ elite Warriors, the Hashisins, were able to survive in the harsh and unforgiving environment of the desert. Survival of the fittest: the rule of the desert, the rule of Fire. One didn’t make a living in the dry, unfertile, sandy lands of the South by being nice, complacent, or mild. There were no second chances there.

Sheba listened to the cook’s story stoically but was secretly relieved about the impending investigation. However, as far as she could see, she was already found guilty regardless of proof to the contrary. If there was even a slight doubt of her innocence, she would get banished from the camp. She didn’t really think they would allow her in with the Esendri, not only because they disliked her even more than the others, but because they clearly felt the power the others chose to ignore.

Hopefully, her brother would stand up for her and tell these morons that the only thing she had eaten had been her breakfast carrot; which shouldn’t be too hard for him to remember, considering he and his so-called friends had teased her mercilessly about it when they found her sitting on the dune above the practice ring. But with her usual luck, Tarek would tell a variation of the truth in the hopes of avoiding chastisement.

After a few minutes, one of the guards came back to inform Alhar that his son was out in the desert for a ride, but that he had found the Heir instead and had brought him.

“What’s going on?” Tarek An-Pyr, the Prince and Heir of the Kingdom asked.

Where his sister was the mirror of the late King, the boy came after his mother, the Queen. Tarek had inherited Diarsa An-Pyr’s gleaming brown hair, her gentle chocolate-colored eyes, and her pleasant and sociable nature – an effect of her being a Princess of Ter. Unfortunately, he seemed to have got her height, too: he barely reached five-foot-two yet, almost a head smaller than the other boys his age.

“The guard told me that there’s a problem with my sister. What happened?”

“Your sister is being accused of the theft of several special fruits and dishonorable behavior, my Prince. The cook said that you and my son came across her when returning from training. She claims that you saw her eating a sun fruit – one of which was stolen. These are serious accusations, so be careful and answer honestly. Can you confirm the cook’s statement?” Alhar asked him.

Tarek looked at his sister and took in her state of appearance. Although she was his fraternal twin and they shared a soul bond that should have made them well aware of each other’s emotions and well-being, their actual relationship was rather...cool. They might have grown up together, but their parents had always focused more on him and his progress than her. She had always been more of a tag-along, mostly forgotten or neglected like a toy that was no longer wanted.

He had never understood her tendency to observe life rather than to participate in it. It was like she was almost devoid of feeling, so calm and quiet was her presence in his mind. If the guard hadn’t told him about the incident, he never would have known. Even now, he didn’t feel any distress or anger from her, only a slight feeling of resignation. That was simply not normal, considering she was covered in rotten food and accused of a capital offense. He knew she could speak if she wanted to, so it didn’t make sense that she refused to defend herself; she had to realize that her life was on the line, he thought puzzled. This wasn’t home where she could do as she pleased without repercussions.

But whatever he thought about her, he knew that she wasn’t the thief. But he had seen her eating something – a carrot, but so what –, and he had to answer the Consul’s question truthfully or he would pay for it. And surely her guard could vouch for her, thus, the claim would be denied. So no problem if he twisted the truth a bit, he reasoned.

“Well, we did see her watching practice as usual about an hour ago and she did appear to eat something, but I was too far away to recognize the fruit. Why would she steal something that tends to make her ill? I would believe it if she would have taken a red star apple; but a sun fruit? Never,” Tarek said confidently.

“Ha, I knew it! Even her own brother thinks she is a thief!” exclaimed the cook.

“I don’t understand, Mistress Cook. I just said that she wouldn’t steal a sun fruit!” he replied, confused.

Alhar explained it to him in calm, measured words. “You see, your Highness, it wasn’t only a sun fruit that was stolen. Two red star apples are not accounted for, too and the cook found her eating one of said delicacies.”

“Oh.” Oops, maybe he should be more careful with his words, he thought, but...whatever.



## Chapter 2

Sheba listened to her brother dumbfounded. Tarek had really done it, she thought; he actually had lied despite the seriousness of the charges. She understood that he didn't care for her but she hadn't realized he wanted her gone – as in *dead*. As that truth sank in, she felt a sharp pain in her chest, eventually identifying the feeling as heartbreak. It was as if a part of her heart that held what little was left of her capacity to love and trust had withered away, and all that remained was a gaping void of nothingness.

At the rate her soul was dying, she would lose every trait of humanity within the next two years, she thought strangely detached. It would kill her ultimately, because no one could live on power alone, as it needed to be balanced by humanity to prevent an Elementar from turning into nothing more than a vessel for his Element – void of morals, belief, and emotion. If they only knew that their wish to get rid of her was bound to be fulfilled sooner rather than later with their careless actions, the hostile crowd might refrain from actively trying to kill her and let nature take its course.

But even if she survived this time, it would only be on the benefit of the doubt, and certainly not because she was innocent, the Goddess forbid; so perhaps it would be better to end it now. With her less than stellar reputation she would be a suspect every time something happened, regardless, she thought with a sigh.

With a grunt and a loud “Let me part”, Kalani, Sheba's guard, finally arrived. He reached the place by unceremoniously shoving people out of his way; thus, clearing a path. Right on his heels followed the guard sent to retrieve him.

“What's the matter, Consul? What was of such importance to cut short my break?” he asked unimpressed.

Then Kalani looked around and took in the situation.

Exasperated, he man asked, “What did she do now?”

Before anyone could answer, he barked at the girl, "What is with you that you can't be left alone for more than ten minutes without getting into trouble? By Nyx, you should be locked away with no company but your own; maybe then life would be pleasant again."

"Now, now, Warrior Kalani, you would do well to remember that this is the Princess you are speaking to! Whatever else, she is to be addressed properly and respectfully as is fit for her position," the Consul berated the guard. "I want a detailed account of what you did today and then an answer to the question as to where you were, Kalani, that you didn't realize that your ward was in need. So?"

"We ate breakfast, Sir, then visited the stables and fed the animals with carrots; at ten *her Highness* watched Warrior practice for three hours, as usual. Afterwards, we went back to the camp, where I left her in front of Sita's tent with the order to sit tight until I would come back from my break – again, as usual; which was why I wasn't aware of anything going on. What *is* going on, by the way?"

"I will explain it to you shortly. Now, have you at any time seen her eating a red star apple or a sun fruit today, Warrior?"

"No, I haven't. Why would she eat a sun fruit? She doesn't like them, as far as I know. She prefers the horses' left-over carrots – they double as her lunch during practice," he harrumphed. "But she likes red star apples. The Hareemi or Old Nika sometimes give one to her when she is good. But I haven't seen anyone doing that today." A pause. "So, what's this all about?"

"The Princess is accused of theft and cowardice. Something that wouldn't have happened if you would have done your duty and watched her, would it? If the claims hold true, I have no choice than to lay a part of the blame on you," Alhar told him.

Kalani paled and cursed under his breath. He knew what that meant: perimeter duty; which was considered a shame for every self-respecting Warrior seeing that it was a beginners' task.

He turned and glared at Sheba, his eyes full of hatred.

"You're going to pay for that," he hissed at her.

She just stared at him expressionlessly with no reaction to his threat whatsoever.

"Since the testimonials are inconclusive so far, I now ask the rest of you. Has anybody seen her near the pantry tent, or given her the apple she was caught eating?" the Consul went on with his procedure, slowly moving in a circle to address the rest of the crowd.

“Anybody?”

He waited, but to no avail.

“No answer? Not one of you has seen the princess anywhere near the fruits today? Nor given it to her?”

Once again he was greeted with silence as no one came forward.

“What do you suggest I should do now? She was eating a red star apple, but except for my son’s word, no one saw her with the sun fruit. And where she denies the deed, most of you deem her capable of it. Since I can’t find her guilty without hard proof, and I’m not gifted with Omniscience, I’ll have to postpone the case until the return of the Regent. He will find out the truth within minutes and can judge her accordingly. Agreed?”

“But...but...but,” the cook sputtered. “I found her eating one of the missing apples and she did have yellow stains on her robe. That’s proof enough, now is it? There surely is no need to wait another two days for her sentence!”

“What about the Bite of Truth? That you can do, can’t you?” a man suddenly shouted from the back. “There won’t be any doubts left about what she did with the fruits then, will there?”

“Yeah, subject her to the Bite of Truth! That will teach her to lie!” another cried. “Bite of Truth, Bite of Truth, Bite of Truth” the agitated crowd demanded. The chanting grew louder and louder as the people worked themselves in a frenzy.

Sheba paled. *The Bite of Truth?* Were they crazy? She hadn’t known that method was still used, cruel as it was; surely Alhar would decline their demand as it was practically a death sentence. Even in the old times, it had been only used for murderers and traitors, because it killed the defendant if guilty, and caused unbearable agony in the innocent. It was also known as Nyx’s Judgment, because the culprit lived or died based on the Goddess’ verdict. Initiated by the bite of a Fire snake, one of Nyx’s sacred animals, its highly poisonous venom had the power to reveal the truth and serve as lethal punishment if the defendant proved guilty. If the accused was found innocent though, he or she would survive but still experienced venom-induced agony that took up to three days to be purged; the afflicted person needed to be put into a healing sleep rendering him unconscious to remain sane. Sheba looked up to gauge the Consul’s reaction.

“I don’t think that’s warranted here,” Alhar said appalled.

It was one thing to get her confined to the Esendri and publicly disgrace her, but quite another to physically harm her; even the hardest of men couldn’t withstand the pain without crying for mercy.

The butcher spoke up. “Why not? It’s perfect. In the unlikely case that she didn’t do it, at least we would know who did it for real. We just have to look for those who scream in agony in her stead.”

As retaliation for an unfounded charge, the Goddess pointed out the real culprits by inflicting them with the victim’s pain. A nice side effect, sure, but it didn’t take away the pain of the one on trial.

“You realize that this would kill her, even if she was innocent? Her body and mind are not built to endure that kind of pain. It would mean her certain death,” Alhar pointed out.

Sheba didn’t believe her ears. The Consul couldn’t really be considering it, could he? Judging by his pensive expression, she lost hope pretty fast.

“You can’t do that, Consul,” Tarek spoke up. “My uncle won’t be pleased when he returns and finds her dead; I say we wait for him. You can put her in solitary confinement in the meantime; that’s punishment enough, don’t you think?”

“You have to say that – she is your sister, after all, your Highness. However, just because she is the princess, she doesn’t get special treatment. Everyone else would be punished immediately for these crimes, without exception; and when in doubt, the Gift of Omniscience is used. But you already know that, or at least you should, if you listened to your teachers. Since we can’t use it with the Regent absent, we have to fall back on other means of finding the truth. It’s not our fault that only the Regent has the Gift,” came the butcher’s consoling reply.

The crowd murmured assertively.

“After all it’s the way of our people,” the man stated.

“What you say is true, Butcher,” Alhar acknowledged. “But still, it’s a hard punishment and she is still a *child*. Our laws might be harsh, but we don’t hurt children. They are to be protected – at all times.”

“Children, yes; but not her. A Royal’s behavior needs to be exemplary; how can they lead otherwise? Besides, she is old enough to know better and take the consequences of her actions; she isn’t a three-year-old who is unaware of the way of things!” the butcher argued. “And if she can’t take the pain, she isn’t strong enough to live anyway.”

“The Healer can always put her to sleep if she should survive. But I can’t see that happen,” the cook said offhandedly.

“Hear, hear,” someone shouted.

“Just do it!” added another.

“Or are you too afraid of the Regent to take action? ‘Cause then you are not fit to be Consul!” yet another shouted.

“I am not afraid of anything,” an irate Alhar replied. “It simply doesn’t sit well with me to harm a child.”

“Pussy!”, “Chickenshit!”, “Coward!” the frenzied mass of people shouted at his defensive words.

“Enough!” he shouted over the noisy crowd. “If you want action, then you get action! But not without a vote. This decision has to be made by general consensus!”

He paused to gauge the people’s reaction to that.

Satisfied by the mob’s nods and murmurs of agreement, he went on.

“Everyone in favor of the Bite raise their hands!”

Alhar took in the mass of hands in the air with a little smile on his lips; even Kalani had raised his hand.

“Now everyone against the Bite raise their hands!”

Utter silence greeted him, everybody just standing there, motionless.

“Then we have a decision: the girl gets subjected to the Bite of Truth. Guards, fetch the Healer and procure the Fire snake,” he ordered. “Let’s get this over with!”

## Chapter 3

The guards came back ten minutes later with the snake and one of the Healers in tow, who looked thoroughly shocked.

“Consul, you can’t really mean that! The Princess might be...different, but what did you expect after her childhood! Hasn’t she been through enough already? Just wait until the Regent is back; please!” the Healer begged in a fit of sympathy expected of her kind.

