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THE THIRD SCROLL

By Dana Marton

This book is dedicated to Jenel Looney, a treasured friend and incredible cover artist.

With many thanks to all who provided encouragement and/or their special skills along the way: Susan Mallery, Adel Kiss, Linda Ingmanson, Toni Lee, Pat Cleveland, Anita Staley, my friends at SHU who gave me early feedback, and all my wonderful Facebook friends. I appreciate you more than words can say.

www.thethirdscroll.com

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www.danamarton.com

First Edition: May 2012

Reviews:

"...Marton excels at worldbuilding and character development... readers will find it impossible not to care what happens next to Tera. It's impressively easy to become immersed in Marton's fantasy world." Kirkus Review

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## CHAPTER ONE (Twelve Blue Crystals)

We did not have rice to eat with the fish my father, Jarim, might catch. We have not had rice for a long time. Sometimes we did not have fish, either. As I sat in the swaying branches on the top of the

tallest numaba tree, I prayed that he would catch *something* for that night.

Traders never came to our rocky beach since my mother died, and few of the sick made the long trek from the village these days. I had passed into womanhood from childhood, but my healing power had not arrived.

Next to me, Koro hung on to the branch with both hands, his sateen tunic—befitting the only son of a wealthy father—soiled from the climb. The wind ruffled his golden hair, pushing it into his eyes, the exact mellow brown shade as the tree bark. He would not glance down but instead kept his gaze on me. “I talked to my father about visiting yours tonight.”

I looked away. “Jarim is in a bad mood. He had nothing but bad luck with fishing lately. Maybe next week.”

“Next week my father will leave on another trading trip.”

“When he comes back, then.” I turned back to Koro and felt guilty at the sadness I had put on his face. But I would never have my healing powers if I married now. Despair sliced through me at the thought of him coming with his father to present an offering.

“Tera, you are—” he began in that soft voice of his that had comforted me so many times after my mother’s death.

I shook my head, stopping him. “When your father returns from his journey.”

A trip to the farthest Shahala villages could take a full moon crossing or more. Maybe enough time to cajole the spirits into sending my powers to me. Powers like my mother’s, not like my great-grandmother’s, I added silently, to make sure that no spirit who might be listening to my thoughts would misunderstand me.

Koro nodded, the disappointment on his face turning into a fond smile. Truly his face was welcome in my sight, his friendship valued from the bottom of my heart, but I could not give him what he longed for, not yet, not for a while.

My stomach growled.

My resolution wavered.

I could refuse Koro, but how long could I say no to the bride price? Even if I could endure the hunger, a good daughter would not starve her father.

“They will hurry on this trip.” Koro watched the lone cloud above us. “They will want to be back before the rainy season begins.”

For a second I saw the sky as it would be soon, a damp gray blanket thrown on the sun, keeping it captive. I swallowed the lump in my throat, blinking the image away. Jarim and I could not survive another rainy season like the last. Toward the end, only the occasional strand of seaweed washed to shore had kept us from starving. I could still feel the dark, gnawing pain in my belly every time I thought of it.

If those hunger-filled days taught me anything, it was that if I could not heal, I was nothing.

The breeze from the sea strengthened and moved the branches around us. Our perch swayed. Koro held on tight with both hands, his face turning pale.

“Maybe you should go. Your mother might need help with the twins.”

“Of course. And you would want to perform your ceremonies.”

Nothing but kindness sounded in his voice, but I caught a flash of disappointment in his eyes, along with a faint trace of hurt.

I had managed to offend him, at once implying he could not handle the climb and that I did not want him with me.

“I will visit again in a few days, if you do not mind,” he said as he slipped to a lower branch carefully.

“Of course not.” Even to my own ears, the words sounded insincere. I cared for Koro. He was my

childhood friend. But the great shadow of marriage had come between us lately, threatening the only thing I ever wanted.

I watched him climb down and disappear in the dense foliage below me, swallowed by a profusion of palm-size round leaves. Then I turned to the task that had brought me to my perilous perch. As a healer, or almost one, I spent a fair amount of time with potion gathering.

I said my prayers to the spirits and bowed before them. I thanked the numaba tree for sheltering the moonflowers that lived in the crook of its branches. I thanked the flowers at length for their dew, a befitting a great gift. Then I tipped one of the large flowers in front of me, the haunting color of the twin moons, and collected the tiny drops that nestled inside the creamy soft petals. I moved to the next flower and the next, filling the small phial that hung on a cord around my neck.

The ritual of the harvest filled me with peace, but as soon as I finished, frustration nudged its way back into my heart. I loved collecting potions, but the time had come when I wanted more than this.

“The spirits know when the healer is ready, Tera,” my mother had told me a hundred times, trying in vain to quell the sea of impatience inside me.

I was so very ready. Why could the spirits not see?

I pushed to my feet on a sudden impulse, balancing on the swaying branch, and stood over the endless forest that covered our hill. Mountain of No Top stretched on the horizon, the dwelling place of the spirits.

Beyond the mountain lay the desert and the Kadar lands. For all I cared, they could both fall into the sea. Of the large Island of Dahru, I cared only about the Shahala lands of my people and my family’s beach.

Careful of my center of balance, I spread my arms and tipped my head to the sky, the wind whipping my hair around my face.

I shouted my heart’s desire into that salty wind. “Great spirits, I am ready!”

A wild gust rushed my words across the undulating emerald carpet of the treetops, ruffling the leaves. Birds of a dozen colors, like dazzling jewels tossed into the air, took wing.

I waited for the spirits to respond to me, to touch me, but I felt nothing. I could only hear my mother’s soft voice in my ear, words I had heard a million times. “*You cannot rush the spirits.*”

I hung my head. She would have been dismayed by my willfulness and impatience if she were with me.

Disappointment clenched my teeth as I climbed down the tree, watching where I put my feet at every step, even though I had made the climb a thousand times before. I stepped from one thick vine to the next as they wrapped themselves around the tree’s smooth grey bark. My clothes stuck to my skin. Up in the treetops, I had the wind, at home a constant breeze blew on the beach from the sea, but in the woods, the hot air stood still.

I wished my mother were with me still, showing me wonders like the flowers and birds that lived on top of the tall trees. Maybe she had many more secrets she had not had time to share, things I would never know, could never show my own daughter someday.

I did want a family. But not before my healing powers came to me. I could cure without them, help others with potions and poultices, powders and teas. But true healing, my mother had warned me—the knitting of bones and binding of spirits—would be lost to me forever if I rushed the sharing of my body.

I had to make sure Jarim understood this before anyone came to offer for me. I climbed faster. In my hurry, a broken branch snagged the worn linen of my thudi, leaving a slight tear. My traditional thudi had its puffy legs gathered to narrow cuffs at the ankle. Its waist was fastened with a twisted length of blue shawl, as tattered as the strip of linen bound tightly around my middle up to my armpits.

I kept moving. I never thought that the snag might have been a warning from the good spirits resting on top of the numaba tree. If they had whispered *Little Sister, do not rush, watch out*, I did not hear.

To avoid another sharp branch, I had to turn away from the tree a little, now on the beachside of the thick trunk. Jarim stood in front of our home, four men around him. I brushed the hair out of my face and pushed a leafy branch aside for a better glimpse. They were not Shahala. I did not recognize their strange clothing. Maybe they were traders. If only we had something to trade.

Jarim was gesturing as if trying to convince them of something very important, his arms going up and down in a choppy motion like the wings of the small chowa bird.

I stopped. I had left my dress and my veil at home, as always when going for a climb. I could not let strange men see me like this.

But what if they had come for healing?

I tried to help the few who had not heard of my mother's death and made the arduous journey, but despite the healing potions, I rarely succeeded. Jarim said I did not have the power in my hands, but I knew the truth: I did not have the power in my heart. Something inside me was missing, and the spirits sensed it.

