

# THE HAWK & THE SCORPION



**MATTHEW C. McLEAN**

*A tale from Wander the World*

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A Wander the World Tale

Matthew C. McLean

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The Young look upon the Old and say, "Look at all you have."

The Old look upon the Young and say, "Look at all you could be."

-Imala Proverb

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Of the Bazaar, religious debate and how the son of the Imala chief insulted the dread Hadru'us*

From atop the mountains near the sea, the desert seemed to stretch inland for eternity. But Azza knew this not to be true. Her folk, born to the hawk, the Imala, by the grace of Amon, had been to every edge of the Erg desert in search of trade, war, or water.

Today, though, they had no cause to search for any of these. Below her on the arid mesa sprawled the Bazaar, a brief gathering of all Umayuud's desert tribes, a representation of all of the Erg's People. Each had set aside whatever grievances they might foster, had brought their water to sit down at each others' tents.

While trade was the main exchange, many had come to reacquaint with relatives long not seen, others to build new relations. Nearly all of the tribes had at least some representation there; the Imala, the Alfahl, the Scarab, the Ratel. Even the base and feared Hadru'us stood among the many tribes. Only the Bronze Men from the most northern steppes were absent.

Azza heard the morning call, sung in a high and carrying note by a blind woman of the Ghazal tribe. Knowing that the divisions between the tents would soon be filled with merchants, children, and colorful entertainers, she began her descent to the Bazaar.

The Bazaar, with its location chosen over the course of many seasons, was on solid ground and not on the shifting sands that chewed and ate their way across much of the Erg. Even so, walking down from the ridge, Azza was careful as clumps of the reddish dirt gave way under her feet. The familiar smell of offal and dung wafted up from the livestock kennels. Heading towards the Imala khiyam she was pleased to see Hadaad out before the cooking fire, smiling to her and seemingly unsurprised by her early morning constitutional.

She returned his smile. Looking upon him it was easy; he was the only one of the Bronze Men to be at this gathering. He had the strength and beauty of all of his race but had left his brothers to walk among the Imala in search of a wife. Since his arrival Azza had been the envy of many girls.

As she approached, he stood up from the fire and his smile broadened in a display of affection of which her father would never approve. His golden eyes

lingered on her, seeming to stop at the dotted diamond tattoo on her forehead. Unlike her, not born of the Imala, Hadaad had none of the tribal scars or tattoos; she had many. Her frame was marked with one for every rite of passage that had taken her through adolescence. Of the seven tattoos that marked ascendancy into adulthood, hers were six, each of these upon her left cheek, marking different phases of an ascendant Moon that rose along the curve of her eye.

In many lands outside of Umayuud, men would have looked upon her with desire, but perhaps not called her a woman. Lithe, with smooth olive skin and black hair that was radiant in the Son when not covered, she sometimes appeared younger than she was. Regardless, among the Imala and all the Ergian tribes, accession to adulthood was often a matter of necessity, not age.

"You were out early." The warmth of the desert echoed in Hadaad's voice. The temperature never appeared to bother him; between the heat of the fire and the cold of the dawn he was shirtless, easier to stay clean during the morning chores. Not for the first time Azza noted the Bronze Men were well-named. Hadaad's skin was a dusky gold color, almost a dark verdigris at his joints, stretched over muscles that never seemed to tire or age and features that sometimes appeared overly sharp in their angles. He wore his hair long to protect his face and neck from the rays of the Son when not wearing a shemagh or robe.

"Only before the morning call," Azza responded, looking away as to not stare immodestly. "Aleta wanted to feed."

"You spoil her. I have yet to feed the other hawks." He turned from her and bent back to his preparations. It would be ready soon and her duties would commence: She would take the food he had readied to feed the rest of the cast and he would tend the other livestock. "Where is she?"

"She found a hare hiding in the scrub. She'll return when she is done with it." In a land that was often sparse and demanding, the hunting hawks of the Imala were eagerly sought. By custom trained to down prey for their master, Azza had let her favorite have its fill this morning. While camped at the Bazaar, no tribe would lack for food or drink.

Hadaad turned his head and grinned at her over his shoulder, a glint of mischievousness in his eyes. "Well, better to be sure. You had best go fetch her."

Azza continued smiling, understanding the kindness he offered. Normally, for the rest of the morning she would be confined to the khiyam, tethered to her morning duties. Hadaad provided Azza an excuse to go out into the Bazaar.

Azza leaned forward, feeling something for Hadaad she couldn't quite define, but it made her feel warm deep in her chest. Was she blushing?

As if sensing her indecision, Hadaad playfully swatted at her with a stick from the fire, as a child with wooden sword might. Laughing, she danced away from him and towards the Bazaar.

The Bazaar was centered on the collection of common tents and fires, with tribal khiyams and the family tents that composed them ringing the outside. As Azza moved from the Imala khiyam into the communal area the smells in the air changed, from the emanations of the livestock to the aromas of kaffa, produce,

and spices. The noises changed as well, the grunting of the animals and the whistle of the wind replaced by the play of children, the singing of women, the dancing of their men, and the call of traders. Azza was content to wander, enjoying all of the sights and sounds.

It was not long before she found herself lost among the colorful canopies. Having grown amongst the open desert and sea-side mountains, the times were rare that she could not see a horizon. Now, surrounded on all sides by peaked tents, she found the enclosed space to be disorienting. Rather than finding this disconcerting, though, Azza let herself be infected with the glee of a child lost in a mock labyrinth. She moved from tent to trading booth to tent, touching silks, sampling dates, and gazing at finely worked jewelry or iron work.

Among all these things that were rare or new to Azza, one did surface that she recognized: The arguing of men. Following a familiar voice, she came to a crowd standing around two men at a fire, paying witness to their pious speech. To Azza's dismay her younger brother, Dalal, sat across the fire from the disputants.

The two belligerents sat, arms cloaked within voluminous robes. Their exchange was so ardent that Azza would have suspected them of hiding blades in their sleeves had they not been at the Bazaar. She glared at her brother, who hid a smirk behind his hand, watching the two debate with obvious delight.

"By Amon and his dwelling place, the horse, the animal of the Alfahl tribe, is the most beautiful creature of Umayuud," spoke the man to Dalal's right. This was Basit, one who had caused much trouble in the past by praising his tribe at the cost of others. "It has a grace that moves to speed, unlike any creature. To carry a man into battle, no other mount is its peer."

The other man quickly withdrew his hand from his sleeve, pointing at the sky to emphasize his point. Azza breathed a sigh of relief that his hand held nothing. His name was Radi and he was renowned of the Bakr tribe, famous for his skill with the long knife and his willingness to use it against any who ridiculed his beardless face. "But the camel, the animal of the Bakr tribe, is more easily fed and carries greater burdens. What tribe of the Erg could be without?"

"What tribe could hold onto their camel without their horses?" replied the other man hotly. "Its speed is married with a keen alertness that makes its rider victor against any foe upon a camel."

The hand that was pointed skyward became a gesture of supplication as Radi spoke. "Ah, but the camel can travel further into the day than either horse or mule, which cannot match its endurance. Tell me friend, before those gathered here, if you were to ride to Serendib, would you chose to ride upon your horse or upon one of my camels?"

A silence fell over the two men and the crowd. Surely, a more barbed question had not been asked that day. To say that one would ride a horse far across the Erg to Umayuud's second most southern city, Serendib, would only make the answerer look foolish. To admit that the camel a superior animal, though, would cause a loss of respect. Tension among the men and crowd built as the man of Alfahl formulated his answer.

"Brothers," Dalal spoke at last, causing Azza's anxiety to jump up her spine and her brown eyes to widen. "Why argue such things when the trek across the Erg is so dangerous? And the comforts of the Bazaar so grand?"

He stood and addressed the crowd as well as the debaters. "Put this aside and allow me to tell you a story of desert scorpions and how a brother of the Imala tribe made the journey safer for us all." The crowd hushed at the mention of the Hadru'us tribe's animal, each man and woman reflexively looked over their shoulder. After taking a moment to assure themselves no Hadru'us overheard, the two men exchanged glances, acknowledged the other's curiosity, and nodded to the younger man.

"A man of the Imala tribe visited Serendib, drawn by the tales of its high towers and beautiful views of the sea. Surely the city was as wondrous as he was told.

But he was drawn more to the alleys and hovels at the base of the towers, desirous to know what lay in those shadows. Among the places he entered was a merchant's, filled with strange goods from far off lands. To his astonishment, high on one shelf, stood a golden statue of a rat, unmistakable with its four legs, dirty snout and hairless tail."

"Noticing the Imala's gaze, the merchant said to him, 'Beautiful, is it not? Surely worth more than a hundred of its desert brethren.'" The crowd, assured by Dalal's brashness, chuckled quietly at this minor insult to the Ratel tribe.

"'Truly,' my cousin replied, 'what is the cost of such a thing?'" Dalal smiled as he rotated in his speech to the crowd and Azza knew that grin. He was enjoying himself and the laughter he brought from all before him. She felt herself involuntarily smiling as well, distracted by his showmanship.

"'Nothing,' said the merchant, 'but if you take the golden rat from this place you may never bring it back.' This perplexed my cousin greatly, for surely the worth of the statue was several horses." Dalal turned and spoke directly to Radi, drawing more laughter from the crowd as he said, "Or several camels, of course."

"'But why?' my cousin inquired, to which the merchant said nothing, only demanding that if he take the golden rat, he should leave the trader's duka immediately. Thinking the merchant mad, my cousin snatched the treasure from the shelf and ran before the man could change his mind. Riding out into the desert he only stopped once near an oasis to let his horse catch its breath."

As he began the next portion of his tale, Dalal widened his eyes in mock fear and gestured widely with his arms. "But as my cousin sat, he spotted a dozen rats following him from the city. Horrified at the sight of the city's filth pursuing him he mounted his horse and raced towards the oasis. But the rats followed; first a dozen, then more, then surely a hundred, each intent on the golden statue he carried. Terrified, he threw the statue into the oasis and, to his disbelief, the many rats followed the statue, certainly drowning in the deep water."

The crowd about Dalal shifted and muttered, confused at this turn of the story. Assuming a visage of relief at the new found safety of his imaginary cousin, Dalal smiled and continued.

"Seeing a grand opportunity before him, my cousin rode back to the city and entered again the merchant's shop. The merchant, confused as you who stand before me now, said to my cousin, 'You have returned. And without the statue.'"

"'Yes,' my cousin replied, 'Rats followed the accursed statue as you knew they would, but I threw it into the oasis and they followed it to their watery doom.' The merchant, fearful of my cousin's wrath, asked him if there was more he could do to aid him."

"To which my cousin replied, 'Yes. I was wondering – do you have any golden statues of Hadru'us?'"

The crowd laughed loudly and as one, the image of the Hadru'us tribe jumping into an oasis after a golden idol playing in their minds. Azza, even habituated to such showmanship from her brother, could not help but laugh. Smiling, she walked away from Dalal and the concerns about him, wandering the Bazaar as the Son continued to make his way across the sky.

When Azza looked up at the Son again she realized too many hours had passed, so hurried back to her family's tents. Entering the Imala khiyam, Azza saw her father long before she heard him. The mottled robe, colored with the browns, deep reds and whites of the hawk, would have made him difficult to notice in the open desert. But on the khiyam his wildly gesticulating arms made him stand out, and his anger obvious. She sighed and moved forward, bracing for his infuriated verbal assault.

"Where have you been?" Mahesh yelled at her, his arms still waving. "I come to speak to you of the perch houses and I find Hadaad tending to your morning duties?"

Azza felt her face pinch as she tried not to retreat from him as she did when a little girl. "Father, Hadaad is more than capable –"

Mahesh cut her off with another angry gesture. "You think I don't know this? That I would trust a man near my daughter who could not even tend a fire?"

"Then why -- ?"

"Because they are your duties!" He roared at the sky, surely loud enough for all in the khiyam to hear and perhaps Amon himself. Azza felt her cheeks burn as he went on. "If I had meant for you to pawn them off on the nearest tribesfolk, I would have given them to your lazy brother to do."

Bowing her head, not least of which to avoid the gaze of friends and relatives that had begun to stare, Azza spoke quietly. "Yes, father. I'll see to it right away."

"Do that. And when you are done, come to my tent. Unexpected guests have been announced and you will prepare the kaffa ceremony."

Her cheeks burning that much brighter, her head involuntarily rose in protest, "The kaffa ceremony? That is the duty of children!"

"Then perhaps when you learn not to avoid the duties of a woman, you'll no longer be subjected to it." Her father leaned in close enough to let Azza know the matter was not one of debate and she dropped her gaze again. To argue with him now would only be to add to her own embarrassment. Certain that Azza would speak no more on the matter Mahesh turned and left without another word.

At the preparation fire, Azza was disappointed to see that Hadaad was not there. A bit of sympathy would have been welcome, but she suspected that when her father found him tending her duties, he received much the same treatment as she. Most likely he had been sent off to deal with some other, most likely less pleasant, chore.

But a distant screech brought a smile to Azza's face as she looked up to see Aleta circling. The young hawk loved Azza so that she swooped down, making to touch ground where there was no prey. Before Aleta did so, though, Azza pulled on one of a pair of heavy leather gauntlets she carried with her at all times, lifting her arm so Aleta could settle there. She smiled at Aleta as the warm and intelligent eyes blinked at her from the black feathers of her hawk's hood, as if to ask when the two would go hunt again. Azza ruffled the red and white plumage along Aleta's breast, then sighed, making the release gesture, sending her back into the sky. To go hunting now would only make her tardy and anger her father further. So first, to the perch houses.

The perch houses were the bounty and gold of the Imala tribe, a series of moveable nests, for the tribe's best breeding and hunting stock, Aleta being one of the most prized. Tending to the young was this season's most important duty, but also the less pleasant task of cleaning up carrion from the last meals as well as burying any droppings. Azza was relieved to find that Hadaad had finished many of the tasks.

Once all of the work was completed, Azza hurried off to her own tent, cleaned herself as best she could and dressed in the robes for the kaffa ceremony. The robes were of fine blended fabrics to symbolize the peaceful joining of different tribes that the ceremony was meant to be. Special attention was given that nothing loose dangled off the sleeves, to avoid the fire and the anger of boiling waters that were at the ceremony's heart.

Normally she would have assistance in this. Elders of the tribe would have helped her select appropriate colors, made sure her hair was free of any alien objects. Her eyes would be painted so it might appear she were staring down while allowing her to observe the outsiders in her father's tent.

The elders that would have done this would have also discussed with her what they knew about the participants, what specific tribal conventions to observe or grudges to avoid mentioning. But given the surprise nature of this particular ceremony she tended to these things herself as best she could and wondered about the guests as she did.

Only one other appeared in all of this, and she only at the end. This was a surprise as well for it was Litsa, the sister of Azza's mother. Litsa had never appeared to approved of Azza or her mother's choices, including the husband the latter had chosen. This had brought a certain animosity to her duties as matriarch of the Imala. So her hand in Azza's upbringing had been stern, if not devoid of affection. But the younger woman had learned that while Litsa's lessons were not easy and her delivery of them never gentle, they held real wisdom. Wise enough that Azza's mother had herself listened to all of them while still alive, if not heeded them.

In this instance, though, the lesson was quick. Litsa seemed to appear from nowhere, standing in front of Azza as she pushed the flap of her tent aside to leave it. Forcing something hard and cold into Azza's hand, Litsa locked eyes with her niece as she did, only saying to her, "Take this with you." And before Azza could ask anything the older woman was gone.

Looking down into her hand Azza saw the dagger her aunt had handed her. Leather thongs hung from its sheath, long enough to tether it to the inside of her wrist. Jewels were mounted at either end so it might appear as an ornament if glimpsed under her sleeve by a stranger. In her rush Azza hadn't considered if such a thing might be needed and now watched her aunt go, a perplexed and cautious expression on her face.

Being an elder among the Imala, and the leader, it was only natural that Mahesh's tent was the largest and most well appointed. It stood like a small brown hill in the center of the khiyam, the wide blue sky above it belying any possible danger Litsa was concerned about. Pushing aside the heavy flap of horsehide that covered its entrance Azza found that the inside had retained much of the morning's chill even with the coals of the fire still glowing.