“I’m sorry, Jaza, but the vote was unanimous; my hands are bound. Please, do your work and either declare her dead or put her in a healing sleep on the off-chance she survives the Bite,” Alhar informed her. “Now stand back!”

He turned to the crowd and raised his hand to demand silence. The noise quieted down and the people stared at Alhar expectantly. The air was thick with the spectators’ heightened emotions – rage, bloodlust, malice, all of them were palpable.

“Are you sure of your decision?” he asked the crowd. “If she is innocent, it will be one of you who will suffer along with her! Anyone?”

Again, no one moved; the tension increasing with every second.

Sheba looked around, stunned by the hostility of the assembled group. She found her brother’s gaze, screaming inside in despair, but he only averted his eyes to her silent plea. Kalani outright ignored her and the rest stared at her with hatred and glee. Her heart stopped beating for a moment, and a heavy feeling spread through her body; it felt strange to realize that she would be facing death utterly alone in the midst of a hundred people.

Nobody seemed to care enough about her to stand by her side, and even her brother couldn’t be bothered to speak on her behalf. She briefly wondered what he thought when sensing her despair through their bond. Didn’t it faze him at all? She had always looked after him when she felt even the slightest sign of distress of him; which had been often seeing that he had been a small, sickly little boy.

Not that their mother had appreciated the effort. The Queen might have given birth to her, but she had refused to be a mother, her only interest being Tarek. From what she had learned from the servants back home, her mother had forgotten about her two minutes after she was born. Apparently a perfectly fine girl had held no value for her, whereas a boy, even small and sick, had apparently been a godsend. Even as a little girl, she knew that there had to be something seriously wrong if a mother forgot to feed her child on a regular basis. Thank the Goddess her father had deemed her suitable company for dinner, or she would have died of starvation long ago.

The Consul's voice startled her out of her thoughts.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, girl? This is your last chance!"

Resigned she shook her head. What was there to say? It wouldn't make any difference either way.

"Well, let's proceed then!"

He took the Fire snake from its basket and petted the serpent's head, cooing, "Easy, girl, easy."

Then Alhar took position in front of Sheba and began to speak the ritual words.

"By the Law of Fire I seek your divine judgment, for I'm blind to see the truth. Oh mighty Nyx, Queen of the Desert, I humbly request to reveal the truth for all to see and judge whom we bring before you. Let the sacred serpent be your helpmate in your quest, for it shall convey the verdict."

With that, he gathered his considerable Erudite power and pushed it outwards straight into the Fire snake. The scarlet and orange colored animal began to glow in a yellow hue similar to the Consul's sash and started to wind itself around Alhar's hands. The hostile horde began to clap and stomp, chanting "Bite, Bite, Bite," like a mantra.

"Show us the truth," Alhar spoke softly and threw the serpent at the pale trembling girl in front of him under the raucous cheers of the rowdy crowd. Then he waited.

Sheba tried instinctively to back away from the snake coming at her, but to no avail. The animal hit her forcefully at her chest and latched onto her so hard that it nicked the skin beneath her sturdy robe. In an impossibly fast move, the serpent flung itself up her body and sank its teeth into her throat, unloading its venom into the girl's system. She knew she had

to try and stay calm, but the unnatural fire in her blood was overwhelming. The venom spread through her body with enormous speed, leaving only a blaze of gut-wrenching agony behind. Knowing it was in vain, she had to suppress the urge to rip off her skin and *make it stop*.

From there it only got worse, because the serpent had sneaked under her robe, travelling up and down her whole body and biting every bit of flesh in its way. The puncture wounds started to ooze blood, letting Sheba shake like a leaf.

The only thing she knew then was that she *hurt*, all over. Still she refused to utter a sound. She was the Princess of Pyr, and though she was a disgrace, she wouldn't add 'wimp' to her growing list of flaws. On the inside the venom had reached her core and pervaded every single inch of it. Like a force of nature the blaze burned everything in its wake and filled it with molten lava. Everything in her – her emotions, her memories, her identity – was destroyed, torn into a million pieces that were scattered on the minefield that was now her core. Her mind, a cold and clear entity now, followed the venom's destructive path to the secret place that was the fount of her power. There it stopped.

Sheba drew on her last reserves and tried to erect a wall to protect her power, and, thus, her life; the divine poison just eradicated it, leaving only ashes behind. Next, it tried to turn on her power, but the tables were turning, it seemed.

The vast impenetrable darkness of her core managed to confine the venom, effectively caging it. Sheba reinforced the walls by pushing more and more power into it and prayed that they were able to withstand the poison's unrelenting pressure. If not, she would explode from the inside out, her body and soul not able to hold that much pure elemental force.

She felt her power expanding, spreading to the ruins of her soul and mending what was torn. It was a beautiful thing to behold; watching her self being put back together, how the broken pieces were molded into something new, something *else*.

As she marveled at the perfection of it, she suddenly felt the Goddess' power invade her. It flowed into every nook and cranny, examining every memory, every thought she had ever had. Suddenly it stopped; it must have found what it was looking for.

*"I find you innocent, Sheba An-Pyr. Don't be afraid; you are not alone, my child – you never were. Rest assured in the knowledge that I will watch over you as long as you need me to, little Idris."*



Sheba gasped in shock at the Goddess' compassionate words and felt a single tear born of utter misery and absolute, pure joy escape her impressive control.

The crowd watched the girl closely waiting for the truth to be revealed. They reveled in her obvious pain, and some of them even articulated their delight verbally. When they saw the tear running down her cheek, they began to cheer, interpreting it as a sign of guilt and hoping that they would get to witness her impending death. Hopefully, it wouldn't be over too fast. However, for now they had to be patient, because, next, an image began to form with a golden shimmer in the air in front of the princess. Slowly the hazy mist solidified and a vision of the girl appeared.

*The Princess was walking to the stables with a bag in hand, accompanied by Kalani. "You have your carrots, girl?" he asked her.*

*She nodded. When the horses came into view, she began to run, her robe fluttering behind her. Opening the corral gate she stopped in front of a white stallion, offering him one of the vegetables she had brought. The beautiful animal swallowed it whole and whinnied happily. Curious, the other horses drew nearer, nudging her for a treat. She chuckled and petted their heads, then went on to feed them. She had a happy look on her face, and appeared totally at ease in midst of the tall and proud animals that towered over her.*

*Though shy and hostile towards anyone but their chosen riders, the horses clearly loved her. They playfully rubbed their heads and flanks against her, almost knocking her over in the process, and followed her around like puppies as she bowed out under them to leave.*

*Kalani waited for her to come and they made their way to the training area, the pair following the path that wound through the dunes ensuring its concealment. When Kalani joined the Warriors in the training ring, the girl went half way up a dune on the left and got comfortable. After some time of watching practice, she opened her bag and took out a carrot and a slice of Samani, the traditional breakfast bread made of corn flour and curcuma. After finishing her meal, she wiped her hands on her robe, leaving yellow stains.*

*Shortly before the adults ended their practice, a bunch of young boys made their way back to the camp and stopped at her side.*

*Safi, the Consul's son, tugged on her robe and sneered, "If that isn't our favorite freak! Can't even eat properly, Princess, now can you? You resemble more the animals you*

*are so fond of than a human, nowadays. Didn't your mother teach you manners? 'Cause you look like a pig. But maybe you are actually one, little idiot, since you have yet to make a noise other than grunting or squealing!" He laughed derisively. "At least they provide meat when they are dead, whereas you we would have to bury – who knows if your idiocy is contagious."*

*The rest of the group, including Tarek, cracked up at that jab and howled with laughter; they even called her a few choice words themselves. The girl snatched her robe away and stared at the boys with menace in her eyes. Rubbing at the stains, she looked at her grimy hands, and then, with a lightning-fast move, wiped her hands down Safi's robe, thoroughly sullyng it.*

*She looked at him with wide innocent eyes and shrugged. The Consul's son lost it then and called her a bitch, while pushing her down the dune in his anger; then he gathered his laughing posse and went on. The girl tumbled downwards and somehow landed on her feet in a distinct cat-like move in front of her guard.*

*"You ready to roll, little mucky pup?" Kalani snickered and said goodbye to his fellows.*

*Together they jogged back to the camp where he went straight to Sita's tent at the Harem. He told her to sit tight and wait for him, then entered the tent. The girl did as ordered and avidly watched the busy life of the camp.*

*A few minutes later a servant stepped out of the tent and almost stumbled over her.*

*"Sorry, your Highness! I didn't see you. Are you waiting for Kalani?"*

*The girl nodded.*

*"Have you eaten already?"*

*Sheba shook her head.*

*"Wait a minute, I'll get you something. Leave it the big oaf to abandon you here without a thought."*

*With that, the servant went back in and came back with a red star apple.*

*"Here, take that, your Highness; it is a left over from last week and quite old, but it's better than nothing. If you are thirsty or need anything, come find me. Kalani won't be out for some time yet."*

*"Thank you," the girl said almost inaudibly and began to eat her apple.*

*A few minutes later, the cook appeared. Screaming at her and shaking her hard, she tried to take the girl's apple. When the girl refused and tried to escape the woman's clutch by*

*twisting her body in a sudden move, the cook stumbled back in surprise. The irate woman raised her hand to backhand the girl and...*

The vision ended leaving only a glowing mist behind.

There was an eerie silence. No one moved or even twitched, and most just stood there with their mouths hanging open.

The first one to recover was Consul Alhar. Clearing his throat, he said astonished, "Well, that was certainly a surprise!"

"Unbelievable," the butcher said. "Who would have thought it?"

"But, but, but," the cook stammered again, "I was so certain that she did it. Why didn't the servant say anything?"

"It seems we have forgotten to include the Hareemi in our investigation," the Consul remarked offhandedly.

"But if she didn't take the fruits, then who did it? I don't see anyone in pain..."

Before the butcher could finish his sentence, a piercing scream penetrated the hushed quiet. People turned towards the source and found the Prince of Pyr doubled over and writhing in agony. Jaza, the Healer, pushed the guards aside and rushed over to him without so much as looking at the girl who was the real victim.

"Oh my Goddess, boy, what did you do?" she muttered as she examined the boy.

"What's wrong with him?" Alhar wanted to know.

"What do you think? Apparently he was one of those stealing the fruits! What do I do now?"

"You could try and put him in a healing sleep, woman! His pain must be excruciating!"

"I can't do that, Consul! The rules say he has to feel the same pain as the innocent for the same length of time. Only then can I induce the sleep. For goodness' sake, how much longer will it be? The girl can't have been in that much pain and still be standing!" she exclaimed. "Someone go and tell Riba to prepare a bed and a soothing tea, fast!"

At the sudden commotion, Sheba came out of her trance-like state and blinked a few times to clear her mind and focus on the scene before her. However, she was tempted to

retreat again when all she felt was utter agony. But it was worth it, she thought; now they knew.

She looked into the crowd expecting to see confusion, but instead found...nothing; everyone seemed to concentrate on something else. She saw the Healer's robe stand out in the throng of people to her right; they had found their culprit then, she thought remembering the scream that had startled her before. Suddenly a guard ran by and the crowd parted, leaving her with a clear view of the Healer and her patient.

She blinked in utter disbelief – once, twice – but the scene simply didn't change. She felt her throat tighten, and suddenly she couldn't breathe anymore. Her heart worked triple time, her pulse raced, and her body began to shake so hard she could hear her teeth chattering. Something broke in her; all she felt was despair and a betrayal so great that she couldn't bear it anymore. All fight left her, and her eyes, usually glowing with keen vibrancy, now became dull, lifeless orbs.

Sheba wiped the tears off her face that had begun to stream freely and stared at her wet hands, uncomprehending. When she raised her head again, she met her brother's gaze. He looked at her with anger and hatred, all the while writhing and screaming.

At first she didn't understand, but then she grew very still and, all of a sudden, her pain and despair were gone – replaced by an icy coldness that knew no fear, no love, no hate. Like a big dark predator, it lurked in the shadows of her mind, carefully watching, observing, and assessing her surroundings. Everything was either a threat or not; survival at all costs was its only concern.

She didn't know what her brother saw in her eyes, but he paled even more and lowered his eyes. With that, her body gave way at last; there was no strength left in her anymore

“Traitor”, she whispered, as she sank to the ground.

Finally, she passed out.

No one noticed.

## Chapter 4

Four days later, Regent Kara An-Pyr, brother of the late King, entered his tent under the golden gleam of the setting sun. He was tired, sweaty, and very happy to be back. He had missed his comfortable bed, the servants, who catered to his every whim, and the familiar sounds and noises of his home. Though he was in the prime of his life with his sixty-five years given their one hundred and fifty years lifespan, he sometimes felt like he was getting old when his body hurt after two weeks of riding.

He put off his leather gloves and flung his travelling cloak in a corner. Kara sniffed at his robe and decided that he had to freshen up – as soon as possible, because he was pretty sure he would even scare a camel with his stench. He used the prepared basin to wash himself and thought about his latest trip to Ter Minor, a smaller town in Ter located only a day's ride from the border.