Sometimes, secretly, out of sheer frustration, I blamed *him*. My mother had been a Tika Shahala, healer from the highest order. Jarim, a foreigner, weakened her Shahala blood, robbing me of my heritage.

I slipped to the next branch, and it dipped under my weight, the leafy end shifting, and I saw the visitors' ship at last, bobbing in the water some distance from the beach. My fingers went numb as I recognized the black sails.

*A slaver.*

The sea churned furiously around the ghastly vessel, foaming at the mouth. I shivered despite the heat.

I had seen a slave ship once, years before. An illness on board had brought them to seek my mother. The fame of her powers drew all manner of people to us day and night, never giving her a moment of rest. She did not seem to mind. She did everything with a smile. She had the kindest face of any woman, always comforting, making the sick believe they were already well even before she began her cure.

I only saw her sad once in all her life, the day the slave traders came to shore. She helped them, like she would anyone else, taking a boat to the ship and staying on it well into the night.

The Shahala did not own slaves—my people found the practice distasteful. But the Kadar did, attracting unscrupulous traders from the nearby kingdoms that dotted the sea.

The Kadar had to be the most terrible people anywhere, I had thought, but it was not until months later that I truly learned to despise them. From visitors, we had learned that the Kadar High Lord had fallen gravely ill. My mother, with her caring heart, wished to go and heal him.

She sailed away and never returned. Two whole moon crossings passed before word reached us from a trade ship that she had died on her journey. Whatever healing the Kadar had demanded of her had killed her.

I had sworn many times that somehow I would find out how and for what purpose she had died. I had sworn to the spirits that someday, when I was a true healer and had enough crystals to afford the long journey, I would find her resting place and recite the Last Blessing over her grave.

After her death, many a night I had lain on my tear-soaked pillow, wishing to be a sorceress of old so I could curse the Kadar. But as time passed, I let such thoughts drift away with the outgoing tide, for I knew they would have saddened my mother. She could not have borne to see me with hatred in my heart.

Still, forgiveness did not come easy. The Kadar made war, brought injury and misery, while the Shahala healed and lived in peace. I used to think the good spirits that sometimes rested on top of the numaba trees must have been the spirits of the Shahala who had passed on. The bad spirits that lived in the depths of Mirror Sea to grab after anyone who sailed it, I believed to be those of the anguished Kadar who had died in war, not finding peace even in death.

I was not surprised that Mirror Sea churned under the slave ship. I could almost see all those restless Kadar spirits angry because the traders no longer brought them slaves, trying to pull the ship under so they would have servants once again.

When I finally slid to the ground from the lowest branch of the tree, I kept the building between the traders and myself as I made my way to our home. Better to sneak in from the back and retrieve my clothes before they saw me. I did not want to shame Jarim or my mother's memory.

Bending low, I rounded some boulders, ran down the stone stairs and kept to the bushes until I reached the side entrance of the wooden house. The men made loud bragging noises as they talked in the front. I frowned at the sound. Polite people talked little and pleasantly, bringing no more attention to themselves than necessary.

To talk so loud was as if one painted a sign on one's forehead: *Here I am, look at me.* Then everyone would have looked at him and seen him for a fool.

I hoped they did not come for healing, for I feared what people such as them would do when disappointed. Maybe they had come for medicinal herbs. Dried herbs I had aplenty.

I hurried to my room and pulled on my short tunic, regretting for a moment that not one piece of my worn clothing matched any other. We had better clothes when my mother had been alive. We had fine robes and food and laughter. Sometimes those memories seemed less than real, like legends of a golden age.

I wrapped my veil around my head in the proper manner for a healer, then put away my vanity and walked toward the front. I pushed through the wind-torn curtain that covered the entrance.

"Apar," I greeted Jarim—calling him father for the last time.

The traders fell silent. Their gazes poured over me like icy water.

Shells and small disks of metal decorated their clothes in a dizzying array of patterns. Jarim noticed my looking and smoothed down his thin tunic. He wore better clothes than I, but still you could have mistaken him for a servant next to the strangers.

"Everything you say is true?" the tallest one, made taller yet by his wrapped silk headpiece, asked Jarim.

I sucked in my breath at his rudeness. Though no Shahala blood flowed in Jarim's veins, since he had been married to my mother, people had always extended him the same respect. And to question the word of a Shahala was unthinkable.

"Very good healer. Only daughter of a Tika Shahala," Jarim boasted just as rudely, as if not at all offended. He spoke a little of most languages used around our area. I knew them as well as my own, learned from the many visitors who had come to my mother.

I wished Jarim had not said such a thing, even if he said it only because he did not want to shame me.

The leader's eyes narrowed. "Ten blue crystals."

Too much, more than we had seen in a long time, many times more than my help was worth had I been willing to give it. I tugged Jarim's sleeve.

"She is worth twice that," Jarim insisted and hushed me when I tried to speak.

I had never seen him like that before. A healer did not bargain over healing or ask payment. The sick gave gifts according to their abilities, despite reassurances that no payment was necessary.

"Twelve." The trader's impatient tone signaled the end of bargaining as he handed Jarim a worn

leather bag.

~~To my horror, he counted the crystals.~~

Then he nodded. Perhaps he did not feel the need to show manners in front of people who had none, I thought, dazed, and when the traders started toward the ship and motioned to me, I obediently followed but stopped after a moment when my mind cleared a little.

“My herbs.” I turned toward our dwelling. I should probably take a little of everything.

“You will not need those,” the one who had bargained for my services told me.

Of course. They traveled many waters. They probably had their own herbs on the ship. Maybe I would even see something new and exotic.

I looked at Jarim, but he would not look at me.

“Come,” the man ordered.

And I followed him.

I hoped they wanted me to heal slaves, although I was unsure whether my ministrations would be much help. But trying would have been easy, as my heart went out to the unfortunates. And I had to try now, whether master or slave languished in the sickbed—Jarim had already taken the payment.

Our shore met the sea not with a sandy beach but with veritable cliffs the waves beat against. Because of this, most ships docked in Sheharree, and our visitors completed the journey over land. But now a grizzled man, wet from the spray, waited for us, holding the rope of a massive boat wedged between two scarred rocks, each as large as the boat itself.

I eased in, fear stealing into my lungs as we shoved off. The next wave could push us back and smash the boat against the rocks. But the men who handled the oars handled them well and mastered the waves.

What would they do to me if my healing failed? Would they bother to bring me back and demand their crystals? I could too easily see them tossing me overboard, into the rolling sea.

I wanted to tell them I was a fake, that I was sorry my father had taken their payment. But none of them talked, so I too remained silent. I did not want to make them angry, these people who stole others' lives to sell.

My heart beat a hurried rhythm at the unfamiliarity of the boat ride. I squeezed my eyes shut against the fury of the sea. My mother had always forbidden me from taking to the water, a habit I had kept even after her death. The boat tossed, and I grabbed its side, trying to pretend I stood atop a numaba tree, the branches swaying under me in the wind.

A welcome calm spread through my limbs, until the waves sprayed water in my face. I told myself I stood atop the numaba tree, and the rain began to fall. But my mind no longer believed the tale.

After an endless time, the traders shouted, and I opened my eyes. We had reached the dark vessel. The side covered with scars, the wood smelling moldy and sad. Maybe the sadness of the slaves had poured out into the ship. I looked at the traders and wondered if anyone sailing on such a ship could ever be anything but unhappy, but their faces were closed and hard as a naga shell, so I could not tell which way they felt.

I climbed the rope ladder second after the leader, the rest coming up behind me. I did not mind the short climb, the ship not nearly as tall as the trees on our hillside. But I did mind when the wind snatched my veil. The length of fabric, like a dead bird falling from the sky, tossed on the waves but for a moment before it disappeared under the churning water.

The man behind me did not give me time to worry about the loss, he growled at me to hurry.

