

ARIKANA

BOOK I:

SON OF AKANGA



W . B . N J E R U



SON OF AKANGA (Arikana Book 1)

This is the Second edition of the Original title:

The Sorceress of Harem, published in 2022.

This paperback edition is Published and Printed in Kenya by

Arikana Publishing, 2023

Text in this book set in EB Garamond 11.5

Cover/Interior by Arikana Publishing.

Nairobi, Kenya.

Library Of Congress Control Number: 2023320669 (Print)

ISBN 978-9914-49-617-8

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For Mom & Dad

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PIL-FAH-SEIGH

A LONG TIME AGO, while the world was still young, there lived two brothers. They were named Demi and Malong'. They were light beings created by Kai, to roam the lands East of Arikana and dwell there. Demi was not as adventurous or as wild as his brother Malong'. He was a cultivator. He grew seeds from the earth and planted trees in the forests. He called them from the ground, the air, and the water, and they would listen to his voice and flourish.

Malong' was a groomer. He was fond of beasts and of the long reach of the fields where he would often run to. He called the animals to become, one by one:

The lions, the cheetahs, the jackals, the hyenas, the pheasants, the antelopes, the crocodiles, the butterflies, the cattle, the goats, the serpents, all these were well known to Malong's heart.

One day, when Demi was speaking to the trees, Malong' was on the other side in the fields bored. He did not want to seek his brother for company, lest he was drawn into the endless feud of what they should plant next. His imagination was clouded. This was not his best day. He returned home and did not speak to Demi even when he was spoken to.

The next day, Demi decided to join his brother in the fields, and instead of talking him into planting something, he wanted to help him be happy again. Malong saw this and thought, this was not his brother's usual. Demi had never taken interest in what he did and did not care for the animals as much either. Every time he raised a forest, the fields got smaller. Many times Malong' had tried to stop Demi, but being the younger of the two, Malong' would mostly concede. This was the day to show that he could make wondrous creations, greater than Demi's.

He asked him to stand back and see what he was capable of. Demi obliged and watched as his brother worked with his hands. Malong' thought that maybe if he fused some elements of the forests and those of the beasts, then he could wow his brother. He weaved and weaved, and sang and called, and finally, a mighty creature stood. *Shamalak*, he called it.

Demi saw this and thought that his brother was trying to belittle him. He called him the next day to the lake, west of their home, and Malong' witnessed as Demi weaved into being, a water creature from reeds and coral and the bones of dead fish. He called it: *Lukwata*. It was mightier than the one Malong' had made!

The next day, they went out to a fearsome contest, bringing forth many more abominations.

Later that day, Kai came to visit the two as he had not seen them for some time. He had entrusted them with this part of His world. However, when he arrived, he was moved with distaste! Malong' had

just finished forging the most gruesome of all the beasts. A monster so great, only the oceans could hide: **Leviathan!**

In fury, Kai arrested them. He then parted the soil, so that the belly of the earth was seen, and vanished the abominations, sealing the doors to the underworld. He took away the lightful nature of the two and cursed them to live as men of flesh. When they saw that they could no longer create, they asked that Kai be merciful and that He would allow them to marry and bear children, as their flesh could waste away. Kai saw this as a sincere plea and commanded that if it were to be, then they would have to live on separate ends of Arikana. Demi was given the East, and Malong', the West. Kai then promised to send them maidens of flesh with whom they would marry and bear children. On reducing to an entirety of flesh, then all its ails would also befall them and their descendants. Three days after the two brothers were separated by Kai, they became very lonely.

Demi missed Malong' so much that he walked to the fields to see if any memory of him would remain. There, the wind had refused to bring forth forests, and the seeds ceased to hear him. He sang in sorrow through the evening.

Malong' too missed his brother. In the West, trees did not sway as gloriously as those that Demi had created back home. He felt lonely and lost. The animals did not know him. Instead of lions letting him groom their mane, they became aggressive, chasing him away! He also wept, and when he had no more tears to cry, he slept as it was evening.

The next day, both of the brothers awoke to the most beautiful and fair of maidens. They had smooth dark skin and soothing voices, laughing like the jitters of the crickets. They had long dark hair that glistened in the sun and their eyes were deep like wells of sweet water. It was made known to them that the women were sent to be their brides and comfort, as a gift from Kai. The brothers never met again and they lived apart until their deaths.

The story of the East

Demi *wifed* Soye and she bore 7 beautiful daughters. They were named Toya, Yara, Fola, Wuyi, Soni, Enai, and Nuba. They lived in the East with their parents. Demi told them the stories of Kai, and stories of how great he and Malong' once were. However, as the girls grew older, they believed less in their father's tales. Each year after counting 30 suns, they would each present a fat ram to **the sacred tree**; the large oak tree where the brothers were brought into existence by Kai. The girls never understood the custom as they had never seen Kai with their own eyes.

Their father often reminded them of Kai's mercies, and how His hand protected them from evil all year round. Even so, evil had already existed from the beginning. The temptation that led to their fall was its *attribute*. Kek had roamed the realms of men and corrupted them. There had been many wars and wrongs outside of Arikana, but up to then, evil seemed unaware of them.

The girls finally became of age and they desired to marry. However, there were no men in the East. Demi saw it wise to go seek Kai and ask him to provide men for his daughters. As he made his offering, Kai visited him and asked, 'What is it that you seek here? You have already made your sacrifice a fortnight ago. Do you feel that it wasn't enough?'

Demi answered, "My Lord, I am here to ask that you may favour my daughters and give them wonderful men just as you gave to me a wife."

Kai responded, "I am afraid that you cannot receive the sons of your brother, as they already went out to find wives of their own, and have been corrupted by the outside world. This I will do in your favour: I will send 7 good men that I have watched from their birth till now. They will be husbands to your daughters. Once they marry, you must

do your best to keep them close, because if they scatter from your dwelling, then they will also be corrupted.'

Kai consumed the offering by fire and left.

Demi went back home and shared the good news with his family, and then they waited. First, was a man from the South. He was handsome and strong. He married Toya. Three more followed a year later from the East in vessels. They married Yara, Fola, and Wuyi. Later the same year, a tall dark-skinned man came from the North, marrying Soni. After two years, two men came from the far West in vessels, and married Enai and Nuba.

They quickly multiplied and began to crowd their father's dwelling. The men then told their wives, "Ask from your father, each a portion of this vast land, that we may have our dwellings as well." Demi refused this request, saying that it was not Kai's will. As they bore more children, the resources therein were not enough for all of them. One day, Toya's eldest son had a quarrel with Yara's youngest son over the sheep they had brought back from the field. One of them had lost a sheep from his herd and blamed the other. They fought bitterly, and Toya's son killed Yara's son. On seeing this, Demi burned with anger and decided to do the inevitable. It was then that he sent the men out to find land suitable for their families. This way, if they had any quarrels among themselves, it would be their burden to bear.

The man from the South chose Tanga, far South of there. The three men from the East chose to settle along the coastal shorelines of Shani, with it the lands of Takoa, and the Mara which was South of there.

The man from the North took the land known as Kush, North of the lands and one of the men from the far West took the path of the Lake called Nile. The last Westerner chose to stay there with the ageing Demi and take care of him and Soye. He was the husband of the youngest daughter, Nuba. Everyone else took their belongings

moving to their new lands and settled.

The land had not been named. This happened much later when new generations came, as when the people were settling, they were no more than just plots belonging to Demi.

The Flood

After this was done, it rained heavily to the point of flooding. Kai was not pleased with the decision made by Demi.

He did not heed to their agreement. Demi and Soye suffered drowning, as did many of the children who were unable to climb up to higher grounds. When the rains stopped, they all had lost their belongings. They parted from Kai, each on a path that pleased them. Kai, from a distance, watched over them still, never to show Himself. Kai saw the struggle that the men were having, as there had not remained enough cattle or good land to till. He then blessed them with the knowledge of trading, hunting, crafting, fishing, and mining. The Kush found vast mines of precious metals, mainly gold. They also herded cattle in their fields and took so much pride in them, that they did not eat them as much, but instead saw them as a sign of riches.

The mara was surrounded by a mighty forest. Though shared between them, the Takoa and the Akanga, they had most of it within their boundaries. They made lumber and crafted rocks for building and decoration. Due to the amount of labour required to do these tasks, they mainly ate in the forests and wilderness. They were great hunters, and like the Kush, kept large groups of cattle in their homesteads. Further South in Tanga, iron was in plenty! They became masterful smiths and used their tools to hunt and cultivate. Shani saw the ocean as their land till. They made vessels, fished, and travelled to far parts of the ocean, meeting the men from

whence their forefathers came. They traded with the Eastern civilisations with cowries and made treaties with them.

The Takoa were great travellers. They traversed all the lands, trading with the people there: a piece of metal for a piece of fabric, a log of wood for grain, a fish for a gem. They used most of their land to build and store food and items for trade as they did not cultivate much, or herd as much either. Those who did, would not harvest enough to sustain their population, and so trade became their forte.

The Akanga; those who remained on Demi's original plot, were mainly cultivators. They had a few cattle, but they did not hold them as a symbol of pride and riches as the Kush and the Mara. They preferred to keep them for the milk, butter, ghee, and manure.

The Nile dwellers were in a way secluded from the others. They kept to their fishing and their Nile, doing a little cultivation here and there, and a little lumbering when they could. Their land was mainly untouched, as they were not as industrious as the Akanga, or the Mara.

The Rise of Kek

The larger Nilotic people had much time on their hands, and they often sat to do sports and wrestle at night. Among them, there was one small tribe in particular, who were very weak in stature but very cunning.

A day came, and the strongest tribe called on the weak tribe for a challenge. Even in their small number, these men were gutsy and reproached the strong tribe, asking them to put up a wager. One of the strong tribe's wrestlers called *Chui*, to mean leopard- for his strength and speed, suggested a wager:

'We shall meet by the fire to fight in 7 days. If I lose to one of you, then we will give you our piece of land and become your slaves for 7

years; if I win against your champion, then we will have your land and you shall become our slaves for 7 years.'

This was sealed among them as there were no appointed leaders then. Usually, the strongest would have their way.'

The weak tribe met amongst themselves, and none wanted to fight Chui. They had seen how prosperous he had been in various fights. He had broken the jaw of the mighty Bai, and in another fight Choda, also called the Python for his strong arms, had left with broken ribs after facing him. The tribe knew that there was no chance for them to win against the tribe of Chui, and prepared to forfeit their land and become slaves to them.

There came one among them, a young man by the name of Shimei, son of O'tui who rose and said that he knew a way they could win but warned of the risks of it. Desperate, the others begged him to speak, 'Bring out each family a kid, and I will go to pray to the god of the mountains in Beruel.

There, our help will be found'.

Without question, they each gave a kid to him. For 3 days, he led a few men to the far North Eastern mountains of Beruel. They had climbed up to a point on the peak of Beruel when a dark presence came down to meet them.

It was Kek.

They trembled in his presence as He exuded fear and plagued them with his terrifying form. He asked them, 'Sons of Kai! Why do you come to me?'

Shimei replied, 'Lord Kek, we seek you concerning our Kin. They wish to enslave us and take away our land. We have no shield and yet Kai did not bless us with the strength to hold battle. We ask that you save us!'

My people have agreed to give all that we could as an offering, in exchange for your favour.'

Kek gloated at this request. He thought to himself, 'This could be how I get to them who Kai has protected so well.'

He then asked, 'This offering is not enough! What more shall you give to honour my aid to you?'

Shimei then spoke, knowing well that he had to return to his tribesmen with an answer, 'Me and my people will serve you. It is better to be under you who helps us, than under Kai, with whom we continually suffer in our weakness'.

The rest agreed, and a seal of blood was made. Kek then offered them a stone, forged from the rocks at the peak of Beruel.

'This is my gift, the **BON MENDA**. It will grant you powers beyond the strongest man, rivalling Kai's chosen. However, if you use it to your advantage, I WILL that you come to my mountain, here in the deserts. Establish your people here, and serve me. If you break this promise, then you and all your kin shall die from the power vested in this stone!'

The presence left them, and Shimei knew what he had done. He led the men back to the Nile, and surely as Kek had spoken, Chui was defeated by the smallest among Shimei's people. There was disbelief in the eyes of all who saw how the boy lifted a mighty warrior, breaking him to the ground like a lion would a gazelle. The tribesmen of Chui were afraid and they ran back to their huts, getting their hooks, machetes, and spears, to kill Shimei and his people. Only Shimei remained standing before the fire, holding the **BON MENDA** in his hand.

No man crossed his stance and lived, falling 300 men that night. With great devastation, they begged that Shimei and his people leave their land, as they feared death. And so it was that Shimei and his tribesmen followed the route of the Nile to where it drained its water,

in the sea of Reeds. There, in the great Tibesti desert, with the mountains of Beruel to the East, they built their new home, and they called it Nubia.

Shimei feared being followed by enemies from the Nile dwellings and changed his name to Ovu, meaning ***'one marked of Kek'***. The stories of this great happening reached all of the 7 lands. The people questioned how such a small people would defeat such a great tribe! They suspected it was a fable. 'A mere story told to scare children by the fires of the 'lazy' Nile dwellers.'

Kek had succeeded in inflicting fear, but he was far from done. He went down to the belly of the earth, taking Ovu, who was Shimei with him.

Ovu was baffled at seeing those - *abominations!*

Kek maniacally taunted Ovu, 'Unleash one of these to the lands, and prove your loyalty to me.' Ovu had never seen such terrible creatures. He had heard of such in tales, but even those who told these did not fully describe the half of it. He did not wish for the lands to face this kind of devastation. He also knew that if he didn't choose, Kek could bring forth the worst of the underworld himself. He then sought to find one that was weak enough that the men could slay with ease.

He looked at them all: fire breathing, mighty serpents, horrendous monsters, and finally he settled on the Ogres. Kek tricked him, and multiplied the Ogres by the thousands, to an army. These monsters were 9 feet tall, with mouths in the back and front of their heads. They had slimy skin and a single eye that rested atop their two large nostrils. They carried the strength of three warriors and were ferocious in their movement.

Ovu was devastated by what Kek was plotting and wanted to warn the rest. Kek saw the change of heart in Ovu, and kept him there until the damage was done. 'You cannot pity those who looked down on

you. If so, you must choose now, if these Ogres will also meet your tribesmen in Nubia!’ He was quiet, not answering, but shook at the words of Kek.

The Ogres were released at nightfall, ravaging the 7 lands from all directions. Men, women, and children were crushed under the feet of these giants! They proceeded to loot the precious relics and gifts that Kai had given to men from their shrines, including all of the precious NARUMOR scrolls and ritual items of gold. All the blood spilt that night was like a mighty river. Kai was deeply grieved by this and hurried to stop further deaths, as the ogres could have wiped out the entire population. The Ogres quit their path of destruction and retreated to the West, in the lands between Demi and Malong’s people.

Wrath descended to meet Kek. He slew him and chained him atop the mountain of Beruel, taking away his sight for what he had done. Kai then resealed the underworld, mastering a lock and breaking it into the *three of balance* called the SANGARII, scattering them to the North, the South, and the Navel of Arikana.

Ovu was spared, but Kai said to him, ‘Your mischief has created disunion between me and your people. I will no longer protect you, and from now on you must live by the powers given to you by Kek, and no matter what ailments come to you, I will not prevent it!’ Ovu returned to his people, heavy in his heart. Knowing Kai’s word to be true, he mobilised his people to start building a city surrounded by a great wall, using the powers of the BON MENDA.

He set aside *Emissaries*; mercenaries who from childhood were taught to battle at the feet of Beruel. Those who survived the harsh nature of the training, Ovu himself would teach how to control the beasts he had seen hidden in the belly of the Earth. These would know of no pleasure than to serve Kek all their lives. There was an aspect of the stone’s power that over time culminated in youth. The

men and women who sat with Ovu never seemed to age, and with every dawn that came, their foreheads shone even brighter. Ovu knew of this and in his place as the new leader of his tribesmen, decided to keep this manifestation of the stone to only those whom he willed.

The age of men

As the age passed by, the men of the 7 lands grew weary of the Ogres. They feared that they never got enough of the taste of blood that they had that night. Even so, many prayed to their gods as well as they knew that they would be protected from any further attacks. There was wisdom offered in the council of the Lands, that they find worthy leaders from among them, Men of valour who would speak and be heard. They would govern their lands and speak on their behalf to the gods.

When the people heard this, they asked, ‘How then do we find such men in a sea of them?’

The elders proposed that each subtribe forwarded a man who had been trusted with the affairs of the people, and one would be raised to stand over them. They all agreed and men from all the individual lands were raised as leaders. The Akanga had Meneo, The Takoa had Soyinka, The Shani had Menza, The Mara had Omi, The Nile dwellers had Ita, The Kush had Hewala, and the Tanga had Oria. These built altars to their gods, as they were many, and led the people into new seasons of restoration.

Kai saw what they had done, but despite their ignorance, He had laid a promise to watch over them. He intended differently and purposed to send them into war with the Ogres.

The Battle of Peruzio

In the hearts of the leaders, Kai cropped up a thought, this continuing to a meeting; a first of many. All the Kings and Chiefs sat together deciding to wage war with the Ogres. They sent spies westwards to find out where the Ogres had gone. They found a flourishing land, fed by great rivers and plumb fruit cultivated beneath forest canopies. For shelter, the ogres had built giant moulds made of Earth. The Ogres had multiplied in great numbers! When the spies returned, it was told to the men. In great awe, they realised they needed GREAT help.

It had been 150 years since the Ogres attacked. Ita from the Nile dwellers proposed that they seek out the power that Shimei had kept for himself and his tribe up North in Nubia. There was a lot of opposition brought forward over this, however, it was told how many years before, a child destroyed Chui, a mighty man in battle, and another felling 300 men without as much an effort as moving his arms. There was much question to these stories, despite Ita's assurance of the facts. *No one up to then had gone to search for Nubia.* It was at last decided that ONE among them should go North and find the dwelling of the 'Stone-wielder' and return with a cure to their ail.

There was a man, a son of the lineage of Wuyi, a renowned craftsman. He was tall and much stronger than most men in the 7 lands. His name was Peruzio. He was also revered among the Mara people, to be a great huntsman. Those who knew him called him honest and kind, welcoming all to his home- even strangers and helping wherever he could. He was found fit for this quest after a fierce contest. When the other people saw him, they agreed that he was worthy to lead them to war as their champion and even carry their matter to the North.

In Nubia, the years had been good. Even with the imprisonment of Kek, they had prospered, continually offering to the remembrance of the day they were taken from possible slavery. Ovu had grown grey hair despite his body remaining the same. He had built a city to behold! Nubia had become self-sufficient with its walls surrounded by the power of Kek. They built a great Temple for the BON MENDA, whose architecture was so complicated and extravagant, showing the much advancement the Nubians had seen over the years. They had learned how to harvest water from the river Nile and feed their homes. They built towering pyramids where they hid the treasures of their dead, who they never buried. They would preserve their bodies in special tombs, to visit their ancestral spirits in case of family disputes. They weaved their fabrics from palm trees, silk, and gum. They made their cloaks from the sheep and their skins from their goats. They travelled by horse and camel. Their wealth was measured in barley, wheat, and gold.

As the Kingdom of Nubia expanded, so did the population. Ovu saw that it would be difficult to govern alone, and so he decided that there would be twelve regions, each with a representative who would be part of the council of the BON MENDA, members of whom had been touched by its power. These were men and women exceptionally gifted in Prophecy, Healing, Psychic powers, Sorcery and Alchemy. They were also the guardians of the laws of the stone and their Temple, located in the middle of the city.

Among the twelve in the council, was a woman meek in her manner and a powerful healer. Her name was Erea. She was the wife of one of the prophets of Kek, a bald man called Uzi. Erea had three daughters: Zinzi was the eldest. She was three years older than Sheba. Benu was the youngest. They were born of the power of the stone, as Erea had difficulty conceiving children, and was treated using its power.

As with every child born of the stone, they bore a mark that everyone could identify; the hair on their heads was purple. Zinzi took after her father, and was gifted with Prophecy; Sheba got the rarest of all the gifts- that of Psychic and Benu got the gift of her mother, healing. As it was with all gifted children, when they became of age, they would be given to the Kazai and left in the hands of the temple masters, who would train them in the ways of their giftings.

During the tenure Erea sat in Ovu's council, Peruzio appeared from the south, weary from the heat of the desert, with a deathly thirst. He fell at the feet of the gatekeepers of Nubia who took him up immediately and carried him to the Citadel where Ovu sat. Ovu had known that this day would come. The tragedy of the ogres never left his mind. However, he was not willing to share the gains of the BON MENDA with anyone away from Nubia. This is because his counsel had advised against it, citing misuse of the power if put in the hands of outsiders.

Peruzio was revived by Erea, and placed before the council's sitting. He saw the Throne and bowed:

‘Oh Lord of the North, so it was true as it was told to us...’

‘What did they say?’

‘They praised a child and a son for the defeat of the Mightiest tribe among those in the Nile! They spoke of your high place here in the North, minted with majesty and magical wonders!’

‘This you see with your own eyes. What brings you to our city?’

‘My people have suffered a great massacre in the years of your absence. *Ogres* from the bellies of the earth ravaged our land, killing our women and children, maiming our men, and devouring our herds. No nation deserves such a vile punishment. Our nights are full of trembling, and our days are full of fear. They ask, ‘where will they come from? Is it the East? or is it the West?’ Even after all these years, we have not recovered from the losses we suffered that day. I ask for

your aid, as you were once with us as kin. We do not need your armies, we have many willing to fight back home. We ask just but a small favour. Just a touch of the power that once gave you immense strength against your adversary. You have done well for yourself here in this barren wasteland. I have seen this wondrous city you have built yourselves. Our defeat of the Ogres will free us, and my people will forever be grateful to you.'

Ovu answered:

'Mighty warrior, greatest amongst your people, you have spoken true words and even more, you have admitted to the weakness of your people, but I cannot give you what you seek. These men and women seated here represent every single Nubian in speaking against your request. Your people are anarchists, desiring to have power over one another. This power will only bring pain and suffering to you. Who am I to force my way? What if after your conquest over the ogres, you assume sovereignty and then wage war against my people? You understand why I cannot allow it. However, I cannot let you go without a solution. I can offer this counsel; I will give you one of our priests, and between you and the Ogres, there shall be a treaty that may be sealed by the power of Nubia, and so, the Ogres shall never come to your land again, nor you go to theirs!'

Peruzio would not agree to this as the Ogres were increasing, and soon they would advance Eastwards and cause more harm; one that he feared even the power given by Ovu, would not suffice. To this, there was no deal reached between Peruzio and the Nubians, leaving the throne empty-handed, even refusing the escort of Ovu's guards.

The betrayal of Erea

Erea had compassion over Peruzio. When she healed him, she had felt the extent of the damage his body had suffered. Only an overly

determined person could suffer such a treacherous journey, without assurance of relief whatsoever. After the council was dismissed, she ran to her home, changed from her official robes, covering her head, and rode a horse through hidden back streets to the gates of Nubia. She intercepted Peruzio before he got to the gate's clearing and said, 'The power we have thrived on was never given to any one man for his selfish use. I will help you.'

She gave him a change of Nubian clothes and they took the horse to the temple. She managed to sneak him in through the roof. There was a small-time gap in between the offering times in the evening when the stone was left unattended. She forged him a TALISMAN, chipping off a piece of the stone and placing the crevice of the BON MENDA in the middle of her very own honorary council medallion. The piece was made of a triad of gems, and with the chip in the midst of them, it looked like an emblem of the Northern star. It was as beautiful as it was enchanting.

Time was running out and the next group of prophets was coming in to offer. Their footsteps were getting louder.

She quickly sealed the Talisman with the spell, **PIL-FA-SEIGH**, which means in Nubian, '*Cease my Power*'. She rushed to get him out and put him on her horse, directing him to a different path, secret only to Ovu and his closest companions, and through which he would advance out of the city. This act remained secret to her heart.

The TALISMAN OF PERUZIO

Peruzio travelled through the night arriving in Kush at the end of the next day. Word spread fast ahead of him, reaching the leaders that their hero had arrived. They planned to meet immediately and see what Peruzio had brought. On receiving him, there in his hands was a Talisman, known to all as of that day as the TALISMAN OF

PERUZIO. The inscriptions of the sealing spell had faded into the essence of it, and no man could read it. Peruzio was then charged to prepare the men for battle, for by this then, they would become victorious! In groups of 500, Peruzio touched the warriors from each of the lands with the power of the TALISMAN and then continued to train them with tools of war. There were axes, blunt Iron, Machetes, and swords; Spears, shields, and arrows. Due to their weight, it would be cumbersome for one to carry all, so each man had to choose a weapon fit for their skill set.

They then travelled westwards and surrounded the Ogres' dwellings in folds of 2,000 in each direction. Each leader led their troops, carrying horns of battle in their hands. They waited patiently until the ogres were all gone to rest in their moulds, as they were heavy sleepers. Once this had passed, Peruzio blew his horn, as did the other leading warriors, and all followed to attack!

They slaughtered the Ogres with no relent, even their infants, burning down their moulds. They wailed in pain, but they were shown no mercy. The Warriors avenged the blood of their people, and Kai did not stop them. Some of the Ogres fled to the forests of the West, scarred and maimed. Peruzio led the men back home: a hero to his people.

The celebrations were long, going on from dusk till dawn for over a moon. Men got drunk, singing into the night the praises of Peruzio. These became so much that the leaders of the lands envied him, and they started plotting in secret to steal the Talisman from him. Peruzio never took it off! He had tied it with a leather strap and hung it on his neck even when he slept. He was a light sleeper, and never took brew. The leaders would pay off thieves and warriors alike to slay him, but every time, they died in Peruzio's mighty hands.

Peruzio had fallen in love with a woman from the Shani. Her name was Hori. He trusted only her and loved her dearly, siring 3 children

with her. In all this, Peruzio did not seem to age, and it was said that his sons and daughters also continued to have lived longer than the ordinary.

Menza of the Shani summoned Hori to his sitting. She then set for a journey to Shani, leaving her husband's home in Mara. When she met with him, he proposed that she kill Peruzio, and bring him the Talisman, in exchange for great wealth.

She refused this, but Menza threatened her and she had to choose between the death of her parents or her betrothed. She returned home to Peruzio with a heavy heart. That night, she prepared his favourite meal, roasted boar. She then served him some brew, which he declined. She used her charm on him and finally, he fell asleep from getting drunk. Some men came later in the night and killed him, taking the Talisman.

On seeing this, Hori quickly buried her husband and returned to Shani with her children never to claim her reward. She went into hiding, living the rest of her life in mourning. The leaders learned of what Menza had done, and they were angry. Menza was charged by the council, and it was then that it was decided that the Talisman would not be safe in the hands of any one man. They built a fortress for it in Takoa; a central point for all the lands. The fortress was guarded by a select group of warriors, who never let the Talisman out of their sight.

The first generation of leaders passed, and a second was enthroned.

The plague

A deadly plague came over the lands, and those who got sick died in days. No known medicine could cure it. It was then that the people looked to the Talisman and their leaders allowed their medicine men

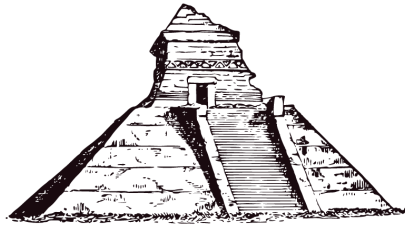
to draw its power, and the people were healed. It was then decreed: 'No longer shall the Talisman's power remain unused. Men shall be set apart and taught to draw from it and use its powers for the benefit of the people. We have seen its healing powers, we must know what more we can use it for.'

This was also the birth of dark magic in the lands. Ignoring the power given to them by Kai through his NARUMOR scrolls, every tribe raised its lead magician. Not all however meant to do well with the gift given to them and soon, harm was returning in terms of greed and misuse. Magicians and witches would be paid off by wealthy men to enslave others, and this did not please Kai.

He then raised his messengers to the lands and made them watchers over the people. However, the people were becoming so hard at heart, that they would not hear them and even planned to kill them. These messengers would then take different lives, shapeshifting to conceal themselves from the eyes of those who sought to do evil against them. They never left their swords behind. In secret, they continued to watch over the people, only intervening when Kai commanded them. They were known as the **GER HAKHAN-** or **THE WATCHERS OF THE ONE.**

The ways of people in the lands reached the Northern Kingdom of Nubia, and Ovu was angry about what he heard. In the lead statute of Nubia, anyone who was found guilty of infringing any of the set laws suffered a public death, and their families would follow them to the gallows!

Kek remained silent, and so Nubia was left to govern itself as Ovu saw best. He remained revered almost as a God among the Nubians for the 258 years that he reigned.



UNREST

IT WAS EARLY in the morning, at the dawn of a new year. The Nubians called this the year of the buffalo— the year of firmness. In Uzi's household, it was the final year of the girls' training with the masters at the Temple. Zinzi was always the first to rise. Her silk was light and loose against the body. Her purple hair was bound together with palm strings and her skin washed well. She was very beautiful, but always second in fairness to Benu.

Their father had waited until they were all at an age fit for them to start the Kazai together. Otherwise, Zinzi, who was the eldest, would have attained her levels first.

She sat alone at the cooking place, preparing a meal for the family. Sheba often rose second and helped with arranging their materials for their day, but today she was late.

Zinzi did not want to wake her. She instead chose to grudgingly do everything by herself, grumbling internally and complaining about how the firstborn had to take care of everyone's messes, forgetting her usually unmade bed that Sheba often spread.

As Zinzi skimmed milk into smaller vessels, she heard a knock. She listened, just to be sure. It could have just been someone turning in their bed. Just as she resumed skimming, another knock followed, and this time it was very distinct. It came from across the corridor. Whoever it was, was getting impatient.

"I heard you!" She answered, as more knocks followed.

"Who would be knocking on the door at this time?"

She held the wooden panel that locked the door, and, 'IMO-A-KHA' it swung open. A serious-faced man about her height stood with a chubby body, covered in a thick cloak. He held a letter tightly under his left arm; and on his right, a shawl.

"Your mother's presence is required today at the council meeting, by our Lord, Ovu."

"It is courteous to at least greet the lady of the house, before ordering at her you know!"

"You are not the lady of the house, and young girl, you are barely a distinguished apprentice of the Kazai..." The man relented, however,

"Greetings, this fine morning, Zinzi.

"That's better! It is a fine morning Tule. Mother is not awake yet, but I will let her know."

"Well, she must not be late. I will be on my way now, as my night is done. Enjoy your day." He handed her the letter, walking away in the direction of the beams of light escaping Beruel's hold. He lifted his shawl and laid it on his head as he disappeared in a distance. Zinzi then closed the door, only to find Sheba skimming the milk that was left.

"Ah! You let me do all the work while you were sleeping, and now

you want to skim the milk?”

“Shika moo, Sister. Your stubbornness will get you someday...”

“It is good you are awake! Go tell Mother that she has to start preparing herself. There is a meeting she has to attend today and from what Tule said, it’s a serious one.”

Zinzi laid the letter on the shelf, quickly moving to take back the milk jar. Displeased, Sheba took the letter going ahead to the back, where their mother slept. She did not enter, but stood at the entrance of the room and called out gently,

“Mother, there is a letter for you. The Lord Ovu requires your presence at the council meeting today.”

There was no reply. She assumed that Erea was still asleep and called to her again.

“I heard you, Sheba. I am already awake,” she came in a croaky voice. This was a very common response especially when her mother was not willing to step on the cold ceramic floor. Sheba went in and gave her the letter. Immediately Erea saw what it said, she jumped out of bed and into a frenzy.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“It just arrived Mother.”

“Well, then it did not come early enough.

At this time, I will most likely be late!”

“Well, you’re in luck! We just learned how to take flight at the Kazai...”

“...what did they teach you to use?” Erea asked as she went through her clothes.

“...Water!” Sheba was confident.

“Oh child, there is so much for you to learn.

We don’t have enough water here for that.”

“Go help your sister, and wake Benu. You will have to go early today. I will wake your father, okay?” Something about that letter

bothered Erea. Sheba just hoped that it would be well thereafter.

Sometime later, as was custom, Uzi took the first step out of their dwelling, a house made of stone and palm leaf thatch, with proper wooden strutting. Uzi had built it with his own hands. The family was well placed in the upper social class among the Nubians, and they lived with the well up members of their region. It was expected as their mother was a member of the Council of the BON MENDA.

The lost horse had been replaced and so Erea rode to the heart of the city. Uzi headed for the temple with the girls, who followed behind him to their Kazai classes.

On arrival, Erea was met by the two men who normally sat on either hand of Ovu: Juba and Adis. They greeted her and helped her off her horse. They proceeded to the meeting at the Citadel. As the large polished doors opened, a silent gaze met her. All eleven members sat in their places, and right at the front, was Ovu. Erea was ushered to her place. She anticipated a scolding, especially from the strict and blunt Ovu, but he didn't even bulge. It was not a normal thing for meetings to be this quiet, and this added to her worry.

After the long silence, Ovu finally spoke:

"I have called you here today because there are matters close to the heart of this Council that we must address. These that grieve me: Firstly, the people's complaints have reached me regarding their desire to see a change in the leadership of specific regions. I have thought about it and I have decided to expand this council, and have more positions for other gifted Nubians. They will undergo various levels of scrutiny from this council and then once they have passed, they can sit with us- even taking the place of leaders who have reached their age threshold or that are unable to fulfil their duties.

"Secondly, the guards have noticed new activity in the deserts outside our gates. Men from the outer lands have wandered into our territory,

poisoned with an inferior form of spell that made them go mad. It is very peculiar, knowing that this is not the first time one of them has come through these deserts. Now with that said, it brings me to my last concern..."

He had not moved his right index finger from his temple all the while, his eyes fixated on the doors. Then suddenly, like he finally noticed the people in his presence, he turned:

"...A few years ago, a warrior came here seeking our help. We declined his request, and he left without any of our assistance, supposedly. That very evening, I was alerted by the men at the gates that he was never seen passing by there, and then a few days later, still, there was no sight of him. Soon after, the BON MENDA in the temple was discovered to have a piece shattered from it, and this was not from a fall, as it was still intact as I left it on the day of its commissioning. I tend to believe that it is no coincidence that now the powers that only existed here are manifesting in the outside world..."

He leaned forward from his rest, his eyes widening.

"Only the members of this council were made aware of the business we had with the man. You all took an oath, same as the guards- to not speak of it. I have questioned each gatekeeper, every Priest- yet none can explain these happenings. I am then convinced that there had to be someone with enough power to see past all of the people involved and successfully aid him, and they are sitting with us in this meeting right now. Exceptional in their gifting, yet cunning enough to defy me and the honour of the BON MENDA!"

As the echoes of those words settled, none spoke a word. They sat with heads hanging low in fear. It was now evident: the stone found a place in Ovu and seemingly, he was slowly likening to Kek.

"I will not ask you to step forward, nor will I force you out. You all have until midnight to surrender yourselves. Go and be with your

families. Prepare them if you must. Once time is up, guards will come to your homes and if a confession is made from the very oath you took, then you and your family will be arrested and readied for the gallows. Take this as an extension of my grace to you for having served under me.

I will not ask for your advice today. If escaping comes to mind, the mistake of leaving any 'secret' passage unguarded shall not be repeated!"

His eyes settled uneasily on each member, and a hasty glance from their cold stare was enough for anyone who left the meeting that day to know that the cruelty of the death arranged was unheard of.

Erea was shaken! Her empathy was going to cost her dearly. She rode away on her horse, not speaking to anyone. She did not head home. She knew this day would come, and had the repercussions thought through. There was one place she had found at the farthest Eastern edge, an island in the seas of reeds. It was a half day's journey on a horse and she had thought it wise that she and her family would use it for their escape to Arabia, away from the reach of Ovu. However, there would not be enough time to get everyone there, unless they all left with her at that very moment.

As she rode through the streets leading to the Temple, she noticed a shadowy figure following in every turn she made.

The Temple was surrounded by a crowd of merchants, who during this time of the year mainly sold animals that could be used for sacrifices. It was a very busy day there, as people went to offer good fortune sacrifices. This also meant that her husband, Uzi, being a prophet of Kek, would be swarmed with many plea seekers and fortuners.

There was a small stall there that Erea had rented a few years back. She paid a hefty sum of 200 gold *domios* for it to be left vacant for her use,

and the day had come. She narrowly escaped the figure and speeded into the branch where the stall was. She left the horse there and took the rest of the terrain on foot. A thick queue trickled from the temple doors down to the markets. She rushed up the stairs and being one of Ovu's council, the doorkeepers let her in indefinitely. Her husband was not among the three prophets standing at the end of the queue, but she knew where he could be found.

Behind the large curtains that hid the insides of the temple, were several doors. One led to the Kazai, the place where children would be trained in their giftings; another led to the quarters where the priests and other sacred servants of Kek would reside. She took the one on the left, passing a group of Kazai masters swiftly, and with little in mind of her, they did not stutter from their heated conversation.

She remembered her daughter's words from earlier about what they were learning, and she knew to go look at the waterfront, at the far end of the Kazai courts. As she made her way past the pillars and huddles of staff and students, she overheard gossip- words that heightened her worry.

'...they came for the girls!'

'...the father too!'

'...she was one of them?'

Erea turned to see eyes watching from a distance. An instant chill caught her chest. Hidden from the multitude, behind one of the grey pillars, cloaked in a familiar purple. She steered off course, raising a stir as her shoulders rubbed roughly past some of the staff. The call from the girl's eyes blocked her senses. She could hear it, loud as a shatter. A desperate clammer, a soul in question, and overwhelming fear. As she neared the pillar, she heard.

'... it's her!'

Quickly, 5 guards started clearing the hallway, pushing and falling some of the people. The tug between the girl and Erea became more

apparent, Sheba was in danger! Her heart raced as she finally crossed to the other end, and she ran madly at the pillar. There, Sheba wept squeezed up in the shadow, her hands wringing her left sleeve profusely. A bloody sleeve!

"Come now! We have to go..."

Sheba's confusion was not eased. Her mother's stretched arms became sturdy, grabbing her and snatching her out of the shadow. The guards were gaining on them.

"...I will tell you all that I must once we're out, but you must find strength. Have you seen your father?" Her voice was shaky, she was rattled. Sheba, almost in a squirm, confirmed the worst.

Erea swallowed hard, as the sting of tears grew,

"Hold my hand, don't let go!"

"I will tell you this; what you have...is special. I never thought I would say this today, but I am glad you are on my side..." there was a brief smirk on Erea's cracking lips.

"Come...I can only save one of us!" Sheba saw the look on her mother's reddening eyes, as the thumping footsteps of the guards got closer, their time was short. They broke into a run!

The guards became even more aggressive, trying to make way past the people. The gap was growing between them.

Erea pulled Sheba towards the door exiting the Kazai. She looked back, and saw the guards behind them, busy with the masses. She looked ahead and saw an aged man standing firm, even as some of the people fled right past him. He wore a grey turban, and robes similar to Ovu's, 'Mika!'

He signalled her to come forth, perhaps there was help after all. Mika was one of the Prophets, dear to Uzi. He had helped Erea gain favour with the throne, to use the BON MENDA for her healing. He had seen her pass at the front of the Temple, noticing the worry in her eyes.

"Come. Come!" He said, waving them to his right. There was a small compartment, where the altar tools were kept.

"You will be safe here for a while, you're lucky I saw you. More guards have barricaded the entrance!" He looked behind him, just to be sure the guards had missed them. Erea and Sheba heaved in relief. Temporary relief.

Mika closed the door behind him, then laid a stern eye on Erea,

"You should have let them take you! You know what happens when you resist. This matter means too much to the lord for him to relent."

"I have to protect my family, Mika. I have to try"

"How did he know?"

"I assumed much. Ovu would never let a stranger on his turf, especially one like Peruzio, leave without his eye watching his every step. That is already passed. I fear that he knows about Sheba..."

His eyes became like those of an owl. He stepped from the door, kneeling before Sheba, seeing her sleeve, "...how many?"

The girl sobbed, still agitating over what she had done. It brought more pain than the stab wound Erea was working to heal.

"They beat father....they...they dragged my sisters in his blood...I...I couldn't hold my anger..."

"...How many?"

"Don't pester her," Erea held her closer. "This was not a path of her choosing."

Mika rose, pouting at the fact.

"You were supposed to heal the power away, Erea!"

"...and take away her choice to be?"

"You wanted a child. You have three gifted daughters. Even if you lost one... If Ovu got Sheba, she could have never known any of this life. She was destined for a terrible future, but you lost the one chance to keep her away from him..."

"I have thought about this so many times. I couldn't let my daughter

live a life without ever knowing..."

"...Why is all this happening to us? What wrong have we done?" Erea's face dropped, "You would all judge me because all you've been taught is to do the will of Nubia's throne. For what I have done, I did for a greater good," She looked back at Sheba.

"Your father had a vision.

I begged him to bear with me...whatever is to happen, you were chosen for it."

"...I willed that one killed the other, and mindlessly, the guard slit his commander's throat. One cut my hand, and I saw his body thrown over the waterfront, breaking on a pillar...the others were afraid of me...they pointed and cursed at me...If I knew how to use this-you call a *gift*, I could have saved them..." Sheba wept.

"...Don't wish any of this away. If only the innocence of the children at the foot of Beruel was allowed, that evil was not planted in their minds...You have been spared, and this is not by mistake-" Hefty footsteps were heard outside the door. Mika silenced the two, leaning back on the door.

"We have the others, only the girl remains," one guard came,

"She's with the mother. They cannot be far. Both sides are sealed, they cannot escape. Check every room until you find the girl. She is one of them the Lord has a key interest in. She could fetch us a good deal from the throne. This kind requires an equal fold!"

"And the mother?"

"She is of no use to Ovu. Do what you must, just make sure we get the girl!"

As the voices went low, Mika became impatient. "I did not think it would come to this. If Ovu knows, he will send some of his emissaries."

Erea held Sheba's arm tightly,

"He will not have my daughter!"

"If he missed one, he will use all that he has to correct that mistake. I thought perhaps I could help you..."

"Do not feel despair, Mika," said Erea.

"You have helped a great deal, but now we must carry on to our separate paths. I will remember your kindness, even to the end."

They managed to sneak out, Sheba still in Erea's lead. Mika remained behind, praying. Hoping. Behold, the great curtains stood between them and their fate. Behind them, a Kazai infested with dishonourable guards, before them: freedom or death!

The temple front was turning chaotic. The deployed guards saw a riot as people fought against their forceful entry. The doors were impossible to go through. Erea saw this, peeking through the curtains. She thought of turning back but the men who were after them before had seen them and were gathering to arrest them. There was no way out.

The prophets stood up trying to calm the people, but their voices were too faint for the noise coming from the pandemonium. Erea then decided to push through the crowd. Sheba held her hand tightly, following her through the masses. The guards kept their eyes on them, but as they followed, the people on the inside started revolting against them as well. The two neared the doors. It became so tightly squeezed, that a pebble wouldn't pass through. Erea stopped. She gradually felt her daughter's fingers swim out of her hand. Sheba was now a little further from her reach. Erea strained to keep her eyes on her daughter, whose body was drowning beneath the heads of people. Sheba's arm remained lifted, but amidst the crowd, she blended right into the riots.