It had been a successful journey; he had gained large concessions from their suppliers, resulting in more and better goods for the same price; he had visited with the Earth Kings' emissary to discuss a more comprehensive trade agreement between the two kingdoms, seeing as Ter had an increasing need for leather goods and superb horses and Pyr needed more food.

Moreover, he had brought his younger brother Rayza, his minor by ten years, back with him – the reason he was two days late –, after they had met in town by sheer luck. Because of his brother being a Hashisin, they didn't see each other all that often; the last time had been two years ago, when the late King's loyal Captain of the Guard had brought Tarek and the girl to Altahir.

Kara didn't think back to that time very often. It still hurt too much to remember his older brother and how the betrayal of one person had cost the life of more than three-hundred people. Benali, his brother's Consul and trusted advisor, had killed the king in cold blood, then had broken the neck of the queen, and, last but not least, had ordered the execution of every single person loyal to the royal pair, including the children. It was a

miracle that both the Prince and his sister had survived the massacre. Fortunately, the Hashisins in the King's Guard had found the kids and escaped with them.

Kara would never forget the moment Rayza had told him that they were all dead. Ever. When he had seen little Tarek, eyes wide with fear, shaking like a leaf, his heart had gone out for the boy, and he had vowed there and then that he would always care for Maris and Diarsa's children – their only legacy – to the best of his abilities.

The girl had arrived sometime later, splattered in blood, with the Captain of the Guard, Master Barin. She had looked dazed and vacant, and she had refused to say a word. Barin had just put her in Kara's arms, told the girl she was safe now, and instructed him to take care of her. He had forgotten to mention that she was weird and a freak. Which was why she had never integrated here, making his and her own life rather difficult in the process. If he knew what was wrong, he would try and help her, but the Healer didn't find anything, so the point was moot. But for better or worse, she was his niece, so he had gotten her a guard and her own tent, and had let her be.

Tarek, on the other hand, had turned out to be a lively boy after he had gotten over his first shock. He was easy to have around, gentle and sweet, and he knew how to behave; no watching others work, always polite to his elders and aiming to please. Yes, the boy would make a fine king someday. Kara felt honored to raise him and ease him into his duties bit by bit.

He looked forward to the day Tarek would go to Pyras and claim his throne. A throne that was vacant since the people of Pyras had forced Benali to leave the city after storming the court; but being the coward he was, he had managed to escape through a hidden tunnel to avoid being roasted by the mob. The King's Hashisin guards might not have been able to prevent the murder, but they had made sure that the royal twins had a throne to claim when they were of age – proving once again why they were to be regarded with extreme caution, when riled. The elite Warriors didn't take failure lightly: there was always hell to pay afterwards. Look at Rayza – some thought the term 'eradicate' was invented just for him.

Though Kara might not be as regal as Maris or an exceptional Warrior like Rayza, he was a good regent and well able to care for his niece and nephew. A caretaker and mediator, that was what he had always excelled in, even as a boy. Well, he had had to as the middle child, since Maris and Rayza had clashed on a regular basis; in return they had always protected him and defended him against their father.

Now he had only Rayza left, whom he got to see every two years at best. Sometimes Kara longed for the close relationship they had had when younger, but he knew that was a futile wish. The same way Maris and Diarsa's death had changed him, it had broken something in his brother, too. Rayza had never forgiven himself for that night, especially because he had been a high-ranking member of the King's Guard. It was as if he couldn't look at him or the children without remembering all he had lost. And it certainly didn't help that the girl was the spitting image of Maris, who in turn had come after their beloved mother, who had died way too early; her absence in their lives was yet another painful topic he carefully avoided. It seemed their line was not one to deal with loss in a grown-up way.

When Kara was done washing up, he changed into a fresh tunic and pants and wrapped a bright yellow sash around. He was proud to be a master Erudite, his specialty being law. With his Gift of Omniscience, he was properly equipped for his function as Head of Trial, something well needed in a society as ruthless and violence-driven as theirs. The power of the Fire in their blood showed itself in their hot-tempered, aggressive, and sometimes downright cruel temper, which was why even the little ones learned early on the importance of restraint and how to keep their emotions in check.

But now he had to hurry; dinner was most probably ready. At the thought of food his stomach grumbled. He stepped out of the tent and followed his nose to his private study tent where his Consul and Tarek were already waiting.

"Hello, my boy!" he greeted his nephew and fondly ruffled his hair.

"Alhar," he nodded at his advisor.

Kara sat down on his favorite cushion and took in the feast before him. The cook surely had outdone herself this time; it was nice to be appreciated, he thought, pleased.

"Ah, it's good to be home!" He took a slice of bread out of the basket in front of him. "I'm sure, you will be glad to hear that the visit was a productive one, my dear Alhar. And even better, I brought a special guest with me." Looking around, he wondered, "Where is he by the way?"

Suddenly the tent opened, and Rayza stepped in.

"Ah, there you are, Brother! Take a seat and enjoy the meal that was prepared for us," Kara said to the black clad mountain of a man as he pointed at the overflowing tables.

"Thank you, Regent. It is well appreciated," Rayza politely replied and took the cushion on the right to ensure he wouldn't be surprised by anything nasty.

“Always the Warrior,” Kara remarked amused. “I assure you, there won’t be any attacks tonight – we do have guards here, you know?”

“Old habits die hard, Brother; and this particular one has kept me alive so far. So please excuse my rude manners,” Rayza answered in a hard tone.

The Hashisin loved his brother dearly and was glad that he was well, but he already began to regret his decision to come here. His brother could make him lose his calm faster than anybody else with his merry and sociable ways, his seemingly never-ending supply of energy, and his naïve neglect of danger. Maybe it would have been better not to threaten every bully away when they were children, he thought glum; perhaps he would have acquired even a small sense of self-preservation then.

If it weren’t for his need to see Maris’ children and assure himself in person of their well-being, he would be on his way to Hardvell, a small mountain village in Aro. A long way to go for a pair of new boots, sure, but they were simply the best. And extremely hard to come by, as those bull-headed gruff mountain dwellers refused to make them without ‘proper deference’ to their work. Jerks, he thought.

“You are excused,” Kara magnanimously told him. “Let’s start eating then!”

Thanking the Goddess for the gifts she had provided, he began to load his plate with everything in his reach.

“So, Consul, what happened in my absence? Anything that requires my immediate attention? I sure hope not, because I could really need a few days of recreation, you know.”

He took a bite of a tender pork chop and looked up with sudden dread when Alhar didn’t answer right away. “What is it?”

“Nothing important, Regent. It has time until after dinner,” the Konsul said in an effort to appease him.

“Great, just...great. Apparently I can’t even let you alone for even ten days.”

Kara sighed and turned to his brother.

“Do you see what I have to put up with these people? You know, you got it right, Brother – if I was a Warrior like you, then I could just up and leave now and let them figure



out their problems all alone,” he complained in a whiny voice. “But you didn’t come here to be bothered with camp politics. Come on, take some of the pork; or the pheasant; or the clams – they are delicious. Oh, and see: there’s even star fruit for dessert! Aren’t you hungry after that long ride?” he gushed, already filling his mouth.

Rayza stared at his brother in wonder. How could anyone be so...clueless and still be alive? In his line of work Kara wouldn’t last even two minutes. Thank Nyx he was an Erudite.

“Brother, I’m sorry to inconvenience you, but I simply can’t eat most of these things; if you deign to remember: I’m Idris,” he reminded the regent sarcastically.

“Why does that mean he can’t eat this food, Uncle Kara?” Tarek suddenly piped in.

Rayza looked at the boy and then at his brother in utter disbelief.

“How in hell doesn’t he know what being Idris means? His own sister is one, too, for Nyx’s sake!”

“My sister is Idris? That can’t be true, Master Hashisin, because she eats quite normally. I think.” Tarek paused, thoughtful. “And wouldn’t she be a Warrior then, instead of a freak?”

“Call me by my name, boy! I am your uncle, after all. And what do mean *a freak*?”

“You are my uncle?” he asked confused. “I don’t remember you.”

“Tarek, mind your manners, boy!” Kara admonished him. “And yes, he is your uncle. He is my younger brother Rayza. He was a member of your father’s Guard and responsible for a lot of important things. And, he was one those who brought you here. So show some respect; he saved your life that night!”

“Oh. Sorry – I didn’t know; I wasn’t allowed to associate with the Guard back home. My apologies, Uncle Rayza,” he said red-faced.

Tarek really didn’t remember the big man, at least six foot five, with his long black hair that fell in a braid down his back and his menacing expression. He didn’t remember much of the night his life had changed irreversibly, though, only the frightened face of his mother as she told him to run and hide. Somewhere on his way to his room, a guard had picked him up and brought him to the stables where he was put on a horse and told to be quiet.

The ride out of the city and through the desert was a blur in his memory; only upon his arrival in Altahir had he realized that they had been riding with a group fifteen Warriors. The next thing he knew was a crying Kara putting him to bed, saying “Welcome to your new home, son”.

Tarek was thankful to his uncle for taking him in, but he still missed his parents every day. His father had been a strong, powerful man and king, and he had great respect for him and his legacy, but his mother had been his world. She had cared for him, supported him and loved him with everything in her, as he had loved her back. And still did.

## Chapter 5

“So, what did you mean with ‘freak’, Tarek?” Rayza asked again. “By the way: though very rare, Idris aren’t limited to Warriors, but quite common for every Talent – you are born that way. Idris are considered Children of Nyx, because they came into this world at midnight under a blue moon.

Being Idris means that you can only eat food grown in the shades, because Naru food in the best case doesn’t nourish you and makes you sick in the worst case. To digest Naru food, an Idris body needs three times the energy yours does; that energy is taken out of every fat reserve your body has, and, if that’s not enough, it draws on your muscles and flesh. Some even starved to death, because there was no proper food for them.

Another trait is that we prefer to be alone, if possible. There’s a reason Idris are called Night Walker: we prefer the quiet of the dark,” he explained to the oblivious boy.

Turning to this brother, he asked him, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “What do you teach them here, Kara? Maybe you should focus on the basics before you allow them to play with swords?”

Rayza watched Kara squirm under his mocking glare. His gut told him that something wasn’t quite right when the boy didn’t even know about his twin’s nature. Even though he himself had been the only Idris out of three, his brothers had always been aware of his special needs and had provided for them. He wondered why Kara hadn’t taught Tarek how to properly care for his sister and why the boy seemed so insensitive towards the girl.

“Now answer my question. Please.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t have any talent whatsoever; thus, she is a freak. Isn’t that right, Uncle?”

Tarek looked at Kara, who in turn seemed to have developed an avid interest in his plate.

“No Talent?” Rayza said and turned to his brother. “She doesn’t have a Talent? Really, Kara?” he said in low and dangerous tone.

"It's true, Master Hashisin," Alhar suddenly joined the discussion

It seemed his brother had found himself a new protector, Rayza thought slightly disgusted.

"She has no Talent to speak of in either area. Every Master in the camp will confirm that. She does have a certain amount of power, sure, but not enough for a real Talent. And then there is the fact that she doesn't speak. As sad as it is, you have to face the truth here, your Highness: she is Esendri," Alhar said in a commiserating voice.

"Esendri? No Talent? And she doesn't speak?" Rayza was shocked to his core. "I don't believe that. She has more power than you, Kara, always had, and you know it!"

His brother looked away in denial.

"But let's assume you are right, and she doesn't have any Talent: how good is her control over what little power she actually has? Where are her fortes?" Rayza demanded to know.

"You don't seem to understand, your Highness – she *doesn't* have any fortes to speak of, therefore, she isn't trained. Where would be the sense in that?" the Consul said.

"You didn't teach her? At all?"

"That's what was decided on behalf of the princess, yes. Like I said, she has no use for it."

Alhar shrugged and took a sip of his wine.

Kara nodded his assent.

Rayza exploded.

"Are you lot bat-shit crazy? You can't just *not* train someone with her power. Even Esendri get basic training to control their temper, and you idiots just let her be? Don't you realize the danger of that? What do you do if she nukes your precious camp in a flash of temper? Or are you waiting for her power to grow to the point where she can't hold it in anymore because of disuse and neglect?" He took a breath and went on, furious, "You fucking morons! What did you think?"

"Huh. I have to admit, you do have a point here. But the Masters all thought it the best way because of her silence and her lack of Talent. Surely, they know what they are talking about," Kara tried to argue. "And mind your language, Hashisin!"

“Well, your Masters know shit then,” Rayza muttered exasperated outright ignoring his brother. “Anyway, where is she? Shouldn’t she be here eating with us? Or is she not welcome at your table?”

“Now that you mention it, I didn’t see her today. Usually, she has at least the decency to greet me. So, where is the girl, Alhar?” Kara wanted to know.