The deck stood deserted, the boards weather-beaten, the black sails frayed. Worn ropes tied down a tall pile of firewood to my left, two wooden buckets secured to the pile with twine. A handful of barrels lay tied to the ship's railing on my other side.

The men shoved me down into the belly of the ship that swallowed me like a large fish that had no



eaten for many days. I shivered even as my forehead beaded with sweat from the hot, stale air. I opened my mouth to ask how many were sick, but a rough hand in the middle of my back shoved me forward into a dark cabin. The door closed with a loud thud behind me.

“I will need a lamp,” I called through the door. “Or a torch.”

Nobody answered.

I turned back to the darkness and lowered my voice. “Is anyone here? Anyone sick?”

I moved forward until I bumped into the wall, then laid my hands on a roughly hewn wood plank and followed it. When I reached the door, I pushed against it to no avail. I felt around for some furniture but found none. I was in an empty cabin somewhere in the middle of the ship. With nothing else to do, I sat down and waited for them to bring my patient to me.

My heart shuddered when I heard the scrape of the anchor being pulled up. Voices rang out on deck. Sails snapped somewhere above me. And I finally realized there would be no sick coming.

I, Tera, daughter of Chalee, Tika Shahala, had been sold by my own father to be a slave.

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CHAPTER TWO (Onra)

I spent eight, maybe nine, days on the ship. I tried to keep track of time by my meals of overcooked fish, but they did not feed me every day, so I could not be certain.

We caught the edge of a hardstorm, and the ship lurched and rolled without stop, battered by waves. Thunder clapped all around as the wind tossed us carelessly. I could think of little else but the bad spirits of the Kadar under the water, trying to pull us down into the deep.

I hated the dark, moldy room, the stale water I found to drink, the bucket in the corner and its stench. I hated being alone the most. I started to think maybe a giant fish had swallowed me, maybe I would never again see the sky, the twin moons, or the numaba trees on our hillside. I had thought maybe—despite my mother’s reassurances—the spirits had not forgiven my family for my great-grandmother’s sin—whose name was not to be spoken—and were now punishing me for her terrible deeds.

Then as suddenly as they had thrust me into my prison, the traders grabbed me from it again, dragged me roughly into the light. I squinted hard as I stumbled forward.

A merciless wind whipped the strange harbor we had reached, cutting through my threadbare clothes to my trembling skin, its icy fingers reaching for my heart. Even with the sun high in the sky, I shivered and wrapped my arms around me.

Nearly a hundred starved-looking men and women huddled on the dock, chained together in heavy iron, some holding listless children in their arms. They avoided looking at each other, as if ashamed of having given up hope.

I did not belong among them. I wanted to insist that someone had made a mistake, that I had only come to the ship to heal the sick. I looked up at the man who dragged me—the lead trader. I opened my mouth, but no words came.

A tall stone wall blocked the view of the city. Kaharta Reh, I heard the traders say. Poles as thick

as my waist made up the gate, held together by massive strips of metal. The gate stood as tall as our ship's mast and wide enough to let four ox carts in side by side.

We waded into the port crowd. Merchants offered their wares, mothers shouted at their children to keep up, people argued over deals. The people were loud beyond bearing, offensively so, the city the least welcoming place I could imagine. Sheharree, our Shahala port, had neither walls nor gate; indeed, such things would have been considered highly rude and inhospitable by my people.

As we passed into Kaharta Reh, once again I had the ominous feeling of being swallowed. I could too easily see the monstrous gates swing close and trap me forever.

We went to the auction house first, where the men led the other slaves into a holding pen. The leader still had my arm in his grip, and he looked at me for the first time. I trembled, thinking he would now chain me to the rest.

"I am a healer, daughter of Tika Shahala. I came on board to heal the sick. Someone must have forgotten," I said, although even I no longer believed it.

"I paid fifteen blue crystals for you." The words slithered out of his mouth with only the slightest movement of his lips.

Twelve crystals, I wanted to tell him. "I can earn more and pay you back," I said instead. I would have said anything to escape, too young to know that my fate had been decided beyond bargaining.

He dragged me on without a word, and I stumbled after him down narrow streets, passing people who hurried by on their daily business, paying little mind to us. In the biting cold, I looked at their strange clothes with envy.

The men wore tight leather leggings with bulky fur tunics on top, the women the kind of one-piece robe the Shahala men wore over their thudrag. A thudrag was very much like a woman's thudi, but not tied at the ankle. I saw neither thudrag nor thudi peeking from the women's heavy wool robes. Under all that billowing material, they walked around naked!

An evil land of backward people, I thought, where men wore women's clothes and women wore men's, where the sun shone without warmth, where a person could be bought and sold like a basket in the market.

My teeth chattered by the time we stopped in front of a hammered iron door, bolted into the stone wall of an enormous building. The trader shouted for entry. We waited until a bent old man opened the door, holding it with gnarled fingers that were blackened at the tips. No eyelashes shaded his small eyes, his gaze sharp like the knar eagle's, his mouth thin as a blade.

My heart banged against my ribs, wanting to run away in panic and leave the rest of my doomed body behind.

The man shuffled back and closed the door in our faces. He did not want me. I nearly sank to the ground with relief.

But the light feeling of having escaped a fate too horrible to contemplate did not last long, for I realized what would happen next. I would be taken back to the market to be sold on the block with the others. Panic plowed into me, and I sank to the cold stones of the street.

Then the door reopened, and the most beautiful woman appeared, in a sky-colored gown, tight on top but widening below the waist like the graceful bell of the lulsa flower. Rich embroidery decorated the cloth so thickly that I could hardly make out the underlying material. A golden veil streamed from two brooches of precious gems on the sides of her head.

She stood as delicate as the reeds of the bay, with large ebony eyes and skin of flower petals. A slender chain of gold encircled her slim waist, and from that hung a multitude of tiny figurines, chiming in magical harmony as she moved, small replicas of flowers, forest animals and birds.

"She is the healer?"

The slave trader nodded with a sly, self-satisfied look.

She inspected me briefly, then held out a bag of crystals without asking for a price. This time, the man did not bargain.

I moved forward, my eyes misty with gratitude that she bought me. Her delicate, serene features reminded me of my mother. Once I told her of the misunderstanding, I knew she would return me to my people. I bent to kiss the hem of her gown, but before I could reach it, she kicked me.

Blinding pain seared through my head; then I heard the crack of my own skull as I bounced against the doorframe. I saw nothing but darkness, hearing her screech from far away as she called for her servants. Rough hands closed around my ankles. My mind floated as if in a dream. They dragged me over the cold stone floor for hours, it seemed... Then blessed darkness and peace.

I awoke on a pallet in a cavernous room, and for a moment felt as if the room was spinning around me. Moonlight peeked in through rows of small holes high up on one wall near the ceiling—nine rows, hundreds of fist-sized holes in each, most covered in glass. Braziers stood against the wall here and there, coal glowing in them, pushing off heat. But still, goose bumps covered my skin.

Silence filled the room, barely ruffled by the delicate sounds of shallow breathing. Dozens of girls slept on the other pallets on the floor around mine—all younger than I.

Pain throbbed through my body, my forehead aching the most, worse than when I had fallen from the numaba tree on my first climb. I lifted my fingers to my temple, and they came away sticky with blood.

I could not see any water jars in the room, so I grabbed the hem of my tunic and used my own spit to clean the wound, then dabbed a few drops of moonflower tears into the gash.

My legs folded as I pushed to stand, so I stayed on my hands and knees. My whole body shook, but I crawled among the sleeping girls, toward the giant door that stood an eternity away.

When I reached the door at last, I pushed against it gently, then a little harder, then with all my strength. The wooden panel refused me freedom with no more apology than a soft creak.

I sank against it and thought for a long time about my mother and our hillside and the numaba trees. Then I crawled back to my bed of rags and cried myself to sleep.