All of a sudden, a shredding thrust of force was felt pushing into the temple. So strong, it collapsed entire pillars, leaving bodies crushed beneath the offering altars. Even the great door's ledges broke. Dust and rubble and screams filled the outside. Inside, horrors and death!

As the dust settled, piles of bodies lay on each other, some badly injured, and those who were lucky dragged their broken bodies to safety.

Erea woke. Her garments were whitened by dust, tasting her blood on her tongue. Her ears were deafened, and her sight clouded and unclear. As little strength remained, she could see blurry movement. She groaned, weary of the pain in her bones. Even so, she was afraid of being found. Right then, darkness covered the mouth of the ruins. She sensed him!

A man- no, An anomaly, clad in excess metallic casts on the chest and knees like one headed to war, riding on a bear-like animal, with the face of a wolf, and claws like red hot daggers. Its mouth was leashed and saliva was oozing from it. It teethed through the leather, like a saber. It stood at a height of three men, and with strength like a young elephant, only faster. The Chemosit! One fed from the Lord's table. Never before had this creature been used before public eyes.

Behind him, a fresh group of guards with more men marched in, going through the bodies in a grave search. Ovu then came off the Chemosit, leaving it to one of his men. His feet never touched the rubble. He levitated over the bodies to where she was. He watched with a face so stony and calm. He circled her, as his beast grunted and danced. He then bent down to where she lay.

"So, Erea of Uzi. I am amazed that a wise woman like you would do such a grievous thing. Did you not think that I would know?" She could not let out a sound but stirred her body to slowly heal. He stood back upright and ordered,

"Find the girl! And when you have, tie her arms first..." he turned to his left menacingly, "I can sense that her strength is much alive!" With such intimidation, he sat back on his beast, and it rammed its way out of the ruins.

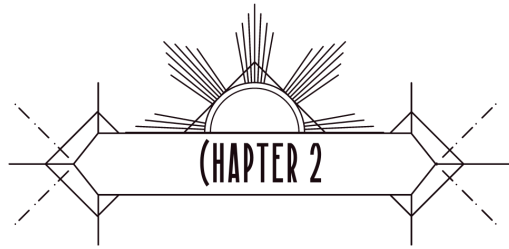
"She was with her mother, so she has to be close by. Search around!

Dig till you find the floors!” one of the senior guards commanded. Sheba woke. She became very afraid. Something had woken her up. She tried to turn from where she lay near the curtains. She felt her limbs and the slight cuts on her knuckles. She had been lucky. Her eyes tilted further to her right, and she saw her mother in the hands of the guards. As she revived her strength to move, a sound clogged her mind, one like a thousand screams, breaking her focus. She covered her ears, but it could not stop. She writhed in pain, fighting intensely to calm her mind. With every ounce of resistance, the sound increased tenfold!

Two women, dressed in bloody red garments draping to their feet, entered the temple. They wore veils on their crowns, covering their faces. One rushed to heal the masses that were still breathing. She was doing it so well, it was as if she had much greater power than what Sheba had seen in her mother! The other stood still at the entrance, her countenance turned in Sheba's direction. Sheba had never felt such strength, wrapping its invincible arms around her, making her bones crunch.

The woman's hands then spun her like a web of air, lifting her, then drawing her from the dead and injured bodies, intently carrying her to the broken doors. The guards stood back, as two readied a rope in their hands. It was then that Erea saw her daughter, hands bound - bruised and helpless. The struggle to free herself from the grip of the guards was vain. Tears were inevitable. Ovu had his way.

Son Of Akanga



ESCAPE

AT THIS TIME, much of the lands had seen many leadership changes. Meneo had been overthrown by Utonga in Akanga after the people rejected his leadership. Menza had succumbed to old age and his son Yumba wa Menza had become king over Shani. Soyinka of Takoa had lived longer than all of them. It was later discovered that he had found a way to live young in his bones for a much longer time than was usual. He hid this from the others and secretly used the Talisman that was well in the fortress built in his land. Soon, the new generation of leaders started to pride themselves in this fountain of youth. All apart from Hewala of Kush.

This led to an argument among the people, as they believed that there was malice against them by their leaders. As a result, Soyinka's homestead was burned to the ground, and this

caused fear in the hearts of the other leaders, so they retracted this behaviour.

There soon was a drought that ravaged the lands. Grain was running out and people were dying. It was then that the GER HAKHAN appeared to the men with a warning from Kai, that they may forsake the evil of the Talisman, return it to Nubia, and serve Him. The council of the lands would further give an offering to Kai for the atonement of their sin. They sort to rid the land of the Talisman, once and for all. It was decided that one of the GER HAKHAN returned the Talisman to Nubia. Amaket, a fair-looking man whose days were spent in the woods of the Mara, was trusted with the task. However, the rest of the GER HAKHAN advised him not to go, as they had heard whispers from the mountains of Beruel that Kek's terrible arm was rising again. They then used their power to conceal it deep in the forests of Mara, away from men.

Amresh, the son of Hewala took his father's place in Kush's leadership. Chaka, a youth at the time, took the place of Utonga in Akanga, as Yumba relinquished his throne in Shani due to his mishandling of the devastating drought. The people had lost faith in him, and he had lost hope for them. Soon, the people abandoned Kai. The GER HAKHAN's presence had disappeared with the drought. People turned back to their gods.

With a resurgence of witches and magicians, the people in Akanga beseeched Chaka over them, and it was decreed in all the land, that if anyone was found practising magic or any form of necromancy, apart from the Chief's ordained order of magicians, they would be lynched in public with no trial. Chaka would make many enemies by making this decree.

.....

Escape

The year of Uzi's family arrest was the same year that the drought had ended.

The night was cold in Nubia. Uzi's family was in shackles, as guards readied them for execution the next day- early in the morning. The hours in between would be torturous. Uzi had been healed by one of Ovu's healers. The most feared of all was Sheba. She was taken away from the rest. Guarding her was the mystery woman who had gotten her arrested. Her hands had been bound, and her mind clogged with a spell to keep her from breaking loose.

Erea sat on the dirt of her holding cell, looking across the hall at the tears of Zinzi and Benu. In the cell beside her, Uzi lay, yet to wake from his healing injury. He had lost a lot of blood. It was mostly quiet, with weeping that would subside from time to time. Soon, the girls fell asleep.

Erea firmly believed in her act. She yearned to explain herself to the girls, but with the guards pacing back and forth, constantly demanding their silence, there was little she could do. The night guards would take shifts and in between the handing over period, she found some consolation.

"...I am so sorry, my daughters. There was no other way."

Her head was low as was her voice. It felt like the words cut right through her throat.

"It is hard, but- we will find a way out of this." She promised herself.

A cough was heard from the nearby cell.

The cough came again, followed by a long groan. This woke the girls. Uzi's body began to move in the cell. Erea feared that he would judge her harshly once he came to. He turned to see the torch flame waving to the little air that blew from the outside. His sight was getting clearer. He looked past it and saw his two daughters, Zinzi and Benu. He sat up, and then dragged his feet to the bars of Cuirass, keeping

him away from them, "Are you alright?"

They nodded rapidly.

It gave them comfort, to see their father well. He realised that Sheba was not there with them. He looked by his side and saw Erea on the other side of the Cuirass, cooped up in a corner with her head down. Unlike the girls, she was not elated about his rising. He turned to her, and calmly said, "I always knew, and I could not have wanted it differently."

Her head tilted a little. "Zinzi had troubling dreams when you were off to seek out a place in the Sea. It was greatly concerning to the girls. I had to tell them."

Erea broke into tears. She had been very strong for the most part, but her heart had not been sure about her choices, because they had hurt the ones she loved the most.

"You are very brave my dear. You've shown them a great and admirable thing!"

There was a 'clunk' at the entrance, meaning a new guard had been let into the cells. Uzi remained fixated on Erea and the girls on Uzi. Chinking keys, with very distinct and familiar rhythmic footsteps with whistling followed. The guards would stop momentarily to inspect the cells closer to the entrance. He finally came to Uzi's cell, and in a very familiar voice said, "You are awake?! I thought you were..."

"You are just in time!" Uzi cut him off unexpectedly. There arose a friendly exchange between the two. The guard proceeded to take out a bunch of keys. "Where is the other one?" he asked.

"They took her away to another cell."

"I was not told of this, so you may as well have to rescue her on your own. We all have our part to play in this."

It was Tule! The guard who had delivered the letter to the Uzi household that morning. He unlocked the cells, keenly watching out

for any passing guards.

“Did you bring what I asked?”

Tule opened the leather pouch hanging from his waist and a small porcelain bottle swang within.

“Leave some for Sheba.”

As quickly as they were freed, each took a sip of the disgusting potion brought by Tule. Their bodies began to change:

Zinzi’s height was reduced, Benu’s waist bulged, Erea’s skin darkened and Uzi’s hair grew back. They all turned into Tule’s form!

“Why do we all look the same?” Erea asked.

“It’s a mirroring potion. You become like the closest form you see,”

He sneered at them, “Your minds may be a little creative, but...am I this round?”

“Girls, we will meet you at your mother’s stall. We will find Sheba. You leave one at a time and do not speak when spoken to, even when you are stopped. Zinzi...”

“Yes *baba*”

“Once you are out, guide your sister. And you Benu...be brave, just as your mother.” There was a brief smile on her form.

“The potion wears off in a tide’s turn (hour and a half or so) You need to get going,” Tule warned.

“We owe you our lives dear friend,” Erea said with a lump in her throat.

“Mine is already in the axe’s path,” He stepped past her and neared the coal-dark wall behind her cell.

“Anytime when you’re ready. And make it look brutal...” his body fell to the ground, as Erea wisped away his waking consciousness.

One by one, the girls came out walking the way Tule had come. Benu was first. Each time a guard greeted her, she would bow and say nothing. Once the reveal of the pitch darkness outside appeared, she jumped into it like one who waited for years to greet it. In its covering,

she moved with utmost agility, avoiding any torch and eye. Ahead, she could see the barricade where her exit was. In it, eagle eyes watching. Two guards leaving the prison cells were coming in her direction. She kept in the cover of darkness, and heard their exchange:

“They cannot wait till morning. The Lord has ordered their killing at midnight.”

“And what of the girl? Does He also want her dead?”

“That, I am not sure of. I have a feeling that we will be told. It’s going to be in a few hours, I have to get home. I am not one to hold an axe and launch it on people’s heads. I loathe it!”

“Well Tenzin, very few of us are lucky to shift from the Prisons to Council duty...”

“You’re right. Speaking of council duty, do you mind checking on Tule before you start your shift? He’s with the Lord’s prisoners. They just shifted him this afternoon.”

“He has returned? He couldn’t even maintain a job with the council? How did he even get to be the one to watch them?”

“Well, a lot of our men got crushed at the Temple today, he was the only extra guard available. If it weren’t for those Cuirass cells, I don’t think the Warder trusts him at all.”

They turned into a dim-lit room, facing away from the barricade. After a while, the fresh guard walked out. Benu sneaked up to the door of the room, blindsiding him. She peeped within the room and saw the other guard turned away from the door. In a touch, she weakened the man and mirrored his form. She walked out, not any more confident. As she approached the barricade, she could see three guards turn to assess her.

“Guard! State your name and reserve position.” One called. She froze.

“Guard, state your name and reserve position!”
She knew if her voice was heard, she would ruin everything.

She deepened her voice as much as she could, "Tenzin! Just a guard..." The dark figures turned to each other as if consulting.

"Come forward!"

Her knees almost buckled. Her throat felt dry. She proceeded. The closer she got, the more their rugged and horrible features showed. These were men who had faced many threats and lived. The gallows in Nubia were famed for the uncanny prisoners they held.

"Who did you leave at your post, Tenzin?" asked the tallest guard. She had not heard his name, so she kept silent. "Have you gone deaf?" He lowered his craning neck. One of the guards saw how intimidated Tenzin's form was and said, "Let the man pass. We all know the kind of horrors one can see in those cells. Besides, he's already done with his shift."

The tall guard turned to the sympathetic guard, "Is that so? Then you go and make sure that Tenzin's wing is secure. He will not leave until I know who has taken this deaf man's post!"

He gave a horrid eye at Benu.

Soon, it was Zinzi's turn. As she left, she did not encounter many guards as the shifting period was complete.

Ovu had ensured minimum capacity in that wing for his 'guests'. Quickening enough prisoner settlements to have several cells empty, some unshut. She made a turn for the passage leading to the outside, and a guard was walking in her direction. She hid back, not sure of her next move. What if they had seen Tule's form leave at first? They would suspect that something was off, and that would not end well for her and her parents. The man neared the turn, marching in bold steps.

She rushed to pull out one of the torches, meaning to harm him. Right before he could reach the turn, a voice echoed from the entrance.

"Are you standing in for Tenzin?" The voice at the entrance asked.

“Yes, I am,” the guard stopped to respond, “Has he not told you? I just relieved him. He said he did not want to catch the horror of the execution tonight.”

“He did seem disturbed. He did not speak a word to the Warder when questioned about his leaving.”

Zinzi caught a glimpse of the two. From what she heard, Benu must have been this Tenzin they spoke of. ‘Smart girl!’ She thought.

Behind her, one more guard was approaching. A woman. Zinzi turned in her direction, hiding the handle of the torch behind her back. The passage had become darker. The female guard greeted her, and she nodded as they passed each other. Zinzi then came from behind her, and clobbered her with all her might, dragging her body to one of the empty cells nearby. The two men stopped for a moment, curious about the noise.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. Mind checking it out?”

Zinzi quickly appeared from the turn in the woman’s form, greeting the men squarely.

“Did you hear the noise? It sounded like someone had let out a shriek.”

“No, I did not. You’re in a prison- shrieks happen all the time.” She tried to make light of it. The fresh guard insisted on checking. Zinzi, not well aware of protocol, walked on towards the entrance to meet the other guard. He did not speak to her, let alone look at her. Immediately she walked out, she started pacing faster into the darkness, almost sprinting into a run. Up ahead, those at the barricade were noticing this. She saw one being held aside, looking a little intimidated. By her mannerisms;

‘That must be Benu.’

“Where do you think you’re going?!” The Warder stopped her. Zinzi thought fast, “You called for me...I...I am standing in for

Tenzin.”

The Warder’s eyes bulged.

“I did not ask for you. Go back and tell Mbaruk that I am coming to inspect the cells since none of you have proper respect for our Lord!”

“Yet I ask of you, Lord,” she bowed, ignoring the anger in the warder’s eyes. “Mbaruk told me of Tenzin’s illness. Allow me to take him to a healer...”

“I will not allow such a thing! He came walking, let him take himself. That’s final!”

“He is not stable, my lord. I am glad you caught him before he left. I was afraid he would end up losing his way and perhaps bring harm to himself. Let me take him,” Zinzi spoke, hiding her face.

Benu noticed her antics and realised, ‘Zinzi?’

The warder bent closer to her, “Woman, I wouldn’t care less if you birthed him. Go back and do as I say!”

He proceeded to shove her to the ground, and as she grappled to get back up, Mbaruk came running.

“Warder! There is an injured guard in the cells!”

The warder rolled his tongue, “And my prisoners?” Mbaruk hesitated. The Warder rose, ordering at once, “You! take that sick man to a healer and return before midnight! Your punishment for defiance will be made ready by then.” He pointed at Zinzi’s and then to Benu’s forms.

“The rest of you, keep an eye on the compound. If anyone escapes, the Lord will have for your heads on platters next. Show me!” The Warder went on with Mbaruk to the cells.

As the men took their position, Zinzi and Benu stayed behind, slowly fading into the outside of the prisons. The Warder was immediately led to where Tule had fallen, in Erea’s cell.

“Where are the prisoners?”

None could answer.

“It is impossible to escape Cuirass, even for the most powerful alchemists- Unless the cells were unlocked by a guard.

Where - are - the - prisoners?!” The warder was burning.

The guards were dispatched to go search the entire prison, leaving the Warder and Mbaruk at the cell. As they investigated the body, they found no marks or signs of struggle.

“I want those prisoners hanged the moment they are found. I will not be seen as incompetent!”

The warder started to walk away from Mbaruk and Tule’s bodies. A few steps away, he saw the girl’s cell also empty. He inspected the bar’s lock, prompting more suspicion.

He could sense something. In his attempt to check within, Uzi struck him, falling him unconscious. As Mbaruk approached, Erea pounced on him, wiping him out before he could let out a scream. She then took his form. The two hid the bodies therein, ransacking their pockets, to find two passes and a master key. The Warder was always carrying these around, just in case, Ovu came to see his political prisoners. With these, they began their search for Sheba. There was not enough tide left, and so they had to move fast.

It appeared to them that every guard they met would hurriedly salute them. Uzi assumed the obvious, “You! Come here.” The guard holding one of the cell chambers that evening came to him, bowing before resuming the conversation. “Since you fools let the prisoners escape, tell me where the girl, Sheba, is being kept?” The guard looked at him. Something was different about his voice, but, “She is being held deep in the second wing dock.”

Uzi then moved to follow his directions. The guard returned to his post, though with more questions about the warder.

They made their way to a heavily guarded chamber. Erea was shaken by what she saw. 10 well-built men were holding this chamber, each wielding a brutal weapon. Right ahead, the woman from the temple

sat on the ground, focused undeterred on one of the cells. Erea nudged Uzi. He stuttered, "Well...I...Uhm...Yes, I have come to see the prisoner," None of them seemed concerned. Uzi bit his tongue, then, "Unless you wish to be beheaded, make way!" None of them moved. He failed to notice the difference in guard. These were not the warder's men. Their silver seal was different from the brass one the others wore. These were Ovu's own. Uzi decided to advance towards the cell, but they stood like an impenetrable wall before him.

"Leave, or we will be forced to take you out instead," One of them said.

"I dare you to try!" Erea came in a fiery tone, breathing heavily. Uzi held her back momentarily.

The man stepped forward, and as soon as he laid his hand on Mbaruk's form, Erea touched his temple, and he collapsed right then! The others held out their weapons. "**Let us pass!**" This was an invite for trouble, and Uzi knew that nothing could stop Erea's determination. The men came at them, intending a forceful removal. Erea held out her only weapon- her hands. Uzi quickly unbuckled the belt on his waist. This was all they brought to the brawl:

Two of the men rushed at Uzi, as two others contended with Erea. A club missed Uzi's hip by a whisker, as another grabbed his cloak yanking him to the ground. As the guard lifted his club once more, Uzi whipped at his face hard with the belt, edging him out. The other thrust a fist at him, falling on Uzi's shoulder heavily, and cracking a bone. A ringing filled his ears, as pain spread rapidly to the tips of his fingers. He turned swiftly from meeting a second fist, rolling past the guard to grab the club from the fallen guard. He aimed at him, meeting the guard's sternum, drawing him to the ground, wriggling in great pain.

Erea moved furiously with her arms. She dodged as many clubs and smelted blades, as she struck and fell the men, one by one. She heard a

cry, only to see her husband kneel, as the club fell from his injured shoulder. Her rage increased tenfold. She took down the remaining men, even before they took a hit at her. She had practised restraint for too long. She dashed off to reach Uzi.

Just before her hand could fully stretch to him, a tough resistance met her body. Her thoughts were being controlled by another force. Uzi saw her eyes involuntarily turn, like wind on a windmill. He snatched back the club and stood by the walls of the dock from where he lay. She contorted mechanically towards him, and he strived to stay away from her touch. She continued to follow him hastily deeper into the cell chambers, grunting as she fought the will-bending in her mind. The emissary sat a few steps away.

The ground began to develop sharp rocks. Erea's form was lifted over them.

"Erea! fight it.." Her form was changing. The potion was wearing off. She got closer to Uzi, and as he reversed from her, one of the stones tripped him and he fell on his back, landing on a bed of the sharp tongues of rock. His heaving and cries told of the grave pain he was in. Erea could see the agony he suffered, but she couldn't take it away.

The woman sat there, not shifting her attention from Sheba. *What her daughter would have become.* Emissaries were trained to cause such unworldly torture.

Her power was so great that even when doing so, she could fight Sheba's will. The emissary then released Erea's thoughts but held her body. She then lifted *her* to where she sat, and spoke with a dry crispy voice, "Look at her. So peaceful. So sound. She will make a perfect servant for our Lord." Erea's head was turned to the cell. Sheba was upside down, hanging from the roof of the cell. Her purple hair was fading into grey. She had fought against this woman for so long, and her body was weakening.

“Sheba! Sheba!”

“She cannot hear you. I have drifted *her* away from all her senses. She is mine now. You see, our Lord did not intend to kill this one. I just don’t understand how she has lived so long away from us.”

“Sheba! listen to my voice. I am here. Shed your worry, my child. You can fight her!”

“I told you. Nothing will come out of your pleading.” Behind them, a cell swung open, and the emissary threw Erea in it and shut it. “I suggest that you wait for your death! Save your energy.”

As Erea continued to plead with the woman, Uzi from afar continued to grapple. The rocks did not cut through deeply.

He was suspended atop their balance, and this was excruciating! He slowly tried to lift his body, and with each undigging of the rock edges, unnerving pain came with it. Even so, he did not stop until his whole body rolled onto flat ground. He felt his strength return, and he could breathe there as he lay on his stomach, his true form already exposed. Meanwhile, the noise had raised alarm. A guard had seen what was happening and speeded off to get more men.

Uzi felt for an object on the ground with his hand. He lifted his face in the direction of the woman. He calculated. He then summoned all the strength he could, contorting his body to make one last throw. The stone flew off his hand, aiming at the torch on the wall next to the emissary. A chip of burning wood fell on the emissary’s clothes, and they caught fire!

She shifted her attention to put out the fire. Immediately, Erea broke from her hold, and Sheba fell from the roof of the cell. She awoke, injured from the fall.

“Sheba!”

Erea screamed as she took out the master key, struggling to unlock the cell. Immediately it opened, she ran to her daughter, holding her in her arms tightly again. Her skin was so cold that Erea could feel it

through her garments. She intensively began to heal any wound or broken ligament she felt. Outside the chamber, more men were coming. Erea hurriedly carried Sheba out of the cell, the woman had burnt most of her flesh and was fading to death in a grotesque scene. Erea looked to her husband, and him to her. In between them were impassable sharp rocks.

“You can let her go. She knows what she must do,” came a weakened Uzi. Erea hadn’t seen the men appearing at the entrance. Unrelenting arrows and spears were readied towards them. There was no way they could save Uzi. Erea put Sheba on the ground.

As soon as she turned to defend her stance, a mighty spear met her on her chest, planting her on the floor! Sheba saw this and gave out a breathless scream.

The horror of seeing her parents lose their lives was indescribable. No child deserved to know such pain. Her anger was so loud inside of her, that the walls began to cave. The men stopped for a while, as the earth beneath their feet shook violently.

“She is going to kill us all!”

“Aim at her!”

Even before they could launch their arrows, a huge boulder broke from the walls, crushing a good number of them. There was great panic in the gallows and the surrounding areas. Sheba focused her power away from the rubble and broke the walls beside her. As the chamber walls caved, she dragged herself and the weight of her mother’s body towards the broken wall.

Her efforts could not yield. Erea’s final breath pleaded with her in her mind.

“It is done. Your freedom is given.”

She did not sound conflicted nor sorrowful. She was fulfilled and confident. She urged Sheba forward, and as her hands lost her mother’s, she fell on the other side of the walls.

Escape

As a fresh breeze washed her face, barely drying her teary eyes and softening the lump in her throat, Sheba looked back and wished differently. Her gift had become a curse. She dragged her feet out, into the back ends of the prisons. She thought of her sisters, as nothing much was left of the prison chambers. What if they too had met their doom that night?

Either way, she couldn't stay.

She knew that after what had happened, there would be hell rising from Ovu's throne.

She carried her body down into the town, hiding from the numerous guards who were heading to the remains at the prison. She had nowhere left to go, but to the stall where her mother had always told her about. When she got there, she found her mother's horse outside of it and on checking the door, the lock was broken. She hid behind it, her heart palpitating. She closed her eyes to catch the thoughts of the souls inside. Eventually, she pushed the door, careful not to arouse any peculiar reactions. It was dark inside, but the dying city flames poured light in through the door. As she reached past it, she could hear the quivering of her sisters, afraid and desolate. She called out to them and Zinzi reached for her with an embrace.

"Sister! you are safe!"

"Where is Benu...?" Benu's face appeared to the light, joining them. Zinzi then asked, "Where is mother...and father?" This was hard for Sheba to explain. She began to weep. The quake they had felt was the same one that had sealed their deaths. Even as they wept, it would be a matter of time before the whole of Nubia was turned upside down. They had to vanish.

Zinzi: Mother said we come here, but then where do we go now?

Sheba: There is a place near the Sea of Reeds. She said we would be safe there.

Zinzi: How so? Ovu will soon find out about the purchase of it.

We'll be captured even before we can make our escape.

Sheba: You are right. Either way, we need to go away somewhere...

Benu: How about the place where the man- mother helped came from? He will remember her kindness and help us.

Zinzi: Am afraid he might not recognize us. We never met him, Benu...I wonder if he is even alive.

Benu: There has to be someplace out there we can run to...

Zinzi: Yes, there could be. But then, the walls, those gates, all sealed shut. How do we get across them without being seen?

Sheba: I think...I think I can help with that.

They did not take the horse. It would raise too much suspicion. They moved in stealth to the gates and stayed a distance away from the mighty walls surrounding the city. There was a wall of power, but without the oath of Ovu, there could be no passage. Sheba then went forward, leaving the girls hiding behind some buildings adjacent to the gates. There were four men there, two who held the mace of the power barrier, and two who manned the place for intruders. This was it!

One of the guards saw a female figure approaching their station, and called out, "Turn back at once. These are shut under the Lord's orders!" She kept approaching. "Woman, get back!" another guard raised his voice. Her small body frame did not give them a cause for alarm. "We will ask you one last time..." He choked. Something heavy gripped his throat. He fell to his knees with his hands on his neck, gasping for air. The other saw this and came forward. The guard had fallen to his death. The remaining three turned fully to the woman before them.

Even before they could reach to tackle her, two turned on each other, and also fell to their death. The last felt his body clamped, unwillingly turning the mace to open the gates, and in this way, Sheba led her sisters out of Nubia, into the desert. Death had become

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something she could inflict with little thought.

The sisters were in utter shock! One bearing their blood had become so formidable in her gifting!

“Is this the power *baba* spoke of?” Benu asked Sheba from behind. What Sheba had feared turning into, had become. She grabbed Benu’s arm, and assured her, “I promise to never hurt you.” There was no time. Zinzi went ahead of them, “We can speak of it later! We need to get as far away from this place as we can.”

As they ran into the unknown, the unending desert presented a new challenge. One, not even their magic could rise above. Which direction were they to take? Where would they go? Would they be accepted in these new lands?

Morning

The morning came fast for Ovu. To the Nubians, his hand was incompetent and weak. Many prisoners had escaped that night. As recapturing ensued, there was no telling what extent of damage had been done.

Ovu did not contend with his officials anymore, edging them out, including the warder who woke just a few tides turns after the breaking. Tule had managed to slip away and hid in the gutter region of the West side of the city. Ovu remained more concerned with reclaiming the girl. Why was he so interested and invested in having Sheba? If she knew her full power and was free to use it, independent of Kek’s mind, she could destroy much of what Nubia was built on; Fear.

In his search for answers from his guards, he realised that outside of Nubia, the girls would fail, unless they travelled by horse or camel. It is then that he sent out emissaries to go and find the girls, as they couldn’t have gone far. He feared that Sheba would destroy the

guards too easily, so his gifted men, like the woman who controlled Sheba, would do well to get her back. They obeyed His word and began their search.

The desert and the nomad

“Water...”

They were as thirsty as she was. “Maybe we should have headed for the Sea of Reeds. Look around us, sand. Not a place of shade. A place of dying.” They all agreed.

“Keep walking, we cannot stop now.”

The scorching sun burned above them, and below their feet, the oven hot sand seared their soles. Hot air filled their lungs, making it hard to breathe. Benu fell many times. She was tired. Zinzi dragged her weight, and Sheba was the only one strong enough to go up and look over the dunes, only to see more sand. There was no oasis. They fell on the sands awaiting death to come. As the winds of the deserts blew over them, Sheba felt herself again. She turned to see her sisters.

Benu was unconscious.

Zinzi’s forehead was dry with white salty sweat lines marking it. Sheba crawled up the dune until she couldn’t, then her weight rolled her back to once she had started. She saw the vultures circling above them. This was not the way she thought it would end. She was not ready to give up. She left the girls and climbed the dune one last time. There, at a distance, she saw a few palms and thickets huddled around a crystalline pool.

“It could either be real or a mirage but still...”

Her dry and cracked lips hoped. She regained a little life. Before she could turn to tell her sisters, her shaky legs failed her, and she fell on the other side, tumbling into the cover of sand. The three were separated again. The strong desert winds continued, covering Sheba’s

body completely.

The emissaries flew by and saw Benu and Zinzi's bodies laying side by side, partially covered in sand. They had known that there were three, **however, even with their power, the third was not found.** They then proceeded to carry the bodies back to the city. As the dunes reshaped, a company from the North-

Western dwellings of Tibesti were passing by in a caravan, heading to Kush. The man who owned it was called Dachew. He was a kind man, and also a close ally to King Amresh of Kush.

His servants had gone ahead to find an oasis, and they had returned with positive news!

As one of his male servants reached for a vessel from his camel's back, he saw there- beneath its hooves, a body covered in sand. He bent down immediately to dig it out.

"Is she alive?" came one of the other servants.

He felt for life and responded, "She is, but she might not be for too long."

"We will not leave her behind. Do all you can to keep her breathing" Dachew spoke from his camel, noticing the markings on her linens.

"What would one of them be doing here in the sands?" his deputy asked discreetly.

Dachew's eyes clocked the expansive sand, "If indeed she is one of them, we must hurry. It would be better if she is found in another's hands. She could be gifted. Those of where we go have not seen this kind. She could fetch us a good price." He said, referring to her partial purple and grey hair.

Sheba was taken away in the caravan to Kush. She did not wake for many days. Dachew strongly thought of selling her as a slave. She was young, strong in stature, and fair to the eye. He even considered selling her to the Arabs. In Kush, many people had chosen to become slaves and were sold to them by their wealthy kinsmen. They did not

see it as slavery, as just like Dachew's men, they were taken to foreign lands to work and their salary would be sent back to their families in every yearly rotation, and they could be freed at the end if their master willed so. Not everyone met a good master. A majority suffered in the hands of the men who bought them from auctions and others never returned. The price was well for the slave's family, as they would then trade their wages for food and needs.

She finally woke, laying on a bed far more comfortable than the one she had at home in Nubia. There at the corner, a dark-skinned man, just like her people, sat watching her with egg white eyes that never blinked. He was shirtless, with a pair of khaki shorts and a Shuka on his shoulder. She slowly lifted her body to sit up, but her body stuttered.

"Careful. Master would not want you to be hurt."

The man had this surprising velvety voice. He wedged his arms on his knees, attempting to stand from his stool.

"Master?" Sheba thought he spoke of one of Nubia's men, but also, the man did not dress as they did.

"Who is your master?"

"He is a gracious man. His name is Dachew of Tibesti. He is a good friend of the King of this land"

"King? What land is this?" She panted.

"Ah!" The man stood and went to the small window behind him. It had been covered with blinds, so the light could not break-in. He lifted them and pointed to the small village outside.

"This is Kush of Amresh."

She struggled to stand. He rushed to her side and held her up to the sight. Her eyes slowly got used to the burning light of the sun, and she saw a bleak landscape not to be compared to Nubia. The people had donkeys to carry them. Their children were naked, and their farms bare. The soil was red and the people sat under the few

Escape

scattered trees joyously chattering. Their houses were made from twigs sealed with mud, and their fences were bushes mended together.

“You brought me here...why?”

“I saw your body under my camel after we had found water for my master’s caravan. He saw you and asked me to take good care of you. You’re valuable to him.”

“My sisters...” She remembered. She let go of his shoulder and tried vigorously to walk towards the entrance of the room. She held onto the walls and the ledges to keep straight, but eventually tripped on her steps. The man rushed to break her fall.

“No, I think you should rest and be strong for the Master...”

She couldn’t accept his care.

She pulled herself from his hold, “Tell me then, where you found me...were there others like me?”

“No...you were the only one we saw. We even looked for your horse and tent, but there was none. You were lucky we even saw you in the sand!”

On hearing this, her heart bled. She had seen in his mind, it was the truth. She wept bitterly. Not even food or water could comfort her. She wanted to die more than anything. It was then that Dachew came to her, and saw her pain. He turned to his servant, “She weeps like one who has lost a child. Leave her. When she is ready, she will speak. I do not seek to enslave her anymore. The very day she becomes calm, set her free so she can find another place to mourn for her loss.” It was this pain that made her cut her hair, never to grow it ever again. She wanted to start again and be free of the misfortunes that followed her. She cursed her curse. It was no longer to her the gift Erea pronounced it to be.

The day came. Dachew met her for the second time and said to her, “I know where you come from. I do not wish to know your reason to escape it. I only ask that you leave us. Go far away from this land, and

never turn back. I have seen the evil that follows you. It is far much greater than these lands can hold!"

She was not expecting those words, as she had not spoken to him once.

Dachew would walk in the fields in the evening, and many times he had seen jackals gathering in the corners of the parcel of land he had bought in Kush. This was unusual because Jackals only roamed in the plain lands in Ngengi, away from people.

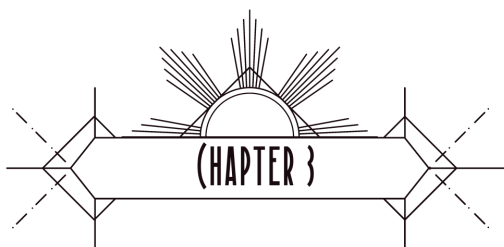
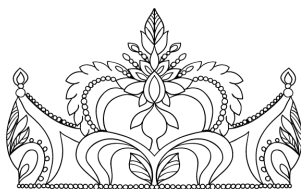
It was then that he consulted with the magicians in Kush, and there, he was shown the girl's fate. He was advised to free himself from her. He became very troubled by this.

"Find your way to a land of many hills and rivers.

The people will tell you its name; Akanga. Their spirits are strong, and they may protect you til your enemies tire. I bid you farewell. Now, you are on your own."

Sheba walked away from Dachew's house. She was lost, bitter and destitute; but she did not think of death anymore. She knew in her heart that rest would only come to her, if her enemies were destroyed, preferably by her hand. Maybe then, her pain could be quenched.

She now had to find a way to live again. So she walked.



AKANGA

50 years later...

Every time he set his eyes on her, he knew that she was no ordinary woman!

THERE WAS A GLOW inside-out of her, that broke his silence as he held her hand, noticing it quiver and sliding out of his grip. Her work dress was mainly just a wax-hardened fabric, brown with thin strips of beads across the chest and the ends fitting her to her knees. She was in a great hurry that day, and not even the words of a young, handsome, strong, well-meaning son of a Chief could stop her.

She had been at the river fetching water for their evening. Barely was

her second jar filled when they turned to the call of-

“MAMA! Sheera...Mama!”

At that point, she exited his presence. Her strong strides took her quickly past the thickets of the river banks, only to meet the devastated face of Mirito. She jerked from the sudden appearance of Sheera. Her heartbeat was superfast. With little time to waste, she stretched out her arm and grabbed Mirito. As they ran back to their homestead, her heart knew she was not ready to raise her little sister on her own.

Kenan had been watching her from a distance. He had admired her, and even more, desired to have her as his betrothed. They were both of age. The only problem was that Kenan was the chief's son. He was the oldest of Shifü's children, followed closely by Jero. Then there was Anyiko, then Museti, and Chemu, the youngest. Their Mother, Ma' Lena was old but still strong.

According to custom, he could only marry from a family with equal stature as royalty. He was yet to make his choice. To his father, no son of his would marry just any kind of woman. As the times changed, so did the quality of brides. Like all the chiefs before him had done, including his father, he made an invitation to all the clansmen and Kings of the vast lands whose daughters had come of age. They were to present them as brides on the night of festivities called 'Hika', with the promise of certain perks that came with proximity to the Chief's table.

Many had heard and accepted the call. Kenan would have to choose among the maidens presented before him that very day.

Sheera was her mother's first child. Due to her mother's illness, she had taken over every duty around the homestead. She had seen the medicine man a few days prior. He had prescribed a spice that was very hard to come by. A special tree bark, carried by traders from the Takoa people. The trading path at this time was growing bushes. It

was not until the dry season neared its end, that the Takoa would come bearing their trade items on their donkeys and carriages. They would cross the plain lands into Akanga, where they would exchange their goods for grain, beans, millet, and sorghum.

Sheera had her doubts about her mother's getting well, but she was not going to give up. She had spoken to Jero. He was in charge of the messengers, and from time to time he could be sent out to deliver messages and decrees between Akanga and the Kingships. Jero had promised to see if there was an open chance for anyone to go to Takoa and buy it for her. During this period, there was talk of a new medicine man who did not use traditional herbs, potions, or spices to heal. He had different kinds of medicine he called 'serums' and 'ointments'. He had come from across the Ocean. They said that he was one of the *returned* from the Welsh country. He stayed with the missionaries in the Shani Kingdom. Even if the chance to get the spice was available, the illness was not growing any patient. She bursted through the maize plantation that faced their homestead, dashing straight past the guava tree in their small yard, into her mother's hut. Mirito did not enter out of fear. Sheera quickly bent down to her bedside, letting out some water in a broken calabash, "Mama, drink"

"Sheera, I....I can't...."

Her forehead was sweating profusely and from the feel of it, her fever was high. Her body had an uneven tremble, and her strength was draining out by the second.

"Mama you have to try. For me and Mirito, you have to try..."

"My dearest..." She stretched out her hand with the little bit of strength she had and felt Sheera's left cheek.

"I have lived a long full life. Maybe now is the time to let me go. If your Papa was here..."

"But he is not here Ma...you are all we have!" Sheera felt her mother giving up her life to the disease. "My daughter, listen to me. Your

father is with our ancestors now. I am weak. I have seen you trouble yourself so much for me. The gods are making it very clear my child..."

"You go when it is time, not when you say so Ma..." Just then, light footsteps came from behind the hut. It was round, just like any other in Akanga, made of large coarse mixed mud and dung. Over time, these would crumble due to heavy rains. Their grass and Makuti thatch would sink and cave from the heat and winds. Another set of steps came from afar, meeting the others near the open door. Who had sent for the medicine man? They had paid him with much of the fowl they had. They couldn't afford to see him now, leave alone get his treatment.

"May I enter? I have been sent to you by Jero. He said that it was a matter of life and death!"

"You may, please hurry!"

The man quickly began attending to her mother. Behind him, leaning on the doorpost observing, was Kenan. Sheera paid little attention to him. She remained on her knees, hoping and praying. After he was done, the man handed her a parcel covered in banana leafing, "Here. She should take a lot of water and chew on this bark every evening. Make her eat some bitter herbs to help take out the illness."

Sheera's mother took the dosage of bark given to her. Almost immediately, her trembling stopped, and her fever began to lower, lulling her into sleep.

Sheera couldn't hide her joy.

"Death will come, however, not today."

She covered her mother and turned to the medicine man, "Can we speak outside please?" She proceeded to their small chicken coop to find some fowl to give him.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Well, Jero had told me not to talk of payment until I was sure she

was well. So, for me, it will be..."

"..It will be taken care of!" came the voice of Kenan.

"Any other expenses that may have been incurred will be settled by my brother. Thank you Temba, you may go".

"As you say, young master!" Temba bowed slightly, with a foolish smile on his face, then left the compound. Mirito came from behind the hut, and asked timidly, "Is she okay? Are we going to send her off like Pa?"

"Mirito," Sheera called to her and embraced her with an assuring and warm tone saying, "Mama is going to be okay. You can go see her, and don't wake her up just yet."

After Mirito had left them, Sheera was left standing there with Kenan. She knew that no matter how grateful she felt, it was Jero, not Kenan, that had made all the arrangements, even getting Temba to bring the medicine to her mother. It is Jero she should be grateful to. There was an extended silence between them. No one knew from whence to start the conversation. Someone had to say something.

"I am grateful she is okay." Kenan started.

"I am too. Your brother did a great deal to help. Pass my regards and thanks to him."

"I know this all too well. After all, we both are my Father's sons."

"So what did you want to say earlier at the River?" she came up dodging.

"I...I wanted to...." Kenan was not sure how he was going to say it. All he knew is that his entire plan was shaken. She had this power to catch his words before he said them. "I wanted to help you with the water jars!"

"Oh! The water," She remembered.

"I need to hurry up before the river rises and carries the jars away."

He followed behind her, biting his tongue and throwing empty fists. Sheera evenly balanced a jar on her head and Kenan, another on his

strong arms. They began to talk about their parents. How different they were. They were being honest, picking the parts that would ease their understanding of the present.

All was well until, "I am sure if your father was here, he would have done well to bring you to the Hika."

"You did not know my father away from being your Chief's guard. You have no right to speak of him that way!" She warned him sharply.

"And you. Would you have wanted to come?"

She was quiet for a moment. He knew he had got her. "He was a man of honour, and he had great respect for me and your father. If any of the women who come to the Hika had a choice, I don't think many would come at all. Even if I wanted to, my father wouldn't embarrass me like that."

He was twisted and twirled inside by her answer. She was well aware of where she stepped. They had several laps of fetching and returning. The contours and turns of the path were getting more familiar to Kenan's feet. He would at times pass Sheera and walk ahead of her. His girdle would loosen up at times, mainly due to the rush up the slopes, so he would have to stop frequently to fasten it. During their last trip from the river, the orange sunset across the hills shed on their backs. It felt intimate and warm. The colours of that fiery horizon were enough to open up a man's heart. The canvas of the empty dust path meandering down to the river, with healthy thickets hiding the river's path, was growing darker. The sound of crashing waters was fading and the fields of fully grown maize were dancing to the evening beams, as their ears reflected the golden shimmer on the clouds. Kenan had held on to his confession for far too long. By now, it wouldn't come as a surprise to Sheera.

He let them get halfway up the slope. He proceeded to put his jar down, turning to see how far behind she was. Sheera assumed it was the frequent fastening of the girdle, and eased up her pace. The

reflection of the sun rays on his skin made him glow in a way she had never seen.

‘He is not the young boy I have always known.’ He was turning into a man. A future CHIEF!

As she approached him, he held out his arms to relieve her of the jar on her head. He did well because her neck and legs had begun to tire. He then asked that they just stop for a while, which she agreed to.

“Have you ever seen the sun this beautiful at this time of the season?”

“I never stop to look. It’s savoury!” Sheera said as she took a similar position on the slope’s landing.

“I have had many chances like this taken away from me. My responsibilities are always waiting. It’s either cleaning or changing the wood from the hearth. This feels special, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. Soon, they will come parading their daughters as I am expected to be Chief. Those men, only seeking favour with my father, and their daughters obligated to be a slave to my every word...”