As was the custom she, the preparer, entered on bare feet. She set about organizing the ceremony's components around the fire; a long-handled brass kettle and the accompanying filigreed cups. This done she sat in her appointed spot and began to work the mortar and pestle, grinding the beans of kaffa into a coarse and sticky powder. She added in several other spices at stages of the process, as well as a few whole beans at the end.

This work was nearly done when her father hurriedly entered. While his face betrayed an uncertainty that Azza was not accustomed to seeing, his beard was combed, his fingered bejeweled with rings, and the mottled robe exchanged for another, less worn, one of its type. The ivory-handled talon, the symbol of his office, was displayed in his belt. He appeared in readiness.

His bearing, though, carried the same taut anxiousness that her aunt had. So Azza brought her hands out, and gestured to all of the ceremony's accoutrements, displaying all else, like her father, was ready.

He inspected everything briefly, his eyes darting from one item to the next, until they settled on her. He nodded to Azza, making a satisfied noise. He then turned and held the horsehide open that he had just entered through.

Azza kept her eyes cast down, but concentrated to take in as many details as she could through her peripheral vision. Two men came in. She could tell by their goatskin sandals and the manner in which they bent body to enter that both were tall. But it was the fact that there were two of them that made her briefly break etiquette and raise her head. Two men meant a grievance; one as a speaker, the other as a witness. Both men had hard, black eyes on her father, so neither paid her mind.

The elder of the two men wore a beard that appeared as if it were made of steel wool, his one good eye fixed on Mahesh. His other orb floated like a clouded marble, dead in its socket, a wound proudly received many years ago, long before Azza's time. No doubt on one of the Hadru'us raids against the Five

Cities or on a desert crossing caravan. His skin was very dark, which would have been handsome on his rough features if not for the restrained anger that was there. Azza assumed this anger was associated with the pair's visit but it, in fact, had etched itself onto the man's features permanently. This was Odon and he was known by every member of every tribe of Umayuud and across its desert, the Erg. Entering into the tent he carried no sword, scimitar or yataghan, but a barbed whip, emblematic of his status amongst his folk, was at his waist.

The younger man was lighter of skin but clearly of the same lineage. Not much older than Azza, he was still not capable of growing a complete beard and so shaved clean to hide this. Combined with the absence of scars like his father's, his hairless face made him almost seem to gleam in the firelight by comparison.

Azza stared at his fair skin with something like fascination until he took his eyes from her father to return her gaze. Azza felt the arrogance there and it made her blood rise. It was a slight infraction of custom for her to have looked up, but his glare held such haughtiness it seemed he might like to kill her for it. She wished to dare him to try, but remembered the honor of her tribe and held her place, and dropped her eyes.

Her father inclined his head to Odon saying, "Welcome. Amon greets you through the Imala in me."

Odon returned the slight bow, a perfect reflection of the other's depth, replying, "And Amon returns your favor though the Hadru'us in me."

Her father turned to nod at Odon's son, "Odissan." He said the name like the bad omen it was. After a moment he added, as if to clarify his tone, "Two means a grievance."

"Indeed," Odon spoke, his voice asperated with wear and age, its depth brought even lower by the seriousness in it. "An egregious one."

Mahesh gestured to the mats around the fire, small but thick carpets that offered something better than the ground to sit upon. "Then let us sit and discuss."

Azza filled the long-handled kettle with the appropriate amount of water for the four. She set it upon the fire as the others assumed their places.

"Your son," Odon began, gesturing broadly as if capturing all of the Imala khiyam with no small amount of disdain, "has insulted my tribe." He paused. "Not me, not one of my sons, but all of the Hadru'us." Watching the water come to a boil, Azza felt herself go cold.

"Judai," Mahesh swore softly, signifying his disapproval. "How did this happen?" A carefully worded question, neither accepting nor rejecting blame of any kind, nor calling into question the veracity of the speaker's tale. As Odon relayed the account of Dalal's amusing anecdote Azza added the kaffa mixture to the water, watching it froth as it came to a boil, then removed it from the fire, as the ceremony dictated. She let the concoction calm, watching the waters come to a rest.

As she placed the kettle onto the fire a second time her father, having let Odon finish, politely asked, "You heard this yourself?" Mahesh lightly seasoned

the question with disbelief, implying that even a fool like Dalal would never say such a thing to the face of Odon.

"No." From Odon the word was cold iron.

"Such hearsay is to be expected." Azza listened to her father bend without breaking, offering Odon a reasonable explanation that he could take with his pride and go. He was a different man than the one who had been yelling earlier in the day. Azza would always wonder why her father saved his anger for those he cared about the most.

"I heard this myself." Odissan's lie nearly caused Azza to raise her head with the shock of it. Azza had seen the crowd at Dalal's folly and Odissan had not been among it. Even if she had somehow missed him the crowd itself had been wary for any Hadru'us, driven by the fear the scorpion tribe inspired. Someone would have surely noticed Odissan, thirteenth son of Odon.

As Mahesh pursed his lips in cool deliberation, Azza hurriedly considered contradicting the testimony. She thought better of it, though, deciding there was no way to prove his absence. Most likely some fool equal to her brother repeated the story later and was overheard by a member of the insulted tribe. A more merciful part of her nature wondered briefly about the fate of that tribesman and hoped for a bloodless resolution to that unknown part of this tale.

But why would Odissan tell the lie at all? Deep in contemplation of this question Azza kept herself in the moment by watching the stirring waters of the kaffa.

"So you say," Mahesh gave his attention to Odissan, letting suspicion into his tone for the first time. "Where was this?"

"In the Bazaar – amongst everyone," Odissan replied, increasing the weight of the offense by the size of its audience.

"So my son," Mahesh didn't hide his skepticism as he spoke, "stood in front of all and told this insulting story with you, son of Odon, standing there?"

"He did not know I was present." Odissan's tone held a smugness that suggested he would have been too clever for one such as Dalal. As angry as she was with her brother at that moment, she had to restrain herself from throwing the hot kaffa onto Odissan's robes. Instead she watched it begin to simmer.

More cool than his daughter, Mahesh replied, "Perhaps if you had made your presence known you could have saved us all a great deal of trouble."

"But Odissan did not," Odon interjected, "and Dalal insulted the Hadru'us. At the Bazaar no less." Odon's intonation became nearly sanctimonious, something Azza was sure her father did not miss.

The pause before Mahesh's response suggested to Azza she was right in this. Particularly since he used it to take a heavy sigh and make a show of concern for the honor of the Hadru'us, something that many across the Erg suspected did not exist. "How do you wish to be compensated for this stain?"

"We wish a Gaff," was Odon's immediate reply. A long pause filled the tent at these words. The effort it required for Azza to keep her eyes on the pot nearly distracted her from the boiling of the kaffa. She removed the kettle from the fire just before the water would have risen over the edge and embarrassed everyone,

most of all her.

"A war?" Mahesh replied coolly. "You wish to come at each other as enemies, to steal livestock from one another – for the sake of a jest?"

"It is a ceremony." Azza could almost hear the insult Odissan left unsaid in his sentence. "Little more than a child's game, with no blood meant to be shed."

Mahesh leveled a gaze at Odissan that caused the young man to go quiet and made it clear who was the elder in this group. "Blood is almost always shed in a Gaff, Odissan, son of Odon. Whether it is meant to be or not." He returned to Odon. "Which can cause more bad blood than the original insult." Mahesh gestured to the whip at Odon's belt, "Are you certain this is what the Hadru'us ask of you?"

As custom and good kaffa demanded, Azza left the kettle off the fire for only a few moments before setting it down for the third heating. As it quickly rose to a boil again she added the most precious item, the sugars, causing a strongly aromatic froth to come out of the liquid.

In the short interval of this Odon spoke, his anger seeming a bit forced to Azza, if still frightening. "What would you do if your tribe had been insulted in such a manner?"

Lifting the foaming kettle from the fire Azza nearly dropped it at the humor in her father's reply. "I probably would have laughed, if it were a good joke."

Trying to cover her smile and stifle a giggle, Azza quickly began pouring the kaffa into the filigreed cups, each balanced on its own saucer. Whatever plan Odon and his son had entered with appeared stifled by her father's response as she filled the cups in silence. Giving his guests a moment to think, Mahesh picked his up and blew gingerly on it. With still no reply from the pair forthcoming her father said, "Surely your folk have some humor about other tribes." He sipped carefully from the cup. "Tell me one."

"What?" Odon spoke but both him and his son appeared completely genuine now in their anger.

"Rather than a Gaff," gestured roundly with his cup as he spoke, inviting his guests and Azza to drink, "let us act as equals in a different way. Tell me a joke that your tribe has of the Imala."

Both men bristled as if Mahesh were insulting them now rather than discussing an insult from his son that happened earlier in the day. Ignoring this to such an extent that it appeared he was completely oblivious to it, Mahesh continued, "If it is a good joke, I will go out into the Bazaar and tell it to everyone I meet."

Flummoxed, both men glared at Mahesh until Odisson said, "Our humor on the Imala is of your honor."

Mahesh paused, cup between saucer and lips, then said, "That does not sound very humorous."

He examined the surface of his cup's dark liquid and gently continued, "Also, this is not a joke amongst equals. Dalal's humor only spoke of the Hadru'us chasing a cursed idol, compelled by powers greater than men, perhaps as old as the Elben and Dweorgh. It never called into question the character of

your tribe."

Azza, cup to mouth, hid her surprise in a few quick blinks. As far as she knew no one, and certainly no one here, had told her father the jest in that detail.

Mahesh set down his cup and placed his hands on his knees, opening his stance, as a trader willingly listening to a counter-offer might do. "But tell me anyway. My son did not seek your permission before telling his humorous anecdote, so a greater slight may be due you."

The silence in the tent grew long, drawing away Azza's ability to keep her eyes cast down with it. When it seemed the muscles in her neck might snap from the tension she commanded of them her father said, the slightest sadness in his voice, "The Hadru'us don't have one joke?"

Azza raised her head then as Odon stood, revealing a speed that belied his age. Even his son's anger was tinted with surprise at his father's spryness. While her father's face remained calm, Azza noted his hand drop over the talon, leaving it in the belt but slipping its hilt between ring and forefinger.

Odon did not reach for his belt, but pointed an angry finger at Mahesh. "We are not children! Our honor cannot be salved with words."

With his hand on the talon Mahesh's eyes and voice were still calm and calming. "Then why do you allow it to be besmirched by them?"

Azza saw Odon's eyes dilate with new anger, seeking some kind of release. When he found no violent course he could take and still retain his honor in the tent of his enemy, he raised his finger again to point at Mahesh and said, "A Gaff. At dawn. In four days time."

With that he turned so quickly the mat he had just been sitting on half-spun on the floor. Odissan quickly followed with what Azza would have sworn was a poorly concealed self-satisfied smile on his face.

"Will you not drink?" Mahesh called after them, a slight smile in his voice that only his daughter could detect, kept as it was from his face. "To leave without doing so is to insult the honor of my tribe."

Mahesh let that follow the dark pair out, then settled back on his mat, collecting his thoughts as if he were tabulating a debt that was soon to come due. Azza watched him, as always never quite sure what to make of her father. Sitting there, with the events that just unfolded and their hidden depths, he appeared more sad than angry, even knowing he had been lied to by a pair of men who seemed determined to be his enemy.

After a few moments of this he picked up his cup and again sipped from it. "The kaffa is very good," he told his daughter, his eyes on the horsehide that the Hadru'us had just departed through.

Not sure what to say, Azza showed the wisdom of her mother and said nothing, only nodded recognition of the praise. Mahesh continued to think and stare long enough that Azza moved to leave. Normally, she would clean the remains of the ceremony, but it was, strictly speaking, not her duty and her father had the presence of a man who wanted to be alone.

As she rose Mahesh noticed that Odon, in his hasty exit, had knocked over

his cup, spilling its kaffa into the saucer. "The grounds remain," he said, indicated the particles of the beans that floated in the dish. "Tell our fortune?"

Azza, never having been particularly gifted or renowned for her abilities as a seer, nodded anyway, kneeling next to the saucer to lift it up. As she did the liquid swirled in the dish, moving the grinds around, turning what had been a staid environment into swirling discord. Some of the liquid and beans spilled. She tried to steady her hand, to let the grinds lie again into a pattern or shape she could read from, to discern something from the randomness of the future. Despite her best efforts the liquid seemed to move with its own volition, never letting the grounds settle out of the chaos that moved them.

Azza set the saucer down, saddened and disappointed she could not give her father what he asked. "I don't see anything."

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Of Foolish Brothers, preparation for the Gaff, and those who wear the Sho'un*

The arrow landed perfectly, as if guided by Aleta, providing a satisfyingly high crack as it sank into the tent pole. Far enough away from the khiyam and the Bazaar that she had taken horse and her mother's saddle, Azza had placed the pole into the dried red dirt so she was shooting her arrows away from these. It was not a big target, the tent poles of the Imala being narrow and light, small enough to be wrapped in bundles and carried by children if need be. More than a decade of practice, though, had allowed her to put her arrows accurately into such a space.

"I am still not familiar with all of the Imala's customs," Azza paused, fletched arrow to her cheek, as she heard Hadaad's baritone behind her. "And I know the ceremony of the Gaff requires some violence, but isn't the killing of enemies forbidden?"

Azza relaxed the bowstring, lowering the arrow's tip as she did, her eyes still focused on where she would have landed it. "Yes," she replied, her imagination painting the image of Odissan's face onto the spot that she gazed upon.

"Then why practice with your bow?" Hadaad walked up beside her, not looking at her but pretending to admire the vertical grouping of her arrows on the thin pole.

Azza tried to dispel the phantom of Odissan that lingered in her mind but, finding it did not evanesce so easily, she turned to more pleasant things. "I have blunt arrows," Azza lowered the bow entirely and faced Hadaad. "Used for hunting small game. They will not pass through the mailed shirts the Hadru'us will be wearing under their robes."

"And if you were to hit them in the skull?"

"The wise among them will have iron headpieces wrapped under their turbans." Azza broke her gaze from Hadaad to begin unstringing her bow. His attempts to lead others to a conclusion rather than just stating his thoughts rather irked her, particularly when he applied this social tactic to her. It sounded too much like the forbearing tone her father sometimes took with her, and that wasn't an association she wished to make.

Hadaad did not yet realize this, though, and so persisted with, "And if you

strike them in the face or throat?"

Azza stopped handling her bow to look up at the sky, praying to Imala Amon to give her patience. "Then they will die, Man of Bronze, just as the Imala will die if the Hadru'us are not watchful with their blunted spears or padded maces."

Hadaad's tone changed, his concern shifting from one thing to another. "The Hadru'us do not seem the kind to be cautious when dealing with the lives of others."

Azza bent her head back to her bow, trying to keep an anger that had been floating about her since the kaffa ceremony from landing on Hadaad. Only partially successful, she couldn't quite keep it from her voice as she replied, "And now you have discovered the reason that I practice." Bow unstrung, Azza walked to the pole.

Shielding his eyes from the Son Hadaad found something in the distance to stare at as Azza collected her arrows. "I have been told," he raised his voice to carry the distance, "that I should take an unsharpened yataghan into the battle and endeavor to strike with the flat of the blade."

Azza stopped pulling on the shaft she was working out to turn back to Hadaad. Looking at his features and his strangely hued flesh, Azza was reminded of how different he was from the folk she had known all her life. While the Bronze Men were called tribesmen, any child could see they were different from all the other Peoples of the Erg. This had never truly bothered her before; all beyond her own tribe, even the cousins in Umayuud's Five Cities, seemed strange to her. Their dress, speech, those who chose to worship children of Amon rather than Amon himself made no sense to her. But Hadaad's differences had always been ones that fascinated her. He had been shown to the tribe one day and welcomed, as outsiders sometimes were, and that had been sufficient for Azza.

Now, though, she found herself wanting the company of the familiar. As her mind cast about for those she might wish to talk with her thoughts landed on her brother and she knew who she was truly angry with.

Holding the pole still with one thick gauntlet, Azza used the other to remove the last arrow, and slung it into the quiver strapped to her waist. "Use any weapon of your choosing," she told Hadaad, "as long as you can strike a grown man with force enough to knock him down." She pulled her right leather glove off by gripping the brass studs on the knuckles. Her mind on her brother and violence, Azza recalled how she had sewn the nobs on long ago when Dalal had outgrown her enough that he could best her at wrestling.