* * *

Morning came too fast for night to have sufficiently eased the pain. The little windows showed only a dim light outside when a smaller door on the other end of the room, one I had not seen in the dark before, flew open and banged against the wall.

The woman who had bought me walked in, dressed in an embroidered red silk gown, followed by two servant women with torches. She did not look at any of the girls in particular who stood in neat rows with their heads bowed by the time she reached the middle of the room.

I rose to my knees but could not push all the way to standing. My body swayed from the effort; the light in the room seemed to dim. A small hand clamped on my arm and tugged me up, and even as I struggled to stand, the rows of girls before me parted like saplings bowing to the wind. Then that beautifully embroidered gown came into view, the color of fresh-spilled blood.

I lifted my gaze, finding neither recognition nor emotion in the woman's eyes, not even when my knees buckled and I fell at her feet.

"You may take this morning to heal yourself." Her voice was cold and clipped. She turned to the girl who had tried to help me up. "You stay with her and prepare yourself for tonight."

All the color washed out of the girl's face as she bent her head even deeper. Faint whispers ripple through the room. Without another look at me, the woman turned around and gave instructions to the others, designating a myriad of chores with practiced ease.

Once she moved away, I could no longer hear her, her voice drowned by the rushing blood in my ears that sounded like waves crashing against the shore. I closed my eyes to stop the room from spinning. When I opened them, the room stood empty, except for myself and the girl on the next

pallet. Her shoulders shook as she cried, but then she caught me watching, and she wiped her eyes.

~~“I am Onra.” She swallowed the last sob. “Does your wound hurt?”~~

She had kind, water-colored eyes, reminding me of the sea at the inlet not far from our beach, the place where Jarim had usually gone to fish. Her hair, several shades lighter than mine, fell down her back in a heavy braid.

I reached to my forehead and felt the gap that still seeped. “I am Tera. Could you please tell me where I can find some clean water?”

She pushed to standing and padded to the door. I tried to follow, but she was already returning before my shaky limbs could carry me halfway across the room. I could have wept at the sight of a full bowl of water, more than I had been given on the ship the entire long trip.

“Thank you.” I drank deeply before beginning to wash my wounds.

I went on to wash the ship’s stench off the rest of my body, but Onra stayed my hand and removed the bowl, only to appear with clean water. She brought me yet a third bowl to wash my clothes. Still, I would have taken many more to wash away all the dirt, more than an ocean to make me feel clean again.

I wished I had something to give in return for Onra’s gift. Instead, I had to ask for more help. “I need to go outside to find—” I did not know the word in her language so I said it in mine. “Ninga beetle. Little bug that lives in water.”

She shook her head. “You have to stay here. New slaves get beaten worst. They say a good beating in the beginning saves lots of beatings later. You can find your bugs maybe tomorrow or after.”

I knew enough about wounds to know I should not wait. “Where do you go for water?”

“The clay jars outside the door.”

“How does water come into the jars?”

“The servants bring it from the creek at the end of the fields.”

“I need to go there. I need the beetles for this.” I pointed to the gash in my forehead.

After a moment, she rose to her feet. “I will go.”

“No.” I reached to pull her back. I wanted no harm to befall her because of me.

Her lips tugged into a sad smile. “I will not get beaten today. Kumra would not ruin my skin before tonight.”

She hurried through the door before I could ask her what she meant. She stayed away a long time, until I worried that maybe she had been stopped and beaten despite her reassurances. But then she appeared with a rag bunched in her shaking hands. She set the cloth in front of me and stepped back quickly, grimacing as I began to unfold the small package.

Her expression, a mix of fear and revulsion, betrayed how little she cared for the beetles, so I thanked her even more for the gift.

Three big ningas, flat as if hit by stone, rolled to the floor in front of me. I pressed my lips together. “I need them alive. I should have told you. I am sorry.”

Onra’s eyes widened as she stared at me.

I rose on shaking legs. “I will go.”

She drew a deep breath and pushed me down onto the jumble of rags that covered my pallet, then walked away.

“I need small ones,” I called after her, wincing with embarrassment that I had to issue yet another request.

She gave me a tremulous smile from the doorway.

I sat as close as I could to the nearest brazier that still had some glowing lumps of coal, shivering in my wet clothes. I soaked up the heat for a while, then brought a clean bowl of water from outside the door, careful not to let anyone see me.

Onra stayed away longer this time. But she did return with a few squirming beetles, bundled tight in the rag once again. I lifted the first beetle and, watching my reflection in the mirror of the water, placed its pinchers against the edges of my wound, then squeezed its body.

The beetle sank its black pinchers into my skin, drawing the edges together. With a quick twist, I separated body from head, which would have held the pinchers firmly in place had I not pulled the body away too soon. I could not see enough in the water, my hand obstructing the view. I pulled the half-done pinchers out, wiped the blood, then started over.

Onra, who had been alternating between watching and glancing away in horror, pushed my hand down and picked up the second beetle, only to drop it again when it bit her.

“Like this.” I showed her how to place her fingers farther back on the hard shiny-black wings.

She drew a deep breath, then another, until her hands stopped trembling, then, beetle by beetle, closed my wound.

She had nearly finished by the time a servant woman entered the room with a small bowl. She looked at Onra for a long time with tears in her eyes, then set the bowl down inside the door and left abruptly as she had appeared.

“Who was that?”

Onra dropped the last headless beetle on the pile, cleaned up the mess we had made, then padded over to bring us the bowl. She set the food, some kind of grain cooked in milk, in front of me.

“My mother,” she said in an emotion-filled whisper.

I thought of my mother, who had died and was buried somewhere in this land. I was closer to her than I had been for a long time.

I looked at the closed door, and envied Onra for she still had her mother. “Can you not go to her?”

“I will, after tonight.” She scooped some grain from the bowl with her fingers and lifted it to her mouth, motioning to me to do the same.

The food tasted better than anything I had had for a long time, although not as good as my mother’s cooking, which was now only a sweet memory. “What will you do tonight?” I asked after I eased the worst of my hunger.

Her eyes filled with tears. “Kumra chose me for our Warrior Lord, Tahar.”

“Is Kumra his lalka?” I used the word from my own language for wife as I did not know it in hers. “Mate for life.”

She shook her head. “My mother’s people too had that custom, but not the Kadar. She is the favorite concubine.”

“Are you a concubine?”

A fat tear rolled down her face.

“Forgive me. I do not know your ways.”

She nodded, then pointed toward the room in a sweeping motion. “In Maiden Hall, all of us are slaves. When I reached womanhood, they moved me here from the Servant House for the pleasure of our Lord Tahar. A virgin’s blood increases a warrior’s valor, so he takes a girl often, and always before going off to war. For good luck.” She swallowed hard.

I sat still. “What happens to the virgins afterward?”

“A few who please him much, he keeps as concubines. They move to Pleasure Hall and no longer have to work with the servants.”

“And if you are not selected?”

“I will go to the Servant House.” She looked away. “And after that, any warrior can have me as they please.”

I looked at her, stunned, thinking even death was preferable to that fate. “Maybe he will keep you

“Kumra hates me, and Tahar listens to her. Even if he picked me and I moved to Pleasure Hall, I

would be dead from some mysterious disease soon. That is Kumra's way."

"Can we not escape?"

"Tahar's warriors are great hunters. When they caught us, we would die." She grabbed my hand and held it for a moment, her watery eyes intent on mine. "You must never try."

This I could not promise, so I held my silence.

"I am scared," she whispered after a moment.

"Is Tahar—"

"Not of Tahar. Of weakening. Of crying and bringing shame to our House. I am just a weak girl. Look at me. I have cried ten times today already." She dropped her hands to her sides.

I could not understand how she could worry about bringing shame to anyone when unspeakable shame was being done to her. I began to ask but thought better of it. "You will not cry tonight."