“Isn’t that what men want? A woman who attends to their every need, without question?”

“Maybe most men. What use is it to have a woman who doesn’t love you off her own free will? She cleans, she cooks, she gives birth, she weans, she harvests and all her life in silence, no opinion, no decision, no voice...”

“Oh! we have our voice. We just don’t make it known before public eyes.”

Kenan smiled, “Of course you do.”

“Sheera,” he turned to her with his back facing the sunset, “I have not known anyone like you, and I don’t wish to seek for another either.”

“Charm is deceptive, Kenan,” Sheera saw what was happening. She hid behind her pride, but it shrugged under her feet and her wall

became translucent. She thought it best to make him wait until she was sure.

"I have you here and this is all the time I need to tell you that I have grown very fond of you. Charm may be deceptive, but not when it's all that you are," He was opening up. Sheera chose to remain silent and listen. It would be inconsiderate for her to throw more displeasure at him.

"What you have done for Mirito and your mother, and even when younger- for your father...the clothes you knitted and made from skin and shukas, the braiding of hair you did for your friends, the sacrifices you made for me when we were still little; surely, there is not enough to how much I could say to show how much I admire you..."

"Look around you, *Master!* I have no father to let me come in front of yours and marry us. I have no royal blood in me, like the one they always seek in princesses and maidens. These things you say of me..." She slapped her working dress, "How is your father going to justify this? When the men of this and the next country come to parade their daughters and hear that a servant girl was given to marry you, will they not question your father's integrity? Even if I was willing, this is not a decision that any one of us can make. I have enough trouble here to even try and put myself in the middle of this whirlwind, Kenan..."

"I understand all this, Sheera. But I remain convinced that when my father hears from me, he will not turn my request down. He knows where my heart is and he knows that disappointing him is not my desire. How can I keep this throne, these people....this land even, with the fairest of princesses but stuck with foolish regret?"

"Like a Chief! Like a man who keeps his word, and honours his people. You will do it like one who holds to account his deeds and keeps Akanga before his selfish wants. And I will not be held responsible for the shame and ridicule of this land. No. This cup

before you is too great for a little childish infatuation to get in the way.”

“You will come. You will be there. You will have an equal chance just as everyone else. Many will bring gifts from far and wide, but I will help you. I know my father well...”

“Ha! You speak like one who has control over your destiny. Is it not already taken away from you? Since I have known you, you have despised the ways of the throne. You were never like Jero, who is pleased to serve it in every way. Pray, and plead with all your heart that the gods see it well to do.”

He had been planning this with his brother since the first time his father asked about a bride. They knew that the pride of the people would rest on how well their future leader chose on that day.

The *Hika* would be in a few weeks. At the end of the dry season, there would be a merge of the lands. Many would open up their borders for trade and inter-relations. At this time, if a king was looking for a bride from another land, then it was easy to find one. The Akanga however, did not allow a second bride for a King, maybe a concubine. They would accept suitors from every land apart from KUSH of Harem. This is because they did not have a proper political relationship with them, even though some men had married from the Kush and vice versa.

Kenan had seen how much his father had grown fond of the Arabian robes and Sumerian garments that were brought to their lands each year. Like the ones Mnyazi wore. So he knew that finding the gifts was not the hardest part. The orchestration of their trickery was.

Mnyazi wa Menza

Jero was in what could be the foreign affairs position. His father had seen the gift in him. He may have made many travels without him, but after the fallout with the leader of the Shani, he had to streamline his diplomatic approach.

A year and a half before, the Chief of Akanga, Shifü Konelia: Chaka's son and Kenan's father, met Mnyazi, the descendant of Menza.

The *Guerilla Queen*, they called her. Her graceful rule could be felt from the far ends of Shani. It then spread into her dwelling, welcoming every person who needed the Ocean for food, travel, or even to trade with the Arabs. She was the first woman in a lineage of strongmen, to take the place of ruler. Her people, the Shani, had accepted this. 'The gods chose her', they would say. She was said to ask men to bend over and serve as her seat, especially in small village meetings. Even with her potent hand carrying peace and kindness over all, not everyone was happy that she was queen.

The journey to Mnyazi's home was more of a courtesy call for Shifü. She was the first to host the Welshmen in her land, and fear-mongering had ignited worry in lands near and far. Word had spread around that these men had weapons better than spears and knives. They could roar in the air and burst into sparks, releasing shrapnel so deadly that not even an elephant could withstand it.

Shifü and his son dressed in their finest official wear. Shifü's waist was covered with a brown skin belt that held the bright royal blue robe perfectly. His head was crowned with a hat made from wool, with small silver encrusted beads around the edges of its rim. On his feet were sandals made from skin as well, the same colour as his belt. On his neck, he wore a necklace fitted with many coloured gems, symbolising an openness of thought.

Kenan wore fine linen with fabric cut from the arms to show his well-toned arms; a leather belt for his waist, holding his leather waist cloth that stretched to just under his knee. He carried a black pouch, as well as a staff with him and a white beaded necklace given to him by his sister Anyiko, who was an excellent bead weaver.

Mnyazi's guards walked Konelia and Kenan into her quarters. Palm trees towered over the parched grass, and sandstone carpeted path. At the edge, a skirting of fine sand thinning into the tongue of the ocean. There was a host of women sifting grain, and a few young men smoking some fish under separate open *Makutis*. They passed the servant's huts and ushered them to the largest one in the compound. This one was well strengthened with flints of stone at the bottom of the walls and decorated with ornamental rocks on the doorpost. There was an old Jacaranda tree that gave shade to the small window pointed east. The thatch used on the roofing was fresh. You could smell the new dry rafters and the fresh dung smeared on the tall walls of the round chamber. The guards asked them to wait outside until she was ready to welcome them in.

'You may come! I have waited long to meet the leader of the Akanga'

Her voice broke through the entrance with such anticipation and joy. They walked in finding stools already prepared for them. It was very warm inside even on the earthen floor. It was a relief, especially considering how hot it was outside. Natural light could spring in through the round windows on the wall, lifted right around the height of Kenan's Shoulders. There was a display of paintings done with chalk and sand, of the story of the origins of the Shani. A large stump of Mangrove sat in the middle, where the meetings would be held.

Above it were strong *Mvule* shutters tied intently with thinner rods of Iron in diminishing circles fading into a bullseye in the middle. At

the very front end of this circular chamber, was a lifted earthen ground, where Mnyazi sat. On her left were two men; one her male servant, the other her advisor. Above her throne, was a lace made of the teeth of a lion; a symbol of her power.

"AH! Shifü, I am grateful for the gifts of millet and sorghum you sent me. They were not necessary"

"Mnyazi, it was the least I could do.
I would hate to be an ungrateful guest"

"I accept it. I know you've come from far, with your..."

"...Son! Yes, this is the future leader of my people, Kenan. I figured that he needs to learn a few things from his father. You know, we don't live forever anymore," they laughed at this.

"Of course, so what brings you to my esteemed gateway?"

"I have come to seek a Truce with you. We are not the only in-landers concerned about the coming of these pale-skinned men, and their tricks. We just need to know that they will not cause harm to our people."

"Well, I can tell you that in fact my people have asked me to allow them to stay. You see, Ludwig and his mates have been a blessing to us. They have brought medicines that have healed us, introduced these guns that have helped us keep our borders secure from enemies and the beasts of the wilderness..."

"That is exactly why we fear their advancement. Those from the land of Kush have told us stories of similar men who travelled into their lands in the name of peace and preaching a rather convincing message of development and change. They even began bringing more peculiar men from other lands beyond the Oceans into Kush. Then..."

"Shifü, we too have heard of these stories. They are just tales of the Kush! The very same Kush who have raided your land for cattle each year. They are cunning people, and are not to be trusted! They have

no honour nor are they loyal to any of us, and I believe that these missionaries have good intentions. They came to us. We did not seek them out. In doing so, they have brought us more good than harm. The least I can do is let them help my people. They say that their Queen is peaceful and just, and I believe them.” Mnyazi affirmed her stand.

“Mnyazi...”

“Queen Mnyazi!” She interrupted Shifü.

“...You are a noble and gracious leader. You have been able to reinstate this kingdom to a place of prosperity and your people are thriving now more than ever before. Don’t you find it suspicious that these men arrived and chose to stay in your land with no ask?

The Arabs have traded here for years, and yet many times you have warred with them as well, yet none have taken interest in living here. I ask you in your wisdom; what man gives anything without expecting any benefit in return? Have you not heard of the happenings in Tanga? Will your hands not be tied in the event they ask of you something you cannot suffice?”

“There is a word they live by. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. I have a vast kingdom. I am sure that whatever they will need, we have in abundance.”

“These same men are the reason our cattle are rustled each year! They came in small numbers among the Kush, and then slowly corrupted the mind of Harem. Soon their railroad began, and then the people began losing their land-”

“It is enough Konelia! Enough!” Mnyazi slowly rose from her throne. Her long robe hid her feet as she stood. It was made from silky linen that the Arabs had brought her as a gift from the Sultan of the East. “I have offered you my ear. I have heard you. I will not put the worries for your people before the interests of my own. Even if the stories of the KUSH were true. Even if these men were here for our

land or mines like Tanga, don't forget that we all have had different arrangements. I cannot act as foolishly as that selfish Muyumba!

Besides, our friends the Arabs have built fortresses, and we are all in agreement over the control of our ocean. These white men could try, and even then, they will fall!"

"Mnyazi, these Arabs...how dependable are they? They sell your people as slaves, and they keep their money and interests secure by bribing your elders. Don't tell me that you have so quickly forgotten what they did to Manzu..."

"You insult me in my Kingdom?" her eyes widened. Her hands were on her waist. Tension was building around. Shifü knew no other way to express his concern. He was being blunt and Mnyazi did not tolerate it. The guards were summoned. No Truce was made that day between the Akanga and the Shani. Shifü then understood one thing: If he were to truly liberate his people from the lies of the Welsh men, he had to start by training and teaching his sons. His years were few, and the boys were coming of age. From what it seemed, Whales was gaining favour fast!

6 days after meeting Mnyazi, Jero was sent to bring a customary reconciliation gift. About 100 cattle were expected as a consolation for the insolence. He journeyed for 4 days. After his arrival, he was able to meet Mnyazi. He arrived 2 days ahead of the reconciliation gift. This short window was the opening of a new understanding between the two leaders. Somehow, the boy had convinced Mnyazi that his father was only concerned over the losses suffered due to the herbs they traded that were no longer needed due to the new medicine man. The cattle were quite satisfactory after then. Since that day, his father put him in charge of Akanga's delegations, and all diplomatic duties- which included the messengers.

The Iron Snake

One of Shifü's seers had a dream. He had seen a metal snake that wound up through the 7 lands and vomited its victims to the lake. Its brass head breathed fire, as its Iron tail rested on the beaches of the ocean. He saw the snake enslave the dwellers of the lands it touched. His name was Mugo, an elderly man, who at the time was well known for his outrageous dreams. Once, he dreamed of men dressed as colourful butterflies, flocking the land and eating every stalk and grain in sight. This didn't make much sense to the people until the Welsh arrived. With this, Shifü felt that the dream was a sign of danger.

At this time, the stories of Peruzio and his Talisman were reduced to just tales told to children so they could sleep. However, there was knowledge of a dwelling. An order of magicians far beyond the land of the KUSH, who were far more powerful than those of their land. Shifü believed he had met one of them once, when they sat with the elders of KUSH under the sacred tree, to settle their dispute.

A woman with a complexion darker than any one of the people present there. She spoke with great wisdom and prudence. Her head was shaved bald and her lips were marked with white chalk. She wore a cloak on her shoulders and a fleece-like garment that spread to her feet. Shifü Konelia found her rather unusual, especially for a woman of the KUSH. She is the one who spoke of the KUSH losing their land to the Welsh settlers with pale skin, as the reason for their rustling. Konelia questioned why the Welsh had been allowed to continue dwelling there despite this, but the question was never answered. He concluded that there must have been a pact between Harem and the Pale-skinned men to remain in KUSH, but the mystery remained.

Akanga saw it wise to seek out the distant magical people of the North. If they could surface new, more powerful allies, maybe their

future could be well secured from a Welsh attack. A delegation was then sent there, led by Madinka, the Warrior faction leader. He was accompanied by three boulder-like men on horses, who had experience in war and in compassing through unknown terrains. They managed to find a way, traversing the Nile dwellers' barren land, into the Tibesti desert.

The men returned after thirty days, looking stronger than before! When Shifü enquired of them, Madinka could not speak of it, all he said was that they met three dark figures standing in the dunes, and the next recollection was of their returning. 'We insisted, but they chanted and signed as we have never seen before...the next thing we knew, we were at the entrance of this land!'

This was done in grave secrecy. All that was said was that they had gone to seek out new trading routes, and they had failed to meet new traders for their herbs. Unnamed, unknown, never to be explored. Kenan did not have as much interest in this matter as his brother did. They were just boys then when it happened.

The night before

"Kenan, thinking about what Madinka reported sometime back...do you suppose that kind of power exists?"

"Jero, don't get your mind entangled with this foolishness. You have seen what our magicians can do. Unless there is truth presented undoubtedly before my eyes, those reports are just that!"

"You sound just like father. What is it with you nowadays? Dream with me for a moment."

"I dream, but I see things for what they are, and figures in the desert- I say they went to the Mara and ate all the meat they could stomach then came back. Besides, Father let them off because he respects Madinka's word. If it were me, I could have had them

questioned further.”

“You speak with such arrogance. Madinka is a respected warrior! If his stomach lusted for meat, then I am sure the game here would do. I am convinced that there is more beyond the known lands. Imagine lands full of white sand, unlike the shores of the Shani. A whole country of winds and magic!”

“If this place TRULY exists, and these men are real, then why have they never come here?”

“He never told you?” Jero rose from his bed. Kenan was still, gazing at the moon through the window of their hut. They shared both space and secrets between these walls, and each night, it was either war between a realist and an idealist, or consolation of heartbreaks and failed plans. Jero stood in front of Kenan’s bed, blocking out some of the moonlight.

“Who, father?” asked Kenan.

“It’s either that, or you never listen.”

“Do you mean the *Kushite woman* he told the council about?”

“That exact one!” Jero affirmed with vigour. “For a critic, you cannot possibly doubt the Chief’s own words.”

“I don’t. It is those KUSHITES that I doubt. They are very peculiar in their ways. I cannot blame him for what he witnessed...”

“Are you calling Father: Shifü over all of Akanga, a liar?”

“Aah...I see what you’re building at. No, I will not be part of your scheming, Jero.”

“I do not foresee you finding the right woman at the Hika, oh non-believer. You might as well go ahead of everyone and change that outcome for yourself.”

“My intent is not to work up some cheap story just to win over my father’s blessing. If I must be a leader over the people of Akanga, then I must do so fairly and nobly! A pleasing and honourable way.”

“That is why I will let you choose the fairest bride, first. Perhaps that

blooming flower you craze over from time to time- there at the river. What's her name again..Shaa- Shii..”

“...Sheera,” a bit of life was rising on Kenan's face.

“Yes! That very one, *Sheera*- hear how you say her name. It's like it makes you hold your breath by the syllable,” Jero teased. Kenan pulled back his blushing face away from the moonlight and laid back to rest. “Listen,” Jero explained, “This could work out for the both of us. I control the trade routes and so, I will arrange for the perfect gift to be given to my father. One of those rare fabrics and attires he likes from the Arabians. I will speak to one of the magicians...Kasha! He's not as strict and serious as Seseka. A little wish is made, and your Sheera appears as the princess of those Northerners. With no question, father will pass all the rest, just to have a sitting with one of them!”

“That's where you are wrong. Where will you even find the characters to come as suitors, and even so, how will you convince them that Sheera is indeed a different woman?”

“Ah! Easy...the gifts come with the gown. I have friends in Kush who have mastered the art of treachery quite well. At a good fee, they will present themselves as of expensive taste, and great wisdom. Besides, Sheera's skin is toned just right to fit father's description of the woman he saw. With her face veiled, he won't suspect a thing!”

“Jero, you speak like a fool. Even for me, who so badly wants to see this through; I'm not convinced. Why not just get her uncle to bring her, or some other relative? I am sure there is legislation somewhere that we can bend for that to happen.”

“You see what I am saying -you dream so small brother! Her relatives? What do they have that they can give to the Shifü?”

“Those gifts you speak of. Offer them to their advantage and please father...”

“They are servants! How will they convince Him that they bought

those themselves or even, how will they dare to parade in front of their master? The whole land will hear of the disgrace. *Servants?* They could be ousted from their communities! Father is seeking new alliances. Forge a royalty, call it by name, and he will not think twice.”

“You raise a valid point. Either way, this is an impossible thing. I am bound to accept this marriage and maybe I can get Sheera as a concubine later on.”

“Is that what the woman you love deserves?” Kenan knew well enough to stay silent.

‘The moon shares the same spot in the skies as with the Sun. They never meet. Not once! It’s like the perfect union that was never meant to be. Even with all the stars, the moon could not be as bright as the sun; and with all its brightness, the sun still felt lonely. Maybe those early mornings when he could see the moon, were her waiting for her *sun* just so to share the sky, even for a few moments. She raises tides and sheds the nights hoping to finally have her *Sun* for eternity.’

Jero paced on the floor, conjuring up a new plan.

“I think I might just have found out a way to get father to say yes to you marrying Sheera.”

“Before you start, did you speak to Temba about the medicine Sheera’s mother needed?”

“Well, did you tell her you put me up to this?”

“No, not really. If I told her, she would have refused my help instantly! She’s very proud.”

“For the first time, I’ve heard you admit that she is indeed proud.”

“Heluwa is not getting better, and you need to hurry that man!”

“I need you to pay that medicine man first. He does not come cheap, you know. It took a lot of convincing and empty threats to get him to agree.”

“Okay, I will do so first thing tomorrow morning.”

Kenan thought for a while, “I hope your plan does not involve those

obscure characters from KUSH. I strongly feel that we can look into the decrees of years past and find some way.”

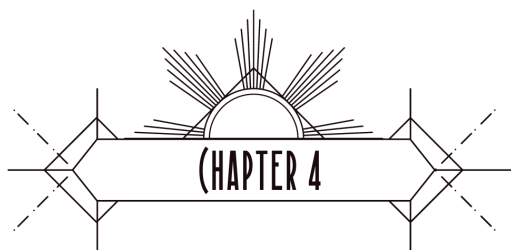
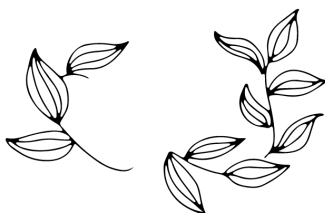
“For once, brother, use your power to fight for what you love!”

Each went to his bed and slept.

Even now as he looked into Sheera’s eyes, he was still unsure of Jero’s plans. He would constantly remember that he had trusted his brother with something so delicate, and then he would remember the many times Jero’s mischief had gotten him into trouble.

“You either fight for love or settle for frustration.”

All in all, there had to be a better way.



THE PROPHECY

IN THOSE DAYS, Ludwig had succeeded in starting two clinics in the Shani Kingdom. Supply vessels of guns and medicine appeared at the far coasts of Zumaliland. Those who saw them said that they had witnessed more Welsh men there, however, they never alighted from their boats. The material would be divided into trade routes to reach the Welsh who were now part of some communities in the Kush mainland. The Zumaliland coast was chosen, to avoid the extortionist hand of the dominant Arabs, who had control over the Ocean trade routes in Shani.

The fears of more Welsh men coming to the lands were fueled further by tales of their barbaric thrust over Kirea, told by the traders who went out to the Ocean. However, they had established that there was a bigger population of pale-skinned people across the seas of reeds

and Sumeria. The Arabs had told of how wealthy their civilisation was, with roads made of rock, and buildings that towered their villages, as well as a very unique sense of dressing. They would describe them as wagers of wars and drunks, which seemed indifferent to Ludwig who never took any brew. Not even the local *Mnazi*!

Since the first week of the Hika's announcement, there had been a rise in demand for fine linen. The Arabs started docking in more ships, as the last of the season's trips were about to happen. The planting season was the least favourable for people to trade, but this time, it almost surpassed the cold and harvest seasons!

"I must go now", Kenan said as he turned away from her, his gaze drifting off into the distance lifting back his hood.

"You know, what Jero is doing is quite considerate. I expected YOU to be the one troubling over such."

He turned back to see her face. Her eyebrows were lifted, her head tilted slightly to the left with her hands behind her back.

"I did all that work- I just told you what I feel about you, and that's the thanks I get?"

"To be fair, I never asked you to do anything in the first place. You slaved for no pay and you were fine with it."

"I may not trust what Jero is up to, but you'll see. "

"Don't get ahead of yourself, *master*. I have lots of suitors, and what a waste it would be if I did not take my time and choose properly."

As this banter continued, Kenan's thoughts returned; he was supposed to meet his father that evening to select an attire for the Hika.

"I have to go. The Shifü doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Go well, my Prince. And thank you for everything."

She had a beguiling smile on, turning away as if not needing any further exchange. His heart was full. She didn't particularly say yes, but she had called him '*my prince*' and she smiled!

The Prophecy

The path back home seemed shorter that evening. He went past the streams that fed the river, all the way behind the closing markets, into the Chief's homestead. It was a buzz of activity, as the women planned the feast. His mother had just delegated duties to them, and so they were channelling responsibilities to the cooks and the harvest workers. Kenan had overseen the previous harvest which was an overflow of grain and produce. The gods had truly been generous to them.

"My son, What joy is this?" Ma' Lena, his mother asked him, noticing his renewed zeal as he passed by her hut. She wore an inner tunic and a light coat on top, without any ornaments. On her head, she had a grey coloured silk headgear, as the one women wore during work.

"Mama, in a few tides, I will have by my side a queen as beautiful, and as diligent as you."

"Oh my son, how glad I am glad that you are finally turning around to this. Go now, and meet your father before he becomes more impatient. You know how he is when you make him wait..." She blessed him and saw him to the quarters where Shifü was. He had not been this jovial ever since his father started speaking of the Hika. He felt coerced to do it. He often prayed about it, making libations and offering whenever he could. He hoped that things would go his way.

He entered the Chief's chambers, lit with lanterns. Their walls were robust in colour, displaying the richness of their heritage as the sceptres of all the Shifüs who had led Akanga hang in order there, from the oldest to the current. The floor was made of earth, mixed with ash and glittering sandstone. The chamber was slightly smaller than that of the Administrative chamber, but it had more rooms. Maidens were everywhere trying to put together all the items for the big day. Anyiko and Chemu were there as well. They met him first before he went ahead to see his father.

His younger sisters were growing up so fast! Anyiko would often vanish in the mid-mornings to join the women in the field, fetching wood and plucking pumpkin leaves; as their youngest, Chemu, would remain to learn around her mother most of the day. The bulging image of his father, who was overseeing everything, went around charging the maidens to be 'faster!' and 'careful!' as the linens were very very expensive. Jero was not here. Kenan assumed that his brother was out working their plan and all. He could have used his keen sense of style right about then.

"Ah! Kenan, you have finally arrived," his father had just seen him approach. He put aside a colourful Ankara cloak with stripes of green, gold, orange, and purple markings all across. "We must choose an attire that speaks HONOUR and utters HANDSOME. So far, I can tell you, you have lots of options! Have you seen your Jero?"

"I haven't. You know Jero and his errands."

"Well then, there is no time to waste! In a few weeks my son, you will have the fairest of all the princesses in the lands! I want you to be as charming as any Prince can be. Better even."

He saw how much pride this brought his father and felt shaken, especially knowing what he and Jero had planned. He also saw how much his father had aged.

Grey hairs were strikingly visible in his beard, his weight was lessening and his arms seemed to tremble at times.

Sooner or later, Kenan would have to assume the seat of Shifü, and this explained why marriage was vital for him at this time. However, the vigour at which Shifü carried out the preparations had increased tenfold. It was almost like he wanted it to happen the next day!

The Prophecy

The Vision

Shifü had had a series of meetings with the magicians. Seseka, the lead magician, had been donning her dark robes which signified the coming of days of tragedy. He had anticipated bad news, perhaps a spoilt harvest, an enemy attack, or a devastating plague.

The seers had a joint vision, one that was very disturbing.

Seseka spoke, “Shifü Konelia, your wisdom over the people has kept our land strong and made it thrive. The gods chose well. However, we have growing fears over the one who is to take over from you. This mantle of leadership is becoming heavier by the day.”

“If this has to do with my son, may I remind you that the gods chose Kenan at birth and I have groomed him for this ever since he had an understanding of it.”

“This is true. I have seen this through. My Shifü, prophecies can be averted, dreams can be changed, but visions- those are like peering into the very eyes of the gods...” She became awfully quiet.

“What did they see? Tell me!”

She continued:

“The seers saw a tree planted in an endless field. It had roots so deep that it drank from the oceans beneath the earth. Then, there rose 7 youthful cubs.

Each was destined to be a ruler, each bearing a mark of the colours representing the 7 kingdoms on their foreheads. One for each cub. **Kush; gold, Takoa; Purple, Tanga; Silver, Shani; Blue, The Nilotes; Green, Mara; Red and Akanga; Black.** The cubs approached the tree to find shade from the scorching sun, much like that of the harvest time. Of the 7, four sat under it: the ones bearing the colours of Kush, Tanga, Shani, and Takoa. All of a sudden, the sun began to dim, and it turned to the colour of blood. The three

remaining cubs saw this and ran off in different directions. On account of this, the tree then began to grow even larger, spreading its branches and growing deadly spear-like thorns. The branches sought after the three cubs. The seers then saw judgement, as the four cubs under the tree were not pursued, but eventually, they became sickly over time. Of the three fleeing, two got to the edge of the field and with nowhere to run, awaited death. One was short of pace and was pierced at the heart. It was the one bearing the colour of Akanga.”

Shifü stood up from the meeting, with a worried look in his eyes, “I have feared a war would come, but not in my old age. Who is our enemy? Is it the Welsh? Is it KUSH?”

“We are yet to know. As it is, this vision is not easy to interpret. If the evil is indeed at work, then we need to find it. We are certain that this will occur at the time of the harvest. Which one? we cannot tell, but most likely very soon. Wisdom speaks Shifü. You must call off the Hika, and prepare your men.”

“No! It is a custom. The next Chief must have a queen by his side. I still have some time before the Harvest. I can change the Hika’s festivities and bring them to a closer date...”

“Shifü, by all means- a war is far more important than a wedding! We are already seeing signs. There have been visitations by a power from far away. A presence we only felt during Madinka’s disappearance to the North, but far much stronger. We fear that we might not be strong enough to suffice once it strikes.”

“Very well, I will speak to my council tomorrow...”

“But there is more, Shifü. The cubs- they represent 7 new kings in the lands.” Seseka’s dark eyes did not blink once!

“Your son is one of them, as is with the changing times. You and I know that evil has tried your family before. I must seek out any roots of it in your bloodline. Tonight, the moon is full, and my magic is

The Prophecy

strong. We cannot wait for the next. I must meet with you and your kin at dusk.”

“But they are not all here. Museti is taking his right of passage away in the meadows. If you must, I can send for him, but it will take much longer for him to arrive.”

“It is not him that you should worry about. Let him remain wherever he is, for the gods did not choose him.”

“Very well. I will gather them tonight.”

Shifü was incensed by these developments. He left the meeting pale and low at heart, yet the plans of the *Hika* never left his mind. Akanga had not seen a war in years, just a few raids that would happen perennially, and even those did not need entire armies. However, wherever they fought, magicians would be summoned to, first of all, predict the outcomes. Warriors would come out in their numbers as advised by the magicians, and many times their predictions would be right. They would bless the men before they went to war. This would take days of conducting rituals and special offerings. If there was doom prophesied as the outcome of a war, then a peace offering would be made to the gods, and a treaty would be proposed between them and their enemy. If there was a win prophesied, then a blood cleansing offering would be offered, and massive plunder over the enemy would be planned.

The gathering

Shifü grabbed Kenan’s arm in a firm fist and then called his daughters from the chamber. He asked them to join him for their evening meal. Kenan felt the grip of his father. Had Shifü known about their plan to rig in Sheera to the *Hika*? Thoughts and doubts began to bubble from within. Shifü could feel the tension in Kenan’s pulse. He eased up his grip and let his arm free. Konelia led the way, leaving Kenan

massaging his bicep. His siblings followed after their father, and hesitantly, Kenan followed behind them.

Their sitting was set in the garden, under the open sky of the night. Warmth was provided by the bonfire set in the middle of the gathering, where one of the male servants would feed its flames with sweet-smelling cedar to keep it going.

The maidens had set up 8 seats around the fire, three of which were of a senior stature. In front of these three, were footstools and for every seat, a gourd of water. The grounds were well carpeted with smooth stones from the river, laid out around the fire hole. There was tender grass growing off its outer rim. The serving party was ready for the family to gather. Ma'Lena was first to arrive. She rearranged the seats and the footstools, as she awaited her husband. He came bearing a heavy head and a slightly bitter look on his face. Ma'Lena hoped that it did not have anything to do with the renewed enthusiasm Kenan had that evening. Anyiko and Chemu also joined the gathering, and behind them was a downcast Kenan. He proceeded to stand two seats away from his father, on his right. Both were unoccupied.

One of the maidens whispered to Ma'Lena, who then signalled Shifü. He turned to see a dull figure, standing at a distance. The light unveiled her form. Seseka gracefully walked to the gathering, choosing the seat between Kenan and Shifü. She remained in her dark regalia, carrying a pouch made from goatskin on her waist. This increased his anxiety. Seseka had the power to manipulate people into a confession by just a mere look. He avoided her eyes all through. He did his best to straighten up and be the most confident he could.

"We may be served, as we wait for Jero. Hopefully, the message got to him in time."

The food was served. There was mashed yam, boiled maize, some steamed pumpkin leaves, sour porridge, and roasted goat meat. They

all ate in silence, though unusual for the family, this was no ordinary night.

Everyone finished up. All this time, Seseka was in her hooded covering, not revealing her head. She never grew her hair. Nothing magical had happened so far. Mother kept Father busy in low tone exchanges, supposedly over how much preparation for the festivities was underway. Shifü had not told her *everything* about the meeting he had earlier. The girls remained silent until the meal was done.

“That was a good meal, thank you so much, my queen.” Ma’ Lena nodded delightfully. “I would like to ask that the maidens excuse us, as well as you two-” Shifü turned to the girls. “We will have our time tomorrow. I ask that Jero’s seat remains as it is until he arrives”.

Soon after the maidens and the girls had left to their quarters, Jero arrived. As usual, he brought his charisma:

“Good evening to you family: your majesty, Chief of all Akanga; Mother, the beautiful Lioness who sits beside him; and the...” he saw Seseka and stuttered.

“You may sit next to your brother, Jero. Our guest is here to meet us four,” Shifü mitigated.

“Seeing that we are all here, Seseka, you may proceed.”

“Very well,” She said as she reached for her pouch, producing a sacred mat, one used to map souls.

“The future can be told through dreams and prophecy, but the past is found inside a person’s heart. That one thing, we are not masters over as we cannot change it.”

She then laid five gems on it. She spoke a spell, and they lit in the order of red, teal, amber, sapphire, and white. “This is already a good sign. It shows that you are all whole in spirit”.

Tension eased across the gathering. Jero discreetly elbowed Kenan’s arm. Shifü released his breath. “I ask that each one of you spread out your palms and free your spirits. You may close your eyes if it helps.

Remember, I am here as a medium, not a judge.”

They did as asked, and a bright light appeared in the middle of the gathering. Its power pulled their spirits in. The glow grew irresistible. It felt calm and warm around them.

“If any one of you has hidden anything that is a threat to the throne of Akanga, it is time for you to confess it. If you speak it here, it shall be forgiven,” Seseka encouraged. Like an enchantment, the guilt in Kenan’s heart was lifted to his lips. With little hesitation, he spilled, “Father! I have found a fair bride here among your people. Sheera: daughter of your deceased chief guard, Toria. I knew if this was made known to you, you would despise me, and more so, She and her clan. My will has never been to bring shame to your Chiefship. My brother and I planned against your design, to see her be by my side. It pleased my heart, and I hid it from you.”

On hearing this, Shifü’s mind began rushing! He did not know what to say, think, or act.

“Speak and be heard, for none can destroy the spirit, apart from the gods themselves!” Seseka continued to fuel the confessions, but none spoke thereafter. There was dead silence. Seseka noticed this and eased up the glow, calming the night. As soon as the light dried up, she stood up and lifted her hands in prayer. She alone was left in the spirit world, interceding and chanting.

Kenan turned his eyes to his father. Ma’Lena held Shifü. She did not lift her face because she felt she played a role to encourage this outcome. Through the dark, Shifü’s eyes burned like matches. His disappointment with his sons was boiling over. He couldn’t imagine the dishonour this could have caused him if it went through. Moreso, knowing what Toria had meant to him.

Toria

Toria, Sheera's father, walked with Shifü as his chief guard for many years. They had developed a great bond of trust, one that only true friendship could bear. Long before Kenan got to his teen years, there had been an attempt on his life by Konelia's brother, Soi. They, just like Jero and Kenan, loved each other deeply; but when their father, Shifü Chaka, fell ill, he had to redeem his heir to continue his Chieftdom. Chaka had been poisoned by an apple brought to him as a tribute by a trader from KUSH during the trading season.

Konelia took over the seat of Shifü after his father as Soi remained by his father's side, treating him and bathing him, and feeding him. Despite being the oldest of the two, the gods refused him to take his father's throne. Their mother had died from Ukoma two years before Konelia's marriage to Ma'Lena.

As the poison took hold of his body, the medicine men advised that Chaka put his house in order. He called his two sons to his bedside. He said his last blessings to them, which in their customs were believed to be the most important of all living blessings:

"Konelia, my son and now Chief over the Akanga, shall long reign and peace stand for all your days. May your family prosper, and may rulers be the continuation of your bloodline."

He then turned to the other, "My eldest son Soi, you have served me well, and for this I am grateful. Serve your brother with the same love as well and may every ruler to come, remain under the care of your bloodline. May your wealth and prosperity come to you in this way." Chaka's spirit left him.

Soi was bitter. He despised serving his brother. For his seed's sake, he vowed to never have a wife or beget a child after that day. As any jealous heart clouded by a lust for revenge, he planned evil against his brother. 10 years after the passing of Chaka, Kenan was born to

Ma'Lena and Konelia. With the boy chosen at birth to be the next Chief, this angered Soi even more. As the boy grew, so did Soi's hatred for him. His anger led him to secretly seek out dark magic to quench its intent.

On the day he intended to end Kenan's life, Soi hid a blade in his leather belt. He walked across the Chief's yard and found the boy and Sheera playing, as both their fathers were present. Ma'Lena was at the edge of the yard winnowing some grain alone. When Soi saw the opportunity to harm the defenceless child, he paced toward Kenan. Aggression filled him with each step.

As he got closer, he reached for his blade. Just then, Toria saw him as he walked out of the Chief's Chambers and ran quickly to stop him. Soi held his blade firmly in hand, lifted and ready to cut open the boy's throat. He threw Sheera to the ground, moving past her swiftly, so he could reach Kenan. The boy started screaming, sprinting for the huts. Ma'Lena turned, and her heart stopped for a moment. Immediately, she dropped her winnowing basket and started running toward her son. Soi's strides proved advantageous to his motive, as he got hold of Kenan's arm. Shifü heard the noise and rushed outside, only to see his brother wrestling Kenan roughly to the ground. Soi let out an angry cry, "You will never be my CHIEF! Never!"

As his blade dived down, Toria grabbed Soi's neck, and with a mighty thrust, he yanked him backward, freeing the boy from Soi's deathly choke. On touching the ground, Soi's aggression had grown beyond control. He viciously slit Toria's abdomen, and blood gushed from his mouth. It was enough to kill him. As Toria fell, an arrow plunged into Soi's back, penetrating through his navel. He turned precariously to see his killer. His temple crashed to the ground, and he was dead. Shifü Konelia had killed his brother!

After the brawl, the grounds had to be cleansed of evil and angered spirits. The children had to be treated by the medicine men for their

The Prophecy

innocence had been tried greatly. It took years for Kenan to finally be independent in his work and living. Soi's plot failed, but in turn raised a lot of questions regarding his reported travel to KUSH, a few days prior. Since that time, the Chief's homestead was marked with guards and maids wherever you turned.

The Reaper

Seseka remained standing, as the fire began to grow again. Wild, violent flames started to burst from it. Shifü was not concerned about this. His mind dwelt on his two sons. "How dare they!"

Soon, the fire became too great to ignore.

Like a rushing wind; convulsing, it danced, beaming with bright yellow and fierce hot orange flames. Seseka opened her mouth wide and increased her tone. Her body was suddenly lifted, her skin glowing in a pale violet hue. Then slowly, she started to wear down, her arms descending as her form fell.

Shifü rose from his seat in fear. Kenan moved away from his seat swiftly. The fire burst into a high wall reaching the tallest trees. Shifü frantically reached for Ma'Lena, "Call for the other magicians. Not those dreamers- the stronger ones!"

The Walsh burned so brightly that the maidens and servants could see it from their quarters. The higher it grew, the louder the shriek of a chant emanating from within it came:

'MANA-A-VUKE RA-HELEMO Z-ATEO'.

Once it seemed fully formed, the chanting stopped.

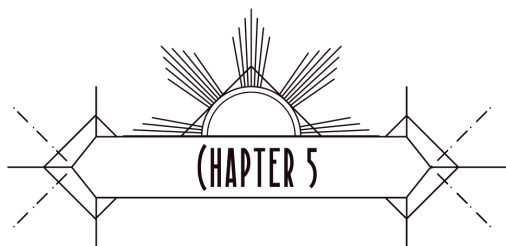
From it, a frail hand protruded. Worn bones with loose bandages strapped up to its wrists. Creeping out of this beam was an ancient creature. A spirit told only in the Narumor. A collector of souls.

Shifü and his sons lay in dismay. Seseke was nowhere to be seen as if the flame had engulfed her.

The creature presented itself fully and started walking on the grounds slowly, dragging its feet from the fire hole, stinking of death. In its hand, was a small wooden box. **The Reaper** approached Shifü, standing before him, and Konelia fell to his knees. A chill like a tomb withered the Chief's homestead.

The faceless gore placed the box at its feet and muttered:

I HAVE COME TO COLLECT.



THE REAPER

L OUD SCREAMS WOKE him up. He could feel that something harrowing was coming. The noises grew louder, as thuds rattled their roof. It was the same week his daughter was born. The same week the women stopped by his work station in the market and hurled insults at him, calling his wife a *witch*. Had he not seen how the people would look at him when they walked together? He knew he loved her, and even though his friends warned him against her, his kindness was all it took to bring a stranger into his life. He turned to his side and felt the warmth of her body. She didn't go tonight, probably because she had just given birth. It was odd that she slept through the third watch. Normally, she would have already left to make her prayers at the river. A little light remained, salvaged by the dying flame on the wick burning on his side. He looked at her arms,

embracing their newborn, cuddled in with her mother. She was perfect for the part.

Again, he was startled by the ruckus. He got off the bed to go see. 'Could it be another lynching?' he thought.

The people here did not take any wrongdoing lightly. One of his former friends had resolved to become a thief, moons ago. It started with rings and bracelets, and soon, kangas and shukas. When they caught him trying to steal a bull from the market pens, he was taken to the local elder, who from the look of things, had little to decide over the young man's fate. His punishment for his sticky hands was to roll down the hill of punishment, in a beehive, enclosed on both sides. If the stinging didn't kill him, then the broken bones and haemorrhages would have had him before he reached the bottom of this gruesome rise, so high, no one could even dare walk its slopes.

From the window, he saw multiple tongues of flames approaching from afar. His heart started beating fast. He then saw a few shady figures moving in the dark, past his gate. The cry had gotten loud enough for him to make sense of it. They were shouting,

'BURN THE WITCH!'

He was certain; they were coming for his wife!

He quickly put out the wick. "Wake up! You need to get away from here," he whispered loudly to the pitch of the darkness, as he felt around for anything that he could use as a weapon.

"WAKE UP!" he called again. She finally turned, "What is the matter?" He rushed to her and spoke in a hush, "They are coming for us. I cannot protect you now. They will not relent this time. You have to take our little girl and run to the magician's den, this instance!" On hearing this, her senses were fully alert, "And you? Shall we wait for you?" he did not respond.

He felt for the little woven bag that carried the few clothes they owned, hanging on the bedpost. He rushed her from the bed,

bundling the baby to her chest with a rag. He then pushed her frantically towards the hip-high window at the opposite end of the hut, and then paced back to the door of the hut, "Go Now! I will come and find you...."

A loud 'bang!' like a heavy stone, was heard hitting the wooden door, almost breaking it. The baby started crying. She felt a familiar fear in her spine. Daunting and callous. He was the only one holding that door from what was imminent death. Their eyes saw the last of each other that night. For the sake of their child, she turned her back on him, something she had promised to never do to someone she loved, ever again. She struggled to climb out through the small window. Right then, another 'THUD!' was heard, and this time the wood gave out.

"There is a WITCH in there!"

The chants had gotten bolder and their intent was being felt rocking the small hut. Women and men, with torches, stood outside, ready to lynch the *scum* of their society.

There was no time. She fell to the other side, still holding her baby close to her chest. Just when she stepped into the clearing, the people were beginning to surround the hut. One of them saw her move about the back, "There she is!! Get her!" She ran across their small field into the thickets and headed for the river. Closely behind her, a mob of people with blades and torches, all trying to catch her and kill her. She had never harmed any of them, but they believed that if she didn't, her little Purple-haired child would.

Lions are born without claws and their roar, but when the cub is grown, it tears through the toughest flesh!

Two men breached the hut, ridding it of a part of the wall as they broke down the door. Zua was on the floor, begging for dear life.

"We warned you to stay away from that WITCH. Now see, she has turned you against your people!"

“...We have done nothing wrong...”

“You’ve spawned with her spirits and magic!” another came from behind the two, breaking the dark with a torch. A familiar voice raged, “Tonight, all this wickedness shall burn.”

As he lifted the torch to set the ends of the thatch roof ablaze, Zua saw the face of his assailants. One of whom he had known as a friend even before meeting the woman. A friend had turned into a foe. They quickly tied up his hands and feet. Leaving him there to burn in the ruins. As the fire engulfed that little hut, in Zua’s heart, he prayed for his wife and daughter. The Midwife had asked them to take the girl to the magicians once she was old enough. He wept because this would never be for him to partake. He just hoped that they made it.

The shingles began to crackle, and his skin seared in the heat. The pain was unsettling. He rolled on the earthen floor trying to get relief, but it couldn’t help. His voice was fading, as was his breath. He had nothing left, but memories of what brought him joy. He closed his eyes, and took his last breath...

She was lost, hiding behind the barrels of the brewers in the market. He had just purchased his first instalment of iron for his work. He had brought with him two of his friends, and when they saw her torn dress, murky at the bottom, and damp from sweat, they taunted her. The clothes bore resemblance to people from far away.