“Well, Regent, as I mentioned before, there was a little incident...”

“Incident?” Exasperated, Kara cursed under his breath. “What did or didn’t she do now? Even if she is grounded, you know that I expect to see her when I come home. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It’s nothing that couldn’t wait, Sire, seeing as she got a bit roughed up, so she is most likely asleep. I’m sure she would be there otherwise.”

“What do you mean she got ‘roughed up’? Why isn’t she in the infirmary if she is hurt? And you didn’t deem that information important?” Kara bombarded him angrily.

“What the hell happened? And when?”

“Uncle, please calm down. It’s not Consul Alhar’s fault. You see, some of the special fruits went missing and the cook accused her of taking them. Things just went downhill fast after that. You know how it is,” Tarek tried to explain hoping that his uncle would leave it at that, because he didn’t exactly want him to know about his role in the whole thing. He sure wouldn’t be pleased.

“Yes, I do know,” Kara sighed. “But to repeat the question: when did that happen and why isn’t she in the infirmary?”

“Why, Sire, the healer said all will be fine with sleep and bed rest for the next days. So we put her in her tent and a servant looks after her every few hours. As to the when, the incident was four days ago,” Alhar said matter-of-factly.

Like Tarek, he hoped that that was end of it. But he didn’t count on the Hashisin.

“How roughed up can a child be that it takes over four days for her to leave her bed? The only injuries I know that take that long to heal are broken bones and a severe concussion, in which case she should never be left unattended. So what is it ,exactly, that’s wrong with her?” Rayza asked in a dangerous tone. “Doesn’t the Princess of Pyr warrant a Healer and constant supervision if she is confined to bed?”

He looked at Alhar and took in the blank expression the man shared with Tarek. Again, his sixth sense told him that something was off here. His brother, of course, didn't seem alarmed at all.

"Kara?"

"Of course she does. But I trust the Healer to do her job, and if she released her, then she isn't in any immediate danger."

"But aren't you interested in what has happened? Because neither Alhar nor Tarek ever answered that question. And you didn't even realize, nor does it appear that you care!"

"You can talk! You don't have to deal with her antics on a daily basis. This isn't the first time she got in trouble and it won't be the last. She is a klutz, no two ways about that! Every other day, she has a bruise somewhere, because she fell down a dune or didn't look where she was going. We are used to it, and so is she. You can't come here after two years absence and play inquisitor, Brother! She is alive and on the mend – that's all that matters. Just leave it be."

"Alive and on the mend? Something is very, very wrong here, Kara, and you are too blind to see it. As usual." Rayza said disgusted. "I want to see my niece, and I strongly suggest that you accompany me."

"Or what?" Kara said, challenging him.

Rayza rose from his seat to his full height and stared at him menacingly. Brother or not, it was never good to offend a predator above you in the food chain. He let all his ire, scorn, and hostility show in his eyes. Then, he said in a voice promising excruciating pain, "Or you will regret it."

Together they made their way to the girl's tent. It was set up way behind Kara's tent in the furthest corner of the camp with no others in sight.

"Why is she so isolated?" Rayza asked into the heavy silence. "How do you protect her properly with no one around?"

"Her tent is put up here precisely *for* her protection, Brother. So that no one will disturb her or spy on her. It works well for everybody that way." Kara answered absent-mindedly.

“Tarek, how is your sister?” Rayza asked the boy now, hoping to get a satisfying answer from him at least.

“Well, I think. On the mend, like the Healer said.”

“I don’t want to know what the healers said. I want your own opinion. How was she when you last visited her?”

“She was asleep then, Uncle, so I can’t really say. But she looked all right.”

Tarek thanked the Goddess that it was dark and no one could see his face clearly. He didn’t exactly lie to the Hashisin, but it wasn’t the whole truth either. He couldn’t very well tell the man that the last time he had seen his sister had been in the infirmary when he had been discharged with the Consul’s son after two days of recovery from the backlash of the Bite – not after witnessing his temper display a few minutes ago. Somehow Tarek didn’t think his Warrior uncle would appreciate that.

And why would he go visit her? If it hadn’t been for her, he wouldn’t have had to experience such enormous agony. How could he have known that a harmless joke would get serious so fast? Safi and he hadn’t realized that the fruit was for the Regent’s return dinner; they had taken them because they had wanted a treat after practice. Maybe Safi shouldn’t have lied about his sister eating a sun fruit, but what had she expected after the stunt with the curcuma? The Consul’s son had never been one to let something rest, especially when bested in front of an audience. So, it was all her fault really, he reasoned, petulant.

“Boy, didn’t you use your bond to know for sure?”

“Our bond? How would that help? It’s not like I can’t talk to her that way. That’s not how it works.”

“It isn’t supposed to be, Tarek,” Rayza said, rolling his eyes. “But though you can’t talk to her, you can *feel* her: if she’s happy or sad, if she is hurt, her state of mind – things like that. Come on, you must know that already.”

“Yeah, well, I do. I heard that it should work like that, but it never did with my sister. I can’t get a feel for her. Nothing, nada, zero. Even during the tri...never mind. It just doesn’t work. It’s almost as if she is dead inside. The only thing I can tell is that she is alive, but nothing more.”

“What the hell? Did you know about that, Kara?” he shouted at the regent. Turning back to Tarek, he said slightly calmer, “Boy, how long has this been going on?”

“It has always been like that. I *never* felt her,” Tarek explained in an effort to make him understand.

Rayza couldn't believe it; every question revealed new horrors. And instead of dealing with them, his brother had chosen to neglect them. The children should have been thoroughly examined by the Healer, physically and emotionally. However, he would bet his life that Kara had settled for the easy route and deemed the psychical evaluation unnecessary after receiving the go ahead from the physical one. Go figure.



## Chapter 6

“It never worked?”

“Never. But I can’t say that I’m surprised, though - she is the most distant person I know, and I’m not entirely sure if she has any emotions at all.”

“Pardon me? Of course, she has emotions – she might be a bit shy, but she always cared deeply about those close to her – especially for you, Tarek. She was always the first to tell your mother if anything was wrong with you,” Rayza told him, disbelieving.

Tarek didn’t think that the Warrior would lie to him, but he still found it hard to believe; it was as if they were talking about a totally different person. But maybe she had been different then; it must have been before his father had taken an interest in him. Perhaps the rumors had been true that Maris had been taking the girl along wherever he went. Out of pity most likely, he thought arrogantly. Why would his father want to spend so much time with a useless girl otherwise?

Good thing, he had eventually recovered and provided him with better company. After all, he was the Heir; thus, it was only right that he had gotten the lion’s share of their parents’ attention, wasn’t it? At least that was what his mother had always told him after tucking him in at night: that he was born to do great things and that the world would be his for the taking. It had never occurred to him that that might not be true.

Finally, they reached the girl’s tent. It lay in total darkness, only the moon’s bright light illuminating the entry.

Rayza looked for a torch and found it on the ground next to the tent. He picked it up and lightened it with his power. It was eerily quiet, and he couldn’t sense any presence other than theirs. Strange, he thought.

“Are you sure she is in this tent?” he asked the Consul puzzled.

“Yes, I am,” the man said with an eye roll. “She wasn’t moved since she was brought here and it isn’t as if she could go anywhere.”

“Oh, stop questioning my Consul, Brother; you are not on assignment!” Kara reprimanded him harshly.

Rayza ignored his brother and went into the small, dark tent. He looked around in the dim light of the torch and took in the sparse accommodations. There was nothing but a little table to the left, a small chest on the right, and something that could be a cot almost invisible at the far end. He shivered because of the cold in the tent, the temperature falling below zero at night, and used his power to heat up the room; immediately it got toasty warm. Slowly he neared the cot and softly called out to the girl.

“Amadri?”

He decided to address her with the sweet endearment, meaning ‘beloved’, that Maris had often used when she was little. Rayza didn’t want her to freak out when waking to a virtual stranger’s voice.

No answer. He tried again, louder.

“Amadri? It’s me, your Uncle Rayza. Wake up, little girl.”

He was now standing directly in front of her cot. Looking down, he had to swallow. She looked exactly like his oldest brother whom he loved and missed dearly every day despite their many differences.

However, something didn’t seem right. His niece was too pale and lay absolutely still, like one of those marble statues of old in Aliaenar, the High King’s old fortress and home of the Hashisins. He had to strain his ears to even hear her breath. If not for the soft rising of her chest, he would have thought her dead.

“What’s wrong with her? Is she in a healing sleep?” he asked.

“Not that I know of, your Highness,” Alhar replied warily.

“Then send for the Healer!” the Hashisin demanded angry and suddenly scared.

“Oh come on, I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Kara remarked. “Girl, wake up. It’s me, the Regent,” he ordered in a stern voice.

Nothing. She didn’t even twitch.

Rayza took a closer look and noticed two angry marks on her otherwise pale throat – looking suspiciously like snake bites.

“Consul, was she bitten in that ‘incident’?” he asked in a low frosty voice.

“Um, well, um...I think so?” the man stammered hesitantly.

“Get the Healer. Now,” Rayza ordered forcefully. “That is *not* normal!”

He bent down to touch her face and suddenly he found himself thrown through the room.

“What the hell?” he shouted shocked.

The Regent looked ashen, and the Consul looked like he wanted to run, rising Rayza’s ire.

“Alhar, do as he says. Get Jaza and the servant taking care of her,” Kara said with a surprisingly strong voice, considering he was shaking pretty hard. Maybe he got it now, Rayza thought pleased that his brother decided to act for once.

“And when you get back, Consul, you might want to tell us exactly what had happened; or better yet, Kara will use the Gift. Maybe then, we get the whole story instead of the bits and pieces you seem to be willing to share,” Rayza added menacingly.

He watched the man pale another shade and then turn tail and run to do as ordered, taking a stunned Tarek with him.

After they had left, the Hashisin turned back to the girl and tried to get closer to her again. But after two feet he had stop. A strange energy, impenetrable like a stone wall, blocked his way.

“What is it?” his brother asked, noticing his sudden halt and his pensive expression.

“What do you think it is, Kara?” he replied, put out. “She blocked us, that’s what. I can’t get any nearer than that.”

“What do you mean, she blocked us? I never heard about such a thing being possible. Are you sure, it isn’t you who doesn’t want to get closer again?” the Regent asked tauntingly.

“Oh I am sure. And just because you didn’t hear about something, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, Master Erudite. It is a common thing under Warriors; that way an enemy can’t get too close to you when injured. It’s a survival mechanism, quite simply. No wonder you don’t know about it – you don’t have one!” Rayza shot back, adrenaline surging through his blood.

He slowly breathed in and out in an effort to calm down and not strangle Kara, then addressed the topic the Regent had avoided so far.

“Your Consul lied to you, Kara. She didn’t get just roughened up a bit – she has bite marks on her throat. From a snake, if I am not mistaken. And the only snakes to induce a coma-like state as hers are Fire snakes, and they live far in the desert. How do you explain that, Brother?”

“I’ve got no idea. But Alhar would have told me that for sure,” Kara said, strangely uncaring.

“And we do have a Fire snake in the camp, by the way. Maybe she was curious and took it out?” he suggested in an attempt to come up with a satisfying explanation.

The tent opened then and Alhar and Tarek came back with Jaza and a maid.

“Regent, you have need of me?” the Healer said.

“Yes, Jaza; I have indeed need of you. I want an explanation as to what is wrong with my niece,” Kara said, looking at her with worry.

“Nothing is *wrong* with her, your Highness. She is just sleeping.”

“If that is true, why isn’t she waking up? Did you put her in a healing sleep without telling anyone?”

“No, I didn’t – there was no need to. She appeared fine when I saw her last.”

Jaza looked questioningly at Alhar, who averted his eyes.

“And when was that, Jaza? And I really would appreciate it if you would answer my questions comprehensively. Otherwise I might think you want to hide something from me.”

“The last time I saw to her in person was two days ago, after I released her from the infirmary. Like I said, she appeared well enough and I told the servant come and get me if her state would change. Which hasn’t been the case,” the Healer said, slightly annoyed. “I do know how to do my work properly, Regent. And there was no reason to occupy a bed that could be needed for actually injured people.”

“I meant no disrespect, Jaza,” Kara apologized immediately. “But I would like to know about her injuries, if you don’t mind. For whatever reason, Alhar wasn’t exactly forthcoming with the information.”

The Healer looked at Alhar with a raised eyebrow and went to answer her liege’s question.

“Well, she had already passed out when she was brought to the infirmary. Judging by the marks on her throat, I’d say she was bitten by a snake, and the only thing you can do in

that case is to wait until the body has fully dissipated the venom.” She shrugged nonchalantly.