She smiled briefly as she thought of her father's blustering reaction to this choice. She was never certain if he was more upset about the bruises she had left on her brother or the mutilation of the heirloom. But then Azza remembered her father solemnly preparing for what was to come.

Finding her anger again Azza moved towards her horse, tying the glove by the loop on its cuff to the quiver's strap. "If you knock an opponent off his feet any man who has honor will recuse himself from the field."

From the shadow of the hand he held across his brow Hadaad's troubled

green eyes rose to watch Azza mount. "And if he doesn't?"

Azza pulled on her horse's reins, executing a tight turn. The steed remained where it had stood, only changing direction, causing her dark hair to dance around her. Before riding off she answered Hadaad. "Then those are the men we kill."

Frustration was only added to Azza's anger as she rode back to the khiyam, forced to slow by the crowds swirling around it. Word had spread amongst the Bazaar of the Hadru'us' challenge. Many who had been settled near the Imala were now decamping, preparing to move away from her tribe as if they now carried some disease.

Azza felt anger and betrayal heat her olive skin, burning around the ink of each tattoo upon it. Surely these folk knew the Imala riders were now out picking a new location for the khiyam that would, in three days time, become the field for the Gaff. Somewhere far from here. Only cowards need distance themselves from association, her anger told her.

Past those, though, an equal number of folk moved in and about the Imala khiyam, speaking with relatives and friends. Some out of concern, others out of the age old tradition of tribal rumor mongering. Whatever their motives, it was good to see many other tribefolk remain.

Returned to the khiyam's corral, Azza unsaddled the horse and took a moment to apologize to the chestnut mare, who she called Calandra. The horse had never revealed its name to her, even when a cousin by marriage had visited from the Alfahl. Nonetheless, she had come to care for the animal, though she was oft reminded by father and peers that the saddle was more difficult to replace than the horse.

Still, she had again taken her anger out on someone who was not its source and, unlike Hadaad, Calandra had no way to understand the hard ride back had little to do with her. But everything had its place, so she took the time to brush down and water the mare. As she stroked Calandra's fur and thanked her for her service, she looked over to the livestock pens. There she saw other Imala tend to the animals and talk amongst themselves, most likely making plans for how best to defend the herds in the Gaff. Having ridden through the migrating crowds to get here, watching these other men and women work at a time when they might have been able to enjoy the Bazaar, Azza was only reminded of how many lives had been disturbed by her brother's jest. Finished with Calandra, she went to find him.

Surprisingly, Dalal was not difficult to locate. In her frustration she imagined him hiding from her, his wide girth and big bones squeezed into an empty barrel or large watering urn. Younger than her by only a few years, his scraggy beard and tall stature often caused others to think him the elder, so he might have tried to hide amongst the men. But she, in fact, found him in front of some of the Imala's many children, holding them rapt as he often did with some tale. Now, though, he was telling them of the Gaff and their part in it.

"So what will you do when you see the black riders?" Dalal asked, his tone

making his expectation of an answer clear.

"Run to the tent!" The responding children's chorus did not disappoint, both enthusiastic and correct. 'Tent' meant both shelter and family, so there was no need for the children to specify to which tent they should run.

"And where will you not go?" Dalal held his expectant tone, but now filled his voice with fraternal caution.

"To the pens!" The children screamed joyfully at this. Happy to avoid the place of most of their chores, they did not consider Dalal's advice was not meant out of laziness. It was meant to keep them from being trampled in the disorder the Hadru'us horsemen would bring with them in the Gaff. The fences that marked the pens were little more than wicker lattices, meant to be light and easily moved, only there so the flocks did not wander off. A good fright would cause the livestock to break free, knocking anything down in their path.

"And what is most important of all?" Dalal held a cupped hand behind his ear as if funneling the expected answer from the children to him. Only silent confusion came from the seated children, though. After a few moments, each began to look at others in the hopes one of them might hold the answer.

Dropping his hand and looking down at them, Dalal made a face of mock disappointment. He placed his hands on his hips and waited in judgment. But the silence from the children only grew longer and they began to squirm on their seats as the expectation grew as well. "Well?" Dalal prodded them. The children avoided his gaze, suddenly finding other things of interest that weren't Dalal. Of particular interest was the sky or their feet.

Finally, a black-haired girl so cute she nearly made Azza want her own, squeaked something in a high pitch that no one else heard. Dalal leaned forward, his stature no longer huge and demanding, but open and coaxing. When the child didn't repeat herself, he leaned close enough to hear the most quiet of whispers and asked her kindly, "What was that?"

The girl whispered again, and Azza would never know if this was the answer Dalal had sought. But he stood tall, whisking the dark-haired chick onto his shoulder, as though he might carry her at the front of a procession. "Yes!" Holding up a fist as large as her head, he threw his voice loud and deep, "You must have courage!"

The children stood and cheered and, for a moment, Azza expected them to rush to her brother and attempt to raise him on their tiny hands. He had laid to rest, at least briefly, the uncertainty of what was to come and their part in it. The resulting joy was such that Azza couldn't help but smile.

Something of her anger was tempered as the children dispersed. She approached Dalal, him tending to a few stragglers who had more questions or whose fear had not quite been allayed.

The last child on its way, he looked up to see Azza. Giving her an evaluating stare he seemed to wonder whether or not he would need to defend himself. As she walked to him his expression did not alter greatly, but Azza did think she noticed his gaze drop to the brass nobs on her gauntlets.

"You're preparing them well," she said by way of greeting.

Dalal snorted a tiny laugh at this. "Yes, while the men are preparing for the Gaff, father has me watching children."

Despite all the anger she had brought with her, had been carrying for the last day, she found herself with some sympathy now. "It seems to be his favorite punishment of late. He found another at the duties he had given to me, so made me as the preparer in his tent for the kaffa ceremony."

The derisiveness Dalal had expressed for his own situation melted away leaving only the humor as he smiled at his sister. "Whatever pretense father used, it was so he could have you there."

This put Azza into a silence that her brother used to gather his water and staff. The idea that her father wanted her at the kaffa ceremony was pleasing, but she had said nothing, and been asked no counsel. Dismissing this as an attempt at flattery she said, "If that were true, I would have had no reason to be there if it weren't for you."

Looping his own falconry gloves onto the strap of his water-skin Dalal sighed, the pair having finally arrived at the destination he had been dreading. "You're not angry with me."

Azza stepped into her brother's path before he could walk away. "Yes, I am."

Dalal sighed again in such an affected way that it made Azza suddenly very nostalgic for times when it had been acceptable for the siblings to wrestle in public. She repressed the urge to don her gauntlets and commence beating her brother with them. Now, older and stronger, the damage she could do with them was much greater.

Dalal did not help her in this by continuing with, "No, you are angry with Odissan for his falsehood."

"If you," Azza moved her open hand from the gauntlets to point a finger at Dalal, "hadn't told that stupid story, in the Bazaar," Azza emphasized those last three words to indicate where the real offense lay, "Odissan would not have had anything to lie about."

To her surprise, Dalal didn't shirk or retreat or try to joke his way out of her accusation. Instead she saw a cold anger come into him that turned the eyes in his face to stone. "So we should live in fear that the Hadru'us should overhear what we really think of them? Even coded in humor? Are we to be so timid as to wilt as they approach? To cower as they stand near? To bow as they leave?"

Azza found her brother's resentful speech affected her, but not so much that reason departed. So she said, "The Imala bow to no one, not of the tribes or of the Five Cities. No conqueror or would-be king has ever brought our kind to heel. We roam the Erg as a free tribe, as we always have." She paused, finding her point. "As have the Hadru'us. Being free of homage to another is not the same as having license to insult them to their face."

"I insulted no Hadru'us," Dalal's tone cooled as it became guarded, Azza recognizing when her brother was attempting to escape blame.

"There was no Hadru'us present when you gave insult," she corrected him, bringing him back to his wrong and her wrath.

"Which would be the same if Odissan did not maintain his falsehood." Dalal

snorted again, his loathing of Odissan made clear. "And most likely just so he could increase his standing in his father's eyes." It made sense that the thirteenth son of such a man might be willing to go to some lengths to earn his father's favor. But Dalal's abhorrence of the other youth made her wonder if they were somehow acquainted, as unlikely as that would be without her knowing it.

But her anger with her own relative caused her to set this thought aside and continue with, "At least it was for Odon's eyes. You spoke before those at the Bazaar, just to gain favor amongst strangers with your tale."

"I have done nothing wrong!" Dalal yelled out loud, sounding every bit like their father. "It was a jest, a joke, an entertainment! If the Hadru'us cannot take the pinprick of humor perhaps a sound beating in the Gaff is due them."

Azza felt her stature grow tall as she withered her brother with a stare, crossing her arms in judgment. "Well, it would seem you've gotten what you wanted. Now we have a Gaff."

Dalal paused, at last seeing his part in the troubles that lay before the Imala, or perhaps just willing to admit them for the first time. Humbled by his sister's statement, his gaze went to the ground as he twisted his staff into it. "It is not what I wanted." Seeking again to shift blame, he added weakly, "It is what Odissan wishes."

"Then you have given it to him," Azza responded flatly, almost regretting it the moment she did. Dalal gave her such a pained expression that she wondered how he had been hiding it till now. Her part in bringing it to the surface gave her no satisfaction.

It was gone in a moment, though, hidden by Dalal in an attempt to save his foolish and masculine pride. He glanced at the ground then back to her saying, "Father wants you before him. He's unhappy you disappeared before dawn." Azza noted he passed on the opportunity to add the word 'again'. The fact he did not rub her with her own wrong showed how pained he was himself. "He wishes to speak with you about your duties preparing for the Gaff."

Azza nodded, unsure of what to say. Her father had spoken to no one after she had left his tent on that first day. His isolation had caused her and others much anxiety and she had ridden before dawn to do something besides roll around in her own sleepless tent. She hoped her father would forgive her this, having begun, it would seem, his second day as active as a darwaysh. So her concern remained with her brother, now warring with her anger until both seemed to dissipate. Standing before her, even with beard and taller than she, Azza could see the boy Dalal had been and had not quite out-grown, and she couldn't decide if she should embrace him or knock him to the ground.

The decision was unsatisfactorily of neither; a simple nod and turn, to leave without comfort or gain. She trod away, feeling empty without her anger and having nothing to replace it.

Her father's tent, in contrast, was a flurry of activity, busier than an aerie filled with fledglings, and Azza knew Litsa would be there as well. Men and women came and went, the horsehide flap that covered the entrance barely having a moment to lie still.

With her eyes and a nod, she acknowledged those who she passed as she entered, and stepped to the right to clear the vestibule for those coming with questions or leaving with tasks. She stood in the cool shadow next to the entrance and away from the day's light now coming in through the tent's vents.

From there she watched her father hold a conversation with a tribesman, a man named Jordan who boiled the rice most evenings for many in the tribe. Jordan nodded his head vigorously at each thing her father said, causing the curly locks that grew from his head to bounce. Finished, he stood and moved briskly out. Another quickly took his place and for a moment Azza believed that she remained unnoticed. Then her father looked into the shadow and gestured for her to come forward. Stepping into the light she bowed to him and Litsa.

"Sit here," he pointed to his left side, the opposite of where Litsa chose to stand, "and watch." If he was angry with her for having rode off before the earliest light, he did not indicate it.

Jordan and the woman who followed him were only a part of a parade of tribefolk that marched through the tent. She watched her father calm some, plan with others, direct many besides those, and each with a focus and placid energy that reminded her of the tribe's totem. Big and small, each visitor seemed to jump to him seeking guidance that he provided before sending them on their flight. Litsa stood, not far away, talking with many of the visitors before or after they spoke with Mahesh, occasionally stepping close to whisper in his ear.

At last, Mahesh turned to his daughter. "Scouts have found three spots they believe to be advantageous to us for the Gaff. Ride out and survey these. When you are done, return here and share your thoughts with us."

Azza blinked, considering this new information. Given her early morning disappearances of late and her brother's delivery of the news that their fathered wished to see her, his lack of anger surprised her. Grateful to a task instead of a punishment she asked, "To whom should I speak?"

"Dinka," Her aunt answered. "She left with the riders early this morning while you were out," Litsa paused, and Azza could almost feel her prepare the disappointment in her voice. "What was it that you were doing?"

Azza felt her scalp flush as she tried to condense her many reasons for the morning sojourn into a short, intelligible and, hopefully, acceptable response. Before she could, though, her father interrupted with, "When the next khiyam has been selected, you will be responsible for the perch houses. Keep this in mind when viewing the sites." Her father reached out with his left hand to touch her right, drawing attention to his eyes. "The perch houses must not be scattered."

Azza nodded, knowing the importance of the nests and feeling the weight of the task from the gentle intensity of her father. She also felt relief; the last Gaff had been many seasons ago and Azza had then been amongst the children to whom Dalal now tended. Now she had direction, even if not an entirely clear one. For how could the ground the perch houses rested upon prevent the Hadru'us from scattering the cast? But to go and see for herself gave her a purpose to which she could focus her restless energy.

Azza gave a final nod and stood, leaving the tent in the same manner as all the other Imala. Asking a few tribefolk about Dinka's location pointed Azza in the right direction.

Dinka, shorter and broader than Azza, shielded her own dark hair and olive skin from Mihr's rays by resting in the shadow of the palm tree the Bazaar was centered around. Next to the tree was the well that gave it life, where she languished on the rocks that made its rim. Bared of her riding robes, in a sleeveless undershirt, should could have just as easily been a baroness of Ceylon and the rocks fine pillows imported from one of the other Five Cities.

With Dinka were those she typically rode; two tall brothers not far from adolescents named Gozal and Bersh. The trio ignored the comings and goings around the well as they drank away the dust from the morning's excursion.

Dinka, though, opened her eyes when Azza said her name and gave the other girl the smile for which she was known. Warm and bright, it had caused many a boy to forget her strength and find himself in the dust. Gozal and Bersh had once counted themselves amongst that number, but now were loyal friends, one already with wife. Azza had always liked Dinka, even if she was older and had been counted among the women first, inspiring a jealousy in Azza she had never been comfortable enough to admit.

"Azza," Dinka returned her greeting. "I looked for you before our morning ride but could not find you."

"No," Azza replied, embarrassed again by her own impatience, wishing she had waited till dawn. "I was elsewhere," she answered weakly, moving past it quickly with, "but father wished for me to speak to you about the sites you saw."

"Of course." Dinka sprang up, grabbing a small, sharp stone from amongst the larger ones on the ground. Walking from the well, she crouched to draw in the dirt away from the feet of the water-bearers so they would not disturb her work.

A quick scratching out of the mountains to the south and the curve of the coast beyond them marked where the two now spoke. Dinka then quickly drew out three other spots indicating the new sites; a flat, horizontal line to the north, a pyramid to the east, and what looked like a series of circles to the southeast. "The open desert north of here," Dinka pointed to the line, "is flat and offers wide views in every direction."

Azza nodded and Dinka pointed to the pyramid, "To the east, there is a single hill that grows out of the desert's plain, before its edge rises to meet the mountains."

Another nod and Dinka moved the stone in her hand to the circles. "To the southeast is a rocky outcropping many hundreds of yards in length and breadth." Dinka pivoted to Azza and smiled, squinting her eyes against the Son. "If you hurry you should be able to see all of them before the day's end." Engrossed in thought Azza nodded again, still looking at the impromptu map. When she realized the other woman was waiting with gentle patience she smiled and thanked her.

Azza walked back to the Imala khiyam, wondering as she did at how Dinka

and her men had scouted such a wide area in one morning. To view the specific places Dinka had found would take hard riding for the day's remainder. She would have preferred to wait till the hottest part of the day had passed, but to do so might push her task into tomorrow. With the Gaff now only three days away, even the palest of slugs would not have thought this a wise choice.

Returning to her small tent, Azza prepared for travel while Mihr was highest in the sky. She wrapped loose robes around her body in layers; the clothing would shield from the light and absorb the worst of the heat between its folds. To keep her face from burning she applied the dark dust of kohl around her eyes and a shemagh scarf to wrap around her head. Long enough that it could be used to cover her face if a sandstorm should arise, the shemagh was also decorated in the feathery brown, deep scarlet, and vibrant white that would tell any desert dweller her tribe of origin and status.