She looked at me with wet eyelashes that clumped together, her eyes begging. I did not know if I could give her what she needed, but I gave her what I could. "You might be a girl, but inside you are as brave as any warrior. Look at the battle you already won today."

She waited.

"The battle of the beetles."

The corner of her mouth tugged up as she wiped her eyes. "I will not forget you, Tera, even if I do not see you for a while."

She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed gently to turn me around, then combed through my hair with her slim fingers. "I will make your maiden's braid."

All the girls I had seen that morning had their hair in one long braid down their back. Kumra wore hers woven into the shape of a crown around her head.

Onra separated my hair into three equal parts and began to work the strands with quick fingers. "Slave girls wear their hair in two braids, one on each side. When they reach womanhood, they switch to a single braid like mine. After leaving Maiden Hall to go back to Servant House, their hair is cut short. Concubines keep their hair long to make into pretty weaves to please our Lord."

She drew the leather cord from the end of her own braid to tie mine. "You have pretty hair," she said, "like black silk. And eyes to match. Be careful of Kumra." She grabbed a blanket from her cot and pulled four long pieces of wool yarn from it. "We should make you a charm belt."

I glanced at hers, made of simple yarn and decorated with small wood carvings, nothing like Kumra's gold and crystal.

"I do not know this custom."

Her fingers flew as she braided the belt. "Fire, earth, water, air," she named each strand. "They offer protection from bad luck. Better if you have charms. Better even if the charm is made by the soothsayer, but for that you would have to pay."

She pulled a reddish pebble from the folds of her dress, kissed it on one side, spit on the other, wrapped a piece of yarn around it, then tied it to the belt.

"Here." She held up the finished piece and helped me fit it around my waist. "I drew the pebble from the creek. It might be lucky for you. The creek gave you the beetles that helped you heal your wound."

I nodded, although I did not completely follow her logic. But she seemed happy to have protected me so neatly, and I did not want to ruin even that little joy in her day.

She stood with sudden determination when she was finished. "I need to go and prepare." She walked to the small door that connected our room to the rest of the house and, without another word, disappeared through it.

I vowed never to follow that path. For myself, for Onra, and for my mother's memory, I swore to the spirits to escape from this unbearable place and find my way back to my own people.

But first, I would find out how my mother had died in this terrible land and recite the Last Blessing over her grave.

* * *

The Kadar battle feast seemed the same and yet completely different from our Shahala celebrations. People joked, sang, ate like any people coming together. Except for the slaves who served the warriors and their concubines.

They came in a steady stream from outside, bringing heaping trays of food from the kitchen. Each tray stopped at a stone table at the head of the Great Hall. Giant swords carved from stone made up the table's legs, their tips resting on the ground. The swords' handles supported the table top, a large stone shield.

Carved symbols covered both the swords and the shield, angular and resembling slim arrowheads that pointed in every direction. But their pattern seemed orderly in a way—maybe some kind of writing.

Onto this stone table the servants placed a small portion of food from each tray before serving the rest to Tahar and his people. I sat in another room with the rest of the maidens, about fifty of us, watching the feast through veiled windows.

Darkness enveloped our room, while a multitude of oil lamps and torches lit the Great Hall; thus we could see them, but nobody could see us. Nobody even glanced in our direction, even though they must have known we were there.

A stalwart man sat almost directly across the room from me, his large upper body covered in formfitting, hardened leather. The wide panes of his weatherworn face glowed with color from the wine. Only men sat on the short-legged wooden benches around the low table, warriors to the last. Behind them, reclining on pillows, chatted their concubines.

Tahar had the most, all beautiful women save the youngest, whose wide cheeks had a strong resemblance to his.

"Is she his daughter?" I whispered to the girl next to me, a willowy redhead with a tiny mole under her right eye.

She drew her eyebrows together in a disapproving grimace. "It is not to be spoken of."

"She should have been sent away a long time ago," the girl on my other side, younger and rounder than the first, whispered. "Sent to another Lord as a gift. Daughters of concubines do not stay in their father's Pleasure Hall beyond childhood, lest their father's eyes fall upon them in lust and their House be cursed forever."

"Kumra has no sons, just one daughter," another girl added as if unable to resist the gossip. "She uses every excuse to keep her."

A commotion at the Great Hall's door silenced her.

A beautiful young woman entered, dressed in a white flowing dress of the finest silk. Her golden hair, combed to a sheen, fell nearly to the backs of her knees. A garland of white flowers graced her head, her small feet bare on the stone floor. I did not recognize her until somebody whispered, "Onra behind me."

She walked to the Lord's seat with trembling grace, then lowered herself to her knees and bowed deep before him. He looked her over, then took her hand and rose, bringing her up with him. He turned his back on the warriors at his table and led her through a doorway, deeper into the house, a servant quick to close the door behind them.

"I cannot believe she was chosen before me," the redhead whispered furiously. "I should be the one to wear the dress and nothing else on my body to please my Lord. When it is my turn, Tahar *will* keep me."

The celebration in the Great Hall continued as if nothing had happened, as if nobody at all cared

about the brutal crime being committed somewhere near.

~~At the Shahala, if a man forced himself on a woman, he was cast out from his people, made as if dead, left to wander the hills alone until he starved, if the spirits willed it so.~~

Not for the first time and not for the last, I felt stricken by the vast difference between the Kadar and the Shahala, repulsed by the people who had bought me. How could the sun and the moons tolerate such people? How could the spirits? Why did the sea not rise up to wash away even their shameful memory?

How I wished for my mother, her wisdom, her strength. Silently, I asked her spirit to guide me, to help me be wise enough to know what to do, and brave enough to do it.

I waited for a long time to feel a response that she heard me, as I often had back home—a slight breeze on my face, the graceful dip of a tree branch, the playful slosh of a wave that sounded different from the others. But nothing happened there in our veiled room.

Then Tahar reappeared in the doorway, at last, with Onra behind him, and I forgot to worry about my mother. Onra stood naked, her pale flesh glowing in the trembling light cast by the torches. She stayed where she stood, while Tahar, an arrogant smile on his face, seated himself amid loud cheers.

“Does this mean he keeps her?” I whispered.

“He would have sent her straight to Pleasure Hall, then,” one of the girls answered.

My heart ached for Onra as she walked slowly across the endless room. A woman servant threw flower petals on her and thanked her for bringing good luck to the House. The warriors banged their fists on the table, whistled, and made other rude noises.

She slowed when she walked by our window, blood smeared on her white thighs. Her head held high, she shed no tears. When she reached the outside door, her mother wrapped her in a blanket and led her out into the cold night.

A young warrior stood from the end of the table.

“Tonight, she will be had by many,” the redhead next to me whispered. “Straight from the Lord’s bed, her virgin’s blood still flowing. It is good luck for the men.”

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### **CHAPTER THREE** **(Pleasure Hall)**

That night, I had a dream—the last one for a long time to come.

In my dream, I searched the woods behind our house for fresh herbs when a great mist descended on the mountain. I crossed the foothills and reached the mountain with the speed of a dream. At first, I could not see anything. My heart flapped inside my chest like a caged bird. Then I heard a faint voice, my mother’s, calling me up the mountain and deeper into the mist.

As I walked, the mist began to swirl around me. I recognized the good spirits of the Shahala, and I knew they had come down from the sky, not to harm but to protect me, to lead me to my mother. I ran forward as fast as I could, all the way to the top, and when I reached the highest snow-covered peak, the mist disappeared.

I looked down the mountain to search for my mother and saw a great multitude below: the Shahala



the Kadar, and all the people of all the lands from as far as the Kingdom of Orh. And they lifted their eyes to me.

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I woke up in tears, wishing I had caught even a single glimpse of my mother instead of all the nations, but I did not have time to ponder the dream long, as the next moment, the door flew open and Kumra walked into our room.