“She probably escaped the Arab ships and came here on foot,” they guessed. Her head had been shaven clean. His friends talked him out of helping her, saying that she would only mean trouble for him to help an outsider, but he insisted. He gave her water, and she drank. After a guard and a half of water, they left her. Later on in the evening, he sneaked back to where they had left her, and she had not moved. It was as if she knew he would return. He came with a robe that she wore, and he took her back to his small homestead.

Sheba regained her strength under his care. When she was well

The Reaper

enough, he asked her to go back to her country, but she refused. She asked him to stay, as she was no longer wanted there and was banished never to return. She continued to weave up a story about a King from the north, who made pyramids and sandcastles, and a people with great powers even rivalling gods. She told him of her sisters, who escaped from the country with her, but never made it quite to freedom, and that she feared for her life. He failed to see reason in her stories, but how could he? He was just a mere commoner, dreaming of starting a small blacksmith station.

He let her stay, and they became inseparable. It was as if a spell bound them. She loved him as he did her. To his friends, he had changed. He even defended her practices. Those who saw her at the river during the third watch had confessed that she prayed to water spirits!

At last, the fruit of their love was born. She named her *Neveh*, to mean ‘the joy that cometh at daybreak’. She knew that the day would come when she would continue the long bloodline of powerful mystical women before her. She never told him why their daughter’s hair was purple. Over time, her power became useless over him. The spell that bound them was far much greater than any one that magic could conjure.’

Sheba ran till she got to the river, then she stopped. Those chasing after her saw this and slowed in their tracks, saying, “Beware! She could be summoning her water spirits and they could harm us.”

Others said, “They cannot! We will remain here on dry land, The spirits cannot harm us here.”

The crowd was fattening. She became very afraid.

She pleaded with them, reversing into the river.

On one hand, she held her crying baby, swaddled on her chest; On the other, she warded them off. The closer they came, the more desperate she became. Her knees sank into the water. When they

realised that there were no spirits to protect her, they began charging at her. She knew she had to protect herself and her daughter.

She bent down to the water and began to chant under her breath, then the water began to rise. The crowd was at the edge of the river and they did not notice the tide. She increased the intensity of it, controlling the river with her hand. As twigs and stones were hurled, she lifted the rocks from beneath the river and set them hoarding against the crowd. When they saw this, some started rushing out of the water screaming;

“Stand back! Her spirits are rising!”

The crowd was so large, that from the back they never heard the warnings.

As the rocks descended on the first line of the crowd, the next started throwing torches and any projectiles they had at her. She then raised a wall of water from the river, building it with the overflowing tides, swaying them from side to side, freeing her other arm from her child who remained bundled to her chest. Still to this point, she was being remorseful to them. Her hands were tiring from holding up the water. She then ascended over it, and as the people saw her elevated, they all sank in fear and utter confusion.

Some said, “That is no WITCH. Not even our finest magicians can do this. She must be a goddess!” With this sight in the last half of the moonlight that night, she propelled her body away into the hills, never to be seen again.

After her escape, she knew she would not dwell in the same land again. Her Zua was dead in the hut, burnt with the little possession they had. She only knew of one place to take her young one. That morning as the news spread, Olu woke to the crying of a baby outside the magician’s den. Along with it, was a small woven bag of clothing. He looked into her eyes. He felt her spirit burn. It was so strong, there was no denying her power. He tested her with the four objects of

The Reaper

power; the rod for leadership, gold for wealth, myrrh for wisdom, and silver for spirit. She chose Myrrh and Silver; the symbols of the most powerful magicians in Akanga.

Determining her as a 'child of magic' he named her Seseka. She grew up learning their ways, hidden from the people. He too never let her grow her hair, not once. He feared that the people could reject her and her giftings. He had known of her birth, but very little of her parents. When she became of age, he only told her what he had heard. At times, she would try to use her gifts to find her lost mother, but with no memory of her, she would hit dead ends. She had been taught that magic is not self-serving. Her full strength would never be realised. Her blood had proved great sorcery, an easy task. This is how she became the lead magician.

The devil's due

Somewhere behind this gateway of fire was Seseka. In Front of it was an evil spirit, fully formed and in its way a relic.

They had made Soi's burial a secret from the people. He was buried in a different plot from the graveyard of Chiefs. They had also asked the lead magician then, OLU, to appease the ancestors to allow his passage into the spiritual. Soi's hut was brought down. His material possessions had been seized and burnt so that his spirit, if vengeful, could not return.

Shifü readied his soul with prayer for forgiveness and repentance, if at all the spirit was sent for him. The courtyard and every single eye witnessing this in the garden froze in amazement. The glorious sore of this unholy being, strapped from head to toe in bandages with brief exposures of bones on its arms and legs, was shocking. Every soul 150 strides away could feel the disturbance.

The blinding light behind the Reaper did not waver or lower. Its

eyes were like melting coal in a furnace, with strap cuttings around what would be its mouth and breathing pores. Konelia did not raise his head once! It raised its arm slowly from its corpse flesh. As it went higher, a wind in time would spread with every few stretches from the scene. Statues formed everywhere. Once fully raised, a staff formed in its folding fist, the head of it, bearing the mark of the god of death. The Reaper dropped the butt of the staff to the stone carpeted ground, and in the stillness of time, only Shifü could move.

“I am MOMEKH, here under the mastership of the Sorceress of Harem, to whom your brother Soi made his intent over your Chieftdom known. In place of his inheritance and his own life, he asked for a great thing. He implored her, that he be given the chance to end your lineage of heirs. He failed in his quest. He did not trust KEK wholly.” It turned its grim face briefly to Kenan, then back to Shifü.

It raised the staff and twice knocked on the box before Shifü, and it cracked.

“Look!” Hisses started to emanate from the dark crack. They reached Shifü’s ear, piercing his heart. The crack began to grow, and so did the noises. “See what you have made for yourselves!”

Terrible cries were enveloped in it. It tortured him as he heard them. Then, a certain one came louder above the rest. His eyes became keen peeking inside the box, as the lid was halfway open, and a whirly image of Soi rose from it. He seemed trapped in a dark and hollow place. He saw his agony, his spirit held unable to free himself. Konelia battled with this torment until he couldn’t sustain it anymore. “You had a choice that day, and you chose the boy over your brother!” As he sought to try and reach the box, MOMEKH closed it back, and lifted it back to his fold.

Again, its dry and smoky voice came up.

“My master sent me here to collect the debt that is rightfully owed

The Reaper

to her. What's lost is lost. Your brother has already given his life, but his birthright remains here with you.

The Sorceress desires it, and in turn, your brother's spirit will rest. You must give what is due."

With these words, Konelia finally raised his trembling body from the ground.

"My brother did not have much to his name and even what he owned, was burnt to ashes. All that my father had, is of the people of this land. All our riches and wealth are theirs to give. Is there any other thing I can offer to quench your master's wrath? Be it gold, or tribute..."

"I have not come to contest or bargain my master's will. You must avail that that was promised or else- I will take something more dear to you. A treasure..." Momekh scanned the surroundings, "Aah! There is plenty of it here."

"I plead with you, that you may grant me time. For this that you ask cannot be given unless the gatekeepers of the land provide it to me"

"You insult my master's mercy! Have I not made it very clear that I do not come to contest her wish? Do you think that the spirits here could contain the dreadful hand that lurks around you? The day of your judgement nears. Fertile lands will be made deserts, whole rivers turned to blood, and men swallowed in storms of fire! If my master wills, all your land could be turned to dust right this moment!" The reaper's eyes gleed, as it saw Shifü melt.

"Oh Yes! You have heard! The one you have been preparing for the throne- He will fail!" Konelia was dumbfounded.

There was no one to stand in the reaper's way.

"Move aside! I will pick to my liking- a gift for my master until you can pay her in full." It waved Shifü from its path, freeing Kenan and Jero from the stillness of time. At the sight of the Reaper, they too

shook in fear. *It* was looking for something. One that was more valued, and much more precious to Konelia. It wasn't the two. Its eyes quickly hovered over the entire homestead, as its dark spirit floated out of the premise, into the huts. With every soul still in time, it passed all the servant huts, from the high in rank to those who weaved mats for the Chief. It then clung onto one hut. It slowly wound itself around Chemu's body, right under the hands of her sister Anyiko. It then brought her through the mass of frozen bodies, making its way back to the garden. On seeing what it had taken from him, Shifü's heart stopped. It's like it knew that nothing could tear him apart as much as losing his little Chemu. The boys were old enough to fight, Anyiko was almost ready for marriage, but his little girl was innocent and still in need of her father's protection.

"Until you can pay my master, the girl shall remain with me!" The reaper said.

"...not her, not my little girl. Take me instead! Yes, take me!.."

"No! Take me...I am the one who Soi wanted to kill," Kenan tried to waver the outcome. The Reaper was satisfied with its harvest. Shifü looked at his son from across the gathering. Kenan was on his knees in tears, fighting Jero's hold, trying to reach the reaper. Konelia cried out, "Son! there is nothing we can do. Let it be."

"Meet the full amount before the rising of the next full moon. You must then go to the City of Harem. The payment can only be made by *blood*. Your *blood*! There in the Mountain of Abadia, the Sorceress will see to your justification."

It then walked back the way it came with a gift for its master. Seeing his daughter disappear into the light broke Konelia's heart so badly, that he lay like a fool on the ground. He did not know what to do after that. As lightning strikes, so was the opening closed. Behind it, Seseka's body lay. The quiet sound of the night returned. The horror had just stopped, confusion manifesting in the hearts of those who

had seen it.

A loud cry came from the huts,

“CHEMU! CHEMU! CHEMU!”

It faded in the backdrop of what had just occurred.

After a while, Kasha, Seseka’s assistant, came to attend to Shifü, who remained frighteningly motionless as Ma’Lena wept bitterly by his side. The ring of the words from Momekh was embroidered in Shifü’s mind. Kasha saw Seseka’s body lying across Shifü, almost lifeless. Kenan was still in Jero’s arms. He wasn’t holding him back anymore, rather, he was holding him in.

Ma’Lena didn’t sleep that night. She wept, perusing through the last of her daughter’s moments as the maidservants and Anyiko tried to explain the anomaly to themselves as best as they could. After a short assessment of the situation, the medicine man was called to the Chief’s homestead, arriving with three magicians. He did his best to heal.

“It’s the strongest medicine I could give. It may calm them till tomorrow. After that, the battle is in your court, Kasha.”

Temba explained. All the powerful spells bottled up in their dens, yet all that they could give was a **blacksapia** root. Kasha released him. He turned to the hut where Shifü had been taken. The root had caused them to fall into a deep sleep. Seseka was taken back to the den. After seeing what this ‘magic’ had done to her, Kasha was more afraid. He even doubted if his divination could refresh the casualties of it. He too did his best.

It took weeks for normalcy to return. The Hika was called off. The rains came early. The rainmakers claimed that they had asked for the downpour to cleanse their land. Harvesting was underway, as some of the early planters prepared their fields. Rain fell on the thatched roofs, dripping down the straws and beams, then in a stream, the drops would converge at the edge, dripping down to part the dust and

create mud. The women would normally celebrate the coming of the new season, but not this time.

There were many stories told from the night of the encounter. Many said that the end of the Chaka lineage's reign was at hand. Others saw them as cursed. Others said that Seseka was behind the visitation, attributing this to her extraordinary giftings. She had been unconscious for days now, so those who blamed her were always forced to explain how she also suffered from this 'act of the gods'. Madinka took charge of the administrative council. If Kenan had been well, then that would have been his turf.

Shifü Konelia's health got better, and so did that of his sons. When the medicine man had cleared them, Ma'Lena was quick to ask Madinka that he arranges for a rare special meeting the next day for Konelia to address the people of the extended council. This meant that not only did the faction leaders attend, but also the different leaders of all the clans in the Akanga land, and they were 12 in number. This he did.

On the day of the meeting, all twelve, plus the leaders of the three other factions: **Kambo** with the builders' faction, **Gawa** with the field faction, and since Seseka had not awoken, **Kasha** came in her place representing the magicians' faction. They all sat in the large administrative chambers, in anticipation of what their Shifü was about to say. Some were in fear of this 'curse' charging them during the meeting. For many, to be able to get the questions they had was essential, not just for them, but for their people too.

At last, Shifü Konelia rose from his beddings. He declined to wear his royal regalia and settled for his brown skin coat on top. Two guards stood by him, in case he fell weak. Behind him, his two sons followed. They donned their official clothes and even though Kenan was a bit sickly, Jero was willing to help him to his seat at the meeting. On entering, the whole council stood. Murmurs stopped, and utter

silence filled the chambers. They noticed that Shifü was a little slower, but they were glad at heart to see their leader fight on after such devastation. He walked in their midst, right on the aisle of the room. Some craned their necks to at least get a glimpse of him. His sons sat on the balcony away from all the people. It towered above the whole room, as it was preserved for ceremonies, like the Hika, when the Chief would not sit at the throne area, preferring a secluded area with his guests. Shifü left his guards and climbed up to the throne. He then signalled the council to sit, and so they did. He looked over all of them and saw the expectation on their faces.

He spoke, "I greet you all!" a unanimous reception of the greeting roared in the chamber. He continued, "I am grateful for your prayers over my family. I also want to thank Madinka, who served our people in my stead. To you, my friend, I am very grateful."

His eyes were on Madinka, who had positioned himself at the far left seat on the front row.

"I know you expect much from me, but I believe the most important thing for all in the land to know, is that their Chief is well again. Hence, I will only speak to the faction leaders of the things that must be done, as this is not a matter for all the Akanga."

All of a sudden, everyone turned to each other in confusion.

"Then why were we called to come?"

Those silent whispers turned to heckles in such a short time. Shifü raised his arm, and gradually the people calmed.

He answered them, "I am grateful you came, and you shall not leave empty-handed for your sacrifice. Our granaries are full once more, and this year the gods have been very kind to us. For every portion that you had offered for the festival, you shall receive double of it as you leave to take back to your people. With that, may I be left with my immediate council?" The extended council members felt compensated in a way, and an effort to leave was made. With much

haste, the chamber was cleared, and only the 4 faction leaders remained, as well as Shifü's sons, who remained on the balcony.

Shifü stood from his throne and came closer to level ground as if seeking secret council:

"As you know, there has been a change in plans. The Hika that I dearly longed for, will not happen. However, the magicians had warned me, particularly Seseka- It is clear that we have amassed a jealous enemy. My brother Soi, went to seek help from a Sorceress in Harem's Kush, committing the sacrilege of treating our gods with contempt. I require of you because no other can I trust. You see, Soi had offered a payment to acquire certain magic to kill..."

His eyes crossed to Kenan's from a distance, "...my son. He offered evil his inheritance from my father if he succeeded. He gave his life instead. I thank the gods of our land for protecting my son and my family." Shifü was quiet for a while, pondering on some bitter thoughts.

"A reaper spirit visited me, and in it spoke such disturbing matters to my household. It insisted that its master was showing remorse with us and was capable of unspeakable evil; and to this effect and to avoid calamity, Soi's inheritance has been long due. As a taunting gesture, a kind of security was made when the reaper took my youngest daughter. It said that the only way to get her back is if I bring Soi's entire inheritance to the sorceress. This is why I did not want the others here. The tribal leaders would gossip and make haste to dethrone me. These truths should remain between us. I thought it best that they witnessed that I was well, so they could respect my position over the Akanga people. They are fickle and they need to be shown! Now, what wisdom would you share with me concerning this Sorceress of Harem?"

Kasha lifted his arm, and Shifü beckoned him to speak. He reached for his aged pouch and pulled out a torn scroll, then stretched it on

the floor. On the scroll were charcoal drawings and notes taken from the old Narumor. "Before the death of your father, Chaka, there was a rising word of a woman who lived among the Kush. She was sought after by many travellers from far and wide, because of her great acumen in the magic of fortune-telling, and an unparalleled charming technique- the kind only a true sorceress could wield."

"This I have heard about. I was just a young man then. They said the woman disappeared from their land during **the purging?**" Shifü asked objectively.

"Yes, but years after that time, there were new reports from the midlands of Kush. Harem had welcomed to his palace a woman of peculiar powers. It was told to us that she became so endeared by the throne bearer, that Harem also let her sit in his council!"

"...Could she be the same one we met at the meeting with KUSH over the raids?" As these words drew from Shifü's mouth, Jero leaned in to hear better. Kenan was amazed. His brother might have been onto something all along.

"It could be...Would you, by any chance, have her description," Madinka said.

"She has a dark berry complexion, and she often covers her head. She is always dressed in long robes gotten from the nomad traders. Her hair never grows and her lips are marked in white."

"That's the exact one! The same one who mentioned the welsh men to us," Madinka jumped to the conclusion.

Shifü nodded, urging Kasha to go on, "Her power is possibly the same one Seseka had sensed, just days before the visitation happened. She must be the one the Reaper spoke of."

"Harem has no honour! He continues to disrespect our agreements, even letting his pawns attack our throne with demons. Shifü, do you not see the trap he sets for you. How can anyone from this very sitting, enter Harem's city? Is this not the same as wishing death upon

themselves?" Kambo asked.

"Yes, my Shifü, it concerns me as well. What if this is another way of them luring you from the protection of our spirits so that they can kill you? We have people here that depend highly on you. If at all, this is an act deserving a response. A response of war!"

"Enough!" Shifü stopped Madinka, "I will not go. I love my daughter, yes, and I also want to free her. I would give up anything to see to it, but I cannot go." There was a slight calm in the room. He then turned his eyes up to the balcony and pointed almost at the middle of both his sons. "THEY WILL GO!" Stuttering, and unsure about his father's imposing decision for him to join his brother on the journey to Kush, Kenan felt his father's anger boil over. During the recovery period, their father never once asked for them or to know if they were okay. Had he not lost enough to risk his family again in this way? Jero was elated, and as he looked down at his father, he raised his voice, "I will go! I know these people, I have more experience in the lands than my brother. Father, let me."

"Father?! Father, you call me, yet the two of you planned to betray my trust. How different are you from Soi? If I knew of his treachery, I could have been the one Soi slew, then my family could have been freed of this!"

"We cannot change what the gods have planned," Jero stood from his seat, intent on speaking his mind, regardless.

"I am the one who convinced Kenan to fight for her- to elope with her. I am the one who planned to go out to seek help from Kush!"

"You did what? Now you are a friend to my enemies Jero? I trusted you with a position in my leadership and this is how you repay my goodwill, to keep you from following the path of Soi..."

"Is that so? After all, I have been through for your throne, all that because you thought I would become jealous and betray my brother, just like yours did, Father?"

“You know nothing of what you speak! You were not there to see it. You have not suffered the losses I have. To think that I had done well. I cannot be led away from choosing to protect what I love.”

“I finally see it...I understand why you took so much pride in all of this. Your son, the heir of the throne, and also my brother, is to go into that spectacle of an event and marry a mistake. Yet you speak of choices when you know very well where his heart is. All you cared about was what colours were his robe and how many rich coffers would attend, and all for what? Your dignity and...”

“What do you mean? That is Tradition! And for you who knows so little, who are you to speak to your father with such a tone? And who said that your brother had a choice? None of us did, but we made the most of what we got. Look at me and your mother- have we not raised you well and kept our matters in order? What is this entitlement you have gotten, to even argue with your father in such a manner?”

Kenan held Jero's arm and pulled him back, asking him to be silent before he said anything beyond forgiveness.

“Let go of me, you coward! I am fighting for what you never would. If you are to lead these people, then you should at least lead yourself first!” Kenan unhanded Jero and *he* stormed out.

“I will deal with you later!”

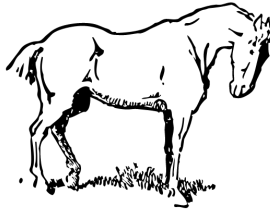
These words burned in his chest for days. Those around the council sitting were abrupt to also attempt to leave, as this was getting out of hand. Shifü came to and requested that they finally close the plan to get everything back to where it should be, “I apologise. He can be a little hot-tempered, and- I don't know where he gets that from...anyways, (*he cleared his throat*) Gawa, please, what do you suggest over this matter?”

“I suggest that we get a proper curating of everything that may have been your brothers by the elders, then set aside a delegation that will go to see this sorceress, having been attended to by our magicians of

coarse,” Gawa, the leader of the field faction spoke in his usual calm and subtle manner.

“Yes, Gawa! I still insist that my two sons go on my behalf. Madinka, find some of your best warriors, five of them. I also want Seseka to be alerted of this once she awakens. She has felt this power and she knows it well. She needs to charm them before going into Kush to meet the sorceress. Kambo, help them set some temporary shelter for the nights they will endure in their travel to the city. My handmaids will pack their food and water. A messenger will be sent immediately to make it known to Harem that my sons will be coming. Is this settled?” they all agreed to this.

Shifü lifted his eyes back to the balcony, Kenan had left as well.



LEAVING

THE MESSENGER ran through the last mile, increasing his pace as he neared the place the four trade routes joined. Home was not far from here. He had braved through nights in the wilderness and grasslands, fighting off jackals and hyenas to deliver a very important message from King Harem. He had torn his black shirt that was heavily knitted with strands of nylon wool, as he marched through the thickets of the Ngengi plateau. His feet were so worn from the long travel that not only were his sandal straps almost tearing off, his legs were sore as veins encapsulated his cafts and arms. The route was well fed by streams and more favourably, it was the wet season, so his gourd was full most times. He could see the rainbow curve above the hills of his home, thankful to the gods for protection. With him was a bag made from hide. In it was a package.

He was more glad, seeing that he was returning with a response. He hoped that it was well with his master, for only he could open the package.

The guards let him through to the Chief's quarters. Shifü had asked not to meet anyone until he had received the news from the messenger. There were smoke signals two days prior, and this meant that the messenger was near. Shifü was anxious. As soon as he heard that the boy had returned, he left his hut and walked out to meet him. He quickly greeted and blessed the young man, "Thank you, my boy, may the gods favour you and your family. You may go home now," he then entered his hut. He sat down on the three-legged wooden stool, placed near the window. It was still day, so he could read without the help of a lantern. He quickly loosened the package's strings and unravelled the sheath covering, to look within. After he had read it, he became certain of what to do next. He called for a meeting with Madinka and Kasha immediately!

Madinka was busy marking the cattle that were returning to his homestead from the river. His wife was on his large farm, tending to their plantation of grain and millet, as the rains were proving to be constant in their pattern this time. His eldest son, Batu, who was also part of the warrior faction in the Akanga Chieftdom, was out training with the others. His second born was the one bringing in the Cattle, ahead of this third, who was far behind ensuring none of the animals was left behind. Madinka heard a firm voice from behind him. He turned with little concern, his arms still rested on the pen. It was Shifü's chief guard, Jamba, explaining his requirement to go see Konelia at their occasional meeting point.

He did well to follow him, leaving his sons tending to the cattle. It was urgent.

At the Magicians' den, Kasha and four other magicians of different orders were still trying to revive Seseka. She had been asleep for so

long that her bones were now beginning to curve out on her skin. She could not eat nor drink. Her flesh lay there, unconscious, but alive. Her purple hair had begun to grow again. Kasha would often cut it, well aware of how Seseka abhorred it. They concluded that she was still in the spirit realm even though with every intervention, there was no reaching her.

There were four orders of the magicians: the first was **the Azmathes**. These were complete in their journey of seeking, and their aura was fully formed. There were only seven of them: three major and four minor. These would reach the spirit world and tell the people as well as the Shifü of any message from the gods. They were also gifted with special powers to project their spirits, work magic with their symbolic relics, and also prophesied as Seers to the people. Then there was the **Vuli**. These were the rainmakers, the medicine men, the dreamers, the diviners, and the charmers. They were gifted separately to serve different purposes each. Of these, the medicine men were the most elite, as their craft was harder to learn. Then there was the **Togere**.

These were the select few who were separated for the sole purpose of ceremonies. They were like priests and spiritual advisors with wisdom, but less versed in the arts of magic. The last order was the **Tuana**. They were the young apprentices, born with magic or re-gifted by the gods. They were yet to learn their path. Until that was defined, they remained as students learning under their masters.

Kasha was an Azmathe.

The magicians' den was hidden in between two ridges, where many caves were. They lived, practised, and also were consulted from there.

Just like Madinka, Kasha followed, after the guard was sent to get him.

They found Shifü already there, waiting by the oak tree just outside the village of the chief. There was no one else there. The guards had

been asked to wait and watch from afar, about 30 of Madinka's long strides. He greeted them, and wasted no time, as the sun was almost setting. "I have received the confirmation we have been waiting for," he started, looking at the package in his hands then he continued, "Harem has accepted the coming of my sons and the delegation to see his sorceress, but he asks for something more."

"Is it cattle he wants? Because that's all he seems to want from us," Madinka implied the obvious.

"No," Shifü then turned his eyes towards the sun.

He shielded his face from its light, then with a brief exhale continued, "He asks for Seseka to go as well."

"She is not well, and it has been days. We have tried everything and we do not know when she is going to be well," Kasha reported. Madinka was left to question, "How does Harem know of Seseka?" Shifü put the letter forward to Madinka, "Go ahead, read it for yourself."

"This is very baffling! What would Seseka benefit Harem? I think He and that sorceress have plotted this from the very beginning," Kasha retaliated.

"I am now certain that my brother had a long-term commitment when he sought for her. Whatever magic he thought he needed to complete his deceit could have been readily found among those who scoff against us, and at a more availed price. Perhaps he too shared in the plot."

"Harem seems to be very specific in his asking of Seseka..." Madinka read through.

"Our spirits are very strong here. If my sons are to go without our master magician to protect them, I am afraid that whatever dark power sits outside our boundaries may proceed easily with its purpose!" Shifü was even more concerned.

"It may be that because of Soi's error, the Sorceress found legal

grounds against our spirits to enter. There must be a reason she never came as herself, sending a neutral, like the reaper. Seseka has known about this sorceress for a long time, yet she has not shown any desire to reach her, leave alone acknowledge her. I have felt a powerful essence around her spirit. It's like all her strength is gallantly protecting it. Even we cannot get through to her.

I have spoken to the Azmathes, and they have recommended that only a power equal to or greater than that of Seseka's spirit can revive her. That night, if at all it was the sorceress who trapped her in her sleep, she may be the only one to set her free!" Kasha affirmed their fears.

"We have little choice now. We do not know what Harem has planned. If at all the sorceress succeeds to revive Seseka, then she will still be for us. She will do well to protect my sons. Kasha, I am trusting you to go with them, so you can ensure this."

"I will Shifü. As soon as all the rituals are done, I will help contain her body for the journey to Harem's city."

"Good. Madinka, ready the men and tell Kambo to make sure the company is set. In two days, when the moon is out to guide their nights. So will the journey happen."

After Kasha had left, Madinka came closer to Shifü and asked, "I know that in your wisdom, you have considered many things before making these decisions. I have wanted to ask you something."

"You may. I trust your council in all things.

You know that."

"Then Shifü, What prompted you to let Kenan and Jero be the ones to go? We have many good men who could go to Kush, and even if Harem laid a trap, then is it not better for it to fall upon them, than your sons?"

"That very reason is why, Madinka," Shifü laid his hand heavily on Madinka's shoulder. "There is a lot that has yet to be said. Maybe I

can share this burden with you at a more adequate gathering. However, the sorceress made these things known to me, right before the eyes of Kenan and Jero. I am old, and such a journey may require a whole host of maids and guards. Despite our disagreements, I know that they would trouble themselves for Chemu, just as much as I. Only they can I trust with such a task.”

Konelia then leaned closer to him, Madinka noticing the welling in Shifü’s eyes, “Only my blood can avenge the evils of its own making, Madinka.”

They saluted and left the oak tree, each back his way. In two days, Jero and Kenan would head to Harem’s city, to pay the last of Soi’s debt, then see to it that Chemu, their sister, was returned to their father. This was certain, and there was no changing Shifü’s mind. Kenan and Jero had been away from their father all the while since the meeting where Shifü had lashed out at them. It was for the best. Jero was still on official duty and was also helping Kenan understand the route of the journey that was ahead. Sometimes they would think that this was their fault, but then why did they have to risk their lives for their father’s sins?

It was an outright punishment to them. Shifü could have sent out his ranking councilmen or his mighty army to go and do his bidding, but it seemed to them that his throne had become more valuable to him. Maybe the Sorceress had seen this coming all the while. Maybe it was her plan finally working out as she planned. However, it was now clear that her hand on Kush was more prominent than thought earlier.

Kush

The Kushites had seen tremendous growth in their cities. Those who had visited their land, either to trade or to see loved ones, would come

back with gifts greater than those from Shani. They would also tell stories of roads of Iron, buildings of stone, and pavements made of tar. There would be talk of metallic bulls that would rev like a wild beast, and carry the Welsh from one city to the next! The growth of the Welsh presence had worried some dwellers of Kush, especially those who had to surrender their land to them. Their fields would be cut in half for the iron road to pass through and some would lose all of it. Normally, if the grazing area would dry in one portion, the other would be thriving, but with the current changes, their cattle died and only a few would be left to graze. Losing their most valued wealth was the reason why they had resulted in organising raids into Akanga.

Harem was the son of King Amresh, the Kushite. Amresh was a great friend to Chaka, even though he was older. During Amresh's reign, many from Akanga married into Kush and the Kush married into Akanga. Their borders were open, and the lands thrived on their relationship for trade purposes mostly. There was one thing that Amresh desired most.

The Queen, Fariti, would not bear him a son. Things changed when King Amresh realised that he was growing old and weary, and still had not gotten a son to take his place as King. He became restless. He sorted treatment from the best medicine men both in Kush and Akanga land, yet nothing changed.

He was not willing to let his Kingdom go to the hands of another, outside his bloodline. His brothers were all dead of old age, and their sons were lost in the pleasures of their youth. There was a maid in his palace, a young woman who he was fond of. She was the most trusted in the palace, to be with the King at all times. She did the cooking, washing, and any other thing that was required of her.

On a particularly rainy night, the King was alone in his bed. The Queen was *unclean* at the time, and she was away from her husband as was customary. The King asked if the maid would stay with him

through the cold night and keep him warm. Amresh told her of all the honour she would receive if she bore him a child. She said that she was only a servant. That people would hate her for it, and even stone her and her husband for this atrocious act. The King promised her protection, and even offered to move her entire family to a place closer to the palace, but to this, she would not agree.

After much hesitation, she did. He laid with her. She became pregnant, and her husband would soon know. She went back to the King and told him of this error. He then decided to marry her, and pay her husband due for all the dowry he had paid to her parents, all of it tripled. This arrangement was made, but her husband refused the offer. The King became angry and summoned him to his courts, so he could tell him why he had rejected it. Before his arrival, Amresh ordered his murder in the streets of the city. The maid, Zehut, became his wife and bore to him a son, Harem. She had not had a child with her husband at the time.

The Queen was not pleased with Amresh's doing. However, she chose to remain quiet over the matter. As days went by, jealousy stirred in her chest, seeing how a son brought joy to her King. A joy she could never give him. Zehut was receiving more favour from Amresh, than she. On a night, as rainy as the one Harem was conceived, a sudden illness struck Zehut and she died. She was mourned only by Amresh, as Harem was just a babe. He knew what happened, and he felt that the Queen's anger was justified. Since that time, the two would never relate as ones who were endeared to each other ever again.

Amresh, was the first King in all the Kingdoms of the East to accept the coming of the Welsh men. They would follow the Zumali route into Kush. Amresh died of old age, and Harem became King at only 12 years of age, under the watch of Queen Fariti, who became quite fond of the boy. He remained like a son to her, even to her death. It

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was in Harem's reign, that Kush began to open up borders to new Kingdoms and Sultanates from the far East.

Dawn arrived. Kenan and Jero woke up early. They had spent the last five days trying to reach their father, but were always turned away by Jamba, Shifü's guard. He explained to them that the Chief did not want to speak to anyone, as he was dealing with much heavier matters. Their plea would never be heard, not once.

5 strong young men entered the Chief's homestead with horses for the journey. Behind them also was Kambo, who had packed sisal tents stacked on the backs of two donkeys.

Madinka had remained in Shifü's quarters through the night.

The two spoke at length regarding many things of Akanga, including succession.

Kasha took a little bit longer than everyone else to arrive.

Ma'Lena sat outside the Chief's hut weaving, as Anyiko sat on the grass next to her, tucked in a heavy shuka.

"I feel very uncomfortable with this journey."

Kenan started.

"I am really afraid of what may be lying ahead of us.

"IT IS worrying, but we have to. As much as We wouldn't want to let Father down, I want to see mother smile again. These past days have dried her happiness, and- without Chemu, the family is not the same"

"Jero, I want to be here to serve the people..." Kenan tapped his brother's shoulder, "...To have you here when the times become troublesome. How will father work the land if we do not return-"

"Well then, pray! Pray hard that we return victorious from our quest. It would be very difficult for the people to deal with Museti as the Shifü," they shared a peal of short laughter.

The sky was clearing, as the sun rays broke through, and the quarter

crescent moon set into the hills. The ground was still moist from the rains. The fresh cold dew washed on their feet as they made their way to the courts for their briefing. This was the first time they would hear from their father in a long time. They met the five warriors who would accompany them, the four magicians; one from each order to bless them, and Kambo with his tents folded and ready.

Kasha rushed in to meet with Shifü and Madinka.

Anyiko walked past the warriors, her face partially hidden with the shuka. She went straight to her brothers, who were deep in conversation with Batu, Madinka's eldest son. He would lead the company. Batu saw her approach and stepped aside to let them speak.

"Be careful where you go," She started at the two.

"You'll have Father to blame for anything that happens to us," Kenan responded.

"What's done, is done. I cannot speak for him, but I know for sure he has his reasons..." The look in her eyes changed as she held Kenan's hand. "I will pray all I can and I will not stop. Just promise to bring her back to us."

"I don't like making these kinds of promises-

She turned to Jero, "I am not asking you to. I am telling you to come back. You must!" She looked back at Ma'Lena, "Those eyes are hiding a well of tears. I cannot watch her go through so much agony for another night."

Jero was prompted to embrace her, "You Pray. I am sure the gods will help us find our way back."

It might have been a little comforting at the time, but tougher times were ahead, ones that even made prayer difficult.

As Anyiko left them, Jero saw how Batu looked at her, but he kept it to himself.

From Shifü's quarters, deep rumbling voices were heard approaching. Everyone stood at attention. From the doors, Madinka stepped

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out, then Shifü followed, and then Kasha- whose hands held an unfamiliar object delicately. They stood in front of the delegation. After their salute, Shifü addressed them.

“I trust that the gods have kept you well. As you know, all of you will go into the land of the Kush, into the city of Harem. Harem already knows of your coming and he will not meet you with hostility. Once you meet him, give him my greetings.

From his authority, the Sorceress will be shown to you. In your company, you will have the entire inheritance belonging to Soi, weighed by the elders in today’s value. Once you meet the sorceress, you shall give it to her, and mention it as the full bargain for CHEMU. She will know what to do. You have been granted by the generosity of my council, food, tents, beasts, and gold coins to keep you until you return. The magicians will pray and charm you to protect you from all harm. Our spirits will be with you, and our gods will lead you. May you go in peace, I bid you a safe journey and return.”

On delivering these words, Shifü went back into his hut. He did not spare a moment with his sons. It was as if he was sending them to a place of no return. Like he wanted nothing to do with their leaving. Jero looked at Kenan and saw that he felt like his father was disappointed in him.

“Once Chemu has returned, he will trust us again.”

“This goes beyond Chemu. He knows what he has done- I just hope he doesn’t expect us to forget so fast.” Kenan brushed off the sentiment and went to get his belongings.

After the prayer and charm were done, each received an amulet for protection which they were to wear on their bodies at all times. This way, the magicians would see them in the places they went and pray over them while there. These were made from salt crystals and smoothened silver. Kasha then came hurriedly to Kenan, with the

unfamiliar object at hand. It was then known that Kasha would not go on this journey, as there was fear of new attacks with Seseka's absence.

He then pulled Kenan aside and unwrapped the sheath to reveal a life form encased in an Orb- the kind used to bear spirits of trapped souls. He explained the orb to him, "You must carry this with you at all times. DO NOT LOSE IT. It is a projection of Seseka's sleeping spirit. You must present this to the Sorceress. May the gods be with you young master." Kenan took it in his hand and put the orb in his pouch together with his other material, profusely assuring Kasha of its safety.

Everyone got on their horse, led by Batu and one other warrior at the front, Kenan and Jero followed, another warrior behind them, Kambo with his tents and supplies followed, as the other two warriors remained in the back. Each warrior carried a measure of the inheritance, potioned in pure gold.

The journey started.

Ma'Lena stood behind them, at the gates of Shifü's homestead, tears flowing. She stood there until there was no sight of them anymore. Her heart went with them, but Anyiko stayed to comfort her.

The day was slowly cracking, there were a few clouds up and a sweet wind singing to their ears as they made moderate steps away from home. They rode past the crossroads separating the Kingdoms, seeing a few last-minute traders returning from the Shani. Most of them were Takoa traders and a few from Mara. Ahead of them were massive plain lands of the Ngengi plateau.

The men had remained silent all the while.

They would last at least 5 days on their going and returning, and maybe two in the city. They had travelled all day to reach the

quarter-way mark, near the Sacred Tree, where most intercommunity clashes would be addressed. *It was the place believed to be the sprouting of their ancestors.* Kambo requested that they stop, as the donkeys were not as strong as the horses. So they did for the night.

Darkness flooded in quickly, as the gushing red evening sun shone dimly on the other end of the sky. They set the tents on a well-scouted ground, where the thickets and acacia formed a circle. This would act as protection for their animals as well as for the men, with warriors taking turns to keep watch. They lit a huge bonfire to keep the wild beasts away. They sat around the fire to warm their bodies and roast meat. Batu was the first to watch. At this time, most of the men were still awake, with some mincing their last shred of bone. This watch was the longest of all four.

Jero walked up behind Batu, who sat on a stone overlooking the open grasslands, towards the direction of home. Batu wore a leather loin kilt and khaki pants, braving the cold of the night with his chest guarded only by a heavy Safari shirt. He mulled a grass stalk between his teeth, and right next to him, his **Njora**, bow, and arrows rested.

"I assume that the strongest one chooses to watch the night alone. Don't you ever need company?" Batu realised the voice and moved to place another stone next to him. "It feels alone here, away from all the comfort."

"You are one of our greatest warriors. Every feat you have earned is remarkable!" Jero praised him.

"My father always told me that I take after him, so I am always meant to think that it was meant to happen. He always carries such an overpriced expectation over me."

"That's Madinka for you. He may be a nobleman but your father is a bit stingy with crediting people. I am almost sure he will never leave his position until he's far too old to lift a spear!"

"Oh Yes! If the politics don't get the better of him, then maybe the

peaceful lands will wear him out.” Batu lowered his voice to mimic his father’s voice, “*A man of war without his share of blood dies unfulfilled!*”

“You know, my brother goes through the same cycles every day. Come to think of it, Madinka and Shifü are very much the same.”

“Mhm, they toughen you up because they want what’s best for the people. There’s no wrong in proper preparation, I guess.”

Jero studied Batu’s position. He seemed easy and rather comfortable with his presence. So, he went ahead, “You know, my sister is not seeing anyone- at least not any that I know of, and I’ve got ears everywhere.”

Batu turned his face for the first time to Jero, pulling out the stalk from his mouth. He then broke into jeering laughter. Jero confirmed his suspicions.

“You need to go to sleep now. It seems like the heat got into your brains”

“I highly doubt that. Earlier today, while she was speaking to Kenan, I saw how you were. She has her charm, and believe me, she just might...”

“...Jero, I can tell that you are onto something here. You’ve been buttering me up for this with all the ‘greatest warrior’ remarks, haven’t you?”

“I want to hear you deny it, then I’ll leave.”

Batu saw how determined Jero was. To be honest, Batu had admired Anyiko for a while now. Even so, he had feared many things. The last thing he would want is to speak about his feelings with the crafty brother of the very woman he fancied. This would be the least of his worries, as Shifü was not tolerant of anyone daring around one of his beloved children.

“Alright! She is very beautiful.” (*he chuckled to the side*)

“I think she is more than just that in your eyes. Worry not. Unlike

Kenan, I can be very accommodating. You can trust me.”

Batu was quiet for a while. Then:

“...I was thinking; could you help me pick a proper gift for her when we get to the City? Something she would love.”

“Sure! Just don’t let Kenan know about our little arrangement. Are you thinking about proposing yet?”

“You know, you can become a nag. Go back and rest for tomorrow. Let me finish my watch-” There was a sudden noise from behind one of the tents. Batu quickly moved to his side and lifted his bow and arrows. There was a slight growl.

“Maybe it’s a jackal!”

Jero remained behind watching Batu stealthily approach. Kambo saw them from the bonfire where he sat. He kept still. As Batu set his bow and arrow, he signalled Jero with a nod. Jero’s response was fast, rattling the bushes beside him. A little startled, Batu launched an arrow at ‘it’, hitting the animal in its stomach. The air became relaxed. It was a hare, a little larger than a loaf.

“Ah! Some extra meat for tomorrow!” came Kambo after the kill.

Shifü’s homestead

After hearing Kenan’s confession that evening, Shifü’s thoughts over who the future Shifü of Akanga would marry grew immensely. With no festival to determine his wish, he was distraught over the mention of a servant girl. Was Kenan disregarding all the good fortune that came with a proper bride? No! He had to do something about it. There was already so much tension between them, so banishing her was out of the question. He recalled- they were alone in the lion’s pit. He wanted them to come back to him. He did. He had to move in wisdom because, in loss or gain, there was an equal burden to bear. Both would be consequential to his throne.

After they had finished eating that evening, Shifü went to speak to his wife. He had refrained from speaking about these matters to her. She had not questioned him at all either. They spent most of the 'after-healing' days in separate huts. She knew him all too well. She probably was the one person who could see through Shifü, even when everyone believed his stand and authority. She feared him the least.

He walked in gentle steps across the administration chambers, past the kitchen to where she used to stay. The maidens were just leaving after speaking to her about the next day's arrangements.

They bowed to him, then walked off at a faster pace.

With no guards waiting, he let himself in. There were two lanterns mounted on the walls. A scent of olives and mint coloured the air. It smelled just like it would when they shared the larger hut. It was warm here. She was busy, setting her shukas in order after washing. There were a few wooden drawers and stools, one of them with her latest knitting sitting on it. She was in her long tunic and overcoat, her headgear, and all her beaded ornaments as well.

He took a few steps towards the mantle that leaned against the wall and felt it. He remembered buying this for her after they had Chemu, as a gift from the Mara. Tuma had recommended him to some of the best craftsmen in all of Mara. He then lifted his face to his wife. She had been faithful and wise, by his side all this time and bore him all his children, and yet here they are, not speaking to each other.

"Lena, I've come to talk," he started in a low tone. Without turning to him she replied, "So you finally need me, Shifü. Why do you come at this time after all my tears have dried up?"

"Lena- I do not wish to go that road. So much has happened in the past few weeks, I had to do what was right. I have had many meetings over this, and we all agreed that this was..."