Feeling the need for company better than her own, Azza went to the perch houses and called to Aleta. While her father may have cursed Azza's disfiguring her mother's gloves, the bronze knuckles flashed in the morning light and her companion flew to them unerringly. Azza smiled as she felt the familiar pressure of her hawk's talons, then scolded herself lightly. It was sacrilege to claim ownership over a gift from Amon, but she was unable to think of Aleta as anything but her hawk. Holding Aleta's weight with one hand, she caressed her breast feathers gently with the other, quietly asking her forgiveness.

Back to the corral, Azza took a fresh horse to let Calandra rest. The flat pan of the desert to the north needed little inspection. Its advantage was as clear to her as it was to Dinka; any rider, particular a group of Hadru'us, would be visible from far off. However, most of the terrain in this region of the Erg would convey this benefit, so she set out in the direction of the pyramid Dinka had scratched into the ground.

The hill was, in fact, a spike of crusty strata that thrust from the flat landscape of the desert plain as if Mammon himself had pushed it up from his shadowy domain. Azza slowed her horse's pace to a walk and trotted around the butte, inspecting its deep crags and the shadows within them.

Dinka had, of course, been right to consider this place. The bluff was steep and so isolated that it would almost assuredly prevent any attack from that direction if the Imala camped against it. The hollows around its base could provide some shade, as well as some shelter if the wind became high.

Azza finished her circle and paused to drink from her water-skin, the heat of the day already seeping through the layers of her robes. Aleta briefly touched down on the saddle's pommel and Azza offered her water from cupped hand.

The hawk drank briefly then returned to flight as a gust picked up loose dirt and scattered it about. Some of this found home on Azza as it stuck to the sweat on her skin. She gave this no mind; what parts of her that were exposed could always use more protection. Finished viewing the rock she rode to the south.

The outcropping Dinka had described was much harder to find, being far less prominent and obscured by rising heat waves. Azza began to worry that she would have to return to the khiyam without viewing this final site when she

noticed Aleta circling not far to the southeast. Azza smiled up at the hawk as she approached, noting the ground beneath her horse's hooves was already becoming more rocky.

Closer so the distortions of the air were less of a hindrance, she saw the outcropping was practically a short plateau, a rise that lifted off the desert floor. On this oblong face were many broken rocks of varied sizes and shapes.

Riding around it as she had with the butte, Azza imagined her People defending this ground as it hindered Hadru'us horses. She called Aleta to offer her more water, thanked her for the guidance, and then turned to ride back to the khiyam.

As Azza returned Mihr was disappearing below the horizon, standing opposite of Moon as she moved to take her place in the evening's sky. Releasing Aleta, Azza knew she would unerringly return to the perch houses, so she walked the nameless horse back to the corral, passing by bustling tribesman as she did. Without a new site chosen yet, the Imala were already preparing to leave. Never to stay in one place for too long, this was their custom, even if the coming Gaff made everyone's movements more urgent.

Horse and saddle stowed, she returned to her father's tent, still covered in dust and kohl. The horsehide was pulled aside to let the heat of the day escape, requiring Azza to only bow slightly to enter. Removing the shemagh as she did, she bared her head and face before her elders, her comely features darkened by kohl and the shadows thrown by the fire.

Sharing a late kaffa with Litsa and the other elders of the tribe, her father broke from their conversation and gestured for Azza to sit with them. Zaido, a child to which Azza herself had taught kaffa preparation, handed her a filigreed cup with the pungent black liquid. Taking the beverage Azza suddenly realized how much the day had drained from her and gratefully sipped, the liquid providing her energy and quieting her hunger.

The powerful stimulants of the kaffa worked their magic and Azza realized that all stared at her. Looking up from the cup she locked eyes with her father. He spoke. "The tribe is prepared to move. Where are we to go?"

Azza knew her answer for this, but still found the question took her aback. At the center of the Imala in her father's tent she hesitated, feeling more importance being put on her answer than she had anticipated. This caused her to review her thoughts and question her decision, most doubly so since she was certain that this same question had been put to Dinka and her men.

Confident that her answer was what was best for the tribe, even if it conflicted with others', she replied. "There is a rise from the desert floor to the southeast that Dinka and her riders have located. This should be the place of the Gaff."

There was a muttering amongst the Imala around Mahesh and Litsa, which her father quieted with a gesture of his hand. Never having taken his gaze away from Azza he asked her, "Why?"

"The ground is rocky, laden with boulders large and small, as though something great had stood there once but long ago fell to ruin. It will make

riding, even moreso riding quickly, difficult, tripping up any raiding Hadru'us. The rocks may also provide places for the smallest Imala to hide."

"Or places for ambush?" Litsa asked.

Azza considered this, then nodded. "There are stones on the field that are large enough for that."

"Why not the hill Dinka spoke of?"

Azza turned to the owner of the question, a woman named Elicora. Numbered amongst the tallest in the tribe, she seemed to nearly touch the tent's peak even sitting. "It would provide a strong defense," Azza acknowledged. "But if the Gaff goes poorly for us it could also trap us there." Elicora nodded assent at this, followed by all the elders, for no one wished to be surrounded by Hadru'us with no means of retreat.

"And how will this place keep the perch houses from being scattered?" her father asked.

"Give me three strong men," Azza replied, her confidence building from the elders' reaction. "We can march off the space needed for the nests and then 30 more. There we will dig a trench, a stride's width and knee deep, in a circle. The rocky ground will keep the Hadru'us from spotting it. Any of them that are dishonorable enough to attack the perch houses may find themselves thrown from saddle and their mount wounded."

"And the livestock?" Hedeon, sitting to her father's left, asked this, his deep brown eyes not yet satisfied. Unlike the cast, the livestock was fair game for the Hadru'us. While many in the Imala suspected the scorpion tribe capable of foul play, this was to be worried about with any opponent.

"Would be afforded the same protection of the rocks as the rest of the tribe." Azza left unsaid that any trenches, traps, or dirty tricks around the livestock for a Gaff would only reflect on the Imalas' honor.

Again, all nodded in concurrence. Her father gave Litsa a smile aside saying, "I told you she would choose wisely."

Not sure if she was meant to hear these words, Azza nonetheless felt herself involuntarily stand straighter. None of the elders paid much mind. She controlled her pride, attempting to model the others' indifference as another elder spoke.

Hunched over his kaffa and gazing into its depths, Elrad's sharp face portrayed all of the distress that each Imala felt at the coming of the Gaff, plus something more. He expressed his unshared thought in a hushed and hurried tone. "What if she is right, and something great once stood there? What if it were brought low by Mammon's hooves? What if he has cursed it?"

At the mention of Amon's angry child, the ruler of the darkness underground and above it, Mahesh's tent went quiet. Each man and woman was afraid that to speak after the invocation of the name would bring his attention to them.

After a time passed, the silence was broken by the sound of goats bleating outside the tent as a nameless Imala moved his animals. Each of them comforted by such mundane susurrus Mahesh ordained, "Mammon is the wealthy one, and all things of mortal men go to him in time. If it is our fate to meet our end in this

place, I do not believe an old curse will be its cause." Azza's father smiled in a comforting way, "Mammon has a way of making these things known beyond my child's imagination."

Feeling nettled that the enunciation of the horned god had been set on her, and wrongly so in her mind, Azza nearly said so. But before she could, her father dropped his smile and spoke to her. "Pick your three strong men. Include your Bronze Man." Azza felt the rise and fall of emotional drift she had been experiencing since entering the tent drop into a hole of embarrassment. She involuntarily blushed at the mention on Hadaad as "hers," and blushed more when the heat of her skin told her she was unable to control it.

If her father noticed this he did not pause in his speech. "Go, tonight, and set camp at the site of the Gaff. Work in the dark if you can, and dig through the morning. Then sleep through the hottest part of the day, water yourselves and rest. Begin again when Mihr allows it."

Azza nodded and drained her cup. Grateful for the reinvigorating powers of the kaffa, she thanked Zaidao as she stood to leave. Exiting she heard her father say to the others, "Let us make sure the Imala are ready to travel in the morn. Dinka will lead us to the plateau."

Hearing the familiar name Azza decided then on Gozal and Bersh as the two additional men she would select. Both knew the way to the outcropping and had strong backs. As brothers their tents would be near each other, so Azza strode off in that direction. Along the way, she spotted a wayward child playing in the dirt with a stick. She called to him and sent the boy off to fetch Hadaad, telling him to meet at the corral.

Around their fire Gozal and Bersh stood tall at Azza's approach, making laconic greetings. Neither said much as she explained the responsibility that had been lain upon her and that she had selected them to aid her in it. At this decree Gozal entered his tent where his muttering complaints could be heard, while Bersh picked up the long javelin of his reputation and kissed his young wife goodbye. In short order complaints and sweet farewells had ceased and the trio headed to the corral.

His steed already selected, Hadaad was stroking the creature's muzzle, both little more than outlines in the dark. However, she could hear the smile in his voice as he chided her, "So the tall brothers you go to fetch, but to me you send a child?"

Azza flustered at this, feeling it compounded by the number of times the subject of Hadaad had done so recently, and she roughly told him to mount his horse and follow. The brothers chuckled at this, but so did Hadaad, and everyone rode.

Only the light of Moon allowed the four to find the rocky outcropping again, but find it they did. The group took torch and lantern to locate the place Azza had thought would be best for the perch houses. This done, Azza did as she told her father she would – she walked off a large enough space for the nests, 30 more, then walked out a circle that she marked out for the others with small stones on the outer perimeter.

Surveying the field under Moon's divine presence, Azza questioned herself and the wisdom of her idea. The circle was much larger than she imagined it and she doubted there was enough time to dig a trench in its place. Looking on the faces of her companions, she was unable to see any reassurance or doubt there. So she breathed deeply and took the spade from Calandra's tack to set to work. Without much word, not even a grumbling one from Gozal, the men followed suit.

The lives of the Imala were no softer than any of the Ergian tribes, spent mostly hungry and always thirsty, and the hardness this bred in them allowed the quartet to work through the night. They dug away at the loose soil, spreading it about to keep piles along its edge from being noticed, tossing away loose rocks.

They did this until Mihr peeked his head above the horizon and then they continued to dig. Eventually the incandescent desert drove them each to pull a bedroll from their animal's cante bag, used their spade's shaft to prop a blanket up to create shade, and slept upon the rocky ground. They only rose again when the worst of the day's heat had faded, beginning with a simple shared meal of water, rice, and dried meat. Then the four stood and set to digging at the circle again.

On one of the infrequent pauses that Azza took to stand straight and ease the burning muscles of her back she saw on the horizon the spires and forms of the moving Imala. A mass of animals and folk that undulated as it moved forward, the rods, rolls, poles, and everything that constituted their livelihoods moved to and fro as the tribe trekked across the desert on the backs of their beasts.

Examining the ground, Azza was pleased to see the progress on the circle had been great, each of them having dug enough to nearly complete it as intended. She wiped the sweat from her dotted brown brow and took a celebratory drink of water. With the day not yet done she could see the circle would be dug in time for the Gaff and this filled her with equal parts pride and relief. The steady work of her companions showed they shared in at least the former.

A rider broke from the mass of Imala as it approached the plateau, heading more quickly towards the circle. As it drew closer Azza made out the form of Dinka, her head barely rising above that of her horse. Whether it was through prior knowledge of the field or superior skill, Dinka made her way speedily to Azza, causing the younger woman to worry again that perhaps she had made the wrong choice. This did not seem to be Dinka's concern, though, as she stopped her horse near Azza. Her eyes lingered more on the strained and sweating figures of the other diggers than they did on the ground.

Azza stared up at the mounted woman as Dinka eyed the muscled frames of the men. Turning her gaze to Azza, Dinka gave her a lewd wink and smile saying, "The brothers do good work, do they not?"

Despite her fatigue Azza found herself laughing at Dinka's lascivious jest, nodding towards the others to acknowledge its subjects. "The Bronze Man does fine work as well," Azza replied, gesturing towards Hadaad with her chin. This

caused Dinka to lean forward in her saddle and narrow her eyes, as if Hadaad's figure was very distant or bore great scrutiny. Azza laughed again at this exaggerated gesture as Dinka responded, "Indeed."

Driving her horse back in the direction of the migrating Imala, Dinka put her smile away to show her joking was done. "The pit is nearly complete. Good work done by all of you." She pointed towards three grouped camels and a horse near the front of the caravan. "Mahesh wishes to see you."

Azza nodded. "I'll find father as soon as we finish here."

Whatever good humor had been in Dinka dropped out. "He did not say when you were finished."

Azza leaned on the shaft of her spade, considering this. It seemed contradictory to the teachings of her father to leave before a task was complete. But then this had little to do with Dinka so she released the woman from her own task by saying, "I will see to it." It was then Dinka's moment to nod before she rode off.

Azza surveyed the trench and the work that remained to be done, then dug back into the soil. Her father's tent was not yet set, which to Azza's mind gave her time to finish digging with the others. She did not feel right in Dinka's interpretation of her father's orders to leave the work early. Instead she hurried as best she could.

The last shovelful of dirt thrown from the trench, Azza gratefully stepped out of it, walking to Calandra to put away her spade and drink from her water-skin. She thanked the others as she prepared to leave. Gozal muttered something around a mouthful of snack, while Bersh said little but prepared his own horse to find his wife somewhere within the settling caravan.

Hadaad, Azza realized after climbing onto Calandra, followed her. Not accustomed to this shadow, she stared at him and said, "What are you doing?"

"Going with you," was his smiling reply. Through this easy charm Azza thought she could see something more there, a worry the Bronze Man did not usually carry with him.

"I go to see my father," Azza replied in an attempt to banish him. Regardless of their tribe of origin, most men did not enjoy spending time in the presence of their paramour's father.

Hadaad nodded as if this were good news he had been expecting. "Then perhaps he can direct me to my next task. I am, as you know, unfamiliar with the ritual of the Gaff."

Weariness combined with the recently acquired knowledge that everyone, not just the other young women of the tribe, seemed to know about her fondness for Hadaad, made Azza unreasonably irritated. Too tired to express this, but being self-possessed enough to know her prickliness was not Hadaad's intended effect, she tried to smile. Unsure of how successful this was she replied, "Set your tent. Rest. Prepare for tomorrow as if it were a battle." Upon her command the horse she rode pivoted towards the rest of the Imala. "For it is."

Somewhere between the trench and her father's tent she began to regret

those last words. There was truth in them, to be sure, for while weapons would be deadened and no man was meant to kill another, it was still dangerous business. The Hadru'us would attack as angry folk with wounded honor, particularly the likes of Odissan, for his falsehood depended on it. But she wondered, if her words were true could they not be the last ones she spoke to Hadaad?

She shook this maudlin thought from her head and set Calandra at a trot. In the interval between Dinka's visit and finishing the trench, the tribe had begun to set camp, unbent tent poles already high in the sky like skeletal trees marking the place that was now the khiyam. She found her father hooking horsehide in the making of his own tent, continuing to speak and direct others as he did. He did not stop working at her approach, but only said, "Dalal is bringing the perch houses. Go and find him. Direct him to where you have dug." He finished tying the strap he had been working on then faced his daughter, "Return here when you have done this."

At these words Azza felt the long night's labor combine with little sleep to push down on her. She nearly complained. Surely once Dalal was shown the trench, she should be able to rest, but her father's words sounded as if another task awaited her. The exhaustion that caused her to hesitate, though, also kept her from being able to articulate this. She merely stood there until again directed her to go as if the problem had been that she had not heard him.

Feeling perfunctorily dismissed, Azza was prepared to take her irascibility out on her brother, listing and reclassifying why these events were his fault as she tromped through the forming khiyam. While many of her cousins and tribe folk stepped out of Calandra's way without word, Azza found a smile when she located her brother.

Leading a train of camels with the cast's perch houses tethered to them, Dalal was surrounded by a whirlwind of hawks to whom the nests belonged. The youngest of them, unable to leave their dwellings, let out a steady cacophony of unhappy chirping, while all of the birds crapped over everything, particularly Dalal. His own shemagh was pulled over his head to keep the worst of it from him, but he and his camel were covered in the filthy stuff. He stooped in the saddle, glowering straight ahead as if the gods themselves were crapping on him. Azza did not bother to disguise or restrain her smile, for in her mind they were.