I received one more day to heal, a day of anger and sorrow that I spent alone, missing Onra's company. The warriors prepared for war outside. I could not see them but heard them through the window holes.

The women cried their farewell as Tahar left with the best of his men for the harbor. They would sail to Wotwor, a nearby kingdom ravaged by war. Their king had paid for Tahar's services.

The next morning, I jumped up with the rest of the girls and listened to Kumra's orders as she made her way to me, her gown of golden silk trailing on the floor behind her. She stopped in the empty spot where Onra's pallet had been before—one of the girls had folded it and leaned it against the far wall after the feast. Kumra grabbed my chin with strong fingers and lifted my head to examine my wounds.

Her scent, the strong essence of the lorba flower, twisted my nose. She clicked her tongue, I hoped not in displeasure.

“What is your name?”

“Tera.”

She let go of my chin and pointed to the two girls standing next to me. “You will take Tera and clean behind Warrior Hall today.”

When they deepened their bow, so did I.

As Kumra moved on, I followed outside after the girls, across the gravel courtyard surrounded by stone buildings. I wrapped my arms around myself against the cold, but the wind bit into my skin. I hurried, the sharp gravel cutting my bare feet.

I shivered at the sight of all the stone around me, large, evenly cut boulders, hundreds and hundreds of them piled on top of each other to form the buildings' unnatural shapes. These stones had not been taken out of the fields by men who worked the land—my heart trembled at the thought—the were cut from the mountains.

I could see in my mind those scarred mountains and their angry spirits demanding retribution for their damaged sanctuaries.

Did the Kadar respect nothing? Did nothing stand beyond being used for gain? Did they not know that by chipping away the mountains, they were bleeding the strength from their own lives?

I swallowed my grief and made sure to note the square buildings, the tall wall that protected them on what I knew was the street side to town, the multitude of small huts, the open fields behind the Servant House at the end of which, Onra had said, ran the creek.

The land stretched like flatbread toward the horizon, and although I could not see it, I could smell the ocean and heard the cry of its birds in the air. Dahru was a vast island, too vast to cross on foot. If we were to return home someday, I would have to go over the water again.

I shivered, my worn clothes hardly a match for the biting wind. Yet despite the chill that seeped deep into my bones, I slowed to see more. But soon the two girls entered the building on the far end of the courtyard and I dared not lag too far behind.

At least ten Maiden Halls would have fitted inside Warrior Hall, with room left over. The place stank like rotten kukuyu. I breathed short, shallow breaths. “Do all the warriors stay here?”

“Of course not,” the taller of the two girls, the willowy redhead, spat the words at me, her green eyes narrowing with displeasure. “Only the young ones who have no concubines.” She marched ahead to throw open the wood shutters.

Light flooded the room, revealing row upon row of pallets, larger than ours and with more space between them. ~~Most had wooden trunks either at the foot or at the head. Weapons and various articles of clothing covered the floor, some stacked neatly, some carelessly scattered.~~

“I am Lenya.” The younger girl, who still had the plump, chubby look of childhood, walked across the room toward the door in the back. “Do not mind Igril. She thinks we were sent here because of you. She hates servant work.”

I followed her. The breeze finally thinned the foul air enough so I could fill my lungs. “Are we not servants?”

“We are slaves, but we are maidens. The rest of the slaves are servants.”

“But you still work every day?”

“Of course.” She reached the door and pushed it open. “But we handle nicer chores than this.”

The smell of Warrior Hall was but a weak warning compared to what waited for us outside. The stench smacked my nose like a branch in the face. Behind Warrior Hall stood the warriors’ latrines. Kumra had sent us to clean *those*. I could not blame Igril if she hated me forever.

A sudden gust of wind raced around the buildings and slammed into us, making us bend at the waist as we moved forward. I envied Igril’s and Lenya’s thick wool dresses that covered them from wrist to ankle, coveted the wide strips of leather bound around their feet.

“Count yourself lucky Kumra did not have you beaten.” Igril picked up a bucket and handed me another. “She does that sometimes to new slaves right at the beginning to make sure they know what to expect if they disobey.”

She probably meant the words to scare me, but I was relieved that at least she was talking to me. I did not wish to make any enemies. “Do they ever?”

She looked at me for a long moment, her face changing from annoyance to some deeper emotion. “Tahar had my brother beaten to death.”

I felt the blood leave my head first, then the rest of my body, until even my heart felt empty.

Lenya squeezed my arm. “That will not be your fate. I heard the servants when they first brought you in. You are a healer, too valuable. They did not even beat you.” She cocked her head. “You are a healer, are you not?”

I knew I had to say yes—what would await me if anyone found out the truth—but my tongue refused to say the lie.

“Of course you are. Your forehead.” She pointed. “It is already healed.”

I reached up and brushed away what little of the beetles still clung to my skin. I always healed fast. My mother’s blood worked strong within me.

“Kumra will gain even more favor with our Lord if she has you heal the wounded upon his return.”

I had no mind to wait for Tahar’s return or for Kumra to discover the lack of my healing powers. She would send me to be resold on the block in a heartbeat.

I had but one thought in my troubled mind: escape.

\* \* \*

Life without freedom runs on its own time. My childhood at home had flowed without effort, measured by landmarks of one happy event after the other, or the dread of waiting for things I disliked, like cleaning the foul-smelling kukuyu weeds my mother used for sprains.

At Maiden Hall where Kumra worked me hard from dawn to well into the night, things to look forward to had disappeared. As had hope; I watched it flutter out an open window one night. Only dread remained, but as it was ever-present, it could not serve as marker for the passing time.

The days at Maiden Hall had neither beginning nor end, for sleep passed in the blink of an eye. I slept as soon as my worn body touched my pallet; then I heard the door bang open, and I pulled awake again as if no time had passed at all.

Little by little, I grew familiar with the other girls and the ways of the House of Tahar. I learned that ~~only the sons of warriors could be warriors; the children of servants would always remain slaves~~ although the girls became maidens for a short time.

Daughters of warriors were given as concubines to other warriors either at their Lord's House or another's. Anyone could take a servant girl, but the taking of a maiden was punishable by death, as was all disobedience. Some of the Great Houses had different laws, but Tahar kept with the old ways.

I made friends with as many of the maidens as would let me, and was glad never to be chosen for chores in Pleasure Hall, for I heard many tales about the cruelty of concubines.

The hatred of some of the maidens was enough, indeed almost more than I could bear, for I gave them no reason to treat me so. But a few, seeing Kumra's obvious dislike of me, sought to gain her favor by doing whatever they could to torture me. One had gone as far as dropping a small cauldron of boiling water on me to see how fast I could heal myself. I howled with the pain of the welts that covered both arms to the tip of my fingers.

The following morning, as Kumra sent us to do our chores, her gaze landed on my hands.

Her lips flattened into a severe line. "What have you done?"

"An accident, my Lady. I beg your pardon for it." I hoped she would allow me a day of rest so I could think of a poultice that could be made from the meager things available to me.

"You useless, clumsy murna," she yelled, and other offensive names followed. Then she suddenly calmed, which scared me more than the yelling. A cold gleam came into her eyes. "You will be assigned to the wash today. See that you make fine work of it."

I bowed, not wanting to anger her further by showing any emotion. A hard day that turned out to be. The hot water and lye like thousands of sharp talons and teeth attacked my injured flesh. I fainted twice with the pain of it but dared not to leave any of the work undone.

These things happened and worse, and I learned to keep out of Kumra's way. I did nothing to bring myself to her attention and tried my best to do my work as well as I could to give her no excuse for punishment, not that she needed a reason.

The spirits watched over me, for no illness came to the House that would have required any true powers. The few cases of sour stomachs were righted easily with steamed borlan, and the various cuts and sores needed only cleaning and bandaging. Thus my lack of true worth remained undiscovered as the days passed, each colder yet than the one before.