"-necessary? Is that what you were going to say? Since when do we sacrifice our children, and at what cost?"

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“...You know very well that I would be the one in their place, and if the gods let me, I would have taken Chemu’s place.”

She turned her face to him, away from her fabrics.

“You think it doesn’t break me too? When you were away on those long journeys, in the ascend of our youth...” she started walking slowly at him, her tone was almost screeching from the emotions welling up.

“...I raised each one of them to the best of my ability. Maybe, you should have gone in their stead. Maybe then, Akanga would be assured of their future Shifü! You have lived a long and full life, my husband. They have so much to aspire to, yet you waste no time letting them go to your enemy’s doorstep!”

There was a deafening silence between them for a moment. Ma’Lena’s eyes were overflowing. Shifü had not seen it in this sense, but still, he was adamant to make his point.

“I now understand. Now I see. I repent for my judgement. It’s just not what a good father would do, but for a leader- I had to let them go. They need to be reminded that this future they aspire to is not just given to them. You know what that future has become. Would you rather see them fail here, in our hands with the rest of the people?”

“Is this why you came? To justify your doings?” She held her chest, “They are already gone. They are in the hands of the gods now.” She calmed down a bit and sat on one of the stools next to the drawers. Shifü walked silently to the one next to her and sat facing his wife,

“No. I came to speak about Kenan.”

“You have never trusted him. He is not in competition with you. He has always done his best to please you, to hear you say that you are proud of him...” She put her hand on his lap, “You have to let him be like your father did with us.”

“Yes, but you were already royalty from your inception. I never got to know any other girls, only those in palaces and far cities. My father

made sure of this.”

“Well, we raised our boys differently. They have a choice to make, and I have known Sheera since she was a little girl. She is strong and focused, kind and wise; She will be good for him. Good for the Chieftdom.”

“Lena...she is a servant girl.

What honour will this bring to my family, especially in the eyes of the people? You know what they have been saying?”

“There you go. Holding on to your pride. What do these people you talk about give you? Even with those before you, they were never pleased, and they will never be pleased! You have led them through a peaceful time with much harvest and joy. Even if they took this power from you, what then? Is anyone else fit to lead, or will they ‘birth’ a new baby to be Shifü?”

Life was returning between them.

As funny as it sounded, she had spoken well and truly, but Shifü was yet to be changed.

“I swore to her father that I would always honour our friendship no matter what. He was a stubborn man, even more than I. He never accepted my help once, that one!”

“Then honour him by giving his daughter a beautiful wedding. I heard that her mother was very ill. They lost much of their possessions trying to get medicine...”

“So then, what about all the Royals and Kin who wanted to give their daughters in marriage? Some will take offence at this, and we may lose favour with them.”

“It is not Akanga you worry about. Even after you are gone, many years from now, these people will fight for their land not because of its Chief, but because they have nowhere else to call home. It is your legacy that worries you, my husband. The river flows freely in the lands, it gives life to that it chooses, takes a proud meander in fertile

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places, and dry ones alike. Yet, no one ever tells it that it cannot pass here, or there. No one can stand in its way and stop it. Even if they try, it will go around them and it will always find a way to flow because that is what it is meant to do—

She leaned closer, “-You must accept things as they are. I see this as a good thing, for only by doing this will you know who was truly for you, and who was here only to gain from you and your people. Barring your son from Love will only make things worse, and you know this.”

“I do.” He sighed in relief. She had spoken some of the worries away.

“I have not treated you as you deserve, my queen. I hope that you forgive my actions, especially with my anger toward the boys. I promise to be the first to welcome them when they return...”

“Don’t make such promises. What if I meet them first, huh?” they laughed it off. They spent most of the evening talking. He later left her for his bed.

This was the last time they stayed separate during that season.

There were brief showers in the second watch, and the warriors braved through all of it, mastering their sleepy eyes, to look out for animals, and keeping the fire up all night even after the rains put it out. There would be occasional shiny pairs of eyes from the distance wandering in the wild, but they would chase them away or even throw them a bone. Soon, the last watch arrived, and they set up again for the next stride of the journey. This was going to be the longest one yet.

From afar, Shaka, one of the warriors, saw something rather unusual, especially for the plainlands. There was a black-winged figure, like a small tree in the middle of the grasslands. It moved from time to time, remaining behind them. He raised his voice to the other warrior next to him. Uriam looked in the direction he was pointing

to.

“I do not see it. Maybe you still have a little sleep in your eyes.” He thought to himself, “It better be.” Deep down, he was wearier than before.

They continued towards the great valley of Adwa, to the city cradled by its walls, away from the territory of Akanga. There, they would rest for the next night, before heading for Harem’s city.



THE REJECTION

THE RAINS HAD been light from the moon's rising. Most people from the Chief's village worked in the communal fields that gave food to the Chief as well as their households. With permission, anyone would go and harvest a basket full for their family. Those from the Hills in Kuria, the ones who dwelt by the river banks, and the Ngengi had their own lands, most of them inherited. Some were well enough to employ servants in their fields, but many would work on their farmlands by themselves.

That day, Shifū chose to set aside his royal gear for civilian clothing, covering his head with a hood. He then took two of his maidens and his guard Jamba, who also donned everyday Akanga clothing. Ma'Lena had made plans to go to the fields with the maidens earlier on. Being aware of Shifū's plan for the day, she had arranged a small

gift package of fruit and grain, a few *shukas*, and some herbs for them to carry.

As they made their way through the villages and market, the few who recognised them would bow. Many remained unaware, still, Shifü was not offended. Like an ordinary Akanga man, he walked the streets, in the direction of the river.

Finally, they arrived. They entered a small homestead, with three huts in it. Outside was a guava tree that bent a little, a smoking kitchen, and a young lady sitting on a bench outside it, picking grain from combs. There also was a modest plantation, heading down the river slope, and as one could hear, there were more people around. Shifü walked straight toward the young lady, but before he could reach her, a loud scream came from the hut adjacent to her. A middle-aged woman rushed towards him. She was in a khaki top and on her waist a rugged shuka. Her hair was undone, and her face was marked with ash.

“Shifü! Shifü! You have come to see your humble servants!” She greeted him, bowing and holding his hand emphatically. The young lady was sure to notice this, as she had been so invested in her work, that she did not see the Shifü enter. She stood, and curtsied. Her mind was racing. What had they done to deserve this personalised visit? Shifü signalled the maidens to present the gifts, then he bent over to give the woman the well-folded shukas, as the rest of the goods were laid on the grass lawn. The young lady came to pick them up. A smaller girl rushed out to see what was happening. It had been a while since her mother was this joyous.

After the usual welcomes were done, Shifü then turned to the young lady and called out, “Sheera, how have you been?”

“We’ve been okay,” She was very cautious, lest she said the wrong words and got ‘lynched’ for it.

She had not spoken to Kenan since that day at the river, so this for

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her felt like the confirmation of her fears. She had heard about the cancellation of the festival, and also the visitation. This visit, however, felt different. It was unexpected, and Shifü brought them gifts! She had not known about the absence of Kenan, so her heart was still nibbling on the pieces from the last experience they had shared.

“I hear that your mother has not been feeling well. She looks well today.”

“We got help from some good willing people- they helped us get the medicines she needed,” She was careful that the others did not hear her answer. Mirito was not the best at keeping secrets, and neither was her mother. The two were distracted by the gifts from the maidens. All her mother did was marvel at each unveiling. When they had finally received the last of the gifts, Heluwa, Sheera’s mother; a Kuria woman, with fairly dark brown skin and a wilted smile came to Shifü, with this glimmer in her brown eyes, blessing and thanking him for his remembrance. She asked about Ma’Lena, as she knew that the queen had prepared the gifts. She had seen this kind before, many years ago. They had a short exchange with him, as Sheera stepped back to help Mirito carry the gifts into their hut.

Shifü brought enough supplies for two months’ use. The maidens also helped as Jamba remained with Shifü. A few heads popped up from the hedge around the homestead, as people witnessed this rare happening. Shifü sat with them behind the larger hut, away from the local’s view. Jamba would frequent the front side of the hedge, keeping watch.

After a while, Mirito was sent off to the neighbours, leaving Sheera and Heluwa in the home. They offered their guests some sour porridge, something Shifü loved!

“How was your harvest last season?” Shifü asked, citing the impoverished plantation.

“It was just enough to get us through. We are late on the planting as

you can see. Most of our crops are yet to be attended to.”

“I can get Gawa to come and assist in any way he can. This unless you want him to...”

“It is no trouble. My daughter and I will start to work on it as soon as we can. It shall be well. See, the gods have blessed us with rain.”

“Heluwa, can you tell me something?” Shifü put down his drinking vessel and leaned into a more serious conversation. “I have heard that you were ill- thank the gods that you are now well. Your daughter just told me about some good willing people who helped you get your treatment. Who were they?” Heluwa covered her mouth.

She did not think that this would be mentioned.

“...It was some traders. We sent one of our neighbours to get the medicine, and we were in such luck that they had it at a price we could afford,” Sheera cut in.

“Oh! That is splendid. I also heard that you spent all the possessions left to you by Toria to treat this ailment...” He now took a serious pause on this matter.

Sheera started to stutter, conspiring and biting her tongue. “It was your sons!” Heluwa confessed, rather abruptly.

“Kenan paid for the medicines. If it wasn’t for him, I would have perished here in my bed, forgotten and buried next to my husband by my two daughters.”

“How much was it?”

“Shifü, we are not asking for money or anything of the sort from you, and if these gifts are part of it, then you can take them back...” Heluwa felt insulted.

“I mean no dishonour. Your husband and I were great friends, but even so, I wondered for how long he would turn my aid away. To his dying breath, I owed him more than my own life and now I wish to pay it all in full!”

“If you really did, my husband -may his soul rest with the ancestors-

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would not have been brought up in all of this. How long has it been Konelia? I lost count. We were pushed away like we meant nothing, and here in this place where my husband came to me after weeks of being away with you, protecting you, this is the first time you have concerned yourself with us-” Heluwa had been holding on to this bitterness for so long, finally it was steaming out.

“I do not blame you. It was his duty and he took it with pride. I forgave everything, and even there (*She pointed at the grave covered by grass and a small stone to mark its place*) where we laid him, the least you could do is let us have him buried here. Yes, we are needy, but we cannot accept your looking down on us. What you are talking of is more of a debt, and you owe us nothing you can pay back.”

“Very well, Heluwa.

All I did was by his will that he rests here close to his family.

I only wish that I could change much of what has already happened, but I cannot. I only wish that Sheera would be more honest about her true intent with my son,” he said as he turned to the young lady. Sheera was startled. She bowed her head as the ends of her work dress slipped in and out of her fingertips.

“Kenan told me of his little plan to have you come to the *Hika*, and even though I do not understand the trickery, I am offended that you would even accept to dishonour Toria in this manner.”

She went quiet for some time. Heluwa had heard and sometimes witnessed the two, but she never knew that it had gotten this far. Her mouth was wide open and as much as she was shocked, she had to choose a side.

“Sheera...Is this true? Speak that even I can hear. Say something!”

“I would never dishonour my father, let alone your throne. I spoke against it all. I didn’t want a part in anything. How was I to know that they were going to take it so seriously?”

There was little confidence in her words, and Heluwa was not going

to be embarrassed in front of Shifü.

“My daughter, you have already tried to lie once. Don’t bring any more shame to us!”

“Mama...I...I am in no position to lie over such a matter. I too am ashamed by all of this -” She went on one knee. “Shifü, I will not hide it from you, your son has shown interest in me for a while. We grew fond of each other when we were still young. Even after leaving that life, he still came to visit me at the river and sometimes he came to see us here. But- it was innocent. We could never...”

“Tell me one thing, Sheera, do you love him?” Shifü boomed.

“I do”, she responded without any hesitation.

She had known that for Shifü to concern himself this much, Kenan must have already told him everything. Heluwa sprung up, putting her hands on her waist and bitterly biting her lower lip.

“Do not be angry with her Heluwa. It is a simple mistake, and it can be worked out.”

“I do not understand Shifü. My daughter has had many men take interest in her, even bringing me cattle and goats, but she always refused them all! So this is why...Sheera, couldn’t you have just chosen someone else? A man who is more like us...”

“Like us? Because we hold no place in our community, then we are not good enough for the likes of them? I don’t think that this is what father would have wanted. When we had that place where you could go in to see Shifü wherever you wanted; when I could play with Kenan all day without question, nobody said- we were not good enough. Now that we have no favour with grace, then we are not good enough?”

“You will not speak to me as such, young lady...”

“Heluwa! Let her finish.”

Sheera corrected her mother then turned to the chief, “My Shifü, I know loyalty. I have been loyal to everything I was taught by my

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father before he died saving your son- the same one who comes to me. I have never gone out to seek him. Is it not as much a fault of his heart as it is mine? He is the one who asked me...”

“...and what answer did you give him?” Shifü asked sternly.

“I have not given him an answer yet,” Sheera responded, calming down from her aggression.

“Then when he returns, you shall tell him that you cannot be with him”, Shifü spoke leaning towards her, his finger adamantly pointing at the grass.

“This has nothing to do with you or anything Toria did. There are arrangements made for the good of the people. You are going to be a great woman one day. You are still very young and beautiful. You can have any other man you want, and everything will work out just fine. You must let Kenan become who he is destined to be, and if it breaks his heart, then let it be. Hearts can heal, but nations never forget.”

“I have already told you. It is not I that you should worry about. It is your son whom you have to battle with over this matter.” Sheera came up, easing from her bent knee, and returning to her seat.

“He is mine to deal with. I just wanted for us to agree to this. I hope it is clear to you too, Heluwa.”

“As clear as a drop of rain.”

“Right then. Gawa will bring you help for your farm a few days from now, and then you can also return to the wellness Toria may have wanted for you. I must leave you now. Thank you for your hospitality and understanding.” Shifü planted his cane firmly and rose.

Heluwa hid her face from him.

The maidens followed to walk with Shifü out of the homestead. As quickly as they exited, Heluwa’s eyes sharply fixated on Sheera.

Shifü was led to a different path by Jamba. There had been a lot of people waiting outside their homes on the path he had come, awaiting

his passing.

As Jamba led him through the plantain and the thin path by the river, there was a man who followed them from a distance. Jamba had seen him earlier at the village market, but he didn't think much of him. It was clear that he had some kind of intention with the Shifü, and Jamba held on to his Njora firmly, if he tried them.

Ngengi

They reached the far edge of the plain land. The great rift rested there, and to reach its valley, they had to go down its escarpment walls. The path curved on it was thin and so they had to be on their feet to lead the animals through it, otherwise, they would slip and fall. This path was at times very dangerous, as marauders frequented the area. Those who used this path alone, especially during trading season, would get robbed and beaten, sometimes to death. It was the only way known to them. There were other routes used by charlatans and peculiar men, but these were watched by ruthless Kush guards who would kill anyone who passed them.

*Mountains yonder, a song springs in wake
the roar of thunder, and rolling breaks
who will heed to the call of the brave
wait your turn, wait your turn
sleeper rise and lift your blade
battle with cowardice, as ogres prevail
wait your turn, wait your turn
beneath our feet are the bones of men
as we walk slow to that mighty bend
side by side with lions we trend
our turn will roar up to the end!*

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“Have you encountered the Marauders who roam these parts, Batu?” asked Kenan, whose eyes were scanning the view for anything untelling.

“You need not worry. They are just stories, and after all, there are plenty of us. Surely, they cannot undo the strength of Shaka, son of Miano. If they did, then Roba, Wambui’s rock, would have smitten them with his Njora; and even so, where would the brothers of Torment, Uriam, and Webi. If they succeed thus far? Then I, Batu, will have forged my spear through their hearts, one by one, and then stack them all on its mighty iron tip!” Batu spoke in confidence, stepping ahead of everyone. His voice was always reassuring. Kambo had been reciting poems and songs for most of the day. His old eyes widened at Batu’s words, and he greased up his lips to endow the men with a tale.

“Haven’t your fathers told you, of the ages of old? The days of the ogres that ravished the lands of men. Those creatures butchered men and women. They came in their thousands, eating cattle and terrorising warriors. The men suffered much loss, and they sat together from every tribe and planned plunder against their enemy. They sent their mightiest warrior, a man named Peruzio, to go to a faraway land, and seek help from other men, as they would not fight the monsters on their own. Peruzio ran his course, not far from where we are now, into the Northern lands of the Nubians. There, he was said to find a powerful group of women and men alike, who protected themselves with magic, and lived for years without ailing, or even dying! One of them was 600, or was it 800 years...”

“Is that so?” Jero mocked Kambo.

“Ah! boy, it was so. My grandfather told this story to me while I was still a youngling...”

“What did the warrior do next?” the others demanded that Kambo continued.

“He explained the predicament of his people, and they tested his heart, and indeed found him a man of great integrity. They then prized him with a gift, one made from their magic, a Talisman of great power! They then sent him back, warning him to never trust it to any wicked heart, and if he did, then, great calamity would strike the land. When Peruzio returned, he put up an army, covering them with this newfound power, assuring them victory. They all united to face the ogres in the night, as the monsters slept. Alas! They fought with vigour like never before, their swords avenged the people, and all the lands were saved!” Kambo was almost tipping over as he was getting carried away by the intense storytelling he was doing.

“Careful old man! We will not be held responsible for losing an honourable member of the council,” Jestered Jero. “Boy! Do you test me? I have walked this path many times in my youth and never once did a pebble trick my posture!”

“If you must know, the Northern people still exist to this day, hidden in the dunes of sand:

This victory led to many trying to get the Talisman of Peruzio, because they believed that they would have his power, and Peruzio was well aware of this. Soon, the people knew of his whereabouts, and they killed him, taking away the talisman. This lust for power brought deception, lies, and corruption among the people each man over his neighbour. As foretold, the gift brought its curse. It was agreed upon that the people should separate into the 7 lands you see today. The people built a fort for it in Takoa and worshipped its power. The talisman then disappeared one night from the place they had built. It might have returned to the Nubians. No one knows.”

“Maybe someone stole it. Many still scour the lands in search of it,” Jero interjected.

“All in all, we know that it no longer exists among us, and if it weren’t for the gods, maybe it would have destroyed us all,” Batu

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finished. "To think that the Kings once used it to live forever. *Truly, power corrupts even a good man's soul.*"

"Kenan, would you want to be Shifü forever- that is if this Talisman were to return to us?" Jero teased his brother.

"I am not sure. Power is like wine. It can make you drunk out of your reasoning! Look at how father has been lately."

Kambo heard them and quickly spoke in Shifü's defence, "Kenan, I have known your father for many years. He's just in shock of how things have turned out, you see. I am sure after a few days, it shall be well." Kenan turned to view the side of the callous slope, he then said with a thoughtful stare, "I hope so Kambo, I really do."

"..And KEK...why is there so little told of him?"

Kambo's eyes widened at the question. "Do you wish for death, Jero? It is better that way! We do not speak of him, as some have tried to seek him out, there in the mountains where he was chained, and terror struck the lands. There is nothing good about that name. Not one!"

Kenan asked Kambo, "What of Kai?"

Kambo spit to his side and with a bitter face responded, "What of Him? If Kai was truly as good a god as we were told to fear, then surely there wouldn't be so much devastation upon us. Our gods have taken care of us thus far.

Are you not fed from good harvests? Don't the rains shower the earth when their time is nigh? We have seen greater peace over time than in the days of those two! "

"Yet you unfold the scrolls Kai gave to you and read the words within to heal your sick and aid your kin?"

"Oh yes! Shall we die when there is a cure? Lest we forget that these 'forgeries' were once lost. In that time, a different kind of power healed and restored us. It wasn't Kai! No! It was the power of the North. Now that it is taken away, we are free to choose for ourselves

and so far, it has been satisfactory to live away from their rivalry, and make our libations to our gods- Tem, Asis, Iaiman- May they be blessed and reign over Akanga forever!"

The thin path snaked into the valley, with horse hooves grinding on the rocky surface, breaking grains and tiny clefts off it. They found a way to tie up two horses together, so one can lead the other. This way, the two warriors who were positioned behind everyone would deal with the donkeys that were very stubborn from the heights.

All of a sudden, Shaka noticed some gravel fall from above them. He ignored it and thought maybe it was the wind. Then, a few steps along the path, an arrow shot straight in front of him from above. He stopped the donkeys and then grabbed onto the side of the escarpment, then he lifted his eyes. From above, uncountable arrows came flying.

"Marauders! Take cover."

The men quickly reached for their shields.

"We cannot protect ourselves by waiting for their passing, we must ride the horses to the caves ahead!" Batu advised.

They all sat back on their horses, as the warriors from behind left the donkeys there. Another bundle of arrows was showering down, hitting one of the donkey's back. It fell over, braying in pain.

The other one that carried the tents did not move but remained still as if it feared the death of a slope more than that of an arrow. As the horses tried to keep balance, the arrows multiplied ahead of them, and they kept stopping, almost collapsing into the fall.

They came to a wider part of the path. Batu got hold of his horse and waved at the others to pass ahead of him. As they did, he looked up above for the shooters. He saw a brown cloak waving in the wind atop him. "Hurry! They are closing in."

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As they rode into one of the caves, another shower of arrows was coming straight down. They hit his shield heavily. He loosened his horse of the measure of inheritance he had been allocated, and he left the animal behind. The horse's hind legs missed the landing, dragging its weight towards the fall. Luckily, the stones beneath it were more projective, so it did not fall.

All arrows focused on Batu, as he struggled through to get into the cave. His shield was shaking from impact, and the raining metal kept missing his toes by whiskers. From behind him, he could hear footsteps. He turned to see one of the marauders make the turn to reach the donkey. On seeing Batu, he aimed his arrow. Batu, seeing no other way, dived into the cave, to save his life.

Uriam and Shaka saw Batu fall at the entrance, and they rushed to bring him in. Batu gestured to each of them intently and directed them to the outside.

One of the marauders ran up next to the donkey that was still stationary and started loosening its load of tents. Uriam's eye caught him. He then aimed an arrow, planting the marauder's foot on the rocky ground as he gave out a shriek! He struggled to set his foot free when ropes dangled down from above. Five in total. More men came down. They covered their faces leaving space only for the eyes.

Two of the fresh marauders went ahead to free their friend and the donkey. Three of them turned towards the cave, to see where the company had gone.

They had known about the warriors and so they trod with caution, hiding with the protruding rocks on the escarpment walls as they approached. It was hard to shoot at them, even for Batu.

He turned to his men and whispered, "They seem to know this part very well. That is why they chose to attack us from here. On my count, aim your arrows at their legs". They set their bows, ready to shoot.

Jero, Kenan, and Kambo stayed as far back as they could, with the rest of the supplies and the horses.

Batu monitored the marauder's movement.

Two had managed to get the donkey load and had begun scaling up the escarpment. The one wounded had been freed and was limping away, back to the path he came. The other three were still in pursuit. Kenan reached for his back. He had felt a slight strain as they rushed for the caves. He also noticed something else; his pouch was missing! The same one that carried the Orb given to him by Kasha. He then started to retrace his steps with his eyes. He hoped that it had not been lost as otherwise, all this would have been in vain, as Kasha had explained to him.

Jero sat in the corner opposite him. He saw his brother attempting to sneak out of his hiding. He hurriedly threw a pebble at Kenan. Jero nudged him vigorously to get back to his hiding. Kenan was restless. Jero mouthed at him to "Get Back".

Kenan tried to gesture to him that he had lost something valuable, but Jero nudged him further. "Better alive than dead."

Kenan lay low only peeping back to see if he could see the pouch, from time to time. In his last scan, he saw his pouch lying next to one of the other warrior's feet. He was relieved, but he had to get it.

Yet another one of the Marauders jumped onto the entrance of the cave from above, landing on Batu! This one was not in the original count.

On seeing this, the others came from their cover, to carry out a clever ambush over the other 4 warriors. Shaka held one of the men by the arm, wrestling them to the ground with brute force! He then grabbed the man by his throat, choking the life out of him.

Uriam, Webi, and Roba drew their Njoras, each tasked to outdo the numbers before them, as those that had scaled up the walls with their loot, returned to aid their fellows. Arrows were not going to do it.

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The fight was then refined to swords and clubs!

Batu managed to outdo his assailant, tossing him in the air by his legs. The man hit the roof of the cave hard, and then came crashing down the escarpment. Batu quickly felt for his sword, only to see it in the hands of another Marauder.

This one was in a grey cloak, and his turban had gotten loose from the struggle in the fighting. The marauder charged at Batu furiously, missing his stomach slightly, almost getting him off the edge to his death while dodging the jagged blade.

Batu reached for his belt and quickly held up against the next swing of the Njora. He caught the blade using the leather, which almost cut through it, then thrashed the sword onto the ground. The marauder was in awe of Batu's strength. Batu then ran at him, grabbing his cloak by the shoulder and ramming him to the walls of the escarpment.

The man fell unconscious. The Njoras of the other three had cut inches into the flesh of the marauders. They all suffered death at the hands of the warriors as one was pinned unconscious against the walls.

Seeing that the brawl was over, the Akanga men started gathering their material to proceed with their journey. Kenan was first to dash from the back of the cave. He ran straight for the pouch. As he got closer, a bloody shrivelled hand from outside the cave nabbed it!

Batu's assailant had gained consciousness! He was greatly scathed, but as every Marauder lived, he had to run away with something. Before he could make away with the pouch, Kenan threw his knife, catching the man's arm by the sleeve and he could not loosen it. Kenan then slid to grab it from his reach, retracting his knife. As quick as a fly, an arrow flew inches past Kenan's left leg, onto the marauder's temple, gushing blood instantly. Kenan turned back to see Jero holding Batu's bow.

“Next time, we’ll make sure they are all dead before letting you run around,” Batu said. With one donkey dead, they pulled Batu’s horse up from the fall. It took everyone to make the stallion stand back on the path again. They then continued without their tents, with their weapons even closer than before. This journey was not going to be as easy as they had earlier thought.

A Wizard

It was high noon by the time Shifü reached his homestead. Jamba remained behind him and the maidens just to make sure that the man following was properly dealt with. He had tried to call out Shifü’s name several times but they ignored him. The man seemed determined to reach Shifü. He hid in the bushes on the winding road so that he could follow without them noticing.

“If you come any closer, I will not be responsible for what will happen to you!” Jamba barked at the man, on seeing him at the Chief’s gates. He did so holding the head of his butchering knife that never left his leather scabbard.

“You do not understand, I have to speak with him! I have an important message...” the man said aloud as he was at a distance. This did not convince Jamba one bit!

“...It is a message from his brother, Soi!”

Shifü heard this as he stepped further into the Chief’s homestead. He stopped abruptly, then turned on his heel back for the gate. Jamba stood before Shifü, urging him to get inside, “It could be a trap!” but Shifü was adamant.

“Who are you, traveller, and what do you know about my brother?” Jamba tried to call in more guards to the gate.

“I am the man who helped him. I brought him to the Sorceress! Please, I am not armed.” The guards ran at him, as he tried to plead

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with them for complacency and audience with Shifü. They searched him, finding nothing of use on him. Not even cowries!

“Let him through. I will see him in my quarters immediately!” and so it was done.

“What is this message you speak of? My brother is dead! I saw him fall with my own eyes.”

“His body was injured, yes. But you see the oath that bound him to his promise is still alive. His spirit remains trapped in the chambers of the Sorceress. I know because I have had visions of this every night since your visitation...”

“How do you know all these things? This has been kept secret and only the council of the royal guard knows of this! Are you a wizard? What order are you from and who is your master?!”

“I am *Amaket*. I do not dwell among your people. I come from the Mara. I do not have a Master, although I have served many. I do all my works for my own gain and in so doing, I have no attachment to the Mara order of magicians. When Soi planned to harm your son, he sought for me first, but I declined, knowing well that the power I have could not supersede that of the spirits that protect your land. He paid me handsomely, asking for me to show him one who would grant him the power he needed, and I begged him countless times to refrain from his evil.”

Shifü was deep in thought over all that he was hearing from Amaket,

“What demon ailed my brother that it pained him this way?”

“He was blinded- vile from the final blessing your father spoke. Those last ones tend to stick with you for life. I am only a doer of simple illusions. I live from it, and so I took the money and led him to the Sorceress. The only one who would agree to do such a devious ask, and also, the only one in the lands who possessed power, almost as great as that of the Talisman!”

“Nonsense! That is just folklore. A talisman from Nubia and

stories of ogres that have ceased to be on the lands since those days...”

“No Shifü, this is no folklore. The Talisman indeed exists and has been found. I am careful not to speak of it, lest my oath to my order harms me.”

“Then tell me, what is this message that Soi gave to you.”

“Your brother has appeared to me in several visions. His presence was so strong that it shook my house each moment. He sent me to you, to warn you of making your house known to the Sorceress. She has planned evil toward your people. Once you let her touch your family, she will destroy you and all of Akanga will follow!”

Shifü was distressed, muttering under his breath, “The prophecy”

“Tell me, what is it that she holds against me? My sons are headed that way to pay her all that Soi owed to her, so we may be freed of this curse. What more does she seek?”

“She seeks vengeance; the kind that cannot be quenched by possessions. Those are probably for Harem. Hers is the gift you send with it. You must do all that you can to see to it that your sons never let her touch them with her hands! If she does, EVIL will rise like a tide and sweep over your people. There will be blood, and sorrow unlike any other since the foundations of this soil were laid- *FIRE FOR FIRE. BLOOD FOR BLOOD.*”

At the mention of this, Amaket stood from Shifü’s presence. The message had been passed. A gutting worry rose in Shifü’s heart. “What have I done?”

He couldn’t reverse his decision. How would he stop the inevitable? A messenger would not reach the company in time. He then thought of Kasha. ‘Maybe he could reach them by magic.’

He sent for him immediately!

Outside of Shifü’s homestead, the footprints of Amaket could not be traced. Not even a hint of his awful scent remained.

He had vanished!



ADWA

KUSHITES WERE MAINLY herders and miners. With plenty of gold in their land, it was an easy resource to grant the Welsh whose presence in the land was growing. The great escarpments breaking on the face of the earth made very little flourish. Only wildflowers and weeds grew where streams of water crossed. In these parts, only one stream passed, and it was in Adwa.

It was dark, and the time of the first watch was almost over. They recounted the losses they had made that day and realised that to make it to Harem's city and back without running out of supplies, they had to rest for two watches in Adwa and then rise early the next day.

They rode to the city gates. They were let in indefinitely. They needed to find an inn or a place where they could buy food and

rest. On the streets, there were very few people. Some were closing their shops, others were drunk and making merry, and many were in their houses for the night had come. Welsh development had already arrived here.

Their roads were covered in tar, and the Iron road would reach them soon. The people here had soft hair, unlike in Akanga, and their skin-caramel, others even lighter. The people were distinguished in their affairs and their lifestyles as well. Their townhouses were scattered, yet bound by the warmth of the lights in and out of their doors.

Clouds were gathering and it would rain soon. The men rode their horses up to a common inn for travellers, called Megbil.

They unsaddled their horses and walked in, each with their bag of belongings.

"Welcome!" called a man at the counter, presumably the innkeeper. He dressed in the finest of Kush linen, and a single gold chain around his neck. His shawl was bright white to match his suit decorated with a yellow mandarin band and his hair well-kempt. The place was almost empty with a few travellers raving and others indulging in pints, as the cleaners and waiters did their best to keep their tables full.

"You look like you could need a place- perhaps to rest after a long day's travel. We have three perfect rooms you would love!"

"Thank you. We wish to stay for just a short while- until the rain has passed," Kenan replied.

"And where do you come from? Strong and brave young men like you deserve the best!" as a good salesperson, it had to be the best for them.

"We are just wanderers seeking adventure. Can we pay then be shown to our rooms, please? Also, can we have some food brought to us once there?" Kenan continued.

"Of course, of course..." The innkeeper introduced himself as

Hergesa, son of Papitum. He kept a keen eye on the men, as he thought their dialect was rather unusual.

“Are you not from among the Akanga?

You sound much like them.”

Jero responded, “We are, but we’d rather not state our business. I hope that this is fine with you?” Then Hergesa noticed the amulets on their necks, “There was mention of a company sent from the Chief of there...worry not! I will not speak of this to anyone. A guest of Harem is a guest of mine. You will not have to pay a coin for it!”

“No- We would like to pay, please!” Kenan refuted the offer.

‘I knew there was something about you.’

He thinned his eyes, turning to one of his waiters, a short man who seemed clumsy, and with a light step, “Come! These are our guests. Take them to the rooms in the back, they will not be staying for long. Cater to their every need. Don’t charge them anything.”

Batu took a seat and as he waited for the rest to settle in their rooms. As they disappeared behind the door, he started to take in the details of the inn. The expensive glass lanterns, and the hard floors made from the finest of the Mara stones. This was no usual inn. The innkeeper came to him, holding a kettle and a cup made of iron. He poured him some warm water, and then took the seat next to him.

“You know, I have served many Kings here before. I know a prince when I see one, and that...that is no wanderer. You, probably- but that young man has the eyes of a Chief!”

Batu turned to him, as he sipped some water, “All I can tell you is not to argue with the man. It’s been a long day for all of us. Also, thank you for saving us the cost for the night.” He stood and followed the rest, and they settled in for the night.

The men were fast asleep. A few turns in, the door to where Kenan slept with two others was slightly opened. A masked man entered, tip-toeing into the shadows away from the light emanating from the

townhouses on the opposite building block. It was raining heavily outside, so it was easier to move without making a sound. As he crept to the side of Shaka's bed, he searched his belongings, taking nothing. He moved to the other. He then ransacked Roba's bag and quietly in the shadows veered to the last bed, which was Kenan's. He reached amongst his things and found his leather pouch. He searched inside it and saw the Orb. He emptied the rest of the material into his pockets, then he fastened the pouch, with the Orb inside it, onto his girdle and crept away.

As he turned to the door, lightning struck from outside the windows of the room. This rattled him, and the pouch loosened from his girdle. On dropping, the orb fell and rolled out to the centre of the room. Great thunder then followed. The thief became afraid. None of the men had heard him. He left with the coins he had taken, leaving the Orb behind.

'It might be cursed...'

Early the next day, Webi came into the three men's room to wake them. Dawn was clear with no more rain. Kenan went to his belongings to grab his blade. As he searched, Webi called out, "Who's orb is this?"

Kenan stopped immediately and turned to him, "What orb?"

Webi picked it up to show him.

"...but It was right here, how did it..." he realised that his pouch was missing.

"Has any one of you seen my leather pouch, about the size of two fists? I seem to have misplaced it," None had.

He ran to the other rooms and asked the same, yet none had seen it. 'Where could it have gone?'

"Is it the same one you tried to reach for in the cave? You have not been very careful with it," Batu warranted.

"It was there with my belongings by the time we slept. I checked for

the Orb and....wait!” He ran back to his room and took the orb from Webi. He then gave it to Jero for safekeeping as he became aware of the implications of losing it once more.

For a moment, Webi remained stunned- still at the centre of the room. He had seen something in the Orb.

“This is a key part of what Harem asked for. We must see to it that it is not lost.”

Once they were set to leave, Kambo led them out to the front of the Inn. His load had become easier, since losing the tents earlier. The innkeeper stood right at the door waiting for them, dressed the same way as the night before. “I hope Megbil served you well?” he gloated.

“Did I leave anything at the counter yesternight, before heading to the room?” Kenan ignored the greetings, wiping off Hergesa's smile.

“Certainly not. If I find anything, be sure to pass by on your way back. I can tell you're in a hurry.”

“What if we do not return here?”

“Then you'll never know if I found whatever you may or may not have lost now, will you?” Batu's eye twitched at the way Hergesa spoke.

His speech had been salty and sour all through. They ate, and saddled up their horses, heading East for their final stop, Harem's city. As they rode away, Hergesa remained at the door of the inn, watching them go towards the breaking of the sun. He swiped back to his counter and opened his drawer as he did each morning, emptying it of all of the precious stones and cowrie shells that people paid for his service. He saw- there at the edge of his drawer, a black pouch made of leather, the size of two fists. He sneered once more, “They will surely return”.

Museti

There were great woodlands further down the Akanga Chiefdom, stretching to the Mara. These forests were all the timber they needed. There were meadows within, where rights of passage would be carried out, as well as meetings concerning families and clans. This is where Museti had been. In a fortnight, he would be circumcised, and then his right of passage would be complete. Then he would return home. Its removed nature meant that there would be little to no interference with their training until the elders had completed their course. Museti anticipated returning home, and to begin training as a warrior. Many times he would challenge his elder brothers to duel with him with bare knuckles.

If he won, even if it was by chance, none of them would have peace for the rest of the week.

He had been passionate about the art of war from the stories he had heard about the heroes of old. His ears would itch for more. His heart never quenched the thirst for true adventure. He would dream up wars, with himself at the centre of them, fighting beasts like the Nkamanka, and the Sharmalock and then facing entire armies of the undead in the dunes of Tibesti. These stories helped him sleep at night, and even more, charged his days. He had to get initiated into an age set, get into a battalion where they would train together, and be sent out to battles with the others.

The elders who took them through these rights of passage would call them early every morning and lead their divided groups into different spots in the woodlands. They would endure long walks on some days, and on others, long hours without food. There would be a reward for the one who would survive the day and come out as the best student. Their lessons would vary, from teachings on the laws of the Narumor to the history of their people, wrestling fights, and

eventually game hunting. Museti was yet to receive a reward.

There were 12 boys in his age group and only five had gotten rewarded thus far. Nija, the tallest and one of the stronger fellows, had been rewarded thrice. Museti once had a chance to wrestle him, and unlike his brothers, Nija would not let him win. It was a short fight, and nonetheless, there was no shame in a loss to a boy of Nija's stature. Here, they were just boys, regardless of their background, status, or age.

On this particular day, they were going to traverse the woodlands, into the plainlands, where they would each chop, and carry wood from a tree of their choice back to the meadow. On the way there, they would march singing songs they had been taught, and answering questions their set elder would ask about the previous lessons they had been taught. Museti had promised himself that he would make the reward that evening his.

He even spelled it to his shed mate Solly, the night before.

"Tomorrow Solly, I will be the best in our group. I will march ahead and get the most wood, and beat Nija back! you'll see."

"Museti, you say this every day, and it never happens. Just slow down with this useless ambition for beating Nija and actually learn some wisdom from this place?"

"Solly, you just don't have much belief in your heart for yourself."

"What for, Museti? That reward is not going to change anything. I have my plans and I am sticking to them", Museti had never heard Solly speak of any plans, especially over his future. He rolled on his back for this one. "-Since when?"

"You belittle the things I dream of every time. All you see is the big and glorious-You know small things matter too. Those small efforts are the ones that make the great ones possible," came up Solly.

"Then tell me, Wiseman. What does this plan of yours entail? I promise not to make light of it if you trust me with it."

“You? Promise? Not the first time I have heard that-”

“Just tell me. I always tell you mine. Besides, what loss is there to share your aspirations?”

“...when we come out of this place, I will go back home and start making sandals,” his eyes began to glitter as he stared in the dark on the other side of the hammock. “I will make them black and blue, all of them colourful! I will fix the broken ones and make them as good as new. Everyone! From the traveller to the commoner and the royals too; they will come to my stall and buy my sandals until their bags are full!” Museti did not speak for a moment. He then slowly turned back to his position on his side, “Solly, that’s good, but what glory will those sandals bring to you?”

“There you go again. It’s not about the glory! I just want to make people dress their feet in strong and colourful sandals. What’s wrong with that? Everyone wears a pair, and they need them to feel fair.”

“Yes, I understand that, but Don’t you want to fight for your people? To be like the warriors and their adventures of conquest? To bring pride by restoring peace within our borders, and having your name written in history and told to generations, as Solly- the giant slayer!”

“Surely, not all of us will be in those stories. Wars and fights only shed more blood, and trophies only please the hearts of simple men. I choose to live a serving life. I will make the very sandals and soles the warriors will wear to those wars. A small thing to you, but how will they fight in the heat or the rain without grip and cover to help them stand against their warring enemies? When they gain victory, they will say, LOOK! Solly made these shoes of war, and we have won in them. You see, even that has its purpose.”

“Okay, my friend. You trusted me and I made a promise to you and I honour it, like a true warrior! Tomorrow, we will go out to our destinies as whoever we dream of in our hearts. Me, to be the best of

the day, you, to complete the challenge ahead.”

“You never know, Museti. I could end up taking that reward from you one of these fine days.”

Solly and Museti had become very close. They might have differed, but deep within, they had the balance of true friendship.

The forest floors were wet from the night’s downpour. It is heavier in the woods than in any other place. There were beams of the sun tearing through the canopy, however, the air was cold and chilly under there. The boys wore their heavy cloaks, some from fur, others from tree bark sowings. They braced through the mud, protruding roots, and the flora on the forest floor. Drips of large cold water drops would fall on their shaved heads, and they would feel their bones rattle all through their bodies. They marched on carrying each an axe and rope, singing:

‘sene a yo, pona de bato shan! Krito a yo, sempenu na ye! Tan heri shyu oru! Donuni ma pe, sempenu na ye!’

‘I will walk to battles abroad! For the King wants his win today! I may fall on my trial today! May the gods prepare me for my win that day!’

They saw a few men in carts, carrying wood from the forest. Some were parents of the boys trying to see how their sons were fairing, even though they would not reach them.

Museti never saw any of his parents, and he never thought of it in any way as being forgotten. He understood as he was the Chief’s son. They marched on to the clearing of the forest, and there, the grass was endless! They stood in a straight line, and the elder Henu spoke, “You do not have all day! Go and cut down a tree of your choosing, and make wood of it. Once you are done, pack the wood and tie it to the ropes you have in your hands, meet me here, and we will walk back

together. Whoever endures, gets the reward.”

They needed no further telling, as they rushed ahead each to a tree. Big, small, dry, thick, healthy, tall, short, standing or broken, every boy for himself.

Museti chose to go further, almost near the path that led out of Akangaland. There was a tree by the side that he had seen immediately they had made it through to the clearing. It was fairly thick, with no leaves and weak branches. He started to chop it down.

As he strived to fell the tree, he was startled by the sound of a fast horse racing towards him. He stopped for a while to catch sight of the horse and its rider. The elder who came with them sat back on a rock at a high place watching over the boys, with a pack of tobacco that he often dug his fingers into and fit some inside his lower lip. He could see the rider coming as well.

Museti knew the horse. It was from the Chief's stable. It puzzled him for a while, as this one was rarely used. On its back, was a man with a long violet cloak, and he covered his head, riding fast across the plainlands. The boy, however, couldn't recognise the rider. Had it been stolen from his father? He held himself calm and watched as the rider rode fast past him. He took a keen look and noticed that he held a package. Like ones, Kings would send his father. He became distraught by this, and thought, 'Maybe a war is coming!'

The elder then called at him from his high place, “Museti! focus on your work or you will not be finished in time.” He then remembered, ‘The reward!’ He hastened back to finish the task at hand.

On this day, another boy took the reward. His parents had been in the forest that day, and he might have felt the pressure or the urge to make them proud. Maybe that's what Museti needed to make his best effort at the reward.