Calandra stopped outside of the whirlwind of flying hawks that formed around Dalal and Azza did not urge her forward, instead taking a moment to rest in the saddle and gloat. This was enabled when Aleta landed on the pommel of Azza's saddle. The raptor gazed upon her with brown eyes that seemed, at least to Aleta's human, to be quite satisfied with the course of action the cast had taken upon Dalal. Azza caressed Aleta's feathers and whispered sweet affections to the hawk.

It wasn't long before Dalal noticed the steady shadow that trespassed on his misery. He looked out from beneath his shemagh and his mouth formed a resentful grimace as he saw his sister there outside of the rain of feces. He let his

horse plod along without direction from him for a moment before he spoke to his sister sardonically. "You look well, Azza." He had to repeat himself to be heard over the birds' din.

Azza couldn't help but laugh out loud at this, knowing full well she did not look well, covered in days' worth of hard work's dirt and kohl, her frame bent with fatigue and worry. She still felt better than her brother appeared, though, and she tried to reciprocate his polite lie.

"Hello brother," Azza began, "you look -- " She paused then, straining to locate some pretty falsehood, but laughter burst out of her again as another solid dropping landed on Dalal's head. "You look like shit," Azza laughed around her words, trying to hide both with a hand to her mouth. This only aggrandized her outburst, though, and as Dalal glared at her with ill-humor she couldn't help but have some sympathy for him.

This allowed her to pause in her derisive laughter and take her hand from her mouth to call, "Father has asked me to direct you to where the perch houses will stand."

Dalal bowed his head in grateful surrender at these words and Azza was quite sure he would have lifted his head to thank Amon if it weren't for the danger that presented. Instead he spoke to her loudly saying, "Please, yes. I have never seen the cast this unhappy with a move."

Even witnessing the hawk's punishment of her brother Azza couldn't resist the urge to call back, "Perhaps they sense it was avoidable."

Dalal lifted his head again and even through the shadow of the shemagh that covered his eyes Azza could feel his miserable glare. His mouth screwed up, preparing some retort, but it resolved into a defeated grimace. Rather than replying he took a hand off his camel's reins and made a gesture that invited Azza to lead the way. His sister had the mercy to turn away from her brother before gloating further, hiding her smile as she led him to the pit.

Heavy with burden as they were, and trained to move carefully with the perch houses, each camel (stubborn at the best of times) had to be coached over the trench. This was, for a time, something that Azza was happy to sit upon Calandra and watch Dalal struggle with. But when the reins of the lead camel slipped from his hands and Dalal sprawled into the trench her giggles became a sigh and she dismounted. The nestlings of the cast continued their disconsolate chirping, but the circling adults were kind enough not to defecate onto Azza as she stepped forward to help her brother up. The pair then coaxed the camels over the trench.

The poles of the perch houses were stood up with the shaded nests placed on top of those. The unhappy chirping diminished as each adult landed, calming the nestlings within the roosts as they were completed by Azza or Dalal. Tired and unhappy, each for their own reasons, brother and sister spoke little as they worked. Hours went into the endeavor, Azza again finding herself working as the Son went down. Despite this she found reason to smile from time to time as Dalal was pecked at or exuded upon, while she herself remained unscratched and clean from the cast's droppings.

The last rod embedded in the ground with the final perch house assembled atop it, Azza turned to leave. She thought to say something to Dalal, but found her fatigue too great to form words so she merely signaled her departure with a lackadaisical wave and pulled herself into Calandra's saddle. Her brother, still hidden within the protective confines of his shemagh, waved in return.

Without energy, Azza returned to her father's tent as he had directed. It now stood like the central hill to the khiyam as it always did when constructed. Grateful to at least be near the end of her day, she brushed aside the horsehide entrance and stepped in.

Her father, to Azza's surprise, was alone, finishing off the last of a pot of kaffa. He offered her a cup with a gesture, but she declined, hoping she might be able to rest soon. Instead she said, "We are finished with the perch houses. Each stands in the circle dug this day."

"And now you are here as I wished. Thank you." Mahesh nodded, standing to make his way to one of the many bags that hung from the walls of his tent where he spent a moment searching for something. He produced a heavy chain, almost as thick as Azza's smallest finger, a rope of brass meant to be sturdy and reliable rather than ornamental. As Azza stared at it, though, she thought it appeared both strong and beautiful.

This opinion did not change when she saw the pendant hanging from it, a wide circle of gold with an oval of smooth, green gem in its center. Both gold and jewel glimmered in the firelight despite having been in her father's storage for an unknown, but presumably great, period of time.

Mahesh braided his fingers through the chain, holding it up so his daughter could fully see the amulet. He stepped forward to say, "You will wear this tomorrow."

Held as such Azza recognized the jewelry and its significance. "The Sho'un?" She stepped back then, holding a hand up as if to stop her father from coming any closer to her. "No. Give it to another."

Mahesh stopped, his countenance somehow both disappointed and judgmental. "There is only one of its kind for each tribe and it is my decision who shall wear it. I have chosen you."

"Why?"

Mahesh's expression skewing heavily towards the judgment in it. He spoke in the manner of a man explaining something already apparent. "Because the wearer of the Sho'un may not be touched in the Gaff. It will keep you from harm."

"Then you don't. Or Litsa." The amulet held all the protection her father said but Azza gazed at it as if it carried a pox.

"The old?" Mahesh's expression told his daughter this thought was ridiculous, unnecessary, and foolish, managing to make the idea sound like all three. "The Hadru'us will hardly pay us much mind in tomorrow's melee," he lied. Older Mahesh may have been, but fighting in tomorrow's Gaff was his duty as well as Litsa's, the two far from decrepitude.

"Then another." Azza replied, not considering the falsity in her father's

statement. Despite her enervation from the days' labors she felt an anger light in her then, an anger at the Hadru'us, Odissan, and now her father's attempt to rob her of the opportunity for requital. "I wish to fight." In that moment she would have rather felt the sting of a Hadru'us blade than wear the Sho'un.

"So you shall fight," Mahesh replied, an exaggerated tone of concession in his voice. "The Sho'un will only protect you."

"What is the point to fighting in the Gaff if there is no danger to oneself?" Thinking she understood her father's protective instincts, Azza said, "Put it upon Dalal."

Her father laughed, although Azza sensed it was without humor. "The cause of all this trouble? Should I reward him for bringing the Scorpion tribe down upon us?"

"Then have him wear it as punishment. Rob him of whatever pride he may recover by fighting in the Gaff."

"Dalal must face danger in the Gaff. The Hadru'us will not be satisfied without that." Azza could see real worry in her father's face as he spoke these words, a truth he had left unacknowledged till now, having put his duties to all of the Imala above that of his only son.

"The Hadru'us have sought this fight. Why do we care if they are satisfied?" Folded her arms and stepped back again, putting her nearly at the tent's open portal. "If it displeases them then I say it is a better reason for him to wear it."

"The Gaff is expression of pride and anger, daughter. If they are left unsatisfied their grievance may fester into the real violence the Gaff is meant to prevent. And then more Imala may suffer, as more will suffer if you die tomorrow."

Azza blinked, not comprehending the final portion her father's statement. After considering it for a moment she replied, "If it is your wish to prevent suffering, then place it upon Hadaad. He is our guest, and has healing knowledge. Better for him to remain unharmed."

Mahesh joyed exceedingly, so the Sho'un shook in his hands, reminding Azza very much of Dalal. Which made his next statement stand out all the more. "The wisdom in that suggestion only proves that you are fit to lead."

Azza stared upon her father with bemusement, so he continued. "Your brother is capable, not the lazy fool we tell him he is in the hopes he will be better. And one day he will make a fine second, but he is not as you are." Still seeing confusion in his daughter's eyes Mahesh continued, "When I am gone someone must lead the tribe."

Azza felt her mouth open and no words come out as what Mahesh had said slowly came into her cognizance. Verbally he filled the space Azza left by saying, "And besides this, the Sho'un is not a punishment. It is a protection." He stepped forward again. "And you will wear it."

"Father..." Azza felt her protests dissolve under the casual delivery of such news, her mind filled with a daughterly and tribal pride as well as fear and questions of worth. Some unbelieving part of her mumbled out, "But, Dinka is first. I am not even with the final Moon tattoo."

Mahesh nodded again, his daughter's objections being both wise and prudent. "True. All the more reason for you to wear the Sho'un. You must survive the Gaff (Imala Amon willing, uninjured) if you are to move to the womanly estate after the fight."

Surprise after surprise upon her, the thing that Azza had so recently hoped for now was now offered to her. "I am to receive the mǎḡha?"

"Of course," Mahesh shrugged – this was, after all, the most natural in the order of things. "You must receive the final tattoo of Moon if you are to be the tribe's successor."

Azza felt her skin burn at where she hoped to have the Moon tattoo placed. That hope was so great that Azza could not believe it to be true, not at first, not even from her father. Another protest formed on her lips.

As he sometimes did, Mahesh managed to appear both hurt at her objections and displayed an increased determination. He spoke his final reason, perhaps his most honest reason. "I will not lose both of my children on the morn."

Feeling all of the last days' weariness settle upon her, Azza took the Sho'un from her fathers grasp by covering its green gem in her palm. "I will wear it." Still unable to process all of the implications of his decision she replied, "Tomorrow."

Mahesh nodded modestly as if he had been the one to concede the point. "Zaido has raised your tent. I hope his movement of your personal belongings does not upset you."

Azza bowed in return and departed without further word, her attempts to restrain her conflicting feelings almost bending her strong frame. Mahesh walked with her to the tent exit, a father who wished he could help her carry the myriad of burdens he had laid upon her.

In times to come she would think of that day and those preceding it, how many times she had turned away from Hadaad, worked for silent hours with her brother, and spoke to her father in contrivance. Those regrets and others would stay with her, held to her chest as the Sho'un, its eye like a cold comet that would flare without warning in the desert sky.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Of a Barbarous Gaff and its Results*

Not one of the Imala slept well that night. Azza tried, as many did, but the knowledge of what the coming morn brought kept her awake except for a few moments of fitful sleep. Eventually she sat up off her bedroll and lit her lamp, reaching for an oiled roll of hide that she only touched when in need of solace.

Gently unrolling the animal skin Azza felt the weight of the oblong shape, teasing it out one turn at a time until she saw the gleam of its brass handle and silvery blade. Shorter than a yataghan, nearly as short as the cutlasses she had seen used by the corsairs from the coast, its length was further retarded by the slight curve of its blade. The scimitar had been forged as a weapon for a warrior of smaller stature, such as Azza herself or the mother that had left it with her.

Azza lay the blade down on the rag from which she had unrolled it. Enshrined between the skin that preserved it and the lamp that illuminated it, Azza knelt before the sword, pausing a moment to admire its craftsmanship. She took a second clean cloth from her saddlebag, running it along the blade to wipe the preserving oil from it. Seldom taken out and rarely used, it had not been sharpened in many years, making it a perfect weapon for the Gaff.

The oil removed, Azza began to wrap leather strips about the hilt, twisting each around the haft from the pommel to the guard, creating a pad to help her keep its grip in the heat and sweat of battle. With each turn of the sword she contemplated the meaning of the Gaff, her ties to the Imala, and how her mother bound her to it long after her passing.

She recollected what little she could of her mother: Her kindness and her strength, her ability to comfort the baby Dalal when no one else could, her lessons with the bow, her prayers towards animals about to be slaughtered, and the tenebrific expression of her eyes when it was time to commit those deeds. She had seen that visage once turn fearsome as she had held off four bandits. They had been foolish men from the Five Cities, stupid enough to think a lone desert wanderer with children in tow would be easy victims for the slave markets. It had been this blade Azza now prepared which had flashed in defiance of that expectation, leaving one man dead and another with three fewer fingers. That victory made it that much more painful when a wound received in the skirmish had turned putrescent, infecting her mother with a fever that ended her days.

Azza tied off the last thong around the hilt, wondering why there had been no hawk in the sky that day. She examined the sword from pommel to tip, making sure it was completely ready, more determined than ever the Hadru'us would take as little as possible from the Imala in the Gaff.

Rubbing her eyes, Azza realized she had been quietly weeping, so she dusted her eyes with kohl though it was not yet dawn. More protection went on that would not be used on a good day: She pulled on a short coat of mail, padded in the shoulders and chest for some comfort. Then her robes atop this. All of it was held in place by a wide, supporting girdle that she cinched around her waist. Standing, she slid the scimitar in its scabbard through a loop in the cincture stitched in for just such a purpose.

Over her hair she placed an iron skullcap, tightly wrapping the shemagh over that to hold it in place. All of this on, feeling the additional weight, she was grateful the extra accouterments were not necessary for everyday life in the Erg.

Lastly, as promised, she put on the Sho'un, fastening the amulet around her neck. She considered wearing something to cover it, but quickly discarded the idea. That would be a betrayal of the word she had given her father and could only cause more trouble; if some Hadru'us had the luck to lay hands on her out of ignorance, the Imala must seek revenge.

Azza took her hand away from the talisman. As wronged as she felt by having her tribe dishonestly dragged into this conflict she would rather see it end today.

She considered if the other protection she wore was necessary with the Sho'un. Thinking on her discussion with Hadaad when he came upon her practicing archery, she decided it was; this was a battle, mock though it may be, and what may be protected against should be. Leaving the tent, though, Azza also left her bow and quiver behind.

It did not surprise her that other Imala were already out of their tents as well. Dawn was not far away and no tribesman wished to lose person or property because they were caught unawares. Knowing her father would have been busy late into a night that would have stretched into the morning she didn't seek him now. He had made it clear where her duty lie.

Zaido had placed her tent not far from the trench and Azza set out for it now, only pausing to curse one of the rocks that littered the field after she stubbed her toe on it. While her goatskin sandals were excellent for riding, they offered little protection against hard strikes. She smiled through that nuisance of pain a second later, trying to imagine the Hadru'us under similar circumstances. It might mean the work she and the others had done in moving the khiyam to this place was worth it. She was also thankful it was too dark for anyone to have seen her.

Enough light was beginning to color the sky that Azza could see Hadaad's silhouette near the trench, standing outside of it but facing the perch houses. From a distance she thought he was speaking to someone, but saw no other figure there. Then the serpentine movement of his hands and the sound of many voices halted her. Azza did not know what cantrip or sorcery the Bronze Man was working, but she disliked it enough that she decided to stand away until he

was finished.

Whatever apprehension he was evoking reached its conclusion and Hadaad ceased speaking. He smiled in a way she had seen before when dealing with a stubborn animal he was fond of or some unruly child that was not his, and opened the small pouch he had in his hand. With the other he pulled red kernels, small pellets the same color as the soil of the nearby hills, from the sack with his fingertips. He dusted the trench with them, spreading them around it and in it, moving along the outer rim of the trench as he did.

Still uncertain, Azza moved forward, hoping to find that there was time to talk to the cast, and particularly to Aleta, before the Hadru'us' attack. Closing the distance she paused before the trench. Even as one who dug it she was now not sure where it began or ended, how deep it was, or even if it was where she knew it to be. The earth around flowed across the surface of the ditch to hide its depths in the dim light before the dawn.

Worried that the trench might shift as the dunes sometimes did Azza remained on the outside, pulling on her gauntlets and calling to Aleta. Azza lifted her hand to greet the hawk's talons, knowing which hand to raise and how high to lift it by the change in the air around her and the sound of wings. A gesture of her wrist sent Aleta hopping to Azza's shoulder, her claws gripping the padding there as her eyes scanned everything from here to the horizon for any trouble. Both marched towards Hadaad, a protective glint in their eyes.

Sensing time was short Azza ventured to interrupt Hadaad as he continued to spread whatever he pulled from his small bag. He had, in a short time, made his way around most of the trench.

"What have you done?" Azza asked, certain somehow that Hadaad had not asked permission for whatever it was he was now doing.

Hadaad continued to move about the circle rapidly, only his smile and speech indicating he heard Azza. "A small conjuring, nothing more, to hide the trench from Hadru'us eyes should they decide to strike at the cast."

Uncertain of many things in this regard Azza replied, "Is this in violation of the Gaff?"

"Would not the Hadru'us striking at the cast be a violation of the Gaff's rules?"

A part of her angered by the thought of it, Azza quickly answered, "Yes."

"Then I feel certain that this will not matter." Sensing her true concern Hadaad added, "And it will cause the hawks no harm."

Azza, unable to completely put aside her protective instincts, wondered if this would be true should Hadaad not wish it to be. Mollified by his answer, though, she watched the Bronze Man finish his work. "How do you do this?" She found that it was necessary to walk briskly to keep up with him.