“That doesn’t explain why she is still unconscious, Healer,” Rayza confronted her. “Or why she is blocking us. To my knowledge, one only does that when in mortal danger and an enemy is nearby. What’s your explanation for that?”

“Blocking you? Surely you are mistaken, Master Hashisin – she doesn’t have that kind of power,” she stated with authority. “The girl would have to be a Warrior to be able to do that. That’s absurd!”

“You think? Be my guest and try to examine her, then” he scoffed.

Jaza glared at the harsh brute and went in the direction of the bed, suddenly coming to a halt at his side.

“But that’s impossible...it’s like a wall,” she stammered, raising her hands as if to touch it.

“However, I can’t do anything about that, I’m afraid. I don’t know how to circumvent that. Something must have indeed triggered her survival instinct; and it will protect her at all costs,” the Healer murmured absent-minded. “From all I’ve heard, we will have to wait until she is good and ready to wake up.” Shrugging helplessly, she turned to the maid. “How long has she been that way?”

“I don’t know, Mistress Jaza. She appeared the same as usual yesterday evening: fast asleep. I didn’t realize anything was wrong – I’m sorry,” the woman apologized with fear in her voice.

“Yesterday? Didn’t you look after her today?” Kara asked, disbelieving.

“No, my liege. I had kitchen duty all day, and Consul Alhar said it would suffice once a day after my duties,” the servant said, looking at the man for support.

Alhar’s face turned scarlet, and he hurried to explain his order.

“Well, it wasn’t as if she needed the constant supervision while sleeping. And I could hardly justify the servant idly sitting around all day when all the others had to work, now could I? I would have had a mutiny on my hands!”

“We can’t just let her lie here and do nothing! So, what we are going to do now?” Kara asked the Healer and his Consul.

“It’s like I said: there is nothing to do. If you want I can ask someone to stay with her, but what would be the point considering they can’t go near her?” Jaza replied.

“Then I will watch over her,” Rayza suddenly announced. “I will stay with her until she is well again. That way you won’t have to withdraw someone else from their duties.”

“That would indeed be convenient. But I thought you have an assignment?” Kara asked.

“Nothing that can’t wait for a few days. It’s all about priorities, Kara.” Rayza shot him a look full of contempt. “Consider it compensation for my absence the last two years, Brother.”

“How gracious of you, my dear,” Kara scoffed. “Let’s call it a night, then. Do you need anything, Warrior? Your things, a bed, anything?”

“Nothing, thank you. What I really want though is an answer as to what has happened – can you take care of that?”

“Of course. I will get to the bottom of it – tomorrow. I’m too exhausted now to perform an extraction,” Kara yawned. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call on me. Sleep well.”

Nodding at his brother and motioned to the others to follow him.

As the group went back to the study tent, Kara thought about the evening’s revelations. He was aware that Rayza thought him willfully blind to reality, but that wasn’t true. He knew that his people had tried to keep a secret from him, and he would bet his horse that he wouldn’t like it one bit. But he deserved a full night of sleep after his arduous journey, he thought defiantly. In the morning, he would call Alhar, Tarek, and Jaza, and get the full story. If not, he could always use the Gift and bring the truth to light; but like he had said, the process was exhausting and most often he saw more than he wanted or needed to. The Gift of Omniscience meant that literally everything was shown to him, and, if he so wanted, to others, too; nothing, not even one’s most coveted secrets were private anymore. Not something he would like to do to his friends or family. But first things first.

“Tarek, you will go straight to bed when we are back. Alhar, you are dismissed, too. Jaza, you go back to your duties. I will await you in my tent at ten. By then, I hope you have an explanation for me, or I will be forced to use my Gift on you. I wouldn’t like it, mind you,” he said after seeing their shocked expressions, “but I would do so without a qualm. Because the alternative is the Hashisin questioning you and I can promise you’ll like that even less.”

He stopped in front of his tent and bid the others good night, and, after watching them leave, he went straight to bed.

Back in his tent, Tarek changed into his night clothes and went to bed. But sleep evaded him. He didn't seem to be able to stop thinking about the wall his sister had supposedly created. How cool was that? Maybe his Hashisin uncle would teach him the trick after he was done with his sister. Why the man wanted to waste his time watching over a sleeping girl, was beyond him. As he wondered about that, his eyes closed, and he dreamed about stone walls and power.

Alhar brought Tarek to his tent and then turned in. He thought about the up-coming questioning in the morning. Perhaps he should have told his Regent the truth at the first mentioning of the girl, but if it hadn't been for the Hashisin, Kara would have been happy with his evasive answers. It wasn't as if the man had any real interest in the girl.

But they would have to come clean come tomorrow. Tarek would never outright lie to his uncle – it wasn't his nature –, and the healer wasn't happy with the whole thing to begin with; it was a wonder that she hadn't ratted them out yet. Sure that he would be able to come up with something to dissolve the Regent's anger, he fell into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 7

After Rayza had come back from his guest tent with his things and had checked on his horse for a last time, he tried to get comfortable in the girl's small space, but her, aggressive energy kept bothering him. Like he had told Kara, that kind of block was an inbuilt survival mechanism of injured Warriors – *in a hostile environment*. So, who was the enemy? Him, he could understand. He was a virtual stranger to the girl. Kara, Tarek and Alhar, however? Not so much, unless they had been present when she got hurt; but that didn't make any sense. And that she didn't allow the Healer near her, gave cause for concern – either the girl was on the verge of dying, or the woman posed a threat.

Things were getting stranger and stranger by the minute, he thought puzzled. Moreover, if the block really was what he thought it was, it implied the scaring possibility of her having a Talent of Protection. And that was unheard of. Eons ago there had apparently been female Warriors – in the Great Wars where their unique strengths needed and appreciated. But they lived in relative peace now, so...no. Surely, they would have realized it if the girl had inherited her father's Talent, wouldn't they?

Since he couldn't sleep anyway, he tried to talk her again hoping she might grow comfortable enough in his presence to drop the wall. So he spoke to her in a soft, soothing voice.

"Amadri, it's me, Rayza. I don't know if you remember me, but I am your father's youngest brother. I was on his Guard and I was away a lot back then. I travelled the lands to gather information, you know; to get a feel for the mood of the people, so that we could ensure that they were happy and less likely to revolt."

He snorted.

"Excellent job I did. I was so focused on the population in general that I failed to see the danger so close to home."

Rayza took a deep breath to calm his emotions. The hurtful memory of how he hadn't been able to protect his brother weighed heavily on his heart. In the darkness, with no one



to witness his weakness, he couldn't hold in his pain anymore. The words he had refused to voice for two years just spilled out of him now.

"I am sorry, Princess. I am so, so sorry that I couldn't keep your parents alive for you. I am sorry that you have to grow up without their love and guidance, all because I didn't recognize Benali's true nature." Rayza's voice broke with despair and misery. "I am sorry I failed you."

He was ashamed of himself, but he thought that perhaps it was time to act like a man instead of a coward and face his demons.

"And since we are in the middle of a heart-to-heart here, I am sorry that I just upped and left and abandoned you that night. My only excuse is that I couldn't deal with the loss then, and that I had to make sure the bastard paid for what he did. But don't you know it, the rat managed to escape and rumors have it that he is now working as a mercenary in Iquis. I tried to track him down some time ago, but he conveniently disappeared shortly before I happened to find his base. But what can you expect from a coward like that? He was never one to own up to his action, now was he?" Rayza spit out in a bitter tone.

He still couldn't believe that he failed to find the traitor; it smarted, badly. There he was considered one of the best in his field, always finding his mark, and yet Benali had gotten away. However, one day the arrogant bastard would get careless, and then, Rayza would retaliate in kind, as he had sworn to do standing over his brother's dead body.

"Anyway," he said, "I promise I'll find him one day. He won't go unpunished for his crimes. A poor substitute for your parents, I know, but it's all I can give you. That, and saying sorry once again."

He sat on his mat on the floor, lost in his thoughts, when he suddenly felt a change of the energy in the air. Since the girl still lay there unmoving, he focused on her power instead. Closing his eyes, he drew his own power forward which showed itself in its usual jet-black color. He pushed it out towards the girl's wall, and at the contact, he was able to see at last.

Her power was incredible: the colors that of the Night, black too tame a word for it; it reminded him of a night sky devoid of stars. Somehow it seemed to absorb every particle of light around it, leaving only absolute darkness behind. Eclipse, he thought.

He had never seen something like that; had only ever read about it in books dealing with the creation of the four kingdoms and the kings of old. Apparently the strongest Elementars of any kind had either a blinding white manifestation of their power or an

absolute pitch-black one, depending on the owner's element. Earth, Wind and Water were bright as the sun, their ruler being Sol; Fire being ruled by Nyx, showed itself as absolute darkness. But that strength came at a price. Due to the vast amount of raw power they held at all times, they gradually lost their humanity to the point where they had no empathy or sympathy for ordinary men anymore. It was said that most died at some point, because they couldn't hold the increasing power only the Gods were meant to wield, its blinding white blaze devoid of any colorful human tinge.

To avoid that, the Royals of every line were forced to live a significant time with their people in order to create bonds that would anchor them should their power ever become too much. Every obligation, every emotional commitment or any significant relationship could act as such and would absorb part of their energy, holding the level even. Without those bonds, Elementars were likely to be overwhelmed by their power and die a brutal death.

Considering that, Rayza wondered what had happened to the girl that she exhibited such power all of a sudden when she was deemed weak. Maybe the Healer and the Masters had mistaken the darkness in her as absence of power due to their misconceptions. Anyway, his niece was certainly no Esendri and never had been.

He tried to see if he could get a 'feel' for her power to maneuver through it to find the girl behind. Rayza focused his power and willed it to interweave with his niece's; a difficult task, seeing that he could hardly discern his own black energy from her surprisingly even darker one. A black-on-black puzzle – Nyx sure had a good laugh about that somewhere, he thought morosely.

Finally, he did it though and managed to navigate a strand of his energy through the whirling black mass. After some time he reached her core and immediately felt calmness around him instead of aggression. It was a serene place, but he couldn't shake the feeling of being assessed – and going to be attacked should he not get approved of. It was as if there was something lurking in the shadow, watching, waiting for him to make a wrong move.

Rayza looked around cautiously to find a trace of his niece. He called out to her.

"Amadri, where are you? Please, I just...want to talk to you, okay? Come on, little girl. I need you to come back!"

At first, he heard or saw nothing, but then he noticed a movement somewhere to his left.

“Baby girl? Can you hear me?”

Again, a slight wavering in the energy; there in the back, hiding in a dark corner, he could suddenly sense something – or someone. Tentatively he started out in the presence’s direction. As he got closer, he felt it backing deeper into the shadows.

“Go away. Leave me be,” he heard a quiet, weak whisper in his mind.

Thank Nyx, she was talking to him on the psychic plane at least.

“Oh sweetheart, I can’t do that... You’ve been here way too long now. I need you to open your eyes and join the living again,” he said soothingly, his relief palpable.

“No!” she suddenly screamed, the sound blasting through his body almost knocking him over in its fierceness.

“Yes! You have to! How can I help you otherwise?” he asked bewildered and shocked by so much aggression.

“No.” The reply was softer, the voice broken and desperate. “Pain, so much pain...”

“What pain, Amadri? Your body is healed from what I saw. The venom, or whatever it was, is through, I promise!” he pleaded.

“Lies, all lies...it burns, so badly. All over. So many bites; so much pain.” She paused and then declared with quiet strength, “No, I am not going back. There’s no pain here, no evil – only peace. So, go away and leave me be.”

“I know it hurt, but I promise it’s over now. Do you hear me? It’s over!” Rayza tried to reassure her. “And it’s not just me who wants you back – Tarek and Kara are waiting for you, too.”

“Let them; it’s not like they really want me here.” the girl answered, her voice void of emotions.

“That’s not true, girl! They care for you deeply. Even if they don’t show it much on the outside.”

“Things are not always what they look like, Uncle.” A pause. “You of all people should know that, don’t you think?” she said, bitterness seeping from her.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his guard immediately up at the words.

“You *are* a Hashisin, aren’t you?”

“You know?”

“Duh. Of course, I do. I know exactly who you are, *Hradshin Brean*. That’s what you are called, isn’t it? *Onyx spirit?*” she replied in a cold, emotionless voice, proving that she knew more than should be possible in any way.

He was stunned. Only other Hashisins were privy to his Warrior name; they were the only ones to understand it as it was in Elhrasin, the old language of the High Court. Some of his closest friends – Warrior or not – called him Onyx: not because they knew his name, but because of his almost black eyes.

“Anyway, that thing about you being sorry? Do you like carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?” she asked mockingly, her words well beyond what could be expected of someone her age.

Rayza blinked.

“Excuse me?”

“What?”

He sensed her shrug and shook his head.

“You aren’t omniscient, and you didn’t bury the dagger in your King’s back. So why do you feel so guilty about it? It wasn’t yours! Plus, you helped saving us kids and even went back to find the Traitor.”