Amaket

When the day was still young, Shifü Konelia met Kasha over the wizard from Mara, Amaket. Kasha had delayed meeting him, because the evening before, the order of Azmathes had purposed to search the whole land for any spirits that would prove harmful. As they dealt with small unwanted spirits, there were trails of other powerful ones within as well. Some were driven from Mara and others from Shani, none from Kush, and none were peculiar. Amaket had appeared in their search, and he was staying at a local tavern where he had brought trouble that night after a man swindled him of his fortune-telling money. The Azmathes made incantations and new protection spells, casting them over the borders and praying over the family of Shifü. Their jury distinction would not allow them to plough other lands, so the amulets that the company had left with were the only presence they would use to protect them away from home. Seseka's body had not awakened yet.

When Kasha showed up, he was led to the Chief's quarters and Shifü was not in the least pleased with him. Even with all the explanations he gave, things did not change.

"A wizard from the Mara came to see me yesterday. He told me of Soi's spirit being alive! He then spoke of a bad omen that the Sorceress would unleash on my sons and use to ruin my Chieftom. What matters are more pressing than this that puts everyone's life at peril?"

His eyes peeled off their lids. They were bloodshot, evidence of the sleepless night he had. "Find the men and bring them back! I do not know what *magic* you will use, but my sons cannot go to Harem's city!"

"Shifü, as well as the power that surrounds Akanga, other powers al-

so surround other lands. They cannot allow us to work an intervention outside of our borders-”

“What use were those Amulets then? What *magic* do you need to get this done?!”

“There is a way to reach them- without our magic.”

“Speak! I am listening.”

“The Wizard from Mara...” Kasha spoke meekly.

“What about that *crow*? ”

“He has faced the Sorceress before, Many times. He is also known among the Mara people for hawking magical healing stones from far places. A shape-shifter who has used his gift to aid the fallen. If you send out more warriors, then the Kush could take it as a sign of war. The Sorceress does not bow to weapons of men, but those of *magic*. The Wizard- He knows shorter ways to get to her. At this point, the company may be a day and a half away from the City of Harem. Amaket can get there in less than a day- even less!”

“How did you know all of this? Have you met him and asked this of him?”

“No Shifü, as we searched the land yesterday, we found his spirit opened after all the pints he had at the tavern. It was all bare to see.” Kasha responded.

“Bring that drunk fool to me, now!” Shifü commanded, pointing at Jamba who stood at the door.

Amaket was still asleep when Jamba and the Chief’s guards got to him. He caused such a scene, threatening to strip naked if they arrested him. He even called Shifü a confused mushroom before everyone!

They fastened him on one of the horses and brought him back to the Chief’s homestead. Once he was brought to Shifü, Kasha gave him a strong beetroot concoction that sobered him up. Then Shifü Ceased him, “You...you know the way to that Sorceress’ lair? You

must make sure to go and save my sons from her before they get there!”

Amaket scoffed at Shifü, “Why don’t you ask your ‘noble warriors’ to do it in my stead? They have used some of my secret paths between kingdoms every now and then...” He spoke particularly of Jamba’s second in command.

“I am asking you to please save my sons.
Restore my people and I will give you anything you ask!”

“Listen to yourself. You are the reason those innocent boys are wandering the wilderness to fix something they never broke. Their blood is in your hands. Face the consequences!”

“You came all this way to tell me about Soi. You must have cared for something.”

“Yes! I cared for myself. Jahanam is no place of rest. Your brother remains a prisoner in that dreadful place, and in my death, I do not plan to join him!”

“What will it take then? What can I do to change this? May the gods have mercy over my wretched soul,” Shifü broke to his knees. Amaket pitied him.

“Have you not heard what I have spoken over the Sorceress? She is not like any other magician or wizard of these lands.”

“I do not ask that you face her. Just bring my sons back to me. Whatever it is you ask, I will double it.”

Amaket was quiet for a while.

“I ask for your finest grapes in three sackfuls, two full merchant boxes of silver, three of Shifü’s finest robes, and a cart filled with skins from mountain goats. These items will be made available on their return. I also ask for diplomatic immunity to stay here, in the plain lands where no one will bother me as I start a new life. This is my asking. Any less, I will not take it.”

“As you have asked, so shall it be done for you!”

They took their oaths: Shifü then signed a pass in case Kenan, Batu, Jero, or any official from the Kush kingdom questioned Amaket. It was packaged, and the quickest horse set up for him to ride. *The same one that Museti had seen that day at the plainlands.*

Amaket was off, knowing well in his heart that failure was not something he could afford, as pleading with this sorceress as he had seen from time to time, would be like dancing with a wildfire. If you miss a step, it could devour you whole.

Kasha whispered to Shifü before leaving him, “There is a true concern in his eyes, something his kind can never actually master.” Shifü took those words with heaviness, “He knows my cry. You were quick to pass the responsibility because it would cost you greatly. He has seen it all and has nothing to lose. May the gods lead his way. His life will mean more than gold to me.”

Adwa

Morning met the company at the outskirts of Adwa. There, the streams had thrived overnight from the downpour, and the flowers were blooming wildly. Scarlet reds, golden yellows, aqua blues, and freshly greens danced to the mellow wind on their path. There were a few homes seen over the small hills at the edge of the horizon; small because the hills from home were really tall. They did not speak much to each other as they wanted to hasten to their destination, and turn back as fast as they could.

This journey was tiresome.

They had resulted in paying a man loyal to Konelia, who lived just next to the town gates, to keep their donkey and any unnecessary weighty materials for them, until they returned. All they carried was the inheritance of Soi and one change of clothes. His name was **Shama.**

Hergesa had proven to be untrustworthy.

Kambo feared he would slow the men down, but they insisted on his coming, as they had to meet Harem himself, and an official from the Chief's council was needed for official purposes, that the men were not familiar with.

Soi had very little to his name, and so did Konelia. This was so, because at a time before Chaka became Chief, a corrupt Chief who rejoiced in war and oppressed the people of Akanga misused the people's resources. His name was Utonga. The people cried to their gods, making petitions and sacrifices secretly, as many had been arrested for speaking against Utonga.

Kai became angry with him, and so He sent a bold Ger Hakhan to prophesy to the Chief that he and his family would die in the hands of his enemies, like dogs. Utonga had the prophet hung, and his body thrown to the plainlands for the hyenas to devour. It was not long thereafter that there came a war between the Akanga and the Mara. It resulted from a dispute between the two Chiefdoms after Utonga dishonoured the request to bring his daughters to the Mara Chief's son's marriage festival. This was seen as a great insult.

The Mara warriors invaded Akanga, overwhelming Utonga's battalions. After their victory, the Mara men held a vigil outside the chief's homestead, awaiting him so that they would humiliate him and kill him before everyone's eyes. Eventually, the Chief was removed from his hiding place in his quarters, and he together with his family was humiliated, stoned to death, and their bodies burnt to ashes. The tyrant Chief met his death, and the prophecy was fulfilled. In the next few seasons, Chaka, who had been the lead Warrior in Akanga, was chosen to take charge. The Chiefdom celebrated their new chief, as he brought forth peace and prosperity.

To avoid a repeat of such a travesty, it was decreed that no Chief would hold the people's resources as his own, and only by approval of

all the council could any amount be allocated for his use. They were fast approaching Harem's city.

The men were growing hungry, and their horses needed water. There was a small wooden house close to the road. A red house. It was all on its own, as for many kilometres, there were no houses. Smoke billowed from the back of it, where there was a shed for cattle. They decided to stop there for some rest and water, before finishing their journey to Harem's city.

The folks saw them from afar and ran to the road to welcome them, as their horses slowed down. There was a short plump woman and her short lean husband. They were called Salam and Salem. They were jolly and spoke only in the language of Kush. Gladly, Jero was there to interpret their every word.

As the railroad was gaining prospects, these were the last of the remaining dwellers here, and many people who would frequent the road would stop here to refresh their strength. They were offered some Injera and fresh soup of camel bones. The horses shared the water trough with their cattle. Salam and Salem were over 100 years old!

They were believed to be some of the last of the lineage born from the loins of Peruzio. Most of them got tired of the curse of ageing so slowly and ended their lives. These two could have been 132 years old, and still seem fairly aged. If they truly indeed were of Peruzio's lineage, then they were still very youthful.

After they had taken their rest, they rose and mounted their horses again. The day had gotten warmer in the afternoon, and the mud was less sticky. In some parts, the ground was hardening.

As they emerged on the other side of the valley, they saw Kirean men working on metallic tracks. This was the Iron road they had heard of. They expected that the Kushites would be working here, but instead, it was the Kireans. The Welsh men stood over them as they

slaved to work their hammers and bars to finish the tracks. This brought a bitter taste to Kenan's mouth.

How could a man decide to be much superior to the other?

How could the other man accept to be treated in this way?

The senior Welsh men sat under the shades of acacia trees, marking their papers with ink and smoking their cigars in all comfort.

In that brief moment, Kenan vowed to himself that he would not let his people slave for these roads.

The rest of the men noticed his horse slowing down at the scene, and instead of pushing him forward, they left him to it. All apart from Jero who slowed his horse a little, "Brother, we have a quest to finish." He looked at the rail road's activity in front of them.

"They are not even Kushite- those labourers, why does this concern you?"

"I cannot see how Harem has let these men come to his Kingdom, and even bring foreigners here to slave for his benefit. Who do they think they are?"

"The Welsh are Kings in Kirea. At Least for Harem, they haven't taken his crown..."

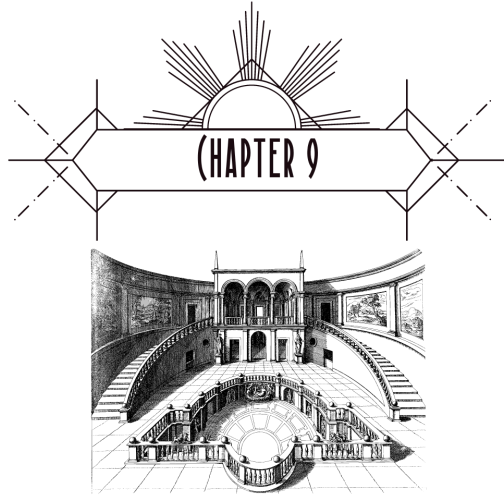
"...Yet! I have learned of them, but never have I seen their ideals at work. We cannot let this happen in our land, Jero. Not once!"

"Kenan, we are on borrowed time. We cannot control what Harem is doing in his land. It's time for you to do what's right for now!"

The clouds began darkening as they edged closer to Harem's city. They had survived Marauders, thefts, wearing long days and nights just to get this far. Shaka was trailing behind them as usual, looking out for any unusual things. The last time was close. He wasn't willing to leave anything unchecked. Being the most conscious one in the group, he would keep a few things to himself.

Like how that night at the Inn, Webi had seen in a flash, the same estranged black headless winged creature, erect in a corner of one of the townhouses facing Megbil.

He had described it. It wore a smokey black robe, and in its webbed hands, it held a wooden box, just as Shaka had witnessed in Ngengi. Hadn't Shaka enquired of it, Webi feared being belittled or getting ridiculed by the others as a coward. Evil lurked around them at all times, and for this reason, Shaka had to keep vigilant. It was potent, but patient.



HAREM'S CITY

AS DUSK APPROACHED, all who had been part of this unfolding matter concerning the Shifü, Soi, and the Sorceress were waiting. In their own small ways, there was an expectation from this night. Ma'Lena locked herself in her hut. She laid obeisance to the gods and left her candles burning.

Shifü sat on his throne accepting no company. He held on firmly to his sceptre of power, hoping that his Chieftdom would not fall, as if it did, then they would have to drag him from this place.

Kasha and the magicians of the order of the Azmathes took another night awake, using the amulets to trace the men's whereabouts spiritually.

In their spirit state, everything in the land of Kush was dark, and

they could only see 8 lights sparkling through this vast darkness. At some point, there would be a violet presence forming around them, and this is when they would pray the hardest. Kasha had never held a responsibility so dire that his life depended on it. He willed wholly that good could come from this.

Madinka was the least worried. He was confident that his son would return to him. A man of war will always judge a fight by the strength he brings to it, and he knew his son was strong. He had prepared him. Amaket was in a hurry, taking hidden pathways through the rivers in the North-West of the Takoa kingdom. He was tied between the reward and its sacrifice. He alone was more versed in what kind of power they were up against. He kept it close to his heart that perhaps this time around, his disappearance would be for good. He said his prayers, clenching his fists and twisting his tongue. The lion's den awaited him.

Kambo was weary. There were no more stops on the journey, to ensure the men reached Harem's city in time. He would contemplate the return journey and wish to be left behind so he could pick up at his own pace. The horses were not as fast as before. The series of ridges were wearing them out. Darkness was encroaching. Iron grey clouds were covering the horizon. They fastened their horse leashes. The city's bridge was revealed from a distance. Batu called for their witness, "Men, we have arrived!"

Uriam, Webi, Jero, Kenan, Roba, Kambo, and Shaka, in this order, followed Batu to the top of the final ridge. They stopped their horses there for a moment, to see the mighty city.

It was glorious!

Harem had built himself a fortress of Iron, Stone, Brass, and gold! There was an unfinished statue of his image at the new gates, as high as the wooden doors themselves. It overshadowed the Pantheon of gods in all the Kingdoms that only had small shrines for their

worship. The doors measured a towering 9 metres tall, 7 metres wide, and 3 metres thick, made from heavy oaks from the woodlands, fastened by the Iron bars of the Mara, and assembled by the hands of the Kush. There was a bridge joining the ridge to the gates. Harem had become like a god on his turf.

“Well, we did not come all this way to stare, did we?” Jero started the rush towards the gates ahead of everyone else.

They would not show it, but there was an uncomfortable quell, entering a city famous for its heathen ways. Evils thrived where the fallen had found a haven to run to, away from their blood-thirsty hunters. Harem had been kind enough to let them stay, taking advantage of their desperation, exploiting them to enrich himself.

They rode to the open gates, as the traveller's curfew had not started. Even so, the people never slept here, as they partied and served brew until dawn. The guards at the doors stopped them. Strong men, almost as big as Madinka. They wore light iron vests on top and loose trousers tucked into thick leather straps, with a heavy buckle on their belts holding a sword in one hand and a club in the other. They were asked to get off their horses, to get clearance. Batu held out their pass with Shifü's signet.

“AH! Batu, you are here-” Called out one of them. He wore a green coat, laced on his chest with a golden cuff, and he wore a bold golden ring. Batu looked at him, and he remembered him. “Sayyid, my friend!” They embraced each other as long-lost brothers would.

“How's the shoulder? When we *left* each other, you were in great pain!” Batu fondly asked Sayyid.

“It has been years now. My father's physician took good care of it,” he shrugged. “How are the fields?” Referring to the Akanga Chiefdom. “The gods have been good to us. There is a good harvest and a flourishing beauty all around.”

“Speaking of beauty- now that you are here, you might want to take

interest in our stock of entertainment. In the palace, tonight is a Celebration just for the cause of your arrival. My father even sent for the latest attraction in town; a damsel that warriors have fought for. Matter of fact, I want you to see how she moves her hips to the music, and how her belly winds like a snake, as her skin shimmers in the light-”

Sayyid took notice of the others as they walked through the gates, ceasing his life-like illustrations. Each holding their horses by their leash.

“The Prince! Even better;

Welcome to the City of Harem!”

Indeed, a city to behold. As a blind man seeing for the first time, their eyes lit in wonder, as their mouths remained ajar! Never had they seen so many buildings together, yet with such diverse multitudes of people. From the gates, they could see the golden pinnacle of the palace which rested at the heart of this maze of traders and schemers. A few years away from this city, seemed like a lifetime of glories missed!

They were shown past the barricades, each one mounting his horse. Sayyid took the lead together with Batu, making their way through the crowds. The inner city glowed marvellously. Their floors were made of boulders smeared with tar, smooth and hard. There would be competing horn noises and revving motors of the ‘beasts’ that would carry people from one place to another.

Kambo could hardly recall some of the new stores and enterprises that had been put up in this bustling Metropol. The air was coloured with scents of fresh-baked bread and sauces, with hints of pepper and leafy herbs. Kushites rarely ate meat. They only made soups from their plentiful camels and goats. Their most valued livestock was Cattle, which gave them milk, ghee, and butter. He could see roasted

Locusts on the verandas, smoked crickets, and alluring buttered sparrows on the streets.

‘If only there was enough money!’

Kenan now eased up from the worry of terrors unknown. All they had to do was get to the King, meet his hosts, and then pay the Sorceress and they would be back on their way home. Jero wondered about Sayyid. How could a prince relate to Batu, a warrior? He would have expected an exchange with Kenan, a prince like him, but it seemed unlikely. Warriors were field men trained for battle, not meetings or delegations.

The company arrived at the palace gates.

Sayyid ordered them open, and so they were, and the men and their horses galloped on palates of grey ceramics and laid out to the palace doors. They left their horses at the stables upfront, and then unloaded the horses, entering the jewel of Kush.

The evidence of Harem’s dealings with the Arabian Sultan was on full display.

Once the Kireans finished building the Iron Road, trading would boom inland. Kush had placed itself in the middle of it. Unlike Akanga, who had locked their borders and not allowed any other civilisations in, Kush was thriving, and Kenan was beginning to reconsider his perception of things.

Not only was this palace greater than his father’s homestead, but such was also unheard of in the lands! The palace courts were endowed with springs of water and well-trimmed hedges; the inside of it with golden mouldings of great kings and vibrant portraits from other lands as well. Anyone who stepped through these walls was sure to be remarkably moved.

The roofs were so high, that even adult elephants would roam free under them, and the floors were as clear as pools of still water. There were servants all around, serving the majesties in the yards, the courts,

and the rooms. They dressed almost like brides, with their spotless brown skin and lush hair molten with oils. They decorated their eyes and lips with *wanja* and pierced their ears and noses to don expensive rings. Their dresses were like gowns, with Crystals aligned to their ocean blue and rose pink silks. They smiled at the men as Sayyid led them through, with grapes at hand, and treys of fruit.

Jero took an elbow at Kenan saying, "Brother, it's not too late to change your mind!"

Kenan took little offence to those remarks, and responded, "Many are fair, but my heart cannot betray my Sheera. No, not once!" Sayyid got his male servants to take them to their quarters where they would stay awaiting the King to meet them. They entered a large pearl white room, with heavily decorated curtains and carpets only a Sultan could dream about. Their beds were like resting on ostrich feathers.

"This is what happens when you gain friends as powerful as my Father has. New opportunities lie beyond the rivers Akanga has confined itself to. I hope that one day a Chief will arise and make changes to your land- ones to benefit the people and its borders." Sayyid spoke, turning his eye to Kenan. He then left them in their room.

As everyone got settled, Kenan reached for his amulet. It had been days and these heavy objects dangled on their necks even to the point of tearing a little bit of skin from them. He thought it would be fine for a few moments to be free from it. He lifted it, almost getting it off, then he remembered- 'the Orb'. He lay the amulet on his bed and went to Jero, who was itching for a bath. There were steaming showers behind the curtains on the room's left-wing. They were unlike the river waters in Akanga, which were chilly and sometimes murky with sediment.

"Do you still have the Orb I gave you this morning?"

"-Maybe I left it as payment to that lovely couple on the road."

“Do you have it or not?!”

“Why does everything have to be so dire to you? A little trust could smoothen up those lines on your forehead, or even that Kinky hair of yours. It’s in the bag where we left it. In my pouch.” He reached for the pouch and showed it to him. It was still there.

“What is in that orb?” asked a concerned Uriam, who stood away from the two brothers. “When I held it- I felt a...”

“What did you see?,” Kambo sprung up from his rest.

Uriam stuttered, “There in the inn...a grim, pale creature- without a head, standing at the corner.

In its hands, it held a small menacing wooden box. After you took it from my hands...the creature disappeared!”

Shaka jumped at what Uriam said, “I have seen it too! In the Ngengi- and Adwa as well! Something about this doesn’t quite settle well with me...”

“Do you think that maybe the Sorceress has been watching our every step?” Uriam concluded.

“Only great sorcery can do such a thing. This is why you must wear your amulets at all times so that Kasha and his magicians can see us and pray. Danger lurks in all corners of this foreign land. We can never be too careful!” Kambo responded.

Batu: Then we must hurry and get this exchange over with.

We may be trained to handle swords and spears, but not conjuring magic and sorcery. It remains a deadly weapon even to great warriors.

Shaka: You are right, Batu- but what of the creature...What could it be?

Suddenly, a rugged figure burst through the doors. “Jero, Kenan, you must come with me at once!”

Batu jumped off his bed, lifting his sword out of its scabbard and at the figure at the door. The man was breathing as heavily as a dying panther.

“Who are you? How do you know us? State your business!”

“You truly are the son of your father, warrior...” the man shifted from Batu’s rage and turned to Kenan. “Your Father made a mistake to let you come to this place.” He held out a decree, his hands shaking rapidly, “Here! I bear a letter from Shifü himself.”

Batu quickly snatched the parcel from the odd-looking fellow. Confused, he confirmed that indeed it was Shifü’s seal.

“I am Amaket. I am here to see to it that you return to your home, this instant!”

“Father sent you? A wizard with no rank in Akanga? Was there no one loyal to the throne willing?” Jero questioned.

“I will explain my plight on our way back. Leave your belongings and follow me now!”

“And where do you think you are taking them, shape-shifter?” An authoritative baritone echoed from behind Amaket.

“They are my guests! They have just arrived- it would be rude for them to leave my roof without meeting their host, don’t you think?”

Amaket turned to stone on hearing that voice. He was well aware of who it was.

“Come with me at once, before it is too late!” Amaket warned as he stepped further inside. He was fighting something inside.

King Harem walked in majestically with four of his guards. His skin was perfect and his posture enduring. His ghostly white Shamma draped low to his feet. He wore golden shoes and a golden crown on his head to radiate his Kingship. He dressed his shoulders with an elaborately embroidered scarf, tailored with fine silk and a covering of gem fibres. Not a mighty man in stature, but his sight was very intimidating. He did not show his age at all!

“-Unless the Prince of Akanga has any dealings with this charlatan?” Harem spoke in a piercing tongue. He did not take his eye off Amaket all the while.

"No, we do not know him, your majesty," Kenan responded meekly. Kambo came forward, "We have come too far and long just to meet you, Oh King! We would never want to dishonour your kind invite and muddy your hands in this way."

"Very well then, get ready. I have a banquet awaiting you. Missing it would be just that; an insult to my kindness." He then took note of the sword and pointed at Amaket, "Drop that sword, warrior! My men will handle this."

Two of his men moved to arrest Amaket, carrying him out. Amaket could not remain silent, throwing words and caution as loudly as he could, hoping one of the men could heed to his cause. There came confusion inside the men, as they witnessed this scene. Harem turned to a grappling Amaket, holding out his hand at him. He folded a fistful of air and slowly, the wizard's face faded off like a boar in a deep slumber. Then the King drew back his arm and swore under his breath,

'No more, Wizard!'

On seeing this, Kambo went ahead to greet the King with a bow asking for a pardon over all that had transpired, "Your majesty, I hope it is of no trouble to you that we may revitalise our worn bodies from the long travel we have had. Let us prepare and meet you at the banquet?"

King Harem sternly looked into his eyes, "I will be in the banquet room. I will leave one of my guards to lead you there once you are ready."

The King signalled one of the two remaining guards to remain at the door. The other went ahead and grabbed the decree from Batu's hands, and followed after the King.

Harem walked off a few steps then stopped, and looked back at the men, "I am sorry for what you've just seen. I do not take liars very well. The matters you come to attend to here are very delicate, and I

will that you all return to your home in one piece. Malice will also not be taken well by the one you have come to see.”

He then straightened his scarf and as he went away from the corridors that lead to the guest rooms, a drunkening scent of his expensive perfume filled the air; bewitching and intoxicating the heart.

As the men got ready, Kenan stood gazing outside the large windows. The city was coming to life with lights like fireflies. The dense clouds had passed and the stars were now visible. The full moon was rising.

It was said that during the full moon, magic was at its strongest in the hands of them that held it.

There was an endless view of the mountains of Abadia, separating the city’s expanse from the wilderness beyond.

“What are you thinking of? It’s late and we need to hurry to the banquet,” Batu came from behind him. Kenan did not turn. He thought for a moment, then asked him, “Why did your father decline to come in your stead?”

Batu did not understand the question.

He had competently managed to save Kenan from all danger so far. He would risk his life for the Prince! He did not want to assume ungratefulness and so he responded, “My father is a proud man. He wanted to prove that he is no father to a coward. That’s all I can tell you.”

“There is very little breadth between pride and regret. I have believed that we were brought here to suffer in their stead, but now...what that wizard said...and what the King did!” He turned from the window and looked Batu in the eye.

“I assure you that as long as I am here, alive and strong, no harm will meet any of us. That’s a promise!”

“Don’t make such promises, Batu. I was there the night this ball began rolling. You have no idea what this magic is capable of- You said it well yourself,” he panned to the others briefly.

“Then we all must do what we can. I know I have no control over most of what has already happened, but that will not make me relent from protecting that which has been entrusted to me. Remember, master, we came here for a much greater reason. What do wizards know of honour?

In this foreign place, I do not see it wise to trust a fellow who even the King himself calls a liar,” Batu said, tightening his belt. Kenan felt that that was rather arrogant of Batu. He looked back at the men, yet none of them seemed concerned about the matter. It was as if it never occurred in the first place! Kenan’s soul was then troubled, like a lamb ready for the slaughter.

“And Sayyid...How do you know him?”

Batu had seen the baffling look on Kenan, especially when Sayyid preferred his company.

“I knew Sayyid in my war training, after my initiation. We were sent away from home, into the far ends of the Ngengi to hunt and bring back game. Then, there was a drought in the land, and many animals had been killed- either by other beasts or from thirst.

The only game that was well availed was on the plainlands of Kush. So we went ahead to seek deer there. We stayed till late hunting. We then set up camp to rest till the next day. That night, we were attacked by new initiates from Kush. They thought we were rustlers. Some ran, but I remained, and so did Sayyid.

As we fought in the dark, I was able to wrestle the young man down, and I dislocated my hip in the process. For him, his arm. We lay there in pain until morning when the others returned to find us. Mutual respect became between us. He was the first person ever to defeat me in combat, well, after my father. Since then, we became good friends.”

He told this story with such nostalgia in his eyes. Behind them, the men finished their preparations. There came a knock on the door, then a call, "The King awaits you in the great hall!"

They were led across the corridors of the palace, each free of their weapons. They proceeded into a huge hall, lit all around by unending flames, distributed to bring an even warmth and colour. Some changed their kindling colour from blue to orange, from red to green. At the front of the hall, was a high throne.

It sat under two ivory that arched above it. The seat was engraved with golden attributes in the Kush language, with smooth leather covered with a woollen cushion. The king's table stretched circularly, leaving only a place for entry into the midst of the party. This would be for the entertainment that evening.

There were all kinds of foods laid out on the table, even meats! From pheasant to bull, all of the meat known to the men was laid there. The brew was ripe, and the tobacco was in plenty! The *divan* seats were just as comfortable as the beds. The King had invited his friends, those worthy of such a feast. There were maidens serving and music from the King's musicians playing. Flutes, harps, drums, shakers, and lyres all to the tune of the festivities. When King Harem saw the men enter, he stood and raised his golden goblet.

And suddenly, everyone became quiet!

He then announced:

"My friends and council, those who I have invited and those who honoured me by appearing with their masters, these are my distinguished guests from Akanga! There, in the middle, are the two sons of the Chief of Akanga, Shifü Konelia. On the left is his senior council, and on the right- those mighty men, are warriors of the Chieftdom. Now that you know each other, let the Merrymaking,

continue!"

They were shown where to sit. From King Harem: on his left sat his son Sayyid, who as expected was followed by Batu and then Kasha and Roba- in that order. To the king's right, sat Kambo, Kenan, Jero, and then Uriam. It felt uncomfortable, especially for Kenan. He felt guilty about sitting amid scoffers, while his dear sister lay somewhere in Kush being tormented by the sorceress. Kenan did not eat. His anger was growing. He saw everyone enjoy the spoils in front of them without measure, yet he was the only one concerned about the real reason they Came. Kenan felt a fire burning from within, and so he rose from among them.

"O King, may I be excused for a moment? I need to loosen up my girdle a little, get some air and space for all these delicacies you have so laboured to share with us." The King did not mind it much, watching him from the corner of his eye as He walked briskly to the corridors right outside the great hall of the banquet.

He leaned on the large opening on the sides of the corridor, as a soothing wind washed his chin. Men would pass behind him with their drinks in one hand, and the other around a woman. He felt disgusted by this. He finally saw why he had detested the ways of the Kushite loyalists so much.

Deep within all the glitter of advancements and development, greed and rot were eating away the morals and values of a once highly respectable people. All this prosperity brought with it a sterile lust for power and oppression. Only a fool couldn't see it. This is why he had to be careful with how he dealt, especially with these new visitors and their demands. Akanga may have been behind, but they were firm with their gods!

Right then, he noticed some Welsh men approaching. Familiar faces. There was a chubby one in the middle, the same one he had seen sitting under the shade as the Kireans worked the Iron road. The

others were possibly in lesser ranks than he.

They were in official uniform, Khaki trousers, and jackets, while the one in the middle wore a dark-coloured 3-piece suit that fit him very well, and a smoking cigar dangling from his lips.

As they marched by, there was a maiden, a young woman. Perhaps a little older than Kenan. She was coming from the banquet, headed in the opposite direction, carrying an empty silver tray. At the sight of her, the man in the middle whispered to his right-hand man, grinning awkwardly. The man nodded to his instruction, walked past the party, and began chatting her up. She walked right past him, snubbing him. Kenan shook his head, "At least someone still holds some values here."

The other man ran up to her and grabbed her wrist, pulling her towards him. Her arm became flimsy and the tray fell to the floor. He then lashed at her, "We're not asking. Now come on!" He led her by the arm, smirking his lips, and brought her to his senior. The chubby man reinstated his grin and grabbed her by the waist, forcing her to walk with him towards the entrance of the banquet.

The woman in turn slapped him across his face! The man then shoved her to the ground, feeling the red hot tan on his face. He felt his bleeding nose. He spit at her and then raised his arm ready to hit her back. The woman squirmed. Kenan rushed quickly and held his flabby hand from hitting her. The Welsh man felt the strength of the arm holding him and then turned to disgustingly size, Kenan.

"Who do you think you are?"

"There are others in that hall that will do your bidding with no question. Let her be!"

The man then looked at his officers, and then back at Kenan. He tore into irritating laughter, like nails on a board.

He proceeded to roughly free his hand from Kenan's hold, and thinned his glance at him,

"I can have any woman I want! You are gravely mistaken to try me."

"Then I suggest that you go back to your country and treat your children the same way you treat the sons and daughters of this land!" Kenan spoke in such a manner that the men realised that he was. There had been plans to get into Akanga. The man wouldn't want to ruin his chances. He refrained from any further exchange, joining his officers, and as he walked into the party, he marked the face of the future Chief of Akanga. Kenan helped the woman up from the floor, "Thank you," She said.

"Those men- why do you serve them, when they treat you as so?" he wondered.

She fervently looked back to see where the three had gone. The master of the banquet was at the door greeting them. The men showed Harem back in their direction, and upon his gaze, the woman hurried to take up her tray and rushed off without saying a word in response. Kenan saw the fear Harem exuded, and thought to himself, 'What could make a man this feared by the people?'

He walked out of the corridors. He had had enough of the evening and so he decided to go back to the guest room. There was an oddity, as he traversed the many hallways and passages of the palace:

The guards were nowhere to be seen!

It was like they had all disappeared.

Their posts were left unattended.

With this established, he decided to explore the palace a little more.

He walked across the pond in the lower courts. Nearly every inch of the walls was covered with paintings and murals.

He found them to be unusually compelling. Some were works from the Welsh country and civilisations from the far East. As he stared at the large portraits of Kush's heritage, he couldn't help but imagine how much it had cost Harem to amass such pieces.

There was one in particular; a large mural of a woman. The moonlight beamed past the pillars in the court section, revealing her

form. Her skin was dark and youthful. Her head was bald, bearing a silver head lace, glazed with many gems. Her skinny long hands rested right below her chest, as her flowy gown dripped from her shoulders, veiling a luscious purple. Her cheekbones were sharp enough to pierce through the canvas. Her chin pointed south, and her ears bore no jewellery. Matter of fact, the only pieces she wore were on her head, and the Talisman on her neck, which hung down into the hold of her left hand. Her eyes were alive! Unlike most of the paintings he had seen, this one was telling. They showed grief, yet a prevalence of bravery. Pride, yet glimmering with vulnerability. The more he looked at it, the more it spoke to him.

A ghostly whisper came.

A hallucination.

It was not clear, but it was like a melody of winds in a thousand willows calling out to him. It was pleasant to his spirit. He started to waver, and then slowly, a call came to him, ‘COME TO ME...’

It became irrefutable.

The arousing call reprised strongly.

‘COME TO ME...’

He was sure to follow where it led him. Like a fool, this unknown voice lingered and carried him through the dim pathways to the back end of the Palace.

He did not hesitate.

‘COME TO ME...’ It came again.

He walked towards the end of the pathway. There beneath it was a tunnel 7 feet deep. It had just been crafted for the King’s access to the Iron road. If he took a few steps forward, he would crash to his death! The voice kept luring him, and he went on. He kept passing door after door, and finally, his foot touched the edge. The glare of the full moon was pouring onto his face. The voice began shifting, with wicked laughter swimming in the threads of the words ‘COME TO

ME...'

His next step led down the balcony.

Just then, a strong arm pulled him back, and quickly, like a blindfold taken off him, the voice went away, and he awoke! He turned to the arms grabbing him and he heard, "Are you well, young master?"

It was Amaket!

"She knows you have come. We need to find the others and leave before she comes to you!" Amaket continued. Kenan stalled for a moment, not sure of what to think. This 'charlatan' had rescued him from certain death! Amaket urged him against delaying any further. He led the way running, and Kenan was quick to follow. As the path ahead became familiar to Kenan, he asked Amaket how he had escaped from the guards.

"There's a full moon tonight!" and that's all that he said, leaving Kenan the more confused. They got to the room. Amaket seemed to understand the palace very well.

"My father may have sent you, but I am not leaving this place without my sister!" Kenan charged Amaket.

"You do not understand. The sorceress desires more than what was told to you. Her thirst for Shiftü's blood is long overdue, and you, young master- I cannot let you perish in her hands!"

"But there was an agreement. The stipend must remain. She must honour her word!"

"Your naive self cannot be reasoned with! Your sister is..." Right then, King Harem stormed the room with his guards.

"Did I not warn you against this liar? Very well. It seems that you'd rather part with those who have betrayed me than with my generous hand. Guards, CEASE them!"

About twenty men followed the King's right hand.

"Leave not a shred of these!"

Amaket quickly held Kenan's arm, and asked him, "Where is the

Orb?!” He showed him to Jero’s bed. It sat closer to the window facing west. Amaket proceeded to push Kenan to his side, holding out his arms as if in a steering position. “Go and find that Orb. I will cover you!”

Amaket drew from the air a fluorescence of light, and waved it like a whip at the men, whisking them off to the walls like leaves in the wind. King Harem saw this and was dismayed at how strong the wizard had become. He then raised his fists in the air, and all of a sudden, his men started losing mass, shrinking from their strong bodies, as a life form started to build on Harem’s flesh.

He was becoming a giant!

As this happened, Kenan rushed through Jero’s things to find the leather pouch and grabbed it as well as the orb inside of it. As he turned back, he saw Harem turn to the size of 8 men. A grizzly brute!

“There is nowhere to run! You are on my turf now. Your death will be my reward to my master, and so I will gladly see to it!” the giant boomed! It raised its enormous arms ready to crash them through the floor. Amaket quickly whisked Kenan off the floor, raising him into the air, and across the room to him. As soon as the clubbing fists hit the floor, the quaking and breaking thrust Amaket into the sunken ruin of a pit, leaving Kenan fallen on the floor above him.

The giant bulldozed its way forward, clearing the frail bodies of the dead guards off the way with its large feet. It Roared into the visage of Kenan, lifting one of the wooded large beds, and throwing it at him. He leaped to the left, barely escaping the carnage, losing the pouch from his hands. It fell into the massive pit that now separated him from the stance of the giant man. Amaket was down, recovering from the blow when one of Kasha’s amulets fell on him, and he woke. Kenan had not worn it back after taking it off. By his side, he saw the pouch bearing the orb. The giant sort to hover around the pit in the midst of the room, muttering, “No one is here to save you, Prince!”

Kenan became disgruntled by this, unsettled, looking to find any weapons around him.

“Those useless knives cannot harm me, boy!” The giant accelerated towards him, crushing every standing item in its way. Kenan felt for a blade in one of the bags next to him, and in a hasty attempt, swung it at the giant. The Njora shattered into pieces on the giant’s skin! On seeing this, it grabbed him by the neck, tossing him to the corner. Kenan was hurt, and the giant was not relenting.

Kasha and the magicians were praying in the night when they realised that one amulet was not lit. It was Kenan’s amulet! The rest of the amulets were not moving. Stationery, somewhere in the Palace. Kasha became worried.

“One last blow to end the legacy of Chaka!” Said the giant, now confident of its win. Just then, Amaket rose from the ruins. He called out to Kenan, “Grab on!” He threw him the pouch he had found. As it flew out of Amaket’s hand, the giant saw it and realised what it was. It then, for a moment shifted its attention towards the Wizard. It reached down the collapsed floor to get to the orb, but the giant missed!

It landed in Kenan’s right hand.

Amaket proceeded to draw more power and focused all his efforts on the giant. He lifted it steadily, wheezing under his breath for its weight was great. He then slammed it through the Eastern wall of the room, crumbling an entire roof fragment on its body, covering it completely. More men had come and were quickly blocking the door. Amaket turned to the giant’s fallen position. He saw no other way out but through the open wall. He raised his voice in a spell echoing the chamber, **‘OROS VEN FLIT TO CUS DE LEVITA’** The men readied their weapons toward the two.

Amaket tied on to Kenan firmly and as soon as the chant was over, he lifted them both out through the ruins into the depths of the

night. As quickly as the first bullet fired out the nozzle into the air, Amaket and Kenan disappeared into the darkness!

Harem's body began to return to normal after this had happened. The men rushed to attend to him so the rubble didn't crush him. Others looked down below the broken wall to see if the two had fallen to the other side. There was no trace of them anywhere! Seeing that Harem was buried unconscious, some of the men rushed out to go get Sayyid.

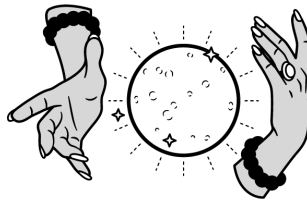
Kasha commanded Tobia, the son of Wefue, to take his horse and deliver the message to Shifü at once that even he could pray, for his son's life was in danger. As Tobia left them, the prayers of the Azmathes began to roar from their den. There was a heightened violet, rising from beneath Kush. It turned to a bloody red, passionate with rage and blindingly bright! *Kasha* saw this, and he knew, "The Sorceress' power is awakening!" He turned to watch the path of the constellations.

She must have seen them come, she must have known the timing, she must have planned this night!

When Shifü heard of the news, he dropped his sceptre wailing,

"What shall I do now?" Tobia told him as he had been told, "You must pray, my Shifü! Pray that the gods might hear you and stop any harm from reaching your sons!" Shifü felt weak in his knees. He turned to his back, bowed to his throne, and wept bitterly.

"I curse the day...I dread it the more! My bitterness towards my sons has become my bed to lie on. I led them to the very resting of the serpent! May the gods forgive me for my blindness. It has come to pass as I had feared. Truly, none is Lord over himself. As the gods planned, may good come...come and bring salvation!"



THE SORCERESS OF HAREM

HER EYES WERE like bolts of lightning. Her skin glowed in her magnificent power. If she could, tonight, all of her enemies would fall at her mercy. Her dwelling was a few hours away from the city. She had her fortress in the heart of the mountains away from the people. In this place, those who could afford her services would come to see her. She would ask for difficult items like the tail of a lion, the eyebrow of a peregrine, the tooth of a crocodile, in exchange for her extraordinary gifts, and some even lost their lives and wealth, seeking her out. She did not hunger for power. It had already been given to her. Hers was to fill her deep wells of solitude and pain.

She sat in the middle of her grandiose fortress, carved into the mountain by skilled hands, feeling its ash and the earth beneath it.

This was her Jahanam. Her power roamed all of Kush, and with the Talisman at hand, nothing was hidden from her.

7 horses were approaching Abadia, her mountain. She had seen the wizard in the palace, but he and the Chief's son had disappeared from her sight. Somehow, they had found a way to hide from her. The power of the moon came to everyone who knew of its secret, and more so those who knew how to steer it. From her sitting, she had sent her priestess, Amora, in her place at the banquet of the King. She did not enter as royalty. No. She went as a lowly servant, hidden among the main attractions of the evening. When Harem failed his master, she was up to the task, to finish what she was sent to foresee: Sayyid had been called from the banquet, leaving his guests to what he called, 'The finest entertainment of the night!'

Amora was then tasked to take another form. One that all who frequented Harem's banquets, were most familiar with:

'-a damsel that warriors have fought for.'

She appeared in the great hall in long yellow silk robes, covering her body completely from head to toe. Every man who looked at her fell in desire. The music changed. A pleasing angelic melody filled the hall, as she was finally in the midst of them.

She dropped her veil:

Her hair was long, plaited into knots that flowed to her waist.

Her eyes were like sapphire, her skin was perfectly tanned. As she danced, her arms moved like threads in the calm winds of the valleys. She moved and turned in the party's midst, raising gasps and cheers from across the room! All eyes were fixed on her, as she entertained Harem's guests in his absence. Slowly, they fell under her enchanting spell, and they all slept.

Sayyid had not been wrong, but he was far from describing how stirring and mesmerising her dancing was!

Amora set up the arrest of the men from Akanga. Only Kambo

remained, as the rest of the men were carried away unconscious in their sleep. From the rubble, Soi's inheritance was swept together and packed onto the 7 horses.

The Sorceress went on to intensely search every corner of Kush but Amaket and Kenan could not be found! With growing frustration, her plan was taking another turn. She however was confident that the Prince would come to her. She made sure of it. She had Chemu, and soon enough Jero! There was something more that made her greatly agitated with Kenan at that point;
The Orb.

Amaket

"We must believe that there is a purpose in all of this. If we stop believing, then all is lost." Amaket spoke in the pitch darkness.

"Whe-where have you brought me?" Kenan asked him hesitantly. Amaket uttered, 'RIUA!' and there was light without a source, and all that was visible was their heads.

"The moon has two faces; one that gives light, and the other that doesn't. Darkness isn't always hiding evil. No. Sometimes, it's just what has not been brought to light yet. This is where the Sun goes when it turns its back. Here, young master, we are protected!" Amaket responded.

This answer did not give the kind of comfort Amaket intended. Kenan faulted their near-death experience, "It is not like Batu to fail his word- Where are the men...?"