"The Imala speak of the ahl al-ard, Ertha's children, and their cousins of air and fire, the djinn. These vapors have smaller relatives, who live without much notice of us." Finished covering the trench Hadaad tied off the pouch to save the last few remaining caryopses. "I spent last night creating a cordial they favor, in exchange for this small benignity." He gestured to the trench, which remained

but was now difficult to see even when staring directly at it, not unlike heat rising up from the earth would bend the eye around it.

Not trusting this illusion, but consoled by Hadaad, Azza nodded and then jumped across the trench. Feeling no different on the other side she walked the 30 paces to the first perch houses, Aleta still upon her shoulder. Bird and woman looked over the cast and found the lot without its usual morning calm, as if sensing from the tribe that trouble was about to take flight. Azza felt Aleta shift her weight upon her shoulder, moving from one talon to the other. The hawk herself was ready for a fight.

But not on this day, Azza resolved, not this fake fight with its dishonest premise. There was no way to tell Aleta that the men brandishing arms and riding to war were not to be killed, their eyes to remain in their heads, their skin upon their skulls. With another gesture Azza summoned Aleta down to her wrist where she held the hawk close to her face and stroked her feathers with the other hand.

Her affection conveyed, Azza swept her arm out towards one of the perch houses, commanding Aleta to go. The stubborn bird remained, though, staring at Azza in defiance. Azza paused, giving Aleta a moment to come to terms with her present role in Amon's creation, but the hawk remained even when given a second gesture.

"Go home warbird," Azza told her with another twist of her wrist. Instead, though, Aleta leapt into the air and flew towards the horizon, away from the mountains and the ocean beyond them, into the Erg's interior, until Azza lost sight of her.

The girl left behind gave a sigh tinged with anger, at once understanding Aleta's dissatisfaction and feeling frustrated that she could not comprehend, or chose not to, that she must leave out of the battle. The eyes of the cast moved to follow Aleta, only returning to Azza long after the hawk had left her vision.

Lowering her eyes from the horizon Azza found Hadaad looking at her with an uncomprehending concern. The Bronze Man was given to staring at the Imala in this fashion, but most often Azza. "Is all well?" he asked, which he often did when he felt uncertain as to what was happening in Azza's head.

Which, in turn, she did not understand. He knew of the Gaff, the foolishness and the falsity that had brought the Imala to this place, of the once unnecessary effort it had taken to address them, and the toll that still might come. Why, therefore, did he ask?

Nevertheless she chose to answer him in a way that she hoped would quell his concern. "All will be well soon enough." Hadaad nodded, knowing at least what she meant by this, that the Gaff was nearly upon them and the desert would be the Imala's home again when it was done.

"Have you eaten?" Hadaad snapped with a new vigor as he spoke, the studied calm that had been his moments ago now disappearing as he twisted his trunk to look on his person to find something to share. Azza laughed, finding something risible about his movements, the contradiction between the esoteric wisdom and meditation that hid the trench and the man before her transformed

into a boy by his eagerness to please a girl.

Azza had reduced her laughter to a dignified amount by the time Hadaad came up with a few dried strips of meat. She realized by his wide grin that he was playing the fool a bit for her amusement, but still, she did not want to laugh in his face.

Instead she nodded and thanked him, sitting on a nearby, flat-headed rock and inviting Hadaad to do the same with a gesture. She took a piece of the proffered food stuff and offered some of her water in return. Still cold from the night, the water was sweet against the taste of the salted scraps.

Eyes on the horizon, looking for any hint of trouble or Aleta's return, Azza found herself without much of an appetite. Certain she should eat, she was unable to much. Instead she merely nibbled on the dried meat, wondering when her eyes strayed from the horizon how much of Hadaad's conjuring was meant to help the Imala and how much of it was meant for her. These thoughts naturally pulled her eyes to his strange, handsome face but his cryptic smile supplied no answer.

Thoughts of Aleta or Hadaad quickly receded as the thought of the impending Hadru'us attack drove them away again and again. Azza found herself unable to sit, the same nervous energy that had caused her to be suspicious of Hadaad now making her pace and sweat. She tried to think of something interesting or clever to say, to appear nonchalant and ready in the face of unknown danger, but any attempts at speech came out as half-completed utterances.

So she abandoned these: No amount of pretending could keep the nervousness out of her stance. After a time of her pacing Hadaad stood upon the rock they had been sitting, scanning the horizon as well. The discussion reduced to nothing but his occasional asking if she saw anything and her negative reply.

Azza pulled her gloves off to wipe the sweat from her palms. How does one pass the time waiting for a war? To dwell on the possibilities of what could happen, to ponder the losses the individual or the tribe might sustain? These achieved nothing, but only made her wish to hide like a child and fruitlessly wish it away. Dwelling on her anger, her desire to find Odissan and strike him down, to humiliate him for his lies, only conjured up vainglorious dreams, some filled with impossible actions, attempts at which would surely only end in her being forced from the field.

None of these aided her. All were possibilities of the future that nothing could be done about now. So she set them aside, donned her gloves again, put her hand on the hilt of her mother's scimitar, and waited. With vigilance she watched the horizon for the dust cloud that would announce the coming of the enemy.

Azza did not see it first, though, but heard the high ululation of the war cry. She had heard it at previous times, but there was something different about it now; a note of fear permeated the wild oscillations of the battle call. Turning in the direction of the woman's voice sounding the alarm, Azza knew why.

In the east, a rising dust cloud hid the horizon, threatening to blot out the

son as it came closer. Azza felt fear grip her throat: The riders must be at least a dozen score to form such a pale, larger than anyone had suspected the Hadru'us raiding party might be. She stood there, feeling a doom descend upon her as the distance between the rising cloud and the khiyam disappeared, eaten by the hooves of Hadru'us horses and the black clad men who rode them.

Paralysis struck. Uncertainty filled Azza. Her duty was to remain with and protect the cast, but her chest ached with the desire to rush to defend those she loved, to stand with them against the dust storm that now rushed toward them.

Her rational mind, nearly asphyxiated by panic and conflicting desire, managed to gasp out something in between; she watched the war pack to see when it would split. Some of the raiders would ride to the pens to rustle the livestock while the rest drove into the khiyam to strike at center of the Imala. If the Hadru'us meant to strike at the cast then this would happen then as well, a group to break off and head towards her and Hadaad. With this number among the Hadru'us Azza could not keep fear out of her heart when she thought of how many could come this way.

But none did. Azza watched the horde, feeling her stomach clench as it barreled toward the khiyam, her abdomen tightening with every stride the raiding party held. No group or individual broke off towards the cast or even, she noted in bewilderment, to the pens.

As the entirety of the throng crashed into the edge of the plateau the khiyam sat upon, the rise and its boulders produced their intended effect, slowing the Hadru'us so the cloud of dust that followed swept over them. Men and women of the Imala, weapons ready, disappeared into the dust as other tribesmen charged on horses. To Azza, much of what was happening disappeared under the brown, murky depths of the cloud.

Watching what she could of the battle Azza felt, for a moment, an emulation of hope. The Imala riders began to round the invading host, encircling them as others on foot stood between the Hadru'us and the khiyam, waiting amongst the stones and dust. But many, perhaps too many, still stood at the pens, watching as Azza watched, uncertain if they should rush into the fight or stay to defend the livestock. The horrible sounds of clashing weapons, downed horses, and wounded folk filled the air, even to the perch houses. Azza felt her heart rise as Hadru'us men began to walk, limp, and be carried out of the fighting cloud, men who acted with honor and had chosen to lead their horses from the field after being knocked from them. In this confusion and the blight of the cloud, it would be all too easy for any of them to remain.

Azza felt her heart rise to the length the chains on it would allow, though, as defeated Imala began to exit as well. She felt her eyes dilate as time perceptively slowed, watching as the vanguard of the Hadru'us emerged from their horses' cloud, through the Imala that had stood against them. Moving further into the khiyam, they pushed towards the large brown tent at its center. Too far to see except by the aid of a hawk's eyes, Azza imagined she could spy the figure of Odissan, still mounted, at the forefront.

A part of Azza's mind scrambled to understand what was happening in front

of her. The size of the Hadru'us Gaff party was enigmatic enough, but why abandon the prizes of raiding the pens? Why press to the khiyam's center? Did Odissan expect to find Dalal there?

Azza did not realize she had begun to run towards that confusion until she heard Hadaad call her name. This stopped her but for a moment, not turning to him, only exerting the will necessary to cease her fleet feet a second time when she heard her name again.

She faced Hadaad then, her mouth working silently, giving him enough time to tell her what she already knew. "We are to stay with the cast Azza! We cannot leave it unprotected!"

The cast, the birds, the joy and treasure of the Imala, Amon's gift to his People. Azza pivoted between Hadaad and the Hadru'us, somehow certain in the face of his true words that whatever violent treachery Odissan had planned did not, after all, involve the hawks. Her eyes on the khiyam, Azza watched a Hadru'us trample a tent with his horse while a long lash unfurled from his hand, a whip and stinger to strike at a fleeing figure.

"I have to go!" Azza did not turn back to Hadaad as she yelled this to him, only running forward to the Gaff, pulling her scimitar from its scabbard. Sand and dirt came off her heels as she sped, sword out, a part of her wishing she had not listened to that stupid, stupid man and left her bow in her tent. She certainly did not listen to him now as he called after her.

The distance from the perch houses to the khiyam's center, which had seemed so short mere hours before, now stretched out before Azza as though the parched ground contained all of the Erg itself. That eternity only passed after much pounding of Azza's feet and when her breath burned. Some Hadru'us spotted her approach, but took heed of the Sho'un and rode after others.

Crossing the line of first tents Azza saw that the murky brown dust that still clouded the air had already been joined by the cries of the afraid and wounded. She felt her heart rived from her chest as she sped past a woman clutching a screaming child, both marked with crimson slashes given to them by Hadru'us' whips.

Run on she did, though, past the tents and those fleeing Hadru'us hooves, seeing more than one Imala lay on the ground rather than walking from the field. Witnessing the Hadru'us wage such a savage Gaff she struck at the rump of the first horse she came across, slapping it hard with the flat of her blade. The disciplined mount did not throw its passenger, but cantered its black-clad rider towards her, legs kicking and churning up dust.

Taken from whatever he had intended as his next victim, the Hadru'us glared at Azza from underneath his turban. Either not seeing or ignoring the Sho'un, he raised a padded mace to bring down on her. Spotting a downed figure on the mount's other side, Azza skirted around the gamboling steed, dodging its hooves and the swings of the cudgel, quicker than a desert wind-devil. She disappeared in and out of the clouds of grime, only appearing long enough to drag the downed Imala behind a stoney outcropping.

His breath still coming from his bleeding mouth, Azza trusted Amon that the

rescued man would be safe enough. She dove back into the open and returned to her sprint into the khiyam.

The sound of hooves behind her told Azza's keen ears the angered Hadru'us rider followed. Dodging between rocks and through the cloud the trampling became louder still, the rider displaying the tenacity of his tribe's namesake. Feeling his eyes upon her, she plunged into a particularly turbid portion of the dust filling the air then ran straight until she nearly collided with a stone that stood to her shoulders. Swerving around it she continued her sprint on the other side. An equine scream from behind told her the animal and rider's fate.

In the heart of the battle Azza was no longer sure of her direction, pandemonium all about. The constant clash of men and animals and rising dirt made it impossible to find her way. Until, that is, she stumbled from the opaqueness of the soiled air to come upon the swath the Hadru'us had cut through the heart of the khiyam. Cleared of any of her tribe or their opponents, the earth churned up amongst the litter of rocks cut a path through the ruin of the waylaid settlement that Azza followed.

His face hidden by the shemagh, Azza still recognized Dalal, his size setting him apart from the other combatants that fought the Hadru'us. She paused long enough to watch him unseat an unlucky enemy with the tip of his staff, burying the other end in the ground to catapult the man from his horse as he might a sack of grain from a camel's back.

His shemagh torn away, Azza saw Dalal smile with a fierce pride, kneeling to strip the weapons from his downed opponent. Feeling every ounce of her ready to lash out like one of the Hadru'us' whips, Azza stood with her back against her brother, ready to defend against any that would try to efface him.

Coming up with a jeweled dagger from the belt of his fallen opponent, Dalal kicked sand on him, cursed him, and demanded he leave the field with the shame of his tribe upon his back. Seeing his sister he held up his prize for her examination and declared, "They'll not get this back!"

Azza nodded curtly, but saw what her brother did not: No Hadru'us waited to step into the breach left by their defeated cousin, or hovered about to an issue an angry challenge to Dalal. If the riders did not push to find her brother, to meet and castigate the son of the Imala, for what did they search?

Her eyes followed the wake of the Hadru'us host, its ruin continuing past where Dalal stood and on into the khiyam. With the cries of humans and animals in the air, a fearfulness for her father set itself upon her, and she ran after it as if she might catch it by the tail. Somewhere behind her she heard Dalal give a throaty, glory-filled laugh before almost certainly setting off to find another opponent.

The dark brown mound of her father's tent was large enough that it was visible from aways even in the floating detritus of the Gaff. Azza felt the growing certainty of her fear take deeper root in the hard soil of her imagination as she approached. Downed animals, camels and horses belonging her to father's cavalcade, surrounded it. Not victims of the plateau's uneven ground or the blinding of the dust, each lay on their side, shafts of arrows protruding from their

carcass.

A dozen or more Hadru'us riders surrounded the tent, no longer converging but riding a barrier circle around it, keeping any Imala from moving past them or seeing much of what transpired beyond. As leader of the tribe Mahesh would have waited here to direct the tribe's warriors to where they were needed most, but now he was trapped, unable to call for aid.

Azza felt her hands stiffen in her gauntlets, clawing for her absent bow. Between each rounding horse she could see flashes of her father, yataghan in hand, surrounded by his downed animals and retainers. Before him, dismounted and standing in the morning Sun, was Odissan, holding the coil of his whip in one hand and a viciously curved long dagger in the other. As horse after horse drove by, Azza could see the two speaking, interrupted only by Odissan intermittently lashing out at Mahesh, snapping the stinger of his black whip in attempts to make the older man dance. Mahesh side-stepped each crack, buying time for a rescue that none of the gods saw fit to grant.

Azza tore her gaze from her father back to the horses, pacing each, the riders were too intent on what was happening within the circle to notice her. The Hadru'us' discipline was enough to keep their horses nearly head to tail, but Azza could see the younger man use his twisted whip to keep her father from approaching close enough to strike with his yataghan. Each shuffling side-step her father made pushed him close to the outer circle of beasts where he must dodge a blow from one of the riders. In the sporadic flashes between each galloping horse Azza recognized the tactics the Hadru'us used for readying a superior animal for the kill.

Mahesh was not an animal, but a man, a child of Amon, and his desire for peace did not mean his weakness. He ably displayed this by sacrificing his left arm to catch Odissan's whip, the tail of his enemy's strikes wrapping around his forearm, slicing through his robes to leave a bloody trail encircling it. Surprised, the younger man was pulled from his feet as Mahesh dragged him closer while pulling himself away from the flurry of weapons that rode around them both.

Kicking Odissan while he sprawled in the dirt kept him there as Mahesh raised his sword, yelling something to his opponent that Azza would never hear, but certain it was a call for surrender. Hand held up from his prostrated position she was also certain that relinquishment was forthcoming till one of the riders broke from the circle to charge into its midst. Splitting the two fighting men, the rider slammed the flank of his horse into Mahesh, knocking him to the ground and trampling the whip, still wrapped around Mahesh's forearm, pummeling him to the earth with each hoof that landed upon it.

Odissan, dagger still in hand, raised himself and staggered towards Azza's father, holding the knife in such a manner that left no mystery to his intent. But the circle was broken now, the horses in disarray, and Azza charged forth with her mother's scimitar in hand, prepared to lend her father the aid they had sought to deny him. Closing the distance, though, she saw her father's eyes recognize her and wish her away. In those eyes Azza saw the reflection of a woman who regretted bringing her children with her on a simple errand of

retrieving water.

Azza lowered the blade as she finished her charge, instead smashing the gauntlet's brass studs into the back of Odissan's head. The vibration of her fist colliding with his skull traveled up Azza's forearm, rattling her bones from her clenched fingers all the way to her teeth. In the trueness of her strike she saw something globulous launch itself from the other side of Odissan's face.