The girl muttered a few very creative choice words that left no doubt about her feelings concerning that particular human being. If you could call him that.

“You see, no need to feel guilty,” she said. “You’ve already made up for it – with interest.”

“You couldn’t possibly understand...” he argued, suddenly on the defensive.

“Oh, I understand perfectly well. Never doubt that. But contrary to you, I can’t just up and leave if it gets too much, now can I? I have to stay and deal with it somehow, whether I want to or not!” the girl stated agitated. “But do hear me whining like a baby?”

“Whining? *Whining?* I’m most definitely *not* whining. Ever.”

Hashisins didn’t whine, complain, or anything else unmanly; crying was for the weak. Pouting, he retaliated in kind.

“If anyone here is on a woe-is-me trip, it’s you. I’m not the one to refuse to come back and deal with life.” Ha, he thought, that would teach her to call him a ninny. “And what’s this I heard about you not talking? Not that you have ever been a chatterbox, little one, but I know for a fact that you are well able to!”

Though starting out rather calm, his voice was getting louder by the second. The girl sure knew how to push every button he had. Maybe her refusal to talk was a blessing in disguise, he thought, disgruntled.

“Yeah, about that. Even if I wanted to, Master Barin made me promise to keep quiet that night and just talk when asked to, and *only* to a member of the Guard or a Hashisin I’m familiar with.”

Rayza was flabbergasted. The Captain of the Royal Guard had managed to bind her? Damn, that was unexpected.

“Barin bound and never released you? That’s not good; not at all,” he muttered. “Why didn’t you tell the Healer? Or show her at least? She could have dissolved the bond and everything would have been fine!”

He couldn’t believe it. Of course, it had been a good thing for Master Barin to bind her considering they were on the run, but it wasn’t like him to forget something as vital as releasing her afterwards. The only explanation was that the man hadn’t realized what he had done. Either he had used too much power in the heat of the moment, or he hadn’t taken the girl’s nature into account, because every promise bound you to its fulfillment – the more powerful the Elementar, the more powerful the bond. And that was especially so for Idris, who generally tended to shy away from every sort of commitment and would rather jump from a mountain than commit to something light-heartedly.

“And what do you mean, you don’t *want* to?” he asked incredulously.

“What would be the point if there is no one to listen, anyway?” Again a shrug. “Whatever you think, I’m as much an outsider here as I was in Pyras. But back home, everyone at least treated me some kind of respect; here, I’m just the freak they can’t get rid of,” she said.

“Yeah, I heard about the freak thing,” he murmured. “But I thought it referred to your ‘non-abilities’?”

“Non-abilities, that’s a nice euphemism,” she scoffed. “Useless, that’s more to the point.”

“You are not useless, girl, and you never have been.”

“Whatever,” she disregarded his statement. “But since I don’t seem to have a Talent, the Esendris’ quarter appears reasonable, don’t you think? At least then, I would be left alone,” she muttered.

“Leave you alone? Explain that, would you? If they don’t treat you right, why didn’t you get Kara or Tarek to take care of it for you?”

“The Regent knows and he does his best. I got my guard, Kalani, for that exact reason: he is supposed to keep me safe,” she explained. “As for Tarek, my brother isn’t very interested in me – never has been actually –, and he would appreciate it if I was out of his hair. He prefers to ignore me if possible – not surprising given that he is ashamed of me.”

“Ashamed of you?” Rayza repeated, sounding more and more like a parrot.

Every bit of information he got from her made him wonder what was going on here. He had never heard someone speaking so matter-of-factly about being neglected, nor had he ever seen such disregard for someone by their own family. It was time to get to the heart of the matter.

“Well, that whole thing can wait for later when we can talk face-to-face.” He took a breath. “Now, I would like to know what happened. Please.”

“Didn’t they tell you? With them caring so much about me and all?” she sneered.

“I want to hear it from you, baby girl, not them.”

“So they didn’t tell you shit. Go figure.”

“Mind your language, Sheba Timaris An-Pyr! What’s the deal?”

## Chapter 8

Sheba was shocked. This was the first time in two years she had heard someone using her given name. When she had first heard Rayza enter the tent and felt his energy, something akin to joy had spread in her heart. But his attempt at touching her had sent her right into a panic again. The memory of the overwhelming agony of the trial and the Fire snake's numerous bites were debilitating.

After she had passed out, her mind had retreated into her soul, hiding deep in the core of her power where there was no pain or hurt. It had been the only way to stay sane and not lose her mind. She had managed to connect with the energy of the world around her, and had let herself be comforted by it while her power had tried to mend what was broken. But for all its efforts, she knew something had invariantly changed – her soul radiating like a brilliant charcoal diamond in the sun. The venom had done its job, had purged her soul to the extent that she had had a hard time holding on to her humanity in the process.

When she had first woken up in her inner sanctuary, she had felt a serene clarity, seeing the world around her with new eyes. There were no morals, no memories, no pain; only an awareness of action and consequence, a sense of the balance that kept their world in order. It had taken extreme effort to find herself again, to remember who she was before. The voices of the Healer and the servants had helped her to remember that she was indeed a ten year old girl with an actual body; and thanks to Jaza's constant reference to her as "the girl", her innate defiance had brought back the memory of her name at last. With that, everything else had come back to her: her parents, her brother, her home.

To her surprise, she actually remembered Rayza quite well, more than he would probably be comfortable with. One day he had gotten into a huge fight with her father on her behalf, accusing him of ignoring her in favor of Tarek; and if he could please spend time with her like he used to or at least get her a teacher, so that she wouldn't 'stalk' the Guard

all the time. Not that they really minded her, but the unanimous opinion was that Warrior practice and tactics discussions were not suitable for a little girl, princess or not.

The King had just laughed and told his brother to calm the hell down, amused that a bunch of hardened soldiers were put out because of his little slip of a daughter. But the next week she'd had a teacher and afternoon lessons with the housekeeper. Apparently her mother had heard about the 'advice' and told her husband it was time to properly educate her.

However, she had still got time to follow the Hashisin around in the morning. Her favorite had been Master Barin, the man always taking some time to explain things to her. If it weren't for him, she would know squat about the history of Quiliaris, the Hashisins and the Gods. And he had never ratted her out to her parents when he had seen her on the lookout late at night when she couldn't sleep, which had been almost always, her Idris nature letting her seek the solitude and the silence of the night. Those had been her happiest times: out on the balustrade, her robe swaying in the gentle breeze, with no one around. Barin had given that to her and for that she would always be grateful. Here at the camp, she didn't have that. As a result, she barely got out at night anymore and it had dampened her spirit. The dunes were no substitute for the stunning view of the last lands of the desert like the one she had had in Pyras.

"Amadri, would you focus and please answer me? What is it with you people here that you refuse to give a direct answer to a simple question?" Rayza suddenly said, startling her.

"Oh, sorry, I was just...astonished that you would know my name. It brought back some memories, that's all." She shrugged apologetically.

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked, utterly confused.

"It's just that I haven't heard it in a very long time." She paused for a moment.

"Anyway, back to what happened. It isn't as simple as you make it out to be – and it depends on what you want. Short version or long: which do you prefer?"

"I'll take the short version in the hopes of helping me understand the apparent complexity of the situation. So dish!" he said in exasperation.

"Well, then, here it is in a nutshell: the cook accused me of theft and cowardice, for which the crowd wanted to burn me; after a short unsatisfying investigation including an accusation of the Consul's son, Alhar and the mob decided per vote that in absence of the



Regent the Bite of Truth would do. That's how I got bitten. And believe me, it was more than once since the snake was amped up from the people's hatred," she said, her anger obvious. "Eventually I passed out, but only after I heard my brother – who was in favor of the judgment, by the way – screaming in agony. I have been here ever since. From what I've picked up in the infirmary, Safi Alhar was involved, too. Apparently his lie was meant to be a harmless prank, or rather revenge for me smearing him with curcuma after he had insulted me." She paused and muttered disgruntled, "Are you happy now?"

Rayza said nothing for a long time. He really, really hoped that what she had said was not the truth.

"They used the Bite on you? On a child?" That was unheard of, he thought aghast.

"Why? Why would they do that? For Nyx's sake, what were you accused of stealing that would warrant such a punishment?" he asked, keeping his tone carefully neutral to not betray his emotions.

"Fruits for the welcome dinner: red star apples and some sun fruits, to be exact. Because the cook found me eating an apple, she readily assumed it was me. And Safi had conveniently mentioned that he saw me eating a sun fruit. Do the math!"

"But even so, why wouldn't they just ground you or give you kitchen duty when all the proof they had was based on circumstantial evidence?"

He just didn't get it; what the hell had they been thinking?

"Like I said, it's not like they want me here nor have great respect for me. I'm useless and a disgrace to the House of Pyr, remember?"

"But, but...what about your brother? Surely he had argued in your favor? They listen to him, don't they? Especially if he was involved like you claim?"

"Oh he was involved, all right. After all the Bite doesn't lie; that's why they used it in the first place. He did try to help me by telling them that I would never steal a sun fruit though. But..."

"What did he say when he came to visit you? What explanation did he have for his behavior?" Rayza asked, grasping at a straw.

"I can't answer that; he never came to see me. But I'm pretty certain though that he was occupied with kitchen duty, Alhar's favorite punishment for him."

Rayza was silent again.

At last, he admitted, "I don't know what to say. I just can't get my head around that." He shook his head for emphasis. "I'm sorry, but I need to hear their version of events; this is too unbelievable. Kara promised the truth for tomorrow morning, using the Gift if necessary. I...I just can't believe that your brother, or the people here for that matter, would do that. Maybe your memory is faulty, befuddled by the venom in your blood?"

It couldn't be true, could it? His brother would never tolerate such behavior towards one of Maris' children. At least that was what he hoped.

"You don't believe me," Sheba stated offended. "But you wanted an answer and got it. It's not my fault the truth isn't to your liking."

"Tomorrow morning I'll know for sure, and if what you said is true, then..."

If he was honest, he didn't know what to do then. A change of topic was desperately needed.

"Well, then. How about you drop your shield and wake up? And let me release that infernal bond?"

"No. I refuse to relive that pain all over again. Do I really need to be awake for you to dissolve the bond?" she asked, letting him change the topic because she realized the nature of his thoughts. However, it didn't change anything; her uncle's hope was in vain.

"Yes, you have to, because it affects your body, not your mind."

"I'll need to think about it. But, I will drop my shield for you. I don't think you'll harm me, but don't touch me if you want to remain safe and sound. I don't tolerate others touching me well at the best of times, and I'm pretty sure I can't handle it right now with my power in control. Come to think of it, you can check for the other bite marks to conform at least that part of my story."

"I can't say that I like your decision, but I'm a pragmatic person. So, yes – we have a deal."

Focusing on her power, Sheba gave the command to lower her defense. Slowly her energy drew back and the air around her cleared. She felt Rayza standing up and approaching her. When he bent down and took the blanket away, she struggled to keep her power in check. Mumbling encouraging words and praising her efforts, he went on to

disrobe her. Reluctantly he touched her dirty robe, which was full of dried stains of rotten vegetables. After he had uncovered her upper body and her legs, she felt him getting predator-still. Well, she had a good idea of what he saw.

“*Shit.*”

The shocked comment made her chuckle. Sheba sensed him raising his hand as if to touch her, but he stopped a few inches above her skin.

“There are at least twenty bites. *Twenty*. That fucking snake had to be frenzied to bite you like that,” he murmured dumbfounded.

And why had no one bothered to change her robes, he wondered briefly, trying his best to ignore the slightly foul smell of her clothes.

“How the hell did you survive that? And how did Tarek?” he asked, aghast.

For all he knew, the highest number of bites anyone had ever survived was four. She was a fucking miracle, he thought. Or the most stubborn being ever.

“Shit,” he shouted again and kicked the chest next to her bed.

“Tarek and Safi each got half of the pain, if I remember correctly,” she mentioned off-handedly.

“Ah, yes. I forgot. The pain is equally divided between all the culprits,” he said, absentminded. “No wonder you don’t want to come back. I’m not sure I would want to either.”

“Tell me why, Hradshin Brean. Give me just one good reason to come back to a world where I’m not welcomed. One damn reason,” she said in a forlorn voice.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. He needed to make that good, because he got the feeling that that was the only chance he would get to convince her to return. And he was right.

“Because you are important to this world, Sheba. Everyone and everything has a reason to be, has its place in life. You will meet someone and change their life, even if only in passing; and sometimes it is enough to just be to change the world.

You are a part of your parents’ legacy; they live on in you and your brother. Tarek and you, Sheba, are all that is left of them, and Kara and me, and every other person in the kingdom looks at you and knows that there’s hope yet. Hope that the traitor hasn’t succeeded; that the rightful King will sit on the throne of Pyras once more.”