The work remained hard, the food scarce, and my heart shivered within my body, for I could never get warm enough. I tied rags around my feet and stuffed them with dry grass for added protection. To keep the chill from the rest of my body, I folded a large rag into a triangle and wore it over my shoulders as a cape, the edges wrapped around my waist and tied in the back, but still my sunburned body shivered.

I had to gain my full strength back before the true winter arrived. My limbs, always strong from climbing, had grown weak. So wherever I had to go, I ran instead of walking. If anything heavy needed to be lifted, I jumped first to grab it. I did my chores fast, then helped the other girls. All the time, I planned, asking the spirits to help me. And then one day they answered.

I was running through the kitchen, a bucket in each hand, on my way to the creek, when I saw a man whose familiar features stopped me, as did his thudrag, the traditional wear of Shahala men. Something in his face, in his being, called out to the kin in mine and drew me to him.

"Little sister, what is your name?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. The words flew from his lips in the language of my people, sweet and smooth like dripping honey.

"I am Tera." I bowed my head as I should when addressing an elder.

"Talmir is my name. By the spirits, I both laugh and cry at the sight of you."

I understood what he meant as I felt the same—happy to find one of my own, sad for he shared m

sorry fate. I had so much to ask him, so much to tell. Two people standing together were ten times stronger than one. Hope filled my heart with warmth for the first time since I left our shores.—

“Talmir—”

I fell silent as Kumra walked through the doors.

“Here.” Talmir snatched a small sweetcake from the table and handed it to me behind his back.

“Come back when you can.”

I nodded my thanks, then ran out through the back with my buckets before Kumra could stop me.

I passed by servants singing as they worked. Two older women made a bawdy joke about men, and the rest broke out laughing. Strange they were, living in servitude like this, yet happy when their masters weren't watching. Among my people, serenity and composure were the most valued traits. The Kadar, even their servants, seemed to live without restraint. They fought hard and laughed hard and danced hard, as if having no control at all over their emotions. At times they seemed like undisciplined children to me.

I did return to Talmir many times. I learned he had been kidnapped on the streets of Tezgin by mercenaries who did not understand that all Shahala could not heal. After they realized Talmir could not help them, they beat him and sold him to a slave trader who in turn sold him to the House of Tahar.

“My mother had come to these lands some time ago,” I told him one day. “Her name was Chalee. Have you met her?”

His eyebrows rose. “Chalee of Sheharree?”

I nodded.

“I heard of her fame.”

“She came to heal the High Lord, and then she died. Do you know where her body is resting?”

“The High Lord lives in the fortress city of Karamur. You would have to inquire that way.”

*Karamur*. I tasted the name, which meant *eagles' nest* in Kadar. I had no idea how far or which way the fortress city lay. My shoulders slumped. “I would wish to recite the Last Blessing over her grave.”

“Say it from afar,” Talmir advised. “If ever the chance comes for you to escape, flee straight for our Shahala lands. Forget about the fortress city.”

He would not escape with me, but he would help. He had a wife now—almost a wife, except for the nights when a warrior came to their shared pallet and Talmir had to wait outside under the stars. He had children, a girl and a boy.

“Avoid going inland. There are more towns like this there, all the way to the desert,” he said one time as we huddled in the corner of the kitchen. “Do not go straight to the harbor, either. You will not be able to sneak onto a ship. They will look for you there.”

I nodded, excitement like a chatty little creek rushing in my veins.

“Go to the hills. The rocks will hide your tracks.”

*The hills*. My heart beat faster. I knew the plants that grew in the hills. They would feed and shelter me.

“The hills follow the coastline all the way to the next port town.” He kept an eye on the door, always on guard. “As long as your hair is not shorn, you can pretend to be a free woman. That will save you on the streets, but we have to think of something for booking passage on a ship. Concubines do not travel. Maybe a merchant's wife.”

“Or a traveling healer.” My mother had traveled like that to the Kadar to help their High Lord. “I will need a length of cloth that could serve as the healer's veil.”

“Fine cloth like that is difficult to find.”

The laundry was closely guarded by those who received the chore. One small tear, one silk

handkerchief lost, and the concubines took it out of the laundress's hide. I didn't think I could steal a veil there, nor would I have wanted someone else to be punished for my crime.

My shoulders slumped as I considered my only option. "Pleasure Hall."

"I cannot help you there."

No man could enter Pleasure Hall other than Tahar.

I hoped I would be assigned a chore there soon, although Kumra liked to keep me working alongside the servants. I did not dare ask any of the other girls for help, not for fear of betrayal, although I knew some would, but because I did not want any of them to come to harm once I escaped.

Not knowing when Tahar would return, I planned to leave soon. In his absence, only a handful of warriors guarded his House. When I ran, I did not want his whole army after me.

I liked the idea of cutting through the hills to the next port for a ship, but home would have to wait. Despite Talmir's warnings, I still wanted to find my mother's grave.

In the next few days, he saved me some food, and I selected two of the largest wool rags that covered my pallet to take with me. I snatched bits and pieces of cloth wherever I could, to stuff under the rags I planned on leaving behind.

The girls fell asleep fast after coming in each night. I just had to make a lump on my cot so when Kumra came to lock the door she would think all were inside. I would hide in the women's latrines until the whole house quieted, then run, evading the guards.

I timed it for a night when both of the moons would be waning. Darkness, like Talmir, would be my friend and speed me to freedom.

By the time the last day arrived, I had everything but a veil. I leapt to my feet the moment the door banged open in the morning, asking the spirits for help. I waited as Kumra gave instructions to all the other girls, then stopped in front of my pallet.

"You are coming with me." For the first time, she sounded tired.

I kept the sudden joy from showing on my face and shuffled after her to the small door with meek obedience, as if the key to my freedom had not just been handed to me. I wondered what she wanted me to clean now and imagined all the most disgusting tasks. I would have happily done all of them and more.

But once I stepped through the door, I forgot about the chores, even about my plans to escape. For Pleasure Hall was nothing like I had expected, not like Maiden Hall at all.

Silk pictures of naked men and women in strange poses covered the walls, painted in rich colors so full of life the images seemed to be moving. I turned my head in embarrassment. My feet sank into a carpet, soft and thick as shirl moss. Then a round pool in the middle of the round hall drew my gaze, and I stared slack-jawed at the steam rising from it.

I could not gawk long, as I had to keep up with Kumra, who hurried along without paying the least attention to the beauty around us. In passing, I admired the graceful reclining benches covered in luscious fabrics, the richly carved low tables, and their bowls of fruit and sweets.

Before me spread a world so strange and beautiful it belonged in a dream, although I was not sure if even in my dreams I could have conceived of it.

Pleasure Hall did not stand deserted during the day as Maiden Hall. About twenty women and twice as many children filled the luxurious central space, and voices of more filtered in from the adjoining chambers. The soft sound of water that seemed to circulate in the pool blended together with the gentle chime of charms around the concubines' waists, creating something akin to music.

A few concubines watched our progress, while others embroidered, played with children, or simply rested. The only similarity between Pleasure Hall and Maiden Hall was the small window holes below the round ceiling, although the glass of the ones here swirled with a rainbow of colors.

From the central space opened many chambers with curved archways, and I followed Kumra into

one of them. Some of her gowns were carelessly scattered on the floor where they lay in twisted poses like beautiful bodies waiting for their spirit to enter them.

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She led me to a small chamber that opened from hers in the back. A delicately carved bed of dark sabal wood stood in the corner, her daughter, Keela, lying upon the bed. Color had fled her face since I had last seen her on the night of the feast. Her eyes stared but did not see.

Kumra had not brought me to clean. She wanted my healing.

“I am a Berangi,” she said. “Have you ever seen a Berangi funeral?”

I shook my head and bowed deep, not daring to look her in the eye.

In the barbaric Kingdom of Berang when an important person died, the family had a servant killed and buried with the dead so they would have someone to take care of them in the afterlife. In the time of the first kings, they used to bury the servants alive.