"Don't worry, they will be kept alive in the Sorceress' fortress until you appear. You must be ready to face her young master, for she has found your life to be of more worth to her now than before."

"Of what worth is it? Why is it that everyone places such importance on me? Am I not just like any other blood in Akanga?"

“Like any other blood?” Amaket’s face leaned closer. “Have you not heard? Is it so hard for Shifü to speak to his heir even about the things that deeply concern them?” It leaned back and continued, “There was a prophecy...”

“What prophecy Amaket? And how would you know about the affairs of the throne of Akanga?”

“From how you speak, I probably know more about it than you ever will.” He proceeded, “It was spoken to all Kingdoms of the lands about the coming of an evil hell-bent on ending the reign of Kai’s heirs. All that will refuse to bow to this darkness, shall face great resistance and even death. Times are changing. Your father assumed wrong to listen to the sorceress, and heed to his anger!”

“With all the power you claim she has, why hasn’t she struck me dead yet?”

“Because you have something she desires with all her heart. The fight standing in her way...that orb!”

Amaket interjected, “That there in your hands is the key to all the calamity that has befallen you. If you did not have *her*, the Sorceress would never have moved to seek retribution from Shifü in the first place!”

“If this is what she has desired most, then she can have it! If it is what it takes for her to leave me and my family alone...”

Kenan’s mind was troubled.

“I have lived many years, even before the birth of your father. True wielders of fire cannot be controlled by the spells that govern the likes of Kasha. They are free to seek out true purpose in the lands. I have watched this unravel for a while...since the day of Chaka’s death! There is a greater hand working behind the Sorceress, and even if she got the Orb, your life will be valuable to another.”

Kenan retaliated, “What then shall I do? If the battle is already lost, why do you ask that I face her?”

The Sorceress Of Harem

“In time, you will know everything, young master. I would rather that you hear those words from the ones who owe you the truth.” Amaket then placed the pouch onto Kenan's hand.

“For now, this is our only weapon. I have little power compared to that the Sorceress holds- *but inside that orb, is our vantage over her. That orb is more powerful than you can imagine!*”

He reached inside his cloak and gave him his amulet. “Keep this on. The prayers of your people may keep the greater evil away.”

Kenan wore it.

“This prophecy, what does it say of Kai, and who are the *heirs* in the lands?”

Amaket gave him a curious look, “Maybe this is why He chose you. You do not crave for power, nor boast of unrighteous causes. All I can tell you is that I am here because Kai is willing for me to be here. I am afraid that if I say anymore, I might bring hardening into your heart, and you may stray away, quickening disaster upon your people, much like your father has.”

Amaket drew out his left arm and put it on the amulet on Kenan's chest. He then raised his other arm and charged the amulet with as much power as he could. At that moment, Kasha saw the lighting of the 8th Amulet in his search.

Kenan was still alive!

The Azmathes were not the only ones who saw it. The Sorceress also felt it. He was not too far from where she was. Her mind returned to her, and she sat there in her abyss waiting for him.

The bodies of Batu, Uriam, Jero, Shaka, Webi, and Roba were still under Amora's spell, riding on horseback with men from Harem's army. Ahead of these 6 horses was *the priestess*, Amora. She rode ahead of them, speeding up towards the mountains of Abadia.

The terrain was rocky, and mountain bushes grew on most of the path. Due to the many trips that had been made by those seeking the Sorceress, there was a clear path, and the moonlight was enough for them to see it.

The Akanga men were heavy, yet the men from Harem's army held them fast, like children, not wavering to one side or the other.

Sheba

When Sheba ran away from Akanga, she fled back to Kush.

Her body was worn from the two whole days that she never ate nor drank. She had used up all her magic running into hiding in the valleys of Adwa. It was then that an old couple, riding on a donkey carriage, coming from trade in Adwa, saw her. Many travellers had rushed by, others running away, seeing how sickly she had become. The couple did not pass her. They stopped their carriage.

The man went ahead with empathy, to the place she lay behind a large boulder, near the road. She could barely sit. His wife came after him and attended to her, offering her a drink of water, and a morsel of unleavened bread. They carried her to their home, where they took care of her until she was well again.

The couple did not have children.

They were aged and were comfortable with their life as it was. This made Sheba wonder, how then could they have longed for each other all these years, yet no fruit came out of it?

The woman often said in the Kush language, "I found companionship with my husband. I could not live for a better one. When I am in need, he has been there for me, and I also, when he has needed me. We have no one else. We rise, we herd our cattle, we sell our little surplus—these vast empty lands are our home. We may not be wealthy or blessed with little ones, but we have each other." It was a form of

acceptance and love that she only wished she had the opportunity to nurture, but it all seemed to slip her hands whenever she tried to. It felt like a punishment, and even so, her heart bled to know that she would die without ever seeing her daughter, or even holding her in her arms again.

When her days to be with the couple ended, she gave her utmost gratitude and asked if there was anything she would do for them in return. They declined, as it was by nature for them to be kind. She knew they would not take anything from her, so she gave them the one thing she thought they would cherish.

Unperceivable to them, Sheba touched them with her magic: The last of it, to destroy the power of the Nubia resting in her. She blessed them with her long life. She felt that it was better to die and let those who found something to live for, pursue it till it's full in their hearts. Salam was the husband, and Salem was the wife.

After they crossed the 150-year mark, they wondered why they did not die. After a long search for answers, they finally settled on to believe that perhaps they were both carriers of the blood of Peruzio.

In Sheba's years living in Akanga, she had heard of the Talisman. She cursed it and loathed the fact that it remained well. It reminded her of her mother's sacrifice and the bitterness that came with her memories of Nubia.

Two days after leaving the couple, she arrived in a small village in the Northern arid ridges leading to Harem's city. Upon arrival, she was thirsty, and behold, there was a well in the middle of the village where people drew water because no river or stream passed by. She walked up to the women who were queueing to get at least a crucible of water.

Their hair was plaited in small locks, rolled up with red dye and mud. They wore very colourful necklace beads with red shukas on

their shoulders, traversing over their bodies in a light manner due to the heat there. Some of the women had babies weaning on their chests, others on their backs. They told stories as some plaited their little ones, passing time as the queue progressed. When they saw Sheba approach, their joy-filled chatter hushed, and they all staired.

“I- thirst,” Sheba cried.

One of the women at the front promptly offered her a drink from a broken clay vessel used to trickle water into other jars to the brim, and she drank. She stayed with the women, not saying another word until evening came. No one asked her who she was, or where she came from. Soon, as they forgot about the stranger sitting quietly among them, they got back to their business.

Word reached the leader of the village that there was a strange woman from the plains who was among the women there. He did not act. He instead waited until the next day. He found Sheba under one of the village widow’s huts. She lay on the veranda as the inside was unbearably hot. He brought with him another. Sheba woke to see two tall figures gazing down at her. One was dressed like the villagers, while the other was fully wrapped in black.

“She came to the well yesterday...” the village leader said.

“...Thank you, Elder. I will see to it that she is well.”

The village leader left the two. The man squatted to meet her where her head rested. She looked at his face; he wore a nose ring and his skin was as dark as those from Nubia. She sat up erratically, not knowing what his intention was.

“My name is Aduma. Are you Sheba, daughter of Uzi?”

Her heart stopped.

‘Ovu has finally found me! My end has come.’

“I did not come to take your life,” Aduma read her thoughts.

“Ovu no longer seeks for you, and Nubia awaits a new awakening by its Lord. You see, the time of Ovu has come to an end, and your sin

is long forgotten. I have been sent by **Kek**-
He has a special assignment for you here.”

She was disarmed by his words. Kek?

She forced her frail body to bow, but Aduma was quick to hold her still.

“The Lord knows what ails you. If you do as He asks, you will see your offspring again and all the people who hurt you will be given to your hands for you to do as you will!”

She did not spare a thought. The chance of her seeing her daughter again, and making her oppressors pay was dwindling faster than her days, but alas!

“Anything to serve my Lord”

He started:

“I once held the place of the chief magician in Kush. I knew of you when Dachew came to me, concerned about your wellbeing. I advised that you flee to Akanga, as Ovu was restless in his search for you. I now serve a different master. The same one who sends me to you. On the day you came to Kush, the Lord sent his emissaries to me. They told me to wait for you here, in this village. I believe you were led here, chosen for a greater purpose.”

“Yet I am frail and undeserving of such honour-why would He think so considerately of me?”

“Kek offers you the power of the stone that your mother gave to the men of this land. They misused it for their futile gain, and he has been seeking to take back its power and entrust it to someone- more worthy. It is hidden, but Kek will reveal its location to you. There is a great power protecting it, and so you shouldn't go alone. Once you have the stone, you must do as He says, that your desire may be fulfilled!”

After saying these words, the man stretched out his hand, and a replenishing power filled her flesh. Immediately he took his arm away,

she lifted her face to enquire further, but he was gone! She had found a new direction, one led by Kek. The next day, she rode a donkey to Harem's city, to begin her new mission.

Sheba had not attempted to seek out the Talisman until then. She searched the lands to see where it had been hidden. Finally, there in the Mara, she felt the rock calling. As advised, she brought *strong men* to the **Ngunga caves**, where for years the Talisman wasted away.

As warned, there was a power protecting the caves. The GER HAKHAN had kept them sealed with their power. If she crossed it, then there would be nothing more for her. There, the trees were so closely planted, that none would know where the entrance or exit of the forest was.

The GER HAKHAN had not been blind to what was happening in the lands. One who was tasked to protect the Talisman had seen them approach and had availed himself. He stood at the entrance of the cave, waiting.

"What is it that you seek?" he called out through the vines hiding the mouth of the caves.

None responded.

By her whim, the men proceeded to attack. The watcher wasted no time, wrestling each one to the ground. He did it so easily, that even Sheba was amazed.

"Why have you come here?"

She turned her neck like a serpent, widening her eyes, arresting the GER HAKHAN only with her mind. She had gotten stronger.

"Get up! go bring it to me," she commanded the men who were on the ground, writhing in pain.

Sheba focused on the man in her fold, "So, you are the one who took it..."

He fought with all his might to free himself, but even with his

power, her grip was unbreakable.

"I have watched you from the day you came to these lands. There is no promise for you here-"

She eased her vice-like grip, and pulled him closer to her, at a distance where she could see his face well enough.

"That is where you are wrong, *Watcher*. Behold, witness true power, not the frail kind your Kai gives."

"Even if you take it, a lonely and poignant death awaits you in the end. Evil cannot reward your pain with good. Only use it for its gain." She did not take those words kindly. She crushed him on the rocks of the cave repetitively, till it cracked on his back! Before she could finish him off, the men returned. One of the men, *Bacha*, called to her, "We have it!"

She dropped the watcher's body from her invincible hold, and finally, she held the Talisman in her hand. She felt Nubia's power run back in her veins. Strength she had never known before, rose in her bones.

"The watcher is of no use to us. He cannot take it back. Leave him there, so his aides see...true power!"

They returned to Kush, and each man received his reward as promised by Sheba, and headed their way. Sheba claimed the Talisman in her mother's name. She even sealed it afresh with one of her mother's spells: '**PIL-FA-SEIGH**' so that no mortal eyes could see it! She began honing her skills again with its providence.

After it was done, She began to fear that the men would speak of the newly found Talisman, and one by one, with what seemed like a plague, she took their lives trapping them in a curse to serve her as *reapers*. All except Bacha, whom she saw promise and deemed useful for her purposes.

In Kush, Sheba started a small fortune-telling trade. At first, she would get paid in small amounts for her services, but eventually,

people saw how true her predictions were, almost like prophecies! Her fame spread and caught the ear of a young King Harem. He summoned this 'fortune teller' to his Palace.

At the time, the Palace was still made in the way Amresh had intended it to be. There were no Welsh men then, and the Railroad had not been started.

The King sought her services over a troubling dream he had had for 5 consecutive nights. It had disturbed his mind greatly, and yet none of the King's magicians could interpret it, as there was none endowed with the proper gift to do it.

This was the vision the King had seen:

Harem was standing in the middle of a field, with his bull grazing. 6 more bulls emerged from 6 directions, and they too started to graze from the same field.

3 of these quickly fattened over the grazing period, and they threatened his bull which was growing thinner and thinner over time. He resolved to find another field, but before he could move his bull, one of the 3 strong bulls struck it by the ribs and his bull died. Its blood gushed out into the field and even turned it scarlet. Instead of stopping, the other bulls continued to feed on it, turning their hide red!

Then Harem would wake.

"Can you answer this difficult dream for me?"

She confidently answered, "My King, my power will not fail you."

With her life as her bargain, she slowly laid her paraphernalia on the palace floor before the throne. Her sage, her bones, and her oil. Eagerness clenched the King's heart. Queen Fariti and the council were also present. Sheba had desired the King's audience for so long, and now she had the opportunity.

With her left hand, she felt the unseen Talisman on her neck, and then lowered her head as if to seek understanding on the matter.

“This is a dream about the future.

The bull in your presence represents your Kingdom and the people of Kush. The field is your vast resources and the long-serving peace you have enjoyed and will continue to enjoy. The other 6 bulls are the throne holders around you.

From the west, The Nile dwellers; from the South West, Akanga and Mara; from the deep south, Tanga; from the immediate south, Takoa and from the South East, the Shani. The dream shows what will happen in the coming years if you, my King, do not act fast and build your Kingdom to be greater than these. Those will end up growing so great that they will conquer you, and even threaten your throne.”

Everyone there was in awe of the great wisdom that this woman spoke. Harem fell from his throne, pleading with her, “What shall we do to avoid such calamity?” She raised her face from her vision, and with mystery in her eyes, she responded:

“Make acquaintances with those from far away lands and continue the dream of your father. Build a great City, fortified in Iron and great walls. The Welsh will come to you, and many more seeking your gold. Let them inhabit, for they will be your allies in war and bring their knowledge and wealth with them. Hear the Sultan from the East. Let him extend his gracious hand to your people. Then, you shall surely succeed against all your enemies!”

The King was so pleased that he offered her a seat on his council, but she refused the offer.

“Tell me, fortune teller, What then can I do to repay your great wisdom over this troubling matter?”

“Oh, King! Lord over all of Kush, I ask that you make me a dwelling there- in the mountain. A fortress where I shall live, and offer the King counsel as his oracle, seeing that your master magicians have failed you in such a grave matter. I ask that from this day, my name shall be changed. I cannot serve the King as just but a lowly ‘fortune teller’.

For I have proven it, let it be known in all the land, that I will serve the people as **THE SORCERESS OF HAREM!**”

The whole room was aghast!

The King gave her his word.

With her wishes implemented, Harem began to trust her more than all his council. She even took lead in envoys and delegations to other Kingdoms. She had become so great in the eyes of the King; so great, that no one saw her magic take root on the throne. She had spies all across the lands, and slowly, she built loyalists and transfigured others into reapers for her doing.

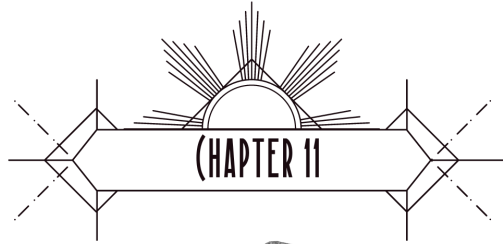
Kek had delivered into her hands more than she had imagined.

It was complete.

Her enemies were going to bow to her great power.

She had all that she needed to accomplish her purpose.

At the King’s Behest, her Victory was at hand!



THE SHAMALOK

KENAN LOOKED at his hands and thought for a moment; ‘How can the fate of the people be placed in these two small hands?’ The burden of this magnitude on his shoulder? Even with his strength and this not to be taken lightly, the warriors had far more muscle, speed, and tact than he.

Amaket had started a small fire, as the mountainside was very cold. He was not one to wonder about things like Kenan. He had managed to keep them safe thus far and was basking in the glory of the Moon’s fullness. He looked across the fire and saw Kenan leaning on a boulder, in the same clothes he had worn for the banquet.

He had placed the pouch with the Orb next to him. Amaket could see the doubt and questioning in Kenan. He fed the fire one last

branch from the bushes he had cleared with the knife he had in his belt and walked up to the young master.

“There is a lot of hopelessness in our time. Each day, mortality reminds us that death is never too far. We could lose someone we love, or someone we care about could lose us at any moment. This is why it is important to have hope. Hope that we are not living to die and be forgotten, but one that helps lift salvation, that in an evil and damned time such as this, good can and will triumph.” He sat by the crackling fire, next to Kenan, “You think too heavily on these things, but nothing happens by chance. It is ordained by the same power that drives through the very fabric of nature. Why does it rain when it does? Why does the sunshine when it does? or even, look- the full moon!”

These words sparked Kenan’s diffidence, “Don’t you think that we are outnumbered? There are not many in this land that will fight on our side. How can we stand against her, when all the odds have favoured her?”

“Don’t be downcast by all of this. You will be surprised how many more are on our side,” Amaket had fickle confidence. At times it came out as proud. Kenan held his amulet and looked into it.

Many leagues away was a group of people praying to the gods for him. He thought of his mother, and how much she had cried after losing Chemu. He thought of Sheera and the promise he had made to her. He had to return home, back to the ones that mattered to him.

“She must have a weakness. There must be some other way past this, Amaket!”

“That, I wish there were. What I do know is that she has lost her immortality and her power does not come from her veins anymore. If she is separated from the Talisman that she draws power from, then like any other man, she will fall to the sword. However, this Talisman is hidden from the eyes of men. She cursed it. This is why that Orb is

very vital to us. It might be a small crack in the wall, but if we fixate all that we have on it, the wall may give in. It has been done before. Peruzio once held on to that very Talisman, but clever men were able to find a way to take it from him.”

“Is it true what you say? That the Talisman is real- like the one of Peruzio?”

“Oh Yes! The very one told in the tales. It has been with her for many years now, and she has become very fond of it. It keeps her from ageing.”

“If there is even a small chance that we manage to unlace it from her neck, what shall we do with it? Shall it not return its curse to the land, springing forth war and greed?”

“I cannot answer every one of your questions, as I have wondered about them as well. If this was a moonless sky, I would have already retreated, young master. It is not for us to worry about the endings of such things. If we lose, then it is not in our place to stop this evil.”

“And if we win?”

“Oh, and if we win? You do not know how much I have pleaded with Kai over this day. I know that for a fact if He gives us the win, we must strive to restore everything as it should be. We must strive to continue Good on our part!”

Kenan looked away from the wizard. He looked downhill to see his father’s horse tied about 20 paces away from where they were. Indeed, Amaket was sent by his father. It gave him some comfort to know that Shifü did care about them.

He then remembered; the wizard almost told him about the whereabouts of his sister, before they were attacked by the giant back in the palace. He began, “You never quite finished your words over where my sister is...”

“Behind you!”

The wizard became startled, with his eyes peeled, seeking support aggressively to be on his feet. Kenan turned to see what it was that scared Amaket so much. He caught sight of a grim, and awful figure best described as an abomination!

Its face was scarred terribly, with both its eyes gouged out. It was the size of a fully grown Baobab tree, with lean arms, and thick stems for feet. Its mouth was sealed with lava and rock, and its hands were like boulders. Its skin was grey like ash, and the moon shone its reflection upon its back. Kenan was shaken.

“Run!”

Kenan rolled downhill, as its tumultuous fist shattered the boulder he had leaned on. Amaket quickly waded over the fire, grabbing the pouch that was on the ground, and quickly turned to lift a flaming branch from the fire, waving it furiously on the Monster’s face.

The creature gave a guttural growl echoing through the mountain! In response, more thunderous steps could be heard approaching. It seemed that the battle had come to them.

Amaket’s knife had fallen from his belt. Kenan hurried to reach it. In his small stature, he went under the creature, slashing its turgid skin and cutting deeply its boneless legs. It oozed thick sap from its wounds, crashing on its back to its death.

“What is it?” Kenan asked, turning to a breathless Amaket.

“That, young master, is a *Shamalok*. I didn’t think her sorcery had gotten to this level. These were hidden away in the belly of the earth-” Amaket listened further, and spewed a warning, “There are more coming. Quick! We need to get to the horse.”

Kenan led a slow Amaket downhill in a panic. Before he could make the final bend down, another *Shamalok* stood in front of him. This one was larger than the first, its arms fit for oak tree branches. It threw the full weight of its fist at him, but he was swift to get behind the rocks. The thud on the ground felt like a tremor. It then turned in his

direction, with the lava in its mouth steaming off and dripping down to its feet. It smelt of sulphur. Meanwhile, Amaket was met by another. They were surrounded.

“Fight boy! Fight!”

A gust of wind from the mountains flowed down towards them, and the air wreaked sulphur. Kenan saw no other way past the rising creature, and he ran further up the mountain seeking better grounds. On seeing this, the *Shamalok* lifted its fists, burning them with the lava in its mouth. It then cast the melted stone in his direction. One broke mid-air into tens of sharp flints. They fell on Kenan’s footprints, with a flint tearing through his shirt, scraping his back.

Despite their weight, size, and sluggish nature, *Shamaloks* were good climbers. With every turn he made, the *Shamalok* elevated itself strongly above him. On seeing how far it had come, he slid down the smooth mountain rocks right under it, lifting his blade, and cutting through its chest down to its stomach, and the sulphur that burnt the lava flowed immensely, burning his sandal’s heel and part of his shoulder. As he mopped in pain, the *Shamalok* fell to its death, joining its fiery stomach to the mountain rocks.

Amaket lifted his arms against the third creature, but its blows clubbed his defence across the hillside. It came at him a second time, but he ditched the hit conjuring up a sharp wedge from the rocks on his side. He could feel the power from the moonlight well inside him. He started to throw the chips off the wedge towards the *Shamalok*. It growled in pain, raging forth to crush him. Its hammering fist landed on his cloak, and the creature lifted him into the air, sending him downhill, towards the horse. He fell in a thud, frightened horse. He hurt his left arm in the fall.

Kenan came down the mountain, holding his shoulder in pain. The *Shamalok*’s dark marble eyes saw him, and from a distance, you could tell, it meant to end him. It growled at him, spitting lava from its

mouth. It turned, taking giant leaps towards Kenan. Amaket lifted his visage to see this, and quickly held out his right arm from where he had fallen, and forged a series of sharp hedges from the rocks beneath the Shamalok, cutting through its chest! Sulphur was gushed out of the dead creature as it went reeling off the mountainside to its death.

It was a great feat to behold!

Two men: one a wizard, and the other a prince, killed 3 Shamaloks!

Amaket made something Kenan had never seen! He lifted flames from the remnants of the fire from earlier, and beneath his voice, he would utter, and the flame would turn blue! He would then hurriedly, like he was afraid it would burn out, lay it on their injuries, and like balm, healing his and Kenan's wounds.

"This has to be the work of the Sorceress. It is time to meet her in her abyss! We must leave this place now before any more of her legions come looking for us. If she can command these Shamaloks, then there is no telling what more she has at her disposal." After he was done, he helped Kenan to his feet. They got on the horse, then Kenan remembered, "The orb!"

"Young Master, you have such a faint memory!" Amaket showed him the pouch on his belt. "I couldn't trust your worrying heart to have this."

They rode off, to meet the sorceress.

The fortress

7 horses arrived at the foot of the fortress' rise. They dislodged their horses and tied them there. There was a small spring of water, where during an indulgence with the Sorceress, horses would be tethered and drink. Amon led the men, as all six carried the bodies of the men from Akanga on their shoulders. It was going to be a short climb. There was a gloominess ahead of them.

Amon remained unaware of what her Master wanted to do with the men. She was used to serving without question.

Once, while still a young maiden, she too had gone to seek the sorceress' help. Her purity pleased the Sorceress, and when she was unable to pay for the healing done to her father, Amon agreed to serve as her priestess for 15 years until her debt was cleared. Her bargain was fair. Some had turned to marauding travellers to clear their debt.

This night would mark her 5th year in service.

Sheera

Back in Akanga, Sheera sat outside the hut she shared with Mirito. Her mother and sister were fast asleep. It was a cold night there as well. The soundtrack of the night prevailed with the chirping of crickets. The river was full from the rains, so it flowed silently, and so did her tears. She was not mourning any loss, but she sobbed from the pain inside her that herbs couldn't piece back together.

Her fears had come true. To this day, very few times had she felt so alone. Even when her father died, there was Kenan's shoulder to rest her heavy head-on. Where had he gone to? Where was he when she was being tested? Had he abandoned her- taking his father's side? She had heard the rumours at the village market. They said that Kenan had left for Kush. Some said it was for official duty, while others said that it was to find a bride, one worthy of a Prince. It hurt to know that she was not going to hear from him again. It hurt that he left her heart this way.

Her mother refuted her desire to be with the man she was in love with. Maybe Heluwa was right to do so. Those royals had chewed up her loyalty, and spit them out without a care! She would ask herself, 'Since when did the choice of Love become a battle?' Her parents were never met with this kind of hostility when they chose to be

together.

Did she choose wrongly?

Is there even such a thing as loving wrongly?

Only time would tell.

Kenan had made his feelings known to her, and it was good that the confirmation came from his mouth to his fathers, and not from her. She wondered if he fought for her as much as she did, him. She wondered if he felt the severing break her heart suffered.

Those *pigs* who came as suiters had poisoned her mother into thinking that her daughter was most unbearable. They brought gifts and gold, yet she said 'NO' to them, and even though Heluwa did not want to force her daughter, many times she thought about their state. If Sheera agreed, then maybe they wouldn't have to toil so hard only to see all their efforts bear little to no fruit. Perhaps a fraction of their sickly poverty could have been cured. Over time, Heluwa's patience with Sheera was wilting.

Most girls her age would have easily given in to the askings of such men. They promised filthy riches on one hand, and yet a lifetime of being overlooked and unloved was hidden away on the other. Many had found good men: Some who served in the royal guard, those who traded, and also those whose fathers were servants to prominent families.

Her friend Mapeng' was married off to a young, handsome man from the field faction. His name was Kunta. He was honest and shy, kind and meek, but not very outspoken. He found a way into her heart one day when the girls were out in the market. They had been to the fishmongers and bought tilapia and a bit of millet flour from the mills. As they walked home, Mapeng's basket of flour tore and the flour spilled many handfuls. She did not know what to do, as this was going to be their only flour for the rest of that season.

In times of trouble, much like these, a kind and soft voice is the best

refuge. It helps calm the heart of its many worries. A young, charming Kunta stopped to offer them some help. He had a small flour mill nearby and he was new, as he had just gotten his inheritance from his father. He did not hesitate to invite them over, seeing them leave with two basketfuls of flour. Even Sheera got a share. Since that day, Mapeng' would not stop speaking about him. Whenever the two would go out to the mills, she would say, "Let's go see Kunta! He will give us a fair amount of flour and he is better than all the others." True to his habit, he always sent them back with a few handfuls extra. Swift was their friendship, and their marriage was due.

'Why couldn't the gods grant me a man like Kunta? I would try and fight my heart to love him. It is better than to live like this.'
Stubborn hearts desire things that they cannot have.

Forbidden fruits.

This was her plight.
She did not know what battle Kenan was fighting that night. It would take a miracle for his return. But, what if he didn't- return? Would her heart then learn to heal those gruesome pains?
She would feel more like a widow even though she was never married to him. He was all she had known since childhood. Mapeng' often encouraged her to keep praying and hoping. She told her that the gods could hear her and make a way, but that day Sheera doubted a great deal.

She told herself, 'He will come back. There at the river, my love shall return'. Love is not a sin. She wasn't the only one in love, and she could tell he meant it because she knew. She sat alone in the night. Sleep would not come, only floods of thoughts.

Ma'Lena

Ma'Lena questioned why she had remained silent before. She had prayed and kneeled for so long: Would these prayers bring back her boys?

Would they bring back Chemu?

Would a mother of 5 be reduced to one without but two?

What kind of prayer would drive a person to a point of no more tears, just painful air moving her pale lips. She rejected the consolations of her maid servants who brought her food and water. Her candles had not gotten dim. This was enough punishment.

She remembered standing there at the very gates of the Chief's homestead, sending them off. Had it not been better, to lose Chemu, but still have the other two here with her?

And what of her husband, the man who made this decree?

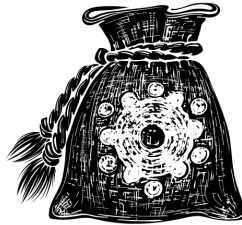
She swore that at all times she would be with him until death separated them. She knew that if she died, Shiftu would remarry and even bear more children. But if he passed before her, a woman would not be allowed to choose a suitor, especially if she is of royalty.

Which King- Which ruler would turn to an old widowed woman for his comfort? It was useless to cry now. Only hope that in some way, the gods would favour the lives of at least one of her boys. She prayed that even if the prophecy was to change, at least the gods would keep Museti and her husband even longer, that she would die a mother of a Chief.

This would certainly be a better way to die.

Her knees were tired. She dusted her tunic and stood. She took the water, leaving the food behind. She then walked to her husband's hut. He was not there. She knew that he felt this pain too. She sat on their bed, watching the moonlight as it mocked the darkness.

She hoped again, And again she prayed.



CONFRONTATIONS

AMAKET AND KENAN rode like the wind, faring through the gravel and ash of the mountain paths.

First light was fast approaching and Amaket's strength could fail him once more. The orb was fastened to his belt, and Kenan carried the knife. There was no turning back now.

Amon led the men to the entrance of the fortress. The bodies were beginning to tire the men. She stood ahead, awaiting them to catch up to her. She turned her eyes towards the city. It was not as glorious as before. The King and his son could not defend it if an attack came. They would all perish. The Sorceress had lied to him. All these things that Harem had let into his land would slowly become his end. Soon, the men stood with Amon towards the clearing:

“Oh Sorceress, I have returned with your prize!”

She spoke with such understanding. There was no echo to her words and no crackle to her voice.

“Amon, you do not bring all of it. If at all, you do not bring what I require the most.” Another voice came from within.

“I did as you asked, but the wizard was swift and his power too cunning. Forgive me for my errors,” Amon responded.

There was a long quiet. Then, “You may come.”

They walked in. The engulfing tunnel was burning with light ahead of them. Towards its end, all could feel the intensity of the threshold. A staircase led to the ‘Circle of the abyss’: There were lamps, similar to the unending smoulders in the palace, only that these burned more like flames. Amon held her coat close, as they took their last steps into the fortress.

On the last landing, they looked up, and there she was, in the middle of a large barren ground, facing East, surrounded by a ring of small lilac flames. She wore a purple cloak, covering her head in a veil, so no one could see her face. There was a devilish glow in her eyes peering through it. Her arms remained hidden inside her cloak, her feet in her tunic. Her seat was unoccupied. She remained still, levitating on the ashes. She was alone.

Behind her were totems of the Nkamanka, the Shamalok, The Jiza, the Duba, the Dingonek, and the Windrider of the West, engraved onto the fortress’ engulfing walls. Above the flaming circle, terrifying metal cages the size of tanks chained to the endless fading climb into the hollow dark ceiling. The cages leaned towards the circle’s edges, where hot boiling lava bubbled in splendour!

There was a backway that led to her fortress’ inner courts, hidden behind her sinister throne.

The men could feel the strong stench of darkness dancing around

their souls, hungering and thirsting. At the far edge of the ground was a shrine, almost like an altar. There was a little smoke billowing from it, as she had just completed her rituals to KEK for that night. The men came behind Amon and stood metres away. She continually hissed in low tones, her voice shifting from falsettos and low chesty voices, frequently colliding as *two* spoke from within her.

She rotated towards them, slowly removing her hand, revealing her aged skin, with long steel coloured nails.

“Place them in the cages. He is near. The one I seek is near!”

The men did as she asked:

The cages were lowered and the Akanga men were thrown in, unconscious. Those that caged them were careful not to fall into the lava.

“Do you have the possessions of payment they came with?”

They were produced, “Excellent!”

By the clenching of her fist, all the locks on the cages shut themselves. They were then lifted higher to position, and the Akanga men woke from their deep daze. The sorceress rotated back facing East.

“If you return as you came, the Wizard will meet with you, and you will die by his hand. I will see Harem in the morning after I am finished with these. You must then fly westwards ...”

As the men stood, one after the other developed wings and ruffling feathers. They lost their height and were reduced to crows! They flew out of the cave, never to return. She was very unkind with her dealings with those that she deemed unmagical.

“Amon!”

“Yes, Sorceress?”

“Fill my gauntlet. I thirst”

Amon smirked at this request.

The gauntlet was behind the backdoor. She returned with it and then lifted her body straight towards Shaka’s cage.

The men were yet to fully recover.

Shaka turned in his cage and met the face of Amon, and he stopped. She was the last person he had seen, but the ambiance had changed. He looked further and saw the Sorceress. In this haziness he thought, maybe it was still a dream.

All of a sudden, a sharp pain, like a piercing blade broke through his rib cage. It continued to taunt him, digging into his heart. In grave pain, he felt his body, yet no blade pierced him! He then saw Amon's eyes, pale as a mushroom, fixated on him. Like she enjoyed watching the torture. The silver gauntlet was slowly filling with a thick essence. He cried from the pain. He was losing his breath, fainting, only to be revived to relive the agony. His cry woke the rest, and they started realising that they were no longer at the palace.

The pain shocked Shaka's chest, withering his flesh, only to abruptly end. The gauntlet was full. Shaka's body was unsparingly drained. As he lay gasping for air, the others watched as the gauntlet was passed to the Sorceress. She took it and drank. Her flesh was revived to its youth. Her strength was renewed.

"Fasten them to the cage floors!"

She stood up and gave dry loud laughter, "The pain of my years as a mortal is to die tonight. Who shall be mighty enough to stand before She that holds the fate of all the 7 lands? The wizard thinks he has a hero at hand. Let them come! They will all fall!"

Amaket and Kenan

The horse did not fail Amaket and Kenan.

They arrived at the fortress' foot. Just as Amaket had feared, there were unattended horses, meaning Harem's men were near.

"Let us climb. If she sends men, then we will fight them as they come. If we wait, the moon will grow less powerful, and I will be of

no help to you,” Amaket directed Kenan.

“Then, may the gods be with us; I, with this blade and you with your *magic*,” Kenan said, wielding his only defence in his hand.

They walked keenly watching their every step, lest a trap was laid there for them. After taking a good number of paces, Amaket stopped. Kenan lagged behind him and asked, being wary of any harm around him.

“Why do you stop? We are almost there-”

He silenced Kenan, and told him to ‘listen!’

“Do you hear that?”

He listened. “What?” Kenan whispered.

“The crows...there!” He pointed up above their stair climb.

“She needs no men. She knows we are near. Young master-” He put his arm on him dearly, “You must promise me, that no matter what happens, you will not listen to her lies, no matter how enticing! You fell for it once. You must be strong and fight it with all you can!”

Kenan felt the weight of those words. “I will do my best...”

“Your best is not good enough! This is it. Beyond tonight, the path will align itself. Doom and life are now placed in our hands. May Kai help us!” Amaket then placed his hand upon Kenan’s eyes, and said, “SEE WHAT HAS BEEN HIDDEN FROM MORTAL EYES - *ONA SAIDE ANA!*” and then lifted his hand from them. “Unless you see, then we go blindly to our enemy. She is capable of much greater illusion than I.”

They continued up to the mouth of the fortress. They looked at each other. They had arrived! One step in front of the other, they walked down the stairway. Kenan remained alert. Right before the fortress’ reveal, a hissing voice pounced upon him, “You do well to fear me, prince!” He knew the voice. “You come to me with a knife? Have you not learnt anything? That cheating fool of a watcher who brings you leads you to your death!”

He missed a step, almost slipping but Amaket held him, turning a cautionary eye at him. They came to a clearing:

The scene of red ragging flames, cages, and behold...the Sorceress!

Her head was uncovered. She looked young again with her skin dark and glowing with a hue.

“I have waited for a long time, Prince of Akanga!”

Kenan looked up and saw his men caged with their necks chained to the middle and their hands bound. The mighty Batu, the brothers of Torment, Uriam, and Webi- all helpless! Shaka coiled up and drained of his strength like one who had not eaten in months, Roba unable to move his head for comfort from the weight of the shackles, and Jero his brother, like one of the caged doves of their boyhood. She wanted him to feel defeated. To deem him trapped like she had once been made to feel. Once, when she, despite being more powerful than *them*, she let them have their way. All of a sudden, the amulet on Kenan began to glow uncontrollably.

The Azmathes had seen the merging of 7 lights at the heart of the great evil, and it was focused on them. On seeing this, Amaket became assured that they were not alone.

He stepped forward, between Kenan and the Sorceress.

“We brought what you asked for, now give us what we came for?”

The Sorceress jeered, “Do you honestly believe that this was all about an exchange?”

“Release the girl. Your fight is not with the innocent.

Do it and we will hand you the orb!” Amaket said, rolling out his fists, ready for a fight.

“What do you take me for, *Watcher*? All this trouble, just to duel with wizardry beneath me?” She then mastered and summoned forth one of the 5 abominations engraved on the wall. The graven Image fell from the stone, erratically materialising into a breathing creature!

“Deal with him!” she commanded, and it obeyed.

The *Jiza*- an ancient lizard- slithered forth, licking its lips of poison aged hundreds of years. Amaket stumbled as he measured the sight of this giant creature. It was 3 times the size of the Nile Crocodile, and with its beady eyes fixed on him. The Sorceress then slowly rose to her seat.

“These creatures were the fall of our fathers. Mistakes like these are meant to be mastered, that way they become under your control. Over time, *Nkamanka*, the *Shamalok*, the *Jiza*, the Ogres, the *Duba*, the *Lukwata*, the *Dingonek*, and dragons have served me well. Better than the oriental guards of the palace.” She rested her deadly gaze on the remaining totems.

“You have already seen two. I do not wish to release *Nkamanka*, for he will finish you quickly. You see, Prince, even I am gracious and patient.”

The moment those words came from her mouth, the ground beneath Amaket and the lizard began to sink. It swallowed them whole, and closed before plain sight!

She put out the ring of fire and reached for Kenan.

He was lifted from the ground where he stood and abruptly brought forth to her seating.

“Your people pray as if your gods can hear you. How ignorant you all are! You build your beliefs on such fickle objects. How can a god be made by the hands of men? I expected an army, but your father sent you, his two sons. The future of his Chieftdom to perish for his sins.” Kenan turned to see his brother, and he saw the suffering all around him.

“You know what you must do. As the Wizard told you- Give me the orb!”

Amaket had been very stern to him. The Orb was their only bargain, and even though by a tiny sniff, he felt a sense of desperation in the

Sorceress. He wondered, 'What is stopping her from grabbing it from my cold dead body?'

She saw his thoughts, and a gruesome voice rose from within her. "The orb and the girl will be spared." In her tightening grip, he was sure to fail. However, he remembered:

"Amaket...Amaket has the orb!"

As she rose, so did the flames grow back. The wizard had tricked her once more. In anger, she took off her cloak, tearing it down. It was then, Kenan's eyes saw it- the Talisman! It was the fairest jewel, carved from every gem known to the Lands, then moulded into the shape of a triad star. It was glowing with iridescence and majesty his eyes had never seen. It had small encryption on it.

It read close to his eyes as he was held there before her.

"Well then, let us see how well he will fare against my Jiza!"

Her hands moved Kenan in the air, wind clasping his neck. His breath choked him.

"PIL-FA-SEIGH!"

On hearing this, her eyes widened as she broke in her power and fell to the ground.

"Who taught you those words?" She choked.

Kenan was immediately loosened from her grasp, massaging his throat. He gasped for air, finding the strength to get up again. Amora hid behind the backdoor, watching closely. The Talisman ceased!

"You do not know what power you are meddling with, fool!"

Kenan swore to his chest, and belted out, "PIL-FA-S..."

Before he could speak the last of it, he waved her arm, flipping Kenan off the ground, his body crashing on the ashy floor.

"Lest you want to return to your father, those words must not come out of your mouth ever again!"

Confrontations

“So be it! I am a small price to pay for my people’s freedom from your evil!” he spoke with such travail as he lay on his back.

“Who said that they will live? Great disaster will sweep the lands soon, and very little will remain. You bargain for nothing! There is no honour amongst your people, not even at your throne. I have seen the way they treat their own people. Selfish! I was once just like you- too trusting, thinking that good has its reward. You know so little about those you fight for, and a dreadful lesser about those you fight! Even if my turf ends tonight, you shall return to nothing. Do you think they will be quick to make you a hero? They are like vultures, deserving nothing but bones. The wizard lied to you. He knows the battle is lost. Look around you, I am Judge now. You are their sacrifice and behold, none can stop *Him!*”

These words fought with Amaket’s in Kenan’s mind, “...and what of you? Shall I believe you, yet to see what you have made of this Land? A playfield for cheats and robbers? You gave your word! If you stand as a judge, then honour yours as we have ours.”

The grounds she stood on were thinning. She was tied to her word, and so was Kek. From the darkness of the back room, the breathing shadow of the reaper appeared. Its bandages were gone, and it was in a grey robe, headless, as Uriam had described the creature he had seen at the inn. It came to the light of the flames, trailing behind it was Chemu, horizontally laid above the ground on a bed of smoke.

“She will return to your father. That was my word to him.”

Akanga

In the silence of the night in the Chief’s homestead, next to Anyiko’s bed, there was a warmth returning. She woke and turned to see what this build of mass was. She was frightened by this. She then saw it

forming, and she quickly ran out of her hut screaming.

“Come quickly! There is a demon in my hut!”

Shifü heard her, and quickly, he ran from his throne. Soon, Ma’Lena and a few maid servants came from their huts. “What ails you, my daughter? Did the reaper return?” Shifü asked, his heart palpitating. He could not afford to lose another one of his children. The male servants were ordered to step ahead and walk in to meet this unseen threat. As they neared the door, they could hear footsteps—tiny ones. “There! At the door!” Jamba pointed. The face of Chemu showed in the moonlight. She was unharmed, and well. Ma’Lena ran to her. Many tried to hold her back saying, ‘It could be a trap!’ But she held out her hand and touched her face. She felt Chemu’s tears. It was her. Her warm face, her kinky hair, and her childish self. Ma’Lena embraced her tightly in her arms, and then Shifü ran to meet them. There was joy in his eyes. He wept for his sons under his breath. Though he wept for Chemu, his heavy poignant heart reminded him of what he had done.

“There must be hope, after all!”

The fortress

After this, the reaper spirit had finished its task, and like dust, wasted to the ground, leaving the robe there that Amon took away.

“What do you hold against my father? What did my people ever do to you?”

“There is blood on your head. Blood on your father’s hands! You know nothing of loss, just privilege!” Suddenly, her body convulsed. Amon did not come to her aid. It was like two were fighting inside of the Sorceress, “No! I have to see her first...”

“He must suffer as they made you suffer!”

“He still has her. You promised!”

Confrontations

“Get out of their way Kenan!” A weary voice came from the back of the entrance. The Sorceress’ eyes squinted at the sight of a weary Amaket!

She summoned Amon. “*Cage the heir!*”

“Watcher!” She dusted her tunic. “It is almost dawn. It’s only a matter of time before your power fails you, and you will end up like those men your useless Kai sent to seek me. Hand over the orb!”