His body lulled away from her, falling as a man who has no will. He collapsed near her father, whose expression was equal parts relief and terror. Splayed out there, the unnatural curvature of his head and his blood pouring out upon the desert's sands told Azza a dreadful truth: Odissan was not wearing his iron skullcap.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Of Decisions, Provisions, and a Father's Love*

The corpse of Odissan was born back to his tribe with nearly the same speed and urgency his living presence had been conveyed to the assassination attempt of Mahesh. Azza knew there would be denials: Odon would speak only of the loss of his child and not of any knowledge he may have had of Odissan's treachery, the Hadru'us witnesses stating he had been slain by a blow from behind while in honorable combat with the Imala leader. She knew this because her father told her.

"This will mean war," Mahesh stated from the stool in front of his tent where all of this had transpired. And Mihr's travel across the sky had not yet marked the midday hour.

Hadaad crouched at Mahesh's left side with his Gramarye, a satchel of tinctures and pastes that he used in tending to the elder's many wounds, but particularly to the ragged flesh of his abraded left arm. The castigating speech Mahesh gave to his daughter was sporadic, interrupted as it was by Hadaad's medicinal administrations and the constant talk of happenings and questions that came from other Imala in the aftermath of the Gaff. He broke in his speech to Azza frequently to listen to such, to provide direction and to cringe in pain when Hadaad would swab a particularly sensitive portion of one of his injuries. In this manner news of Odissan's death, Mahesh's wounds, and how he received them were already spreading through the tribe.

"He would have killed you," Azza said quietly, controlling the anger in her voice. She had hoped for some satisfaction from the Gaff, a pummeling of Odissan that would have sent him in flight to his own dishonest father. But now the perfidious thirteenth son of Odon was proving to be more trouble in death than he was in life.

"Amon's children move the stars above us towards Spring," her father reflected. "He could not pick a better time for war." Azza was uncertain if her father referred to Odon or Odissan. She supposed it must be the former as it mattered little to the latter now.

"The size of the Hadru'us raiding party," Hadaad said without raising his eyes from his sanguinary work, "would suggest that was their intent all along." Both father and daughter, displeased at their family dispute being interrupted, turned to him to see if they might need to include him in their sparring. Hadaad chose

wisely not to add more, instead intent on preparing a needle and thread.

"They came here to murder you," Azza pointed out again, feeling the vice of those who are tortured by their good intentions. Her father, rather than showing any signs of grace, was stern of his daughter's rescue.

"And if they had?" Mahesh paused to make a quick inhalation as Hadaad pushed the needle into his arm. "Men die in wars, even ceremonial ones," he added through the pain.

Azza thought of Dalal in the Gaff, his anger and gratification, and considered her own grief should her father have been slain in such a foul betrayal. "Then Dalal would have insisted on revenge." Azza paused, considering this further. "The Hadru'us would have had their war."

Mahesh gritted his teeth as Hadaad wound the needle and thread through the wound with all of the passion of an exacting tailor. "Litsa would have discouraged him from this."

"I would have forbade it," said Litsa, face streaked with kohl and sweat, clothes covered in dirt, blood, and only the gods knew what else. She stood by one of the dead camels that now marked the circle that would have been Mahesh's grave. Beside her a young girl, Karida, held a stool, nearly as half as tall as her. The seat marked the importance of the conversation, for neither Mahesh or Litsa would sit on the ground and it occurred in open air where any member of the tribe could hear.

Litsa spoke to Azza as Karida placed the stool. "And I would have made you both listen."

Her aunt's callosity had always made it difficult to hold affection for her, but Azza felt a near hatred boil in her now. "To let our father's murderers go without punishment?"

Taking her seat, Litsa coolly replied, "To act with his wishes for the preservation of the Imala."

"Where is Dalal?" Mahesh asked wearily.

"Celebrating," Litsa replied in a tone that suggested no one should be surprised by this. "With others," she added, as if to lessen the offense by its association with many violators.

Mahesh gave a mighty sigh, rolling it out with his patience like a long and well-used carpet. "The Imala did, after all, just repel a mighty Hadru'us horde." He watched Hadaad seam up his arm with a passivity brought on by great fatigue, only punctuated by moments of teeth-gritting pain.

"They only celebrate as they do not yet know the truth of the Gaff's outcome," Litsa replied, grating on Azza further by maintaining the levelness of her tone. "Or its future illations."

Mahesh pondered the darkened sand that marked where Odissan had fallen. "Everyone will know soon enough." Long moments passed in silence as the trio contemplated Odissan's blood, the only noise being Hadaad's diligent work and the Imala who stood nearby, whispering truth and rumors.

Finished with stitching Mahesh's arm, Hadaad tied off the last of the needlework. He stood, taking from the satchel a small ceramic jar, no bigger

than the palm of his hand. "Put this over your wound, twice a day," he handed the container to Mahesh, who took it with his right hand. "The balm will aid in healing and keep the pestilence away."

Mahesh looked at Hadaad, perhaps for the first time in front of Azza, with affection. "If you had only been here when Amira had fallen."

Facing away from her Azza could not see Hadaad's expression, but he laid a still bloody hand upon her father's shoulder. "Arrogance undid Odissan. If he had taken the true estimate of his task he would have arrived better equipped and be here with us now."

With that Hadaad turned and left, pointedly, it seemed to Azza, without acknowledging her. She exerted some control to keep her eyes unrolled and her hands away from her face. She had angered everyone, it appeared, by saving the life of her father.

After Hadaad had strode some distance away, Litsa asked, "What will we tell Odon when he demands compensation for his son's death?" She spoke loudly enough that a group of Imala overheard and paused in their work to remove the carcasses around Mahesh's tent.

Mahesh took a long inhalation, his eyes widening as if he might see into the future. Instead of prognosticating, though, he joked without tone, "That he has less one child to feed?" No one laughed.

Litsa deflated the humorless jest with, "A child he had already spent water and grain raising to a killer. A man such as Odon would be less angry if he had lost a scorpion." Perched, on the stool, Litsa's concern and severity caused her to appear older than her years. Next to her, Karida's eyes went wide with horror as she imagined such a man as Odon and what it would like to be raised by him. A similar expression cascaded out to the youth in the crowd gathering around them, unaffected they might have been by the stench of dead animals.

"True," Mahesh replied, gazing upon his own daughter with eyes that sometimes saw only a little girl. Putting aside his nostalgia he began to gingerly wrap his wounded arm in his robe, using it as a sling. "Odon will most likely make demands that cannot be met. Or may not waste time with words. He may begin sending forth raids immediately."

"Raids?" Litsa's voice pitched higher than she intended, spiking with incredulity. She took control of herself, glancing about her as if she might have impugned her own dignity with such an outburst. "You witnessed the size of the Gaff. Odon has raised a horde. Why would he not bring it to our doorstep?"

"They could enslave us all!" A man standing near did no one any favors by exclaiming this.

Stepping out from the gathering Imala, Hedeon joined the others in giving the fearful man a reproachful glare. Even without full knowledge of what was being discussed, anyone could smell the dread growing in the air. But Imala did not give in to such primordial bursts of panic and the elder's austerity was an example of this to all present.

Hedeon surveyed the crowd of Imala then moved his deep brown eyes to Litsa and Mahesh. "Why are the Hadru'us returning?" he asked, clearly, loudly,

and simply.

Mahesh suspired with fatigue, aware that despite his wounds and many days without much rest this was a story that would need to be repeated many times. So he called for kaffa to be brought and prepared.

Azza bottled her exasperation, knowing full well the talking would begin in earnest now. Ceaseless speech and yelling that would accompany the elders' discussion of the Imala's fate as the rest of the tribe debated around them. The most salient questions and concerns would boil out of the Imala cauldron of discourse to be put to the elders. They, in turn, would argue and dispute them until some course of action had been settled upon.

But Azza could see from the dead livestock around her father's tent that Odon would command his People as one. With the fear of the Hadru'us long gone beyond the trailing dust of their horses, Azza still held the size of the Hadru'us Gaff party in her mind's eye. Raising such a large force would have taken generations, bringing up tribe folk like Odissan from children to warriors. Something other Ergian tribes would have taken note of over the course of years.

Quicker for the Hadru'us to swallow smaller tribes into its own or hire outside mercenaries from one of the Five Cities. To inspire the loyalty necessary to do either of those would have taken much gold and a force of will that none of the Imala had guessed the Hadru'us possessed.

Certainly Odissan could not have done this on his own, so the youngest son's designs on Mahesh made clear Odon's intent. The Hadru'us had always had ways to enrich themselves: Their reputation as hard warriors lent itself to protecting the cross desert caravans for coin. Or if the merchant princes of the Five Cities displeased them, or if it were simply more profitable, to loot those same caravans. It was clear to Azza now that Odon was no longer satisfied with the Hadru'us role in the commerce of Umayuud. He wanted control of all the Erg and only Amon knew how many of the smaller tribes had already fallen to his ambition.

Other tribes were not Azza's concern though. The Imala were. The killing of Odissan, even unintentionally, provided Odon with the justification he required to assault the Imala with impunity, without penalty or recourse from the remaining desert tribes. Odon would have expected the killing of Mahesh to result in a like reaction from the Imala, for the leader of the Hadru'us did not anticipate Litsa's willingness to sacrifice her brother for the good of her tribe. Azza brooded on her aunt's chosen path while the Imala debated, saying nothing until she turned to leave.

"Daughter, where are you going?" Mahesh asked before she moved away from the great colloquy of the tribe. He was barely able to make himself heard over the growing volume of all of the Imala debating blame, fate, and the future.

"To my tent," Azza spoke the truth, then paused to formulate her lie. "I'm weary and have nothing to add here." Mahesh stared pointedly at his daughter; Azza was unsure if it was with jealousy or irritation. After a moment, though, he released her with a wave of his hand. Making her way from the gathering, the only thing that lingered on her was the mixed stares of her tribefolks' admiration

and disapproval.

The thick of the deceit, Azza knew, would be in avoiding others while she prepared. The debate would attract most Imala to Mahesh's tent, but there would be others who would seek her out, to solicit her account of what she had seen and what she had done. Fortunately, Zaido had placed her tent. Since no one had seen her erect it very few would know where to readily find her.

Saddles, rations, water, animals – all of these things she would need in order to set out. The animals would be the last thing to gather since they would attract the most attention. Water, to start then, for no trip into the Erg would be long survived without it.

With Casiah, an old woman too deaf and blind to join the debate, she found the goat fat she needed to return to her tent and begin preparing her water-skins. There she removed the spigots and greased the interior of the bags, a necessary step to prevent them from leaking on the long journey. She would take five bags, three large and two small, but would only take one full, not wishing to take anymore water than she needed from the Imala. She knew a place to fill the other skins and intended to stop there for other purposes as well.

She continued in this until she heard her brother calling for her. More angry at Dalal than she was at any of the Imala, perhaps excluding herself, she continued her work and ignored him. But the calls from her brother grew more and more near until she knew he stood outside her tent. While Zaido may have placed it, each Imala's tent was their own piece of the khiyam and her brother recognized hers though assembled by other hands.

"Azza?" She could tell by Dalal's voice he had been imbibing, either the fermented milk of the camels or wine someone had brought forth before the true conclusion of the Gaff became known. She ignored him, continuing to rub the goat's grease into the crevices and seams of the water-skin.

"Azza," her brother repeated, no longer a question or yell, certain somehow that she was there. Receiving no response he asked, "Sister, what have you done?"

Azza, hands still coated in fat, burst out of her tent before she knew she was moving, to stand in front of her brother. "What have I done?" Her voice raised as she repeated the question, "What have I done?"

At a different time, Dalal's shrinking from the fumes of his sister might have been humorous, but only the standing rocks of the desert plateau witnessed it now. Azza reached up to slap him, leaving an oily palm print on his face. "I saved our father from the murderers you unleashed upon him!" Dalal remained still, staggered into silence while Azza continued with, "And now they will use this as an excuse to wage war! Not a Gaff, not a raid to steal livestock, but a war, with Imala dead and tents burning." Azza stopped talking, catching her breath, unaware until now that so much of her mind had been imaging the consequences of this morning's events.

The angry defenses of her brother began to rise in his eyes, but as Azza prepared to fight him his ire changed, not to the aggravation or accusations Azza was expecting, but to something else. "Then it's true," he replied. "You killed

Odissan."

The shower of tears that came from Azza was as unexpected to her as unsurprising as it was to Dalal, the two having comforted each other in their most private moments since the death of their mother. He embraced her, holding her strongly to his large frame while she held on tight in the manner of one who is preparing to let something go.

"While I was out hunting glory," Azza felt her brother speaking into her shemagh, reminding her of the iron underneath she had not yet removed. "While I was out hunting glory," he repeated to move past his own tears, "you raced to our father in time to save him."

Dalal held his sister to the folds of his robes. Despite the dust of the day and the sweat of his exertions, Azza found comfort there, already missing him. Eventually the sadness of the pair subsided enough that they released one another. Azza reached up to wipe the tears that divided the grease on Dalal's cheek. "This was not your fault. The Hadru'us would have found some reason, at some point, to bring the war they wished to us. Better now than later."

Dalal doubted the truth in those words and it showed on his face. Instead of disputing them, though, he felt the greasy trace on his cheek and examined his sister's hands. "What will we do?"

"I will go to our uncle's caravansary." Azza dropped her eyes and hands from Dalal. "I can take enough water to make that journey then refill my skins there."

Dalal thought of their uncle, Hasin, and his fortified inn with its oasis. He had long ago abandoned the Imalas' transitory path, content to live within the walls of his courtyard. There he negotiated and bartered for the Imala in all of the things their desert ways could not provide them while collecting coin from travelers in need of safe haven. Like others in the tribe, both brother and sister had spent a few summers there helping keep it so. A fine place, yes, but Dalal was certain his sister could not stay there forever. "Then what?"

"Then," Azza looked into her brother's eyes again, giving voice to her intent for the first time to another, "I will tell him I have been exiled from the Imala. The crossroads of the caravansary will take the news across the Erg." She paused, watching her brother's reaction. "The Hadru'us will lose their pretense for war if Odissan's murderer is no longer in our flock."

Dalal stared at his sister in disbelief. "And leave you alone, in the desert, where they can take their revenge upon you. Azza, they will hunt you down."

"Or I can stay," Azza replied, trying to sound like the eldest, "and the Hadru'us will return, with the horde from today and perhaps even more." She caught Dalal's eyes in her own, "And they will murder man, woman, and child, burning everything in their path. They will do this until the Imala are no more than slaves to be sold in the markets of the Five Cities."

Dalal tried to look doubtful of this, but his visage could not hide the fear this brought to his heart. "We are the children of the hawk. Amon would not allow this."

"There are other gods than Amon and no one knows what games they play." Azza felt herself touched by cold in the heat of the desert's day, unsure of why

she said this but feeling its portent. "Other tribes have been lost to time and the Erg. I do not intend to be the cause of this as the Imala's fate."

"You are not the cause," Dalal replied. "If anything the fault lies with me. I should go."

"You did not kill Odissan. Your leaving will accomplish nothing." Azza watched Dalal's burden of guilt grow as the truth of her words set in. "Perhaps," she added, trying to find a way to assuage his pain, "if I go to the other tribes and beseech them directly, explain to them the Hadru'us treachery, perhaps they would agree to aid us." Azza knew this would be a fool's errand: No tribe would ally against the Hadru'us with conflicting testimony of Odissan's death standing in the way.

But Dalal nodded his assent. "Yes, with other tribes beside us we could defeat the Hadru'us." His head moved with increased tempo as the idea gained favor in his mind. "You will need flour, milk, kaffa, at least two--" Dalal stopped, as someone does when they realize they are being listened to when this is not their wish.

He stared behind Azza and she turned to see what quieted him. Hadaad stood beside her tent and she understood Dalal's silence: His sharp features appeared even darker in their verdigris crevices, a restrained anger clouding his face.

"I warned you to stop." Hadaad spoke to Azza, ignoring Dalal. "And you ran from the cast anyway. I called to you three times and each time you ignored me. Now you leave your tribe, to throw yourself into exile, without saying a word to me."

Hadaad paused, somehow becoming more distant even as he stepped closer. "How little you must think of me."