“Pray you do not have to.” Kumra turned back from the door before walking out. “I prefer the old ways, like Tahar.”

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CHAPTER FOUR (Keela)

I stepped closer to the bed where Keela trembled. A double-layered blanket covered her, the outer panel made of blue damask and embroidered with yellow bell flowers, the inner panel finely woven wool. I had admired the cover when I had seen it in the wash. The petals had been done by such a fine hand that the flowers seemed to dance across the material. Now, in the dim room, they looked like blossoms heaped upon a grave.

I reached inside my tunic and clutched the phial hanging on the cord around my neck, my only reminder of my mother and freedom. But even that could not bring me comfort as my fears surrounded me.

I spoke Keela’s name, but she did not respond. I checked her forehead, found it cool and damp with sweat. When I drew the cover down, her trembling increased until I had to hold her in place.

She wore only a thin sleeping robe and her charm belt. I freed her from the robe so I could fully see her pale body, but tied the charm belt back on, even though I did not believe in its powers. She believed, and that might make a difference.

I looked over her pale skin, expecting a bite mark from something poisonous, but did not find it even as I turned her over so I would not miss anything. She shook worse with each passing moment, until her body went into quick, hard convulsions.

A time comes in the progression of disease that all healers recognize, the last chance beyond which exists no return. I looked into Keela’s eyes, the tiny black spots of her pupils that did not see me, and knew I was losing her fast.

I asked my mother’s spirit for guidance and did everything she taught me. I tasted Keela’s sweat—bitter. Her breath stank like tidewater trapped in the low places on the beach, and in it I could smell the poison. I ran out to Kumra’s chamber to ask how long Keela had been suffering and what she had eaten, but Kumra had left, and I had no time to find her.

I returned to the girl, opened her mouth, and shoved my fingers down her throat as far as I could, until her stomach gave up its deadly charge. As the sour stench of vomit filled the room, I grabbed the clay jar from the corner and forced half the water down her throat, then made her give it back again. I did the same with the rest of the water, not an easy task as Keela sputtered and choked, resisting my efforts.

When at last I finished, I returned to Kumra's chamber and dragged over another jar of water to clean Keela and her bed, then brought in one of Kumra's throws to cover the girl, whose convulsions had diminished to weak shivers.

And with that, as little as I had done, I had done all I could. At home, I could have tried a fusion of mixed herbs, but in this strange land I would not have known where to look for them, nor did I have the freedom to leave the House of Tahar and wander into the woods.

Without true powers, I did not have the ability to send my spirit into Keela's body to seek the illness and draw it out, to tell her spirit how to help me, what to do.

My mother used to say youth had its own healing powers, and to them I entrusted Keela. She was young, her body strong. I hoped strong enough—for both our sakes.

I held her hand, anchoring her body to life by the power of touch. I talked to her, for her spirit to hear and find the way back, should it wander. I told her the story of Lawana, the merchant and the beggar boy, the faithful wife, and by the time I got to the Guardians and the Forgotten City, her breathing had grown even.

"You would have liked the Forgotten City." I wiped her face with a wet cloth. "The houses and towers were beautiful beyond anything that exists now in the world. In the middle of the labyrinth of streets stood a round building of wonders, topped not by a flat roof but something that looked like a giant bowl turned upside down. They called it a dome."

She gave no indication that she heard me, but I went on with the tale.

"The outside they covered in sheets of lustrous gold. The inside of the building was one large open space, with seats enough for multitudes. They painted the ceiling blue and attached golden symbols for all the stars as they stood in the moment of the creation of the world. So exact were their measurements that scholars came from distant kingdoms to study them."

I glanced at Keela, and although she did not look in need of clarification, I explained anyway. "Scholars were magical people who studied all things and could explain even the unexplainable." I did not know anything more about their strange order than that.

"In exchange for seeing the Map of Eternity, they brought wondrous gifts, metals many times the strength of iron, and lamps that used less oil and burned ten times brighter than the ordinary ones. They even taught the people of the Forgotten City how to make water come to their houses, so nobody had to pull water from a well or go to the creek."

This had always seemed the most impressive part of the tale to me, and as a child, I had often wished the secrets of the Forgotten City were still known to us.

"These scholars gladly gave any knowledge they had for a glimpse at the Map of Eternity, for when they compared it to the position of the stars of their own times, they could tell many things that passed before in the world and even predict events that were to come."

I went on, for her sake as much as my own. I needed to think about something else than what would happen to me if I failed to restore her health.

"Other strange people came to the Forgotten City too, philosophers, the wise men of the world. They came together in the Forum—their name for the building with the dome that held the Map of Eternity—and by sharing their knowledge, they increased it a hundredfold. The three Guardians of the city asked only one thing of all these masters of knowledge—that before they left, they wrote their wisdom onto scrolls to preserve in that place. The walls of the Forum were covered in holes from flo

to ceiling, like honeycomb. And these recesses held all the knowledge of the world.”

I wondered what Keela would have said to such a thing could she have talked. Many of the Shahala did not believe the myth of the Forgotten City and thought of it as another of our many tales that were but entertainment for small children. My mother, however, talked about it often and with such detail as if she had been there, so it lived vividly in my memory.

“I do not know what to tell you,” I said to the pale-faced girl and squeezed her hand. “Each person must choose what they believe.”

The breeze brought the smell of baking bread from the kitchen and the sound of servant women singing. I could see the blue sky through a small window that stood open to let in fresh air. It seemed as if all life stretched out there, shut away from me, and I was already buried in the dim chamber with the listless body that lay on the bed.

The thought clenched my stomach and replaced the hunger of my missed morning meal with nausea. I had not seen any Kadar tombs around the House of Tahar. Maybe like the Shahala, they had sacred places to rest their dead. Did they bury the spiritless bodies in the hillside as my own people did? Or did they use caves like some foreigners? Did they burn the bodies until only the bones remained?

Everything I had ever heard about funerals in distant lands flooded my terrified mind, as my thoughts circled back to the same unimaginable horror again and again—what it would be like to be buried alive.

Keela whimpered, startling me out of my anxious wonderings. I wiped her brow, frustrated that I could not do more, and tucked Kumra’s red silk coverlet around the girl’s body. I held Keela’s limp hand and whispered to her about all the good things in life, the few that I knew. And in between, I prayed to the spirits, pleaded for their favor. When Kumra returned, she found me on my knees next to the bed.

“I will clean these.” I jumped to my feet and picked up the soiled linens from the corner, but she motioned for me to put them down.

“You will stay here.” She moved toward the sheets and wrinkled her nose at the smell of vomit. “So the illness came from her stomach.” She thought for a moment. “Is it out?”

I nodded, hoping and praying it would be so.

Kumra walked to her daughter, her dress swooshing over the stones as it swept the floor. “Will she live?”

“Yes,” I said, not because I knew so but in case Keela could hear me.

Kumra glanced toward the pile in the corner. “I will send someone.” She looked less imposing now, standing by her daughter’s bed in the middle of the sour-smelling room.

“May I ask for Onra?” I snapped my mouth shut with the last word, stunned by my own impudence.

Kumra narrowed her eyes, and I rushed on before she had a chance to come up with a punishment for my brazenness. “She helped me with my forehead when I first arrived. She is good with the sick, and she is strong. I might need to change the bed again.”

She looked at Keela one more time and left without a word. I sagged against the wall with relief but found no time to rest. Keela began thrashing again, and it required all my strength and attention to keep her from falling from the bed.

* * *

The time of the midday meal had passed when Onra finally came with a jar of fresh water and a bowl of cheese and bread from the kitchen. She looked thinner than I remembered and would not meet my eyes. I set the bowl on the floor while she refilled Keela’s jug. When she finished, I reached for her hand to still her, unsure whether she would want me to ask about what had happened to her.

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