Amaket’s cloak had been ripped clean off his shoulders and shredded into ribbons. His face and knees were bruised. His shirt was dirty from the brawl, and his body was sore from battling the Jiza.

The fight had been close as the Jiza cornered him, almost touching him with its poisonous tongue, when all of a sudden it fell, weak from an unknown cause. It was then that he managed to kill it.

“I will take my chances. You are weak, your strength is frail. Let us leave, for your deal is done. Your Lord will have nothing against you. Do this, and the Orb is yours.” He turned his eyes slightly to Kenan who was being dragged away.

He parted his legs, weaving with his hands in a circular motion, drawing from the last of the fading moon. He harnessed all he had. A thunderous flash blinded the room, lifting the Sorceress off the ground, onto the walls of the fortress, shaking the cages. Amaket lowered his guard, lightning bolting from his fingers. His strength became full! As the rubble settled, the Sorceress held her hand over her face, and she was bleeding. Her weakness was bare. She pulled from the cracking wall and levitated forward furiously.

Even without the Talisman, the Sorceress had drawn enough to hold her own in a fight!

“You fell once, and lost the Talisman you took an oath to protect, and you will fall again! This time for good!” She lifted her

hands as if lifting heavily, then arced her flesh like a bow, then turned swiftly like a serpent, spinning into a whirlwind of flames. Bolts flashed and fire razed, as she pushed the impact of her power at Amaket's stance. A loud thud was heard all around, enough to burst an eardrum. Amaket was now between the overpowering blaze of the sorceress, pushed to the edge of the grounds, beneath it, lava!

The heat burned the skin of his exposed forearms. He cried at the pain, but he held on. The Sorceress saw this and in a calculated move, she amplified the pressure. She had grown in strength tenfold from the last time they had duelled, even at weakness she was a great opponent. Amaket was slipping. The heat of the lava tasted on his heels. He was looking at death if nothing changed.

As the Sorceress focused her energy on Amaket, Kenan noticed how Amon was distracted by the scene, and he quickly pulled himself from her grip and shoved her to the ground. He drew Amaket's blade at her. Amon was not shaken. She laughed, catapulting herself back to her feet. Her face gradually changed. Her beauty became terrifying! She hit the blade clean off Kenan's fist in his first strike, falling away. She then moved defiantly to grab his neck, as he would not stop her force. As she stretched her arms towards him, the amulet on Kenan's neck burst into a great light, blinding Amon. She fell, grappling and crying in pain, as her eyes burned like there were a handful of *Takoan* peppers in them.

Kenan reached for his belt. Just then, he felt something on his side. It wasn't there before. He looked to see- the Orb! Seeing Amon defeated, he turned to the duel behind him. He reached for a stone, throwing it at the Sorceress. She turned to him unfazed.

THE ORB.

Confrontations

At that moment, she put her arms down, and Amaket felt the last shockwave pass through his spine. He swayed precariously, falling forward, away from the edge.

Batu came to, from his cage and saw what Kenan was about to do.

“No!...don’t let her have it!”

“This is what you have desired the most. Here, have it! Take it and let us be!” The men’s cages we’re too high up for Kenan to hear.

In a split second, the Orb flew to her hands. She held it so dear like a mother would a child. None of them understood this.

Kenan began fashioning a way to unlace the Talisman from her neck.

The *magic* that held the men was slowly wearing off.

On his left, Amon was drying her eyes as the burn was yet to stop. Amaket lay on the far edges of the grounds, almost unconscious with his face to the ground. The sorceress then placed her endeared Orb at her feet with such care and tenderness. She then closed her eyes, to revive it. With all her power focused, Kenan saw his chance!

He crept off behind the Sorceress, slowly, not making a sound. He saw where Amaket’s blade had fallen after meeting Amon’s resistance and took it up. He got behind her and started towards her blindside. As he got closer, a second figure began to form on the sorceress’ back.

“Where do you think you are going?”

He fell backwards, dropping the blade as he attempted to flee. It was as if this deformed figure grew from her flesh! It did not bear the Talisman. Its voice boomed like one of a mighty man:

"Finally, you are mine, heir! No magic stands between us, no Sorceress to give mercy, no Wizard to protect you, no limits to what my power can do to you. Not even Kai can save you now!"

Kenan grabbed the ground so hard that it crumbled in between his fingers. At its sight, a terrifying fear shadowed his heart.

"I am the one you should fear..."

It lifted its arm, conjuring up a silver spear from his forsaken blade, with sharp shafts on both ends. It then swung it at Kenan's feet, and he jumped off desperately. Before he could lift his body, another swing came for his neck, scraping his left shoulder. The figure then jumped in the air, twisting like a tide and then jousting the spear straight for his chest! The amulet again blimped, lifting a shielding on him. The spear hit it so hard that it flew from its grasp, cutting the figure's wrist deeply. It felt no pain, sealing off the cut indefinitely!

The figure of the Sorceress grunted, *"Curse this weak form!"*

Kenan coughed up blood. Batu charged him to rise, cringing from his cage. Kenan turned to his right and saw the spear planted on the ashy grounds. He rolled to reach it, only for the figure to pull it up back to its grey hands.

"You are no warrior! You are no fighter!"

What good did Kai see in you? You want justice in a cruel world, Peace in a wartorn country- Water from a rock? Men are flawed, selfish, and cunning. They deserve what they receive! These things Kai believes in cannot cure the likes of your father-"

It raised the spear, once again aiming at Kenan's heart, only for another flare to burn the figure's arms. The spear fell from its hold,

prompting Kenan to dash forward to retrieve it. *The only weapon in that place, fit to cut the evil.*

“No matter!”

The figure dodged Kenan’s attempt at it, sliding off into one of the totems remaining at the wall; the Nkamanka!

Amaket had been still, as his body healed. He finally woke up to see what was happening. From a distance, his frail voice warned Kenan,

“We cannot wait for Him to wake that beast. We have what we came for. Free the men!”

“What about the Orb?” asked Kenan.

“There is no more rightful place for it to be! We leave with our lives and fight another day!” Amaket responded as he stumbled to his feet. Daylight was fast approaching.

Kenan then ran towards the cages, but then the form of Amon quickly appeared before him. She wrestled him to the ground. The spear is all that stood between his flesh and her dagger-like claws. She hammered down at him, Kenan blocking her with all his strength. Around them, the walls started to crumble. The beast was awakening! As the fortress shook fervently, a loose shard fell from above, digging into Amon’s back. At that moment, Amon died. “Hurry now!” The wizard called from the other end.

The Sorceress remained unfazed in her efforts to revive the Orb of Seseka.

At the magician's den, a groan was heard. One of the new apprentices heard it and he could tell distinctly that it came from the inner room. He rushed to find the body of Seseka glowing, and life returning to it. He ran to Kasha, who was deep in meditation, and

whispered, "She is getting up!" Kasha was immediately drawn back to the premise. He held the boy by the arm and led him out.

Amaket lowered the cages slowly. Kenan used the silver spear to break the locks of Jero, Uriam, Webi, Roba and Shaka's cages.

He barely broke Batu's cage, when another tremor, greater than the first, rattled the fortress. Batu's cage swung further past the edge of the grounds, with the spear still dangling off its lock!

The beast freed its leg. *Amaket* ran towards Kenan. He was still limping from the duel earlier. "Come on men! You can heal later, now we have to run- or we perish here!"

Then, finally, with a grand shake, the mammoth beast stood, with flaming red eyes, strength like ocean waves, and skin tough like an armour of steel, with bullish horns and a bitten-off tail end. From its step, lava shook like water in a brook. The glory of this monster, like no other, ever seen, only heard in folk and tales. The spirit of Kek now lived in it. With just a roar, sharp flints from the rock ceiling started to fall like rain.

"Cover your heads!" Shouted Roba. They did not have their shields, so the small rocks easily cut their skin. Shaka grabbed *Amaket's* arm and pulled him under the lowered cages for safety, but even this was not enough. The beast then lifted its leg, making a pass over the sorceress, heading for the men. "Quick, for the stairway!" Roba came again.

"What about Batu?" Webi asked.

Batu saw their concern and braced himself, "Go! Now!"

"We cannot leave you here! There's still some time..." Uriam came.

"Do as I say. GO YOU FOOLS!" Batu commanded them.

With great hesitation, they took *Amaket* and carried him through the plane of the ground in the fortress. The beast then

changed course, charging at them. Batu saw this and quickly reached for the silver spear to break his chains, as well as the cage locks. The beast's horn swerved dangerously close, breaking the spear end into shards, and cutting off the heavy iron chain holding Batu's cage, and it went falling into the lava!

Kenan saw this, and remembering Batu's words, he felt crushed at heart. Strong hands held him, discouraging reversal. It was better to save the many, at the cost of one. He looked back at the beast and thought, perhaps the sorceress was right- the battle was already lost. The men ran with all their might, as the beast gained on them. Shaka tripped on his sandal laces as he rushed, with him down, Amaket's weight overwhelmed Uriam's shoulder and the watcher fell behind. Shaka could feel the breath of Nkamanka, just whiskers away. Uriam tried to run back to him, but Webi, his brother, could not allow it. Jero held a fussing Kenan from the stairway. In a desperate turn, these men knew sacrifice well, as they served in the same Age set and Battalion during their training.

The beast's hoof raised above Shaka, burying him under it! It then dug with its horns, throwing ash as well as the watcher up in the air, like the wind to a leaf. The rest did not wait to see the end of this and ran fast up the staircase.

At the edge of the grounds, Batu dangled inches away from the lava. His body sweated, and his skin seared slightly.

When the cage had swung low, the heat loosened the metal, and finally, his narrow escape was possible. A reckless breakout jump saved him from the lava, but not from death, yet. He dire-ly held on to the crevices of the ground's edge with his fingers. He could feel the skin of his fingertips yield to the weight of his body. He held on tight, fighting to raise himself to level ground. His muscles were now working to save his life!

Reunion

The Sorceress was deep in her incantation, wading the spirit world, to reveal Seseka from the Orb. Time for her had stood still. Kek's spirit was alive, but her spirit sought to find a part of her that was lost in Akanga. Her last remaining blood. She finally saw the gates of it. The place where the undead strayed. As she walked in, she felt her power weakening. She had to hurry and get Seseka out, so she could return and draw more strength from the Talisman.

Finally, in the clearing, the spirit of Seseka lay on a bed of rock. It was slowly awakening. Her boldness began to wither. Her knees wanted to give in for a moment and just look at her from a distance. Although, what good would it be for her to have waited this long and to have made all these sacrifices, only to stand away from her only prize.

Seseka's body began to quiver gently. Sheba felt a compelling pull towards her, like a mother to her child, only that Seseka had grown so much, she would no longer fit in her cradling arms. Uncertainty rested in her mind, and it was easy for Seseka to deny her, but she had to make an effort. She believed that a daughter would know her mother's touch even in a host of many. As she approached the place of Seseka's holding, she saw how much of her was in Seseka. She was growing up to look more like her mother, even though there was a little Zua, especially on her nose and ears. After what seemed like an age, she smiled. There was a simmer of joy in her heart. She then went ahead and laid her hand on her growing hair. It was tough and purple.

"Just like mine..."

Then Seseka's eyes opened!

"You are closer home now than you will ever be, my dear....Seseka"

On hearing the voice, the flashes of the visions she had seen before the visitation at Shifü's courtyard came flooding back. Her heart raced, as

she quickly rose, lifting the weight of her body to the opposite side of the rock bed. Her robes were clear and white. She took a clear look at the woman on her side.

“You! It’s you I saw imprison me! Don’t touch me with your evil claws!”

“Don’t waste your energy,” Sheba said, as she saw Seseka attempt to conjure up magic with her hands. “There is no magic here, daughter-”

There was shock all over Seseka’s spirit.

“It cannot be....you are the evil I saw! You cannot be her...you cannot be my mother!” Seseka did not know what to feel.

“I have looked for so many years. There is no chance that I am of your descendant - I refuse!”

“Let me- I will explain everything,” she saw the fear in Seseka’s eye. So Sheba sang. She sang the songs of her lullabies and the songs of Nubia that she had known. Seseka remembered those words. She remembered the day her eyes first saw—she could see the thatched rafters over her, the dwelling melodies of:

*‘morning till evening, child of the running, wait for my coming,
because my love is still hoping-’*

“No! You cannot be my mother....you cannot be!” Seseka coiled in denial. There was so much she could not understand.

Sheba then went ahead and withdrew the covering of the hood on her head, and from the boldness of her scalp, a grand flow of purple hair showed. Seseka was amazed. There was no doubt. This was her mother! Even so, she kept away from her touch and reach. Sheba then felt a great power leave, making her lose feeling in her left leg, falling onto one knee. Seseka instinctively ran by her side to help Sheba up. She held her by the arm, onto the bed of rock. Sheba was in grave pain. She then put her hand on Seseka’s shoulder and lifted her face.

Through her purple locks, her eyes were tearing up.

She spoke:

"I never meant for this to be how you found out. It was the only way I was assured I could see you one last time. I left you with Olu because I trusted him to show you the right path, that you will not see the terrible path that I had chosen. I could not take away the life you had ahead of you. Forgive me, my daughter.."

"Tell me then...why did you wait so long?"

"You and your people's magic could never have let me. You grew far much stronger than I anticipated. I guess it is better now because magic is no longer a hindrance here." Tears rolled down her cheeks, which seemed to slowly age with each minute, "Your father paid with his life. You see, someone has paid with their lives to see me free. I had to yield to Kek..."

Seseka's face disapproved strongly, but Sheba insisted, "I was worn and tired. I had nothing more to live for. And now, to see you like this– even with all I have done, if my life ends, my heart is full. I let this rotting burden of unforgiveness lead by blindness, and yes, I chose wrong–"

She let go of Seseka's shoulder, "What Olu taught you is nothing compared to how much you have in your blood, my daughter. I was rejected from my home, there in the North country, and the same people that we helped rescue– the same ones my family gave their lives for, they planned against me..." She turned back to Seseka, "Helping these people will only lead to trouble."

"I do not believe that. They raised me, and I found a place among them. There is indeed some good in them–"

"It is because they gain from you! Once they are full of the honey, and they become tired of it because they do not understand it, they will turn against the beekeeper and they will slaughter them."

Seseka hid her face. She was well aware of what Sheba was talking about. This was partly why anyone who was gifted was hidden away in the magician's den. They were not allowed to live out their lives as 'people' but as tools of service.

Sheba placed her hand on Seseka. It had some life in it, soft and frail, "You care for them. I understand. I too have always been. However, I have seen that it is best to look after oneself first. To care for others is to arm them with weapons and be sure that when the time favours them, they will use them against you."

"...But there will be salvation! Surely, you cannot judge them all by the mistakes of one."

"My child, you have not lived for as long as I have. You have not seen the pain and greed that they are capable of..." She stopped moving all of a sudden. Seseka became worried.

"Mother....mother...." Her skin was now showing her age clearly. Seseka wept on the rock. In a gulp of air, Sheba fought for her life. She then raised her frail fingers to the mirroring entrance, where she had entered from. Seseka turned to look. At that moment, she saw a man rising from the fires of the grounds of battle. He took a shard of the broken silver spear from the ground between them and ran towards the body of Sheba, who is the Sorceress. She could see his face. It was Batu. He then raised it, and in a loud cry, he put the shard through the heart of the Sorceress! With her blood in his hands, he left her to die.

Seseka saw the amulet on his neck, and she felt a heaviness in her chest. This grieved Seseka. She cried out loud and then turned to her mother, whose breath was leaving her. Her form had turned cold, as her eyes lost life. YET, Seseka was meant to believe in the purity of the intentions of the men she served? Sheba had let go, choosing not to fight anymore. She saw many spirits rise from the pits of the flames around the grounds where the body lay.

The captives were freed.

Right then, a spirit: that of the same Sheba laid on the bed of rock appeared next to Seseka. She then in a clear, distinct manner looked at her daughter and before disappearing spoke:

“I have finally found peace. You have seen the Truth for yourself. You know what you must do.”

The spirit walked away, joining two other blindingly white figures, similar in form. It was then that the vengeance of a mother was passed on to her daughter. This was a battle Seseka would have to fight till her end.



THE JOURNEY BACK

KASHA WAS BY Seseka's body when she finally woke up. She was overwhelmed by the events that led to her waking. She was weak in her flesh. Teas that had dammed up around her eyes streamed down her cheeks. Kasha helped sturdy her with his arm. "Careful! You have not eaten for many weeks." Her lungs could not master enough air to speak. He could hear her wheezing in agony. Something was wrong. Kasha ordered the apprentices to make her porridge and left her in their hands. He could not take seeing her in that state.

Batu had succeeded in killing the Sorceress. She lay, like an aged, brittle foetus in heavy bundles of clothes, there on the floor.

Upon her death, the Nkamanka had started turning to stone from its hind legs. Its body was slowly cast into stone until the spirit of Kek fully left it. The flames from the fiery ring then exploded into a

blinding bright yellow, retreating to the trenches of the Lava. She was gone, and so was her hold on all of Kush. Amaket remained hoisted by his shirt on the Nkamanka's horn, his screams dying. Batu stood still in amazement, as the beast's final roar faded into the morning. There was no sure way for any one man to have slain it on his own. Perhaps with an army.

Amaket yelped out, "Help me get down!"

Uriam, Webi, Roba, Kenan, and Jero did not stop in their tracks, up the stairs, through the tunnel into the opening that led to the breaking of daylight outside. Uriam was last, slowing down for a moment. He perceived the silence chasing them, and his heart felt the urge to interrogate it. Why did he not hear the soul-crushing roar of the Nkamanka anymore?

He turned to look. Webi noted that there was an increasing gap between them. He thought, 'He probably blames himself for what happened to Shaka'.

"The beast- It has gone silent," Uriam said to himself, certain that something had changed in the Fortress. Before his brother could reach him, he bolted back into the tunnel. "No! Uriam, don't!" cried Webi. He became certain that the heaviness of all this had burdened his brother. Kenan also was not far behind, nudging Webi towards Uriam's direction, "If he heard something, we cannot hesitate. As long as there are men in there, we can always try."

"Did you see that....monster?!" Came Jero from behind, "Brother! we will die if we return to that place."

"Jero, father made us come here with little hope of return. If there is SOMEWHAT a chance to save anyone who tried to fight for our cause, I am taking it!" Kenan said, without looking back at his brother. He followed Uriam into the Fortress, and so did Webi. Jero lagged. Roba dashed right past him.

"Am I the only one who thinks that this is too daring?" Jero asked.

“I am under oath to give my life for you. I am simply doing my duty, young master!” Roba’s voice disappeared in the darkness ahead. Uriam swiftly climbed down those stairs like it was a smooth slope. His heart was drawn to the silhouette wavering on the corners of the flaming walls; that of a stagnant beast, like the one that had terrorised them moments ago. He did not stop. He had to be sure of it. As he got closer, other footsteps lauded from behind him, calling his name frantically. He slowed down, as his heartbeat fastened. His final steps onto the grounds inside the fortress were met with an aghast! He stood there, still like a statue. The rest quickly reached him, and on seeing Uriam’s figure perplexed where he stood, they thought of the worst. “Uriam...get away from her!” finally came Kenan. He did not move. They got battle-ready, taking those last steps so cautiously that a grasshopper would have been louder. Eventually, the scene was slowly unveiled, and so was their awe:

There, the Nkamanka, a 30-foot monster: a rock statue, with Amaket dangling by its horns. Under this magnificent monster, was a man, like a tick on a bull, trying to get the wizard down. None spoke a word. Batu looked back and saw the men. He then signalled them with renewed strength, “I thought you left! Come, help me get him down.”

Uriam and Webi ran fast at Batu and met him in an embrace and a relieving joy. Kenan stood behind them, taking it all in. Batu saw him and relayed his words, “I told you. As long as I am alive, no harm will come to you.” This did not explain how all this had happened. Roba came rushing past him, only for him to see that the noises were not of a fearsome fight, but of joy. Behind him was a slow Jero, contemplating the bizarre act of returning to the very place of death they had been saved from. He was yet to behold the turn of events.

Kenan resolved to go around the massive statue to see where the Sorceress had gone. If the Nkamanka was dead, then she either was

compromised or...gone.

There she was. A weak fossil-like body, in its clothes. He hesitated to reach it. Then on a keen look, there was a shiny object wrapped in her tunic. He slowly reached beneath the lifeless body and held it in his hands. 'THE TALISMAN!' He saw his pouch right next to the ashy cloak and shattered Orb. Kenan wrapped the Talisman in a ripped piece of the cloak, and put it in the pouch, swiftly before the others came.

After the men got the Wizard down, they were ready to leave the fortress. They missed Kenan for a moment. Jero followed the path he had last seen him and found Kenan kneeling next to the body of the Sorceress.

"We need to get out of here before the men of Harem's guard return." Kenan then asked without turning back, "What shall we do with this body?"

"Burn it!" came up Amaket without hesitation. "Turn it into ashes, same for all the others here. They must not be found. We do not want to bring the idea of treason to the throne of Harem!"

"And so, shall we return to the palace after this? I fear that Kambo is not in our company. If they get word of our disappearance, what then will Harem make of him?" Came up Roba from behind Amaket. Indeed, they had reason to worry. Not just for Kambo, but also, where else was safe for any of them? The scouts of Kush all around the South would see them and possibly rally the information to their King. Amaket's present power was not enough to shield them all. Kenan knew not to trust anyone with the Talisman he carried. Amaket may have as well forgotten about it, as he never even mentioned it during the burning of the Sorceress' clothes. Amaket thought hard. Then, he remembered!

"No. We will take another road, one that is North of here. Yes! *Harem has never anticipated any enemies from the North.* We will flee

Northwards, then to Adwa, and make our exit from there. As for the elder, there is nothing we can do. Is our priority not to return to Shifü? He will be expecting his sons. Once it is done, we can think of Kambo. He too knew of the risk that lay before him. I know he set his house in order for whatever outcome, as every one of us did. That is the high calling that lays upon him, and it is an honourable one.”

They threw the bodies of the Sorceress and Amon into the lava together with all their clothes. They also entered the dark back room, where they found a large amount of gold coins, in the reserve of which the Sorceress kept her money. They took enough for two more journeys and each a cloak for their journey back.

They then walked out of the fortress, leaving everything else behind, including the body of Shaka- crushed under the beast’s hoof. *They had briefly done a warrior’s prayer over his death and vowed to prepare a grave for him on returning to Akanga.* As they came down the fortress’ climb, Uriam- who was last to leave- reported seeing some men on horses from the rise, far on the horizon.

“Grab a horse and follow me!” Amaket said as he rushed to get on the horse given to him by Shifü. The men who had been turned into crows had left their horses there. One for each of the men, with one to spare. They took the back rise of the mountain, to stay away from the visible vantage of the men coming to the fortress, and away from their approach. The terrain hid them well.

Harem’s palace

The guards were away, doing their duty. Most of the guests were leaving that morning, and reports had been spread that Harem was unwell from an untold illness. Kambo woke in the middle of the empty great hall. He did not see the men, nor the guests, and this made him wonder, “Have I become too old for brew?”

He got up promptly, rushing out through the great door, into a confusing maze of hallways. There were maidens outside, tending to the last of the guests. Daylight burned his eyes. He turned to see from whence they had come, further into the inner courts. Now he remembered! He marched on eagerly, hoping to find the men in their room, but on nearing his arrival there, a group of guards stood at the entrance, blocking it. Some laid on the floor injured, as others carried rubble away from the terrible scene. Kambo feared for the worst,

“What did they do?!”

He then hid behind one of the pillars near him, lest he was boiled in the same pot as his men. He remembered the last time they talked: It was at the table before Harem excused himself to attend to some-urgent matters.

‘What if the men were in the gallows?’ He thought further.

His clothes would betray him, and so would his outstanding accent. He then saw, from a distance, a male servant. He had not seen one like him before. He was carrying a fold of clothes headed to the East Wing of the Palace. Kambo saw it wise to follow him to what he assumed would be the laundry room. In as much stealth as he could master, he kept behind the servant, staying away from the open. The elaborate design of this palace gave many hidden spots along its hallways. It was an odd thing to see. Curious old man!

Finally, the man made a turn, and shortly after, Kambo followed. He was right! This was the laundry room. Kambo timed for the robes to be placed on the countertop, where the man left them. He rushed in and measured one that would fit him. There wasn’t much to choose from, but the quality of the garments was good enough, even for the shawls! As he tried to undress, he heard footsteps from the opposite end of the corridor. Quickly, taking whatever he held, he hid behind the room’s door. As he waited for the steps to pass, he could hear gossip from the individuals passing by:

“...the King is very ill. Last night was very untimely!” one man said.

“Indeed! I hope that his endeared Sorceress will come fast to heal him.” The other said.

“It is a pity that this had to wait till morning. It would have been better if she made her dwelling here among the King’s allies.”

“The men left immediately when the Prince summoned them. I am sure once she arrives she will catch all of the illness before it does any further harm.”

“-and what of the King’s guests? I wonder what those men from Akanga will report back to their Chief?”

This in particular concerned Kambo.

“You did not hear? They were the reason Harem fell! If Harem ever wakes from this illness, he could pursue war with....” their voices faded as they took the turn. Kambo’s heart became even more troubled. He had to find a way back home, and warn Shiftu of this. He quickly folded his old garments, saving the amulet that remained on his neck. He walked out the door briskly, covering his head with a shawl he had found. As he walked off, the man returned to his clothes and saw the mess. He then spotted a few missing ones. He ran out to see who the thief was, but Kambo was too quick for his glance.

“Why do I always lose the good ones?” he blamed himself. He relented and went back about his business.

As Kambo crafted his way out, the Palace guards began resuming their positions. The maidens were busy in their usual morning routines, and so it was beginning to crowd. He then spotted a group of elderly guests, leaving the Palace. He quickly joined their company, hiding behind them, in the best manner he could. The guards did not make much of it, as they had seen many guests, some drunk and disorderly that same morning. As they proceeded to the gate, there was a checkpoint. Each guest had to verify their name and pick their

horse, so they could leave. Kambo and company had not checked with the guards, as they were brought in by the Prince. He now became very worried. What would he do once the guards got to him? Who would he say he was? The men in front of him were a little intoxicated, so in their stuttering, they bought him some time to think.

He looked around and saw the place where their horses had been tied up. It was the stable of the King, and two guards stood there. There was no way around it. Every corner here was guarded, and only one option remained viable for his exit: through the gate.

"I am Ofenu, son of Kuo, the great spice trader of the Takoa!" came up one of the men. "I am Gezenu, also a son of Kuo. Do you not see the resemblance?" the other barked at the guards signing them off.

"You stink of brew! No son of Kuo is ever sober, is there?" the guards joked at the sight of these men. Soon after, Kambo's turn arrived.

"State your name and business here, my lord?" One of the men seated at the registry asked. He scanned Kambo in his odd clothing and did not know what to think of him.

"Ah...yes...I am...I am..." Kambo was looking for a quick answer, but his mind gave none. "I-I am an Old man!" He finally muttered.

"OLD MAN, we see that- we need your title and the name of the house and land you hail from."

Kambo remained confidently dumb. "Yes, and as I told you- I am an Old Man!"

"My Lord, I will ask you for the last time..." the man stood, trying to see Kambo's face, as he continually dragged the shawl over his face, "...who are you, and how did you get here?!"

Kambo now feared a worse situation, but there was no other plan. "My child, would you stop an old man like myself from going out on my merry way?"

“Take him out of here,” the man dismissed Kambo. “If he cannot state his business then maybe we can give him some- there are many places here that need a proper scrubbing!”

On hearing this, Kambo ran mad! He started tearing up his garments and jumping around in circles. He let drooled saliva and began causing a scene. His head was almost free of the shawl when one of the other guards stopped him. “Maybe he’s lost. What good will a madman do cleaning? Won’t he make it all the worse?” Two more guards were summoned from the inner courts. When Kambo saw them approaching, he grabbed his chest, ready for the grand finale, to rip his garments off his back. Then, he felt the amulet! He began praying to it in a low tone.

On seeing the scene Kambo was causing, the guard in charge called out from the top of the gate, “Throw him out to the streets where he belongs. He is of no use to us!” The two guards came to him, and with brute force lifted him from the ground, and out through the gate and onto the hard ground. Kambo may have hurt his knees, but he was free. He knew he could not return to get his horse, so he walked on to see if anything would come out of his misfortune. He passed a few market stalls and entered a small inn. He sat there for a while and did nothing. He started thinking through the words of the men from the palace. He wiped his face of the saliva and tried nursing his knees with his shawl. He used it to also dust off his torn garment.

The inn was mostly empty, as it was still early.

There came a Kirean man. He looked neat and well-groomed in a yellow turban, an Ankara shirt, and loose khaki trousers. He had spent the night there. He walked to the counter, reaching for his pouch. It looked full. He drew silver coins out and placed them on the empty counter. He did not linger there. He went back to get his hard suitcase, and leather bag and proceeded to the door. Kambo watched him closely as he balanced the two on his motorised

machine. He packed everything in it, and then stood by it as if waiting for someone. After a while, a black man followed carrying many more sacks of goods. He was very very strong and tall. He wore a tunic, tucked into some khaki trousers, and a coat of skin. As he walked past Kambo, he noticed the unsettling image of him, being the only customer at the inn, and decided to rattle him up.

“*Rafiki!* What happened to you? Do you not know well enough to stay out of trouble around here?”

Kambo was offended by this. He stayed silent, lifting his gaze subtly to this bulge of a man.

The man stopped at Kambo’s seat. He saw how untroubled and unwavering Kambo was. He did not seem like other ordinary folks. “Were you beaten up or- robbed?” Still, Kambo did not answer. From the outside, the Kirean man shouted, “We’re getting late! Hurry. We need to make it to Adwa before nightfall!” Kambo heard this, and quickly his face eased, and so did his gaze rise. The big man turned to the Kirean man and said, “Sure Gupta! I just thought this man here needed some cheering, but he seems...”

“No...No...You do not understand- I need to get to Adwa too,” Kambo rushed to interrupt him.

“Well then, you can suddenly speak?”

“You assumed less of me, so I scoffed at you. What else was I to do?”

“Best to know that you also assumed much of me. C’mon then! We have room for two more. We can talk on the way.”

“*Rafiki!* Uhm...” Kambo stalled, trying to seek a private audience with the man, “...I do not mean to trouble you, but I am a bit hungry and easy on the pocket..”

“So, you have been in trouble...If you never say these things, people will just pass you by, even those carrying the very help you may need,” The man said, shaking the sacks on his left arm, “I am Arman. That is Gupta Patel. We are in charge of the rails at Adwa. That is our motor

vehicle, not as fast as a horse, but at least it never tires!”

“Well, Arman; I am Kambo, a prominent BUILDER among the Akanga people.”

“Hurry up! We do not have much time!” Gupta called out Again.

“Builder! We’ll be on our way now,” Arman said, letting Kambo go ahead. Kambo knew how to mount donkeys and horses, but this contraption was new to him. Gupta saw the man struggle to get onto the roof of the vehicle, and hurried to wade him off. Gupta never smiled, but on seeing this, his twist-ended white beard bulged a little. He opened the door and as Kambo sat, all he could say was, “My! this is more comfortable than a horse’s back!” Arman sat with Gupta at the front. He locked his door, throwing a morsel of bread in a clean cloth at Kambo. “Even more comfort will follow when this rail is complete!” They revved up the machine, and off the waking streets of Kush, they drove.

Akanga

Kasha went back to the Azmathes who had risen from their vigil. He did not beat around the bush, “Are they all safe?”

“Master, the evil has quelled back. The sorceress is no more. However, we lost one. The son of Miano, Shaka. The rest are with the Light Wizard, and they are safe for now. Kambo is still in Kush, but so far, no harm has come to him,” came up one of the Azmathes.

“We will pass the message to the family. For now, take your rest. The others will continue to intercede and alert us if anything happens. I will go to Shifü and tell him this news. It will ease his worry. The morning has brought with it a great victory!” Kasha rejoiced. He prepared his horse and rode away to see Shifü.

The sun was rising mightily over the hills. Its rays gave light to all creatures, great and small. The forests and the plainlands are all alike.

These are the days that they would miss. The feel of calm, as men took their tools in their hands and went out to work. The sound of children playing in the vast fields of farmland. The women walked to and fro the marketplace securing their stalls, as others set out to the river to get water. Kasha's path to the Chief's homestead was not as wide today. It was the opening of the first market day of the season. He had forgotten about it, as the past few days were fully focused on events far away from Akanga. By the path, boys were roasting maize and small doves they had captured and possibly been feeding for three or so days. He hadn't eaten for a while, yet he did not feel hungry. He rode past them, as his need to see Shifü was much greater.

Kasha's horse galloped into the Chief's homestead. There, he found the people in a celebratory mood and assumed that they probably had heard. Even so, from whom? He dismounted the horse and left it at the shed with the men that tended to the animals. He then aligned his leather bag on the old cloak that he wore. He walked briskly towards the one place he thought to find Shifü, his throne room. As he entered the mouth of it, there was silence in it but cheering everywhere else. He peered to the very far front and saw the seat empty. *The student had reported to him that after delivering the earlier news, he had left Shifü kneeling there.*

He walked out and saw Jamba standing with some men, near the courtyard. He walked towards them and greeted them. "...Is Shifü in? I have an urgent message for him."

Jamba crossed his muscular arms, taking a deep breath and shifting from the conversation he seemed to enjoy,

"Do you bring bad news?"

"On the contrary. I bear encouraging news for him!"

"Very well then, I will take you to him." He then excused himself from the group and led Kasha across the servant huts, to the one on the left of Shifü's hut. Kasha could feel a calm residing, far from the

joyous chats that the maidservants were having outside of their huts. Jamba then held out his hand, ushering Kasha to walk ahead of him. He called for his approaching the hut's door:

"Kasha is here my Shifü."

"Good! Good! Come in Kasha, I want to hear what you have for me", came Shifü's voice, rejuvenated. He entered Shifü's presence and found a stirring scene. Ma'Lena was seated by the side of her sleeping Chemu, as Anyiko sat on cosy wool on the floor. Shifü was opposite them on a three-legged stool, watching. They all, at once turned to him as he entered. Shifü then stood, and greeted him with such joy!

"At last, She has come back to me."

Shifü did not let Kasha speak a word. He resolved, "Let's talk outside. Please..."

They stepped out. Kasha saw the happiness in Shifü and he hoped to see Shifü like so more often. Kasha planned his words.

"I am glad to find you in this state. I bring you more good news. After our vigil, last night, your sons, the son of Madinka, the two brothers, and Wambui's son are all well. Also, the evil of the Sorceress has been defeated, meaning they succeeded!"

"And what of Miano's boy? did you forget to mention him?"

Kasha did not think that Shifü would consider this important. He thought that as long as Shifü's sons were okay, it wouldn't matter. He hesitated, and Shifü knew:

"We shall see to it that he is given a proper burial, and his family honoured for his bravery."

"It is not easy to lose a son- especially one as praiseworthy as Shaka." Kasha saw a shade cover Shifü's forehead, "Your sons are on their way."

"I know that Kasha. I am glad for this, believe me. That is one thing. The other is the consequence of facing Kenan again. He has restored my joy, yet I have stood in the way of his..."

“Is this to do with the girl? Sheera? I would not worry about that. Love can always happen another time.”

“That is where you are wrong. You have not known a good woman, Kasha— of course, this not being your doing, but that of the gods. How could you explain the passions of us who have a short time to make due with the gift of marriage?”

“I can tell you Shifü, I too have fought with the desire to change.” He stared at the air between them for a while, then continued, “If you wish, I could find him a temporary cure for...”

“Kasha! How can you speak of such cunningness? Have you known magic stronger than the bond of two, whom destiny has meant to be together? This is a mystery only the gods hold dear to their hearts. I cannot do that to him! I cannot let him hate me. Even so, what can I do to change his mind? It is a hopeless love, and he will simply not understand.”

“My Shifü, they- the gods made these plans without consulting any one of us. We can only accept that they have a greater one at hand. It is not an easy burden— this he has to carry, but only they know why.” Shifü put his arm on Kasha’s shoulder, nodding his head. Finally, a smile broke again from his face, “Let us pray that they come back. I am old. I miss seeing their youthful vigour around me, eh!” They parted with a laugh.

Shifü walked back to the hut, Kasha followed Jamba’s path back, and he was off to the market to get a few things to take back to the den. His appetite was returning.

Kush

Horses ran through the fields in the back routes of Harem’s city, raising a cloud of dust behind them. This was where the streams that fed the valleys of the great rift, flowed from. The men were not as

strong as they had been before. They had not slept all through the night, and now each led their horses to follow Amaket, who still to this point carried his tattered cloak with him. It must have meant so much to him, that he did not leave it behind or even burn it.

At the fortress, Sayyid's guards found it abandoned. Not a soul was left behind. It remained a very unusual scene. The stone monster on the grounds of it, the cages broke loose, *Her* absence; there was shrewd 'housekeeping' and this was not the sorceress' way. One of them, the eldest and most experienced, walked past the grounds and headed for the back room. He stepped on something sharp standing out in the ashes. He unearthed a silver shard. He then bent down to examine it.

It was still bloodied. He sensed there was a struggle on those grounds, and it might have been between the men and the sorceress. One of his men had been there when the 6 night guards were commissioned by Sayyid to carry the men's bodies to the Sorceress.

This was a fresh dispatch.

The elder guard called out to him, "Farid!" the man came to answer him. "How many were there?"

"There were 5."

"That cannot be. There had to be others. Even with all the guns in Kush, the Sorceress could not be undone by mere men!"

"...Before they left, there was mention of a wizard- Amaket? Those who remained after the King's tragedy said that the prince was with him."

"I was rushed here to salvage the remains of a lost battle- why didn't anyone say anything to me?!" He rose above their guilty silence.

"Men, meek as sheep in a slaughter- I asked a question!"

He then said under his breath, "I hope Kush grieves for its King. I hope it burns with a vengeance. These lands have not seen war in a long time. There has never been a better time!"

His name was *Bacha*.

He did not work well with Harem's men of war. For this reason, they only woke him when it was dire for blood to be repaid. He bore scars on his chest, arms, and legs from the many brushes he had with death during the rustlings he had led. The Sorceress was well known to him, as he had served her many times. He is the only man from them that she used to retrieve the *Talisman* from the Ngunga caves that she had let live. His heart became blackened by his resolve, serving his and other well-paying person's interests at all times. Nevertheless, Harem appointed him Chief general and even had him sit on his council.

On stepping outside the hollow fortress, he looked to the hills, and then to the lowlands. He then commanded, "We will head back to the Palace. Take the horse they left behind with you as well. She is of no use to Harem now. Make it clear what the men of Akanga have done, to the throne!" They went ahead to mount their horses, riding back in the direction which they came from.

Kambo

Kambo sat on the back-right side, behind Gupta who was driving fully focused on the road. The sun was moving fast, and to this, also were the clouds quick to gather in the North. The railroad was something that Arman kept looking at as they drove past the reserves where the men worked.

"Man from Akanga! My Welsh friends tell me that they would love to come and see your land," He spoke, turning his head slightly to Kambo, "Do you think your Chief would welcome their presence?"

"Not at all!" said Kambo grudgingly.

"Why not? You've seen first hand the advancements in Kush- all that..(pointing at the rail) the Welsh men."

“I have the privilege of sitting in the council of my Shifü, and I can tell you, he has no interest in letting these outside men come and take away his people’s land. Not a Chance!”

“Really? A Chief chose a lowly man like you on his council?” Arman laughed it off. Gupta’s beard widened again.

“It is not as foolish a stand as you may think! I am a very distinguished builder among my people. If this metallic hogwash ever came to our land- I would be the man you would have to deal with first...Well, after Shifü.”

“And what is it that you fear about the Welsh? They have done no harm to anyone here.”

“Unlike the people of Kush, Akanga depends highly on its soil. If that is taken away, then they will become as crude as beggars and thieves. Their hands have fed the 7 lands for many years, and I promise you, news from other places about the Welsh are not very good at all!”

“Well, I can assure you that no one was forced out of their parcel. Each was well paid in gold and they agreed to it. Those that have met harm, have only seen it by the very greedy hands of their leaders! If they had a honourable sitting like Harem, then there would be calm and progress. I see no harm in a little development from your dusty roads to a little tarmac!”

“This is how it all started in the Shani, they lost their gods and let conflict grow between them. As for the South, woe to Muyumba—” He then came closer home, “ If this was such a good thing, then why do these cattle rustlers keep coming for our Herds? It was not like this before!”

“I do not think that has to do with the Welsh. When a man decides to do his own evil, let him not use another’s goodwill, twisting it into a reason to do his bidding! Look! None of the workers on those rails is from Kush. Not one! What slavery is there?”

“Corruption has its root in the gold you hold so dearly. This new craving for something that is so plentiful for you, yet a few hoard it for themselves and only give it to those who please them. How many Kushites are still well up today? They clammer for the little coins left after their sons divide their money and drink all of it. Is there any honour in living with no place to bury your dead, when all you have is a cold, hard piece of metal running on the fields that once fed you?”

“He has a point”, Gupta finally spoke. “My people came here, not by choice. The Welsh too have taken root in Kirea. Many came because they were promised good pay for their work here. At this point, any pay is good for something. We don’t have much left either.”

“Gupta...they labour all day in the sun, but out of that, they are paid more than they would get if they continued to till their little maize and wheat fields.”

“If it wasn’t for the drought, there would have been a choice for us, Arman. They helped feed our people and now our people HAVE to help them,” Gupta responded.

“It is a tough place to be. I don’t understand why Kush let them come here in the first place,” Kambo commented.

Arman reverted to Kambo’s sentiment, “It is because their King is wise. You can never be more ready for a day of war without taking measures. He has made many allies in the East, and the Welsh are helping him become Imperial over all the 7 lands!”

Kambo: They war with guns. We war with spears and arrows. The day will come, and I fear it could be so near, and then we may know who TRULY stands imperial.

Arman: Is this right? What makes you think so?

Kambo: Oh, these old eyes have seen plenty in the years I have lived. These are signs. Pangs of a coming change, and not a peaceful one. A change that Harem might not like very much.

Arman: Old man, peace is like a compromise. When men wage war, only two cures remain. Surrender or defeat!

“The bloody wars! I do not miss those. We lost so many men and mourned over the empty graves of our sons- and all for what? Kings sit on their thrones of stolen glory just to gloat over victories of wars they never fought in!” Gupta spoke bitterly.

Kambo: Well, not in these lands! Here, Kings go to war and only leave the battleground after they have seen victory.

“Yet with all those perspectives, we are all here, in this one metallic contraption,” Arman concluded, leaning back to his seat. His size was making him uncomfortable in the vehicle from time to time.

“I just hope that we finish this rail soon. I need to go back to my family. These lands have no comfort for a stranger.”

“That is something we all can agree on!” Kambo said as they took a turn on the road. From a distance, he saw that bright red house, like a small ink blot on a large page. He remembered the men. He prayed in his heart for them. Those thoughts would not let him rest.

Harem's Palace

Harem lay lifeless on his bed. The midday