Sheba thought about that for a long time. It was true, she was her parents' daughter – but certainly not their legacy; everything she was she had had to become on her own.

“That’s not good enough. It’s Tarek who gives them hope, not me. Nothing of what you’ve said really matters to me. All this talk about me being a legacy of someone is nothing but a load of crap. No word about me as a human being – not a one! And if someone’s daughter is all I’ll ever be, it seems that staying put is the better option. I am done with being nothing more than an obligation you can’t get rid of, done with being a bargaining chip...I am done!” she shouted enraged, her voice echoing in the silence of her core.

“Stop it, Sheba!” Rayza shouted back. “No one thinks of you in that way, so don’t let your anger speak. And don’t you belittle your parents! They have brought into this world and they cared for you the best they could. Furthermore, a lot people, including me, put themselves at risk to ensure that you got the chance to grow up and not be buried next to your father and mother! So don’t you dare talking ill about them! You will honor the dead as is their right! Got that, you ungrateful little chit?” he spit at her, his wrath now in full force after her words.

In response, Sheba exploded. She drew on her energy and fed it her anger, indignation, and disappointment until her obsidian power was laced with the vicious crimson of violent emotions. She hurled a Fire ball straight at Rayza’s chest, and in the next moment she felt him flying through the tent and hoped with all her heart that he hurt – the same way she had hurt four days ago; or the day her father had abandoned her; or the day she had to witness his murder, or every other time someone broke her heart.

“You little bitch!” Rayza shouted enraged while he picked himself up.

Sheba sensed him preparing for retaliation, and in that moment she decided that no matter how much it hurt that she needed to wake up. Now. She would *never* be defenseless again, and as long as she was unconscious her body was vulnerable.

So she focused and made her way back into the land of the living. She opened her eyes, and in a graceful cat-like move defying the soreness of her body she flowed to her feet, raised her hands in front of her and shouted in a raspy, unused voice, “No!”, stopping Rayza dead in his tracks.

“Don’t you dare attack me when I’m lying defenseless before you! Don’t you dare!” she warned him in low dangerous tone.

It took Rayza a moment to understand what he was seeing. He just stood there, frozen, and looked at suddenly upright niece. One minute, she had been lying on her bed, motionless, and the next, she was standing in front of him, ready for battle. He blinked, and then reined in his power. She was right; he *had* been on the verge of attacking her. Hot damn, he thought stunned and a little proud, that girl sure had a temper when provoked. What surprised him even more was her refusal to back down. He knew that she knew that he wasn't only stronger but more skilled, and still she faced him unafraid. *Impressive*. If she were a boy, she would certainly be Hashisin material.

Holding his hands out in a submissive gesture, he said evenly, "Calm down, Sheba. Everything is fine. See, no power." A pause. "Sorry for that, but a counter strike is second nature to me. I didn't actually want to hurt to."

He tilted his head and carefully observed her reactions.

"Are we good?"

The girl slowly lowered her arms, and he felt her power withdrawing, if not totally disappear. *Smart little minx*.

"Don't do that again," he heard her in his mind.

"I can't promise that, Amadri, but I'll try."

He watched her thinking and then nod.

"So, now that you are back with the living, how about I dissolve that annoying bond? So we can talk for real?"

"Does it hurt?" she wanted to know.

"No, but I need to blood bond with you first. Are you okay with that?"

"Blood bond?"

She went very still. Then she angled her head and showed once again how keen a mind she had.

"What are the effects of such a bond, other than allowing you to connect with me? Does it entail some sort of a leash, you know, something to control me with?"

"No, it doesn't. But it would allow me to 'feel' you and to speak with you like we do now. The only reason we can do that now is because we are Idris and family. But it gets exhausting to maintain, whereas the blood bond works as a constant conduit in such a case.

The Healer would be able to do it without a bond, but I don't know if that woman has the power to navigate your darkness, to be honest. She is Naru, isn't she?"

Sheba nodded.

"Well, it's certainly more difficult for them. So?"

"I don't think that I want Jaza wandering around in here. She might not be as hostile as the others, but she isn't fond of me, either. It's why I avoid the infirmary, if possible. But one last question: how long will this bond last?"

"As long as we have need for it. This type of bond dissolves when not warranted or needed anymore or if trust has been broken. The same way the Healers at Pyras blocked the bond between Tarek and you when you were little."

That reminded him of what Tarek had said about the bond the twins shared.

"By the way, why don't you let the healer get your and Tarek's bond into working order again? He said it doesn't work properly."

"Interesting thing for him to say, because my bond to him does work," she answered thoughtful. "As for the other one, if you sure it won't be permanent, let's do it," she gave in at last. "It sure would be nice to be able to talk if I actually want to say something, for a change."

"Come on, then. Time's a wasting!"

"Well, I'm ready when you are."

"Excellent. Give me your hand."

He took his small ritual dagger out of his bag and tested its sharpness.

"Um, what do you think are you doing with that blade?" Sheba asked, eyeing him warily.

"Duh, what do you think? And here I thought the term 'blood bond' was self-explanatory."

Without warning, he lunged forward and grabbed Sheba's hand, ran the blade over her palm and drew blood. He repeated the same motion on his hand and then pressed their wounds together.

"What are you doi...!" Sheba gasped.

But it was too late; the bond had already come to life. Rayza staggered under the force of her power when it flew into him, and Sheba's eyes widened.

"Damn," she said, shocked.

Rayza had to agree with her choice of words here. Slowly he felt the bond settle itself in his core and curiously he closed his eyes. It was an amazing sight to behold: a shimmering white-gold stream of pure energy. He crossed it and found himself in her inner sanctuary once again.

"I look for Barin's bond now, okay?" he informed her and searched until he found the tell-tale imprint of Barin's energy, a golden Ouroboros. "I've found it, Amadri. Now relax and try to keep still. It should only take a few minutes, all right?"

"Yeah, okay. Relax," she muttered, "I can do that."

Rayza heard her take a deep breath and shifting her stance. Concentrating on the bond again, he slowly pushed his own power into it until the Ouroboros started to glow. He pushed more and more energy into it, finally causing the imprint to burn. He saw a short vision of the time that the bond was made, confirming the girl's story. As Rayza's power burned through the mark, the vision evaporated.

"I'm done."

He opened his eyes and looked at the Sheba, who was standing there, frozen.

"Talk to me, Amadri."

She swallowed and he heard her whispering, "Damn, that hurts. Water?"

He searched for a glass and gave it to her. Parched, she drank it in big gulps. She tried to talk again, louder this time.

"By Nyx, this is weird. How do I sound to you? Because I can't say I recognize this voice of mine. That will take some time to get used to," she said slowly, astounded.

"You sound good. A bit raspy and hoarse, but that will vanish shortly. Maybe your voice has changed over the last two years, like you have grown, too."

Grateful that at least that problem was solved, he added, "The others will be pleased when I tell them. You'll see, your life is going to change for the better now that they can have an actual conversation with you. No more accusing you of something without you being able to defend yourself."

"I wouldn't bet on it," she muttered under her breath.

Aloud she said, "But could you do me a favor and not tell them immediately tomorrow? I want to surprise them."

“If that’s what you want, then I’ll keep my mouth shut,” Rayza promised her, glad to be of help in any way he could. “So, want to bring me up to date on camp stuff? You know, information is vital.” he grinned.

“You’re a gossip!” Sheba exclaimed amused and slightly disgusted.

“It’s information broker, I’ll have you know.”

“Semantics!”

“What can I say – occupational hazard.” He shrugged, unapologetic. “Now, tell me!”



## Chapter 9

The next morning came fast. After her chat with her uncle – she still couldn't believe she was able to talk again – Sheba woke up after a three hour nap and first took inventory of her body. Yes, she still hurt, but she could deal – the soreness would eventually go away, leaving only a faint memory of the gruesome experience behind. However, her voice was a different matter: it still sounded strange. Two years were a long time to go without, she thought. She was surprised how raspy it was, nothing like the clear bright voice of other children. Maybe her voice was as broken as she was inside. Memories came back with that thought, and immediately she pushed them back in the darkest, deepest abyss of her mind she could find. Some things were better left alone.

She found herself hungry as evidenced by her growling stomach, meaning she really was alive and on the mend. Lucky me, she thought sarcastically. Sitting up, she saw Rayza lying on the floor on some kind of mat. She got up on silent feet and searched for something edible. On her little table she found a five day old slice of bread, rock-hard by now, and her bag which contained one single shriveled carrot. Great, she thought disappointed; still it was better than nothing. Sheba took a bite of the Samani and swallowed it with water, repeating the motion until everything was down. Then she concentrated on the carrot. *Ugh*. Because of the dryness and the moldy taste of it, she had to force herself to keep her meager meal down. *Disgusting*.

Since the Hashisin was still sleeping, Sheba decided to use her time wisely and change her attire. She opened her chest and took out her rarely used spare set of clothes. Her other clothes were in dire need of some soap and repairs; well, she would concentrate on that later.

She disrobed and looked critically at the scarlet pants and tunic, and the black robe. The last time she had worn those clothes had been two years ago; they were likely to be on the short side. But beggars can't be choosers, so she put them on. Hm, not too short, but definitely too tight; it seemed she had filled out a bit, muscle-wise. Go figure, she thought,

thinking about her hikes up the dunes and her stable work. She might be tall and willowy, but she had strength. Not that anyone had ever noticed.

She looked for her boots and found them in the corner; at least someone had bothered to bring them. She put them on, too, and immediately remembered why she didn't like to wear them. Like her clothes, they didn't fit properly anymore. She would have to ask for new one eventually; she just hoped she didn't have to do kitchen work again in exchange for them. Kara thought it was good for her if she learned the way of things early on to keep her humble and demonstrate to her how blessed she was. Basically, she agreed with the Regent, but funny how Tarek didn't have to do anything other than ask to get something new – if he even had to, because he had his own servant to take care of such things. Not for the first time she asked herself why she had had to be born a woman. Her life certainly could and would have been much easier as a man. But like Rayza had said, everyone seemed to have a purpose in life, so she had to believe she had one, too – whatever it was.

While pondering the injustice of all that, she braided her hip-long jet-black hair, which was the only thing apart from her eyes that she was proud of. Although some thought her eyes 'weird' because of their unusual deep blue hue, she cherished them; they had been her father's, too. And in combination with her hair and the Fire people's formal scarlet robe, they really looked stunning, she thought. Then she sat back on her bed and waited for her uncle to rise.

As the first sun beam reached inside the tent, the Hashisin finally woke. Outside, the servants could be heard bustling around and the smell of breakfast permeated the air. She watched as he stretched and got up in a fluent, effortless move without making a sound. He took fresh clothes out of his bag and dressed the way Warriors did, pants and boots first, then tunic and robe, and lastly, he strapped on his impressive Hashisin long sword as well as several daggers and throwing blades. She briefly wondered how he managed to stand upright with that much additional weight.

Suddenly, he looked up and said with surprise in his voice, "Good morning, little one."

"Good morning to you, too, sleepyhead," Sheba answered smiling.

He raised his brow and looked at her questioningly. "Sleepyhead? It's barely half past five in the morning!"

“Well, I have been up for at least half an hour. Are you ready to go? Because I’m starving,” she said impatiently.

“That’s what woke me up: the smell of fried bacon, coffee and fresh bread. Let’s go, little brat,” Rayza said to her affectionately, remembering at the very last second not to ruffle her hair as would fell natural.

Side by side they left the tent and followed the heavenly smell.

When they reached the public dining tent, no one was present except for a few soldiers, including her guard. Most looked up and then stared at her unabashedly; Kalani, who had had his back to her while refilling his coffee, turned a moment later and eyed her up. Sheba calmly stared back, thinking that he wouldn’t be pleased to have her up and running again, because he sure didn’t like babysitting duty one bit.

As she waited for him to acknowledge her, his eyes briefly betrayed his resentment, but then he noticed the big Warrior next to her. The guard looked him over, and she knew exactly when he realized that he was dealing with a Hashisin, and a royal one at that. He eyed him warily but then greeted him with reverence.

“Good morning, Master Hashisin. I’m Kalani, a member of the Regent’s Guard.”

At Rayza’s blank expression, the man went on. “Sir, if you want to practice after breakfast, please don’t hesitate to ask one of the soldiers for directions. Everyone will be happy to accompany you to the training area, as it is quite hidden.”

“Thank you for your kind offer. I have a meeting after breakfast, but then I would very much like to train. But I’m sure my niece can show me the way, so I don’t have to disturb duty,” Rayza said in a polite but dismissive tone.

“Ah, yes, of course, your Highness.”

At last, Kalani deigned to address his Princess.

“Good morning, girl. I take it, you don’t need my services today?”

Sheba looked at Rayza and decided to try their new blood bond.