Azza had not considered Hadaad's heart and its apparent fragility since she had run from the perch houses. The knowledge of this lent truth to his words and she felt her conscious grow heavy gazing upon his injured countenance. Quickly, though, whatever tenderness she felt for him was trampled by all of the competing emotions in her heart and in her head. She could speak to the rightness of her choice, how if she remained with the cast her father would have surely perished. But Hadaad, in an uncomfortable echo of her elders, would only point out that doing so had endangered many more. Who among even the gods could say if her saving one man had been good or ill for the Imala? That one man, though, was her father.

Certain that Hadaad, as alien as he might be, must understand this, Azza collected her anger for it was lighter and would be easier to travel with than regret. "This has very little to do with you," she reminded him of his place. She rushed to finish before his pain softened her heart. "Is your ego so fragile that in the midst of all of this, that I did not listen to you is what gives you pain?"

"Well," Hadaad took a moment, his anger dissipating a bit, before responding with the honesty she adored in him, "I am a man."

Dalal laughed out loud at this, surprising both Azza and Hadaad. Like the jest that had started all of this, his humor always extended from an

uncomfortable place of truth, and now it caused his frame to shake with mirth. Azza herself, faced as she was by a labyrinth of acerbic choices, still smiled at Hadaad's half-jest and its reminder of why she was fond of him.

Taking advantage of the siblings' speechless moment Hadaad continued with, "You will make it up to me by allowing me to go with you."

Dalal ceased laughing. While Azza suspected that he was truly objecting to the idea of her traveling with a man who she was fond of but unrelated to by blood or marriage, what he said was, "You? What good will you do? You hardly know anything of the Erg. You barely survived your travels from the North when guided by our cousins."

Hadaad looked at Dalal for the first time since his approach, "Then it is good I will be traveling with Azza." Taking affront to Dalal's glare he continued with, "And I have skills and talents that are useful. Ask your father."

Behind her, Azza felt Dalal's silence harden into a cold indignation, making her glad she stood between the two. Eyes still upon Hadaad she asked, "You are likely only to find your death out in the Erg with me, Man of Bronze. There's no glory or songs to be sung for those perish amongst the dunes and wastes."

"Then it's good that traveling in a pair increases our likelihood of survival. And I do not think I'll care much for glory or songs when I am dead." He smiled at his own jest, but Azza felt a deep sorrow in him that he only alluded to with, "My people come from Augelmir, born from his bones, after he was slain in battle by his brother Ymir. There is nothing waiting for me when I die. Better to live well."

Anger still lingering in his voice Dalal spoke, "You'll not find that traveling in the Erg is living well."

"Hard living may also be living well," Hadaad spoke to Dalal, pushing past the young man's acrimony. "And as you say, the northern edge of the Erg gives way to more fertile steppes. If Azza and I make it there then my people may provide us sanctuary. Once safe, we may also find the aid to free the Imala from the Hadru'us threat."

Parsing out his meaning, Azza did not understand the motive so asked, "Why would the Bronze Men do this? Or aid the Imala?"

Hadaad smiled, his charm meant for Azza but dangerously close to Dalal. "It's simple – I'll just tell them that every girl in the Imala tribe is as brave and as quick and as beautiful as you."

Caught between the warmth of Hadaad's flattery, the relief that she may not have to travel alone, and Dalal's rising fraternal possessiveness, Azza decided the first two outweighed any concern she might have about the last. She turned to her brother. "You cannot go with me and leave father here with no child at all. Help us prepare."

The vortex of emotion that was every Imala's day revealed itself on Dalal's face, his own violent actions from the Gaff only showing him his own impotence. This internal conflict resolved itself with a nod and a sad lowering of his head.

Raising it again, he brought his hand up also, to point at her waist. "Give me

the sword."

Reflexively, Azza's hand went to the scimitar. "Why?" She was hurt that her brother might take possession of the blade for the tribe, not letting her carry this small piece of her mother and the Imala with her.

Dalal continued to hold out his hand. "To travel far in the Erg in only a pair while others hunt you is a dangerous prospect. You'll need a sharp blade. I'll see to that for you."

Azza felt she might begin shedding tears again to find her assumption about her brother's intent so reversed. Hesitation gone, she untied the blade and handed it to him, embracing him as he took it. From his bearing Azza could tell that he was embarrassed by such a display in front of another, but that only caused her to hold him tighter before releasing him. "Thank you," she said quietly to keep her voice from cracking.

Dalal, still ruffled, smiled shyly and untangled himself from her. "I'll see what else I may find that could be useful in your travel." As if he required this pretense to ask he said, "When will you go?"

"Tonight," Azza found herself wiping a new tear from her cheek despite herself. "I--"

"We," Hadaad interrupted from behind her.

A small smile joined Azza's tear at this and she continued with, "We will go to the pens after dark to gather the animals."

Dalal nodded. Then considering this more fully he said, "I will have your camels ready for you."

Azza began to protest, but her brother just shook his head. "You will chose lesser mounts, not wishing to take better ones from the tribe. But to survive the Erg you will need the best. At least one that gives milk and a male that you may stud for trade."

Finding it was her turn to become aggravated, Azza was unsure if she was more irritated about her brother patronizing her selection of camels or the assumption she would be unable to endure without superior ones. Her resistance, however, was cut off by Hadaad placing a hand on her shoulder. "There is much to do," he said. "Let Dalal take this from us." In front of her, Azza watched Dalal give Hadaad a reluctantly approving glance.

"Very well," Azza replied, echoing at least her brother's reluctance. "We will meet you after nightfall." Dalal nodded. Then, as if he were afraid to say more, muttered a farewell and left.

Watching him go, Hadaad spoke from behind Azza. "You should spend a few hours being true to the words you gave your father and use them to rest."

Azza let out a quiet, bitter laugh, feeling the fatigue upon her but knowing she would be unable to sleep. "I can rest when I am away from the khiyam and I know the Imala are safe."

Certain that this was yet another piece of good advice from him to her that Azza would ignore, Hadaad touched her shoulder to draw her stare from her retreating brother to him. "Try," he said simply.

His tone, though, bordered too close to a demand and Azza was uncertain

how good the advice was. "Your concern is welcome, but your command is not." She fitted him with her gaze completely. "I thank you for this Hadaad, and welcome your wisdom on the journey. But it is my journey."

Hadaad let his disappointment at her contrary response show. Instead of speaking to that he responded, "Very well. What is it you wish me to accomplish between here and the dark?"

Azza spent little more than a second thinking on this and then began a list of what Hadaad would do. This was far from the first time she had traveled into the Erg, even for long periods, and the provisions needed were rote in her mind. When she was finished, Hadaad simply repeated, "Very well," and left to set about his assigned duties.

Now without Dalal or Hadaad, the tents of the Imala empty around her, Azza felt a premonition of the loneliness that would be her journey. Every long expedition before had always been a sojourn, with her intent to return to a welcoming family. Now, though, the potential of returning seemed dim, at best, and the likelihood she would not darkened her heart. Feeling this might overpower her, Azza moved from underneath its shadow by setting about the tasks she needed to complete in order to begin.

Moon's many children brightly colored the desert sky by the time the trio met at the pens. Preparations for such a journey could take long and their need to be clandestine only extended this. The Imala colloquy had ended and most of the tribe were now asleep in their tents.

From her back and forths across the khiyam, gathering dates and cornmeal and the like, Azza had heard what the gathering had decided. Emissaries would be sent to the Hadru'us to deliver the Imala testimony as to what had transpired in the Gaff and offer condolences and compensation to Odon for the loss of his son. Azza prayed to Amon and whatever gods would listen that they would learn of her departure before this. She was uncomfortably certain the ambassadorial fate of the envoys would be short lived.

Azza found Hadaad in the dark on her way to the pens, carrying two sacks of yet more supplies. Both of them walked together, two Imala chatting in the night being more innocuous than one sneaking through the khiyam alone.

When they finally weltered through the darkness long enough that Dalal emerged from its folds Azza could see that her brother held the reins of five camels; two loaded with the supplies they had previously brought and two for riding, one to spare. Azza intended to ride Calandra to the caravansary, but she would free the horse there. She wished to ride her one last time, but the mare would not survive the long, exsiccating travels beyond her uncle's inn.

This thought dropped from her mind, though, as they came close enough to see Dalal in detail. His expression, which Azza certainly expected to be as sad as she felt, was long and drawn, appearing more suffering than doleful. "I'm sorry Azza," was the only utterance he managed to get out before her confusion was swept away by the appearance of her father stepping out from the night.

A strong young man he had grown to be, but there was still a piece of Dalal that was frightened of his father as a boy is afraid. In that moment of

astonishment Azza felt it to; a tremor that made her feel like a small child.

"Do you think me a fool?" Mahesh asked, the restrained anger in his voice more unsettling than all his yelling. "That I would not notice my children, the two major players in the drama the Imala find ourselves engulfed, were missing?" Azza felt the supplies she carried slip from her shoulder, searching for an excuse to restore his usual paroxysm.

Before she or any of the others could find a reply Mahesh looked to Dalal and said, "Go to your tent. Your Aunt Litsa awaits you."

The dark could not cover the blanch of Dalal's face. His jaw went slack. For a moment Azza thought he might beg to be released from this fate. Instead, he lowered his head and said, "Yes father." He dropped the reins to the camels, one of which croaked out into the darkness. Which direction his tent was in Azza did not know, but he walked past her, handing her the sword. "For all the good it will do you now."

She numbly took it while her father pointed at Hadaad. "And you – leave the Imala khiyam. You are no longer welcome here."

Had Azza not been too stunned to do so she would have gasped at this pronouncement. To toss Hadaad from the khiyam in this fashion, to exile him with so little proof or process, flew in the face of both the debt Mahesh owed him and every law of hospitality.

Hadaad, however, accepted this without comment. He took the sacks Azza had dropped and walked off into the night.

The noise of Hadaad's feet on the sand gradually faded out into the night leaving father and daughter in silence. Only then did Mahesh stepped forward. His face was not the mask of angry rectitude Azza had expected, but bore the hard imprint of sadness upon it. He took her by the shoulders, a hand on each, and said, "We will find a way to bring you home."

Astonished, Azza found her mouth working but no noise escaping it. "I pray to Imala Amon that he and you will be able to forgive me, that should anything happen to you that I may forgive myself." He brought her to his chest, nearly knocking her breath from her with the embrace. "But you have found the right way, the only way, to save your kin."

Chin over his shoulder, Azza stuttered, "But you said--"

"I know what I said," Mahesh released her gruffly, anger and tears mixing on his face. "Can a man not change his mind? Should a leader not do so if the righteousness of the occasion calls for it?" Mahesh's anger was replaced by a reluctant pride, although the tears were still there. "If you had only stopped Odissan then his men would have murdered both of us." He let out a controlled exhalation that threatened to turn into a sob. "Now it seems I will lose you anyway."

"What of Hadaad?" Azza stared out into the night where the Bronze Man had last tread, asking the question more out of a sense of confusion than anything else.

Mahesh waved his hand in the same direction as if his casual exile of Hadaad was of no consequence. "Some excuse must be given for him to travel

with you. Now he has it."

An inner voice that sounded much like Litsa chided Azza for wasting water, feeling tears rising up again. "Father," her voice cracked, "I'm so scared."

This admission reminded Mahesh of his fatherly role and he gently guided his daughter into a more gentle embrace. "Of course you are. Doing the correct thing is always difficult." Releasing her, he tried to smile, "At times more so than others." The smile faded and he became quiet serious. "And so I offer you to stay. Go to Hadaad, tell him this has been a misunderstanding, that your father has forgiven you both, and to return to your tents. All of this," Mahesh waved out into the desert again, somehow encompassing both its enormity and, in this instance, making it seem inconsequential. "All of this will sort itself out."

The only thing that kept Azza from warmly smiling at this was the fresh possibility of tears that it provoked. Even now, with the sword hanging over his head and that of all the Imala, she knew he was earnest in his offer to let her stay. In the growing cold of the night it was a tempting offer, but she thought of the Hadru'us again and the scars they had left on the khiyam in one day alone. Those thoughts of blood stirred her resolve as well as her fear. Blinking the tears out of her eyes she looked into her father's and said, "No."

A half-smile that was equal parts pride and sadness came to Mahesh before he embraced her again. "If I must murder Odon myself," he whispered to her, "we will bring you home."

For the third time he released her, moving away from his own sadness to more practical matters. "I looked over your supplies. You have chosen well." Azza nearly laughed, her father knowing full well that she would carry the right supplies, but having checked anyway. "But be wary of others than the Hadru'us," he cautioned. "Some of Amon's children who roam the desert have lost his way. These folk would give no thought to striking down a traveller if they know it will ingratiate them to a mighty tribe."

"Be careful of where you tread as well. Traveling at night is dangerous." Mahesh continued to speak as he moved to check the camels' head ropes, saddles and the knots that held supplies. "One of the camels could find a hole and break a leg, or the bokassa may be roaming close to the khiyam."

"I know," Azza tried to smile her tears away, to grin at her father's dotting, but his prattling threatened to break her heart. To stop him she stepped forward to take his hands in hers and said, "Thank you."

Azza could see the shadow of anguish on her father's face, her gratitude only reminding him of his perceived failings. Instead of lamenting any further, though, he tightened the bond in their hands and said, "You spare us all with this."

Azza wanted to thank him again: Thank him for stalking out into the night to find her, for making her aware that he knew of her departure, and that in his own mournful way, he approved. Knowing this made the journey, or at least its beginning, better and lighter, but she found it made it more difficult to let her father's hands go.

This was true until her hand flew to her neck in remembrance. "The Sho'un!"

Azza touched the heavy chain and the circle of its pendant having forgotten it in the rush of the day.

"Keep it." Mahesh took her hands again. "Take it with you."

"I cannot. There is only one."

"I will make another. The only power the Sho'un has comes from the tribes and the tribes' recognition of what it is. With you, it will serve as a promise for you to come home."

Then the same camel as before croaked loudly out into the night again and began to settle down to rest. Daughter and father knew the creature's stubborn nature and that if his bended knees lowered its bulk to the desert floor it would take much time to coax it back up again. As such, Mahesh and Azza danced around the creature, waving their arms and yelling at it to stand, to perform its function as deemed by Amon, to be a shining example to its compatriots and its species, and not to be the lazy, meritless creature it was threatening to become.

After a short period of these saltations the camel, reminded it was to perform its function regardless if Mihr was in the sky, stood back to its full height and announced its willingness to proceed with another loud croak.

Both father and daughter, invigorated by such pragmatic matters, found they had again control of their emotions. Taking the camels' head ropes in his hand, Mahesh handed them to Azza saying, "Now go. You cannot keep Hadaad waiting forever."

Azza nodded and took the ropes, hardly able to meet her father's gaze, but doing so, embracing him a final time before whispering another good-bye and making to leave. She wondered for a very long time how long he stood, watching her go, but she did not turn back to see. The pull of that tenderness was too strong and to give in to it then might have kept her from departing.

Somehow unsurprising to Azza, Hadaad waited without a word out passed the edge of the khiyam, sitting upon one of the many rocks of the field. He rose upon seeing her and huffed the two sacks over to the camels, securing them in place without word. Azza was not sure how Hadaad knew the outcome of the smaller colloquy of only father and daughter, but she was grateful that he required no explanation.

Taking the reins of two of the beasts, he set about tying the animals into a line by their lead ropes, giving Azza a cause to follow. Finished, she took the camel's guiding rod from the saddle as she climbed into it. With a command and a tap of the implement, the small caravan of Azza and Hadaad set off into the night, unaware that many of the Imala watched them.

The night passed in silence till morning. It was only broken by the high, lonely cry of a hawk. Squinting up into the cloudless sky Azza was nearly surprised by the spread wings of Aleta descending, the black of her crest and red of her breast being only a darkened blur.

Landing on the pommel of the saddle, Aleta folded her wings and stared at Azza, a multitude of questions and disappointments held in her eyes. Azza had suffered enough indignities of late, but mellowed towards the animal knowing the hawk's anger came from its impression that Azza had intended on traveling

without her.

Azza considered ordering the bird away or even discouraging it from its present course with a swing of the guiding rod. Instead she looked to the starlit horizon, occasionally caressing Aleta's cap feathers in between moments of guiding her mount. She had made enough sacrifices this night. She could not stay home, but she would take what she could with her.