“What do you think, do I need him or will you let me tag along?” she asked, sending the thought into his mind through their bond.

Rayza didn’t blink or anything else to betray that he had apprehended her. But then, she suddenly heard his answer in her head.

“He doesn’t like you much, does he? Or is he generally an insensitive jerk that lacks compassion?”

“A bit of both, I’d say. He isn’t the most empathic man there is, that’s for sure. Moreover, he *really* doesn’t like babysitting duty. Me personally, he doesn’t care about one way or another.”

She paused, waiting for a response. When none came, she wanted to know, “So, what is it? Are you going to play babysitter today or not?”

“All right, you can tag along. We have that meeting at nine, which I’m sure will take time, then lunch and practice. Kara told me you watch the Warriors regularly?”

“Yes, I do. Thanks for letting me come with you,” she answered, happy that she would get to see a Hashisin dancing with his sword once again; what a treat!

Sheba focused on Kalani again. She shook her head, prompting her now smiling guard to leave immediately, lest she would change her mind. The perimeter guards at the tables feigned disinterest and concentrated on their chat, as Rayza and her filled their plates with food and prepared their drinks. It was nice to see someone else with the same eating habits as hers, and at that moment life was good.

When it was time to go, both the Hashisin and the princess got up with regret, unwilling to end their easy camaraderie. But it was time to face reality.

At Kara’s tent, the others were already waiting. Alhar, Tarek, Kalani and the Healer were noticeably subdued and wouldn’t look at either of them. Rayza took in the wary atmosphere and got a heavy feeling in his gut. What if Sheba had spoken the truth? He really hoped her account was colored by a subjective perception of events.

Looking for his brother, he found Kara sitting at the head of a table in the middle of the tent, appearing well rested but as wary as the rest. Rayza motioned for him to get the whole thing started.

Kara clapped his hands at his brother’s nod, and began the meeting.

“Good morning, everybody! I hoped everyone had a good night’s sleep?”

Without waiting for an answer he went on, “Excellent. I had time to think this morning, and here is how we will proceed: I will use my Gift to get the truth out into the open and then every one of you will get an opportunity to explain his side of the story. First, I thought to do it the other way around, but that way we will save a lot of time and breath, all things considered. Agreed?”

Kara looked at the people present and noticed Sheba for the first time.

“Well, good morning, child. How nice of you to grace us with your presence,” he said with a mix of surprise and anger. “I take it you overcame your precarious condition then? And in time, too.”

His voice dripped with sarcasm, but a tiny bit of him was curious how Rayza had achieved what Jaza had deemed impossible. Or maybe it had just been time for her to wake up. Now that he had realized her presence – the girl had an annoying habit of hiding in the shadows – he noticed the way she kept close to his brother. It was the only sign that she might not be back to her usual stubborn self, because he had never seen her turn to someone for protection, however unconscious the decision – not even when she first arrived at the camp. Oh yes, he looked forward to Rayza’s report of what had happened during the hours of the night.

The girl nodded at him and bowed with a defiant look in her eyes, mocking him in return. She didn’t even have to open her mouth to be insolent, he thought, put out; he knew that look – she was definitely up to something.

But first, he wanted to get to the bottom of what had happened. Even though his brother thought him a naïve idiot in such matters, he did know how to extract information, whatever Rayza’s belief. Unbeknownst to the others he had already used the Gift in the morning and knew what had gone down. He had decided on this ruse because he had wanted to see if his brother had been right in his judgment of his most loyal subjects. Kara hoped they would own up to their actions because otherwise he would have to punish them, and he wasn’t willing to lose his Consul, his Healer, and one of his Warriors over a little girl.

He had thought long and hard about what to do with the girl, and the only solution he had come up with was that the girl had to leave Altahir. As sad as it was, he couldn’t protect her every hour of the day, and he couldn’t be sure that he wouldn’t come back from some trip someday only to be greeted by a corpse. And though he didn’t have a lot of love for the girl, she was Maris’s daughter and he had given his promise to look after her. However, he had no idea who would take her in his stead; maybe Rayza would know where to bring her. But back to the subject at hand.

Kara leaned back and got comfortable. He was sure that he wouldn’t have to wait long for a reaction to his plan.

“Sire, I don’t think it will be necessary to use your Gift. We are well capable to give you a comprehensive report of what happened. We might have been a bit careless and certainly have underestimated the situation, but the girl is alive and well; so, no harm, no foul,” Alhar tried to reason, afraid of what the Regent might see.

Kara sensed the air becoming tense and looked at Rayza, who sported a carefully neutral expression – a sure sign that he was getting pissed off. The eruption of his brother’s volcano of a temper was not something he wanted to witness and especially not have directed at himself, as only a few ever survived to tell the tale.

“No, I have made my decision. The use of the Gift is nonnegotiable.”

Kara shrugged and hoped that that would shut up his Consul, who didn’t seem to realize the danger he was in. Even if they combined their power they wouldn’t be able to win against his brother. There was a reason for Hashisins’ notoriety.

“But, Regent, think about the cost not only for you but for us as well. Such violation of privacy is certainly not warranted in that case!” Alhar exclaimed. Then he added in a derisive tone, “The Gift is saved for criminals, not for the insignificant matters of a useless girl!”

“Whom do you call useless? That *girl* is our Princess, and you would do well to remember that she has the power to get you executed if she so wanted,” Rayza said in a dangerously cold voice, his hand already on its way to his sword. “Just because you don’t understand her doesn’t mean she is useless. The only ones in here unworthy are you lot! As far as I can tell, she has never raised her voice against anyone, she has never hurt anyone on purpose, and she has tried her best to stay out of the way. The Princess is ten years old, for goodness’ sake, and should be raising hell with her friends; instead her only ‘friends’ are horses, she doesn’t get any education beyond servant duties, and her favorite place is a dune at the perimeter!

And when was the last time she got new clothes? Because the ones she is wearing were the ones she left Pyras with! What the hell is wrong with you people that you treat an innocent child like trash, and your Princess no less?” Rayza shouted, trying very hard to hold on to his temper and not fry the presumptuous morons in front of him.

“What are you talking about? The clothes look fine, almost new,” Alhar argued, oozing with hostility and blatantly ignoring the rest of the Hashisin’s words.

“They were a present for her eighth birthday, you dimwitted bastard!” Rayza roared.

He punched a part of his excess power into the sand beneath him in an attempt to get himself under control. But the need to kill, the need to maim, didn't diminish, but increased fueled by his ire.

Suddenly, he heard Sheba's voice in his head demanding he calm down. When that didn't help, she laid a hand on his forearm and sent him waves of peace. His protective instincts rose to the fore; her touch and all it implied, prompted him to move to the side putting himself half in front of her. His focus was now on protecting her, allowing him to think again. He switched into Hashisin mode where only cold detachment ruled and regarded the others in the tent like a predator its prey.

The others had paled in the face of his rage, and Kalani instinctively positioned himself between the Regent and him. Drawing his sword, the soldier told Rayza to stand back, albeit with a shaky voice.

"Don't try and threaten me, *boy*," Rayza said in a low voice, all the more menacing for it. "You can't win here –if you even survived." A pause. "Did you forget who I am?"

Rayza visibly relaxed his stance and in a show of dominance simply stared the man down until Kalani averted his eyes.

## Chapter 10

“Soldier, put the sword away. My brother won’t harm me,” Kara ordered angrily and motioned for them to stand back. “I see that there is no reasoning with you,” he addressed the camp people. “A good thing that I have already used the Gift, considering that you lot would try and snow me.”

At that, everyone stared at the Regent in utter shock.

“The Bite of Truth, Consul? Really? You subjected a child to this, this...torture, just because you weren’t willing to wait for me to come back?” Kara asked incredulously.

“But you must have seen the mob! It was either that or her certain death. And since she remained standing throughout the whole trial, it can’t have been that bad. So, no torture here.” Alhar looked at the Regent with thinly veiled contempt. “I know you have to take her side, but stick to the truth!”

“Stick to the truth? What truth do you mean, Alhar? That the girl took at least twenty bites because the snake was as frenzied as the crowd? That your son and Tarek here only experienced half of the pain of the first bite, which sent them to their knees, screaming?” Kara shouted the last words, irate now.

He knew that Alhar had a strong dislike for his niece, but he hadn’t realized its depth.

“Maybe it would be a good idea for you to feel her pain. You realize that I can share what I saw, including emotions, don’t you?” Kara watched Alhar losing all of his self-righteousness and tugging his tail at his menacing words.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Sire,” the advisor replied in a small voice at odds with his imposing figure. He had seen his son writhing with pain and had no desire whatsoever to experience that for himself.

“What punishment did the boys get for their misdeeds, is what I want to know?” Kara said expectantly.

“Well, since they didn’t know that the fruits were meant for the Welcome dinner and didn’t mean any harm with their prank, we decided on kitchen duty for two weeks, which



the boys hate with a passion. That and the Bite's agony are punishment enough, don't you think?"

It took great effort for Alhar to hold Kara's gaze during his explanation.

"Kitchen duty?" Rayza joined in, incredulous. "Are you serious? They almost got the girl killed in their 'prank', and that's all they got?"

"What do you expect? The punishment is in accord with the deed. If you insist, I can suspend their training for the duration of their punishment, too, but anything else would hinder their development more than it would do any good."

"And what kind of compensation do they have to give her? Because your son deliberately lied to the cook and Tarek kept his mouth shut although he knew what was coming." Kara's voice was full of disgust, which let the boy hang his head in shame under his uncle's glare met his.

"Compensation? The boys already suffered their share, don't you think? What could we do to top that, hm? And if you want compensation, then I insist that everyone present at the trial has to do so as well," Alhar scoffed.

Kara pondered that, and finally, had to concede this point. But he wanted an answer to a certain question, so he addressed Tarek.

"Boy, I know that the Consul's son enjoys getting the girl in trouble, but why didn't you speak up at the trial and told them the truth?"

"Yes, Tarek, why did you let your sister hang for something she didn't do?" Rayza wanted to know.

Tarek averted his gaze under the scrutiny of the two men. He swallowed and thought about what to say. That he didn't really care and didn't think it would come to a trial surely wouldn't get him any brownie points. At last, he decided to go with some of the truth, his favorite M.O.

"Uncle, I didn't mean any harm. I thought she would get grounded and that you would clear her after your return. I never thought the crowd would get so upset as to threaten her life. It was a joke!"

He shrugged helplessly.

“Tarek, I understand that you would keep silent in the beginning; but why didn’t you say anything when Alhar asked for witnesses before he conducted the trial? I just don’t understand how you could keep your mouth shut then,” Kara said, his incomprehension clearly written on his face.

“I didn’t think it would hurt that much or that she would be out of commission for so long. The Consul wouldn’t have done it, if it was dangerous, right? And she did eat a red star apple after all, so I thought her guilty anyway.”

The boy’s total lack of care drove Rayza to crazy. He itched to take his sword and run it through the boy’s cold, uncaring heart – nephew or not. He probed Tarek’s emotions, trying to get a feel of him, and recoiled from what he found. Tarek didn’t have one ounce of remorse in him, nor did he even feel the slightest sympathy for his twin sister. There was nothing but self-interest and self-pity, blaming his sister for being the one on the spot now.

In that instant Rayza felt much of his love for Maris’ son die. The realization that the girl had spoken the truth and that she was a stranger in the midst of family broke his heart. It was obvious that Tarek had more of his mother than Rayza had realized. His sister-in-law had strongly favored the boy, willfully neglecting her daughter in the process; she even got Maris to support her position, arguing that the boy needed his father after his illness and that her darling boy certainly was more important, as he was the Heir. Apparently Tarek shared his mother’s opinion. The thought enraged him even more.

“You thought her guilty, although you knew that you had taken the fruits? Do you think us stupid, Tarek? And what do you mean the crowd threatened her life?”

Kara answered for the boy. “The crowd originally wanted to literally burn her, but eventually they decided on the Bite, because they didn’t want to get punished for unjust actions against the Royal House.”

Rayza realized his brother’s anger about that in his rigid posture and was somewhat mollified that Kara wasn’t as uncaring as the rest of the group.

“What would you have me do?” Tarek asked defiantly. “It was too late to say anything when Alhar started the trial, and they wouldn’t have believed me anyway. Moreover, I even had to suffer more than her because she simply passed out, whereas I had

to actually experience the pain. If Jaza hadn't taken care of me and Safi later on and numbed the pain, we would still hurt all over!"

At her brother's twisted, egoistical view of what had happened Rayza felt Sheba's power rising. Through their blood bond he felt it taking on a will of its own and regarding Tarek in a very predatory manner contemplating the best way to eradicate the opponent. The raised hairs in his neck drove home exactly how dangerous the girl was at the moment and how much control she had to have over her power considering Alhar, Tarek, Kalani, and Jaza were still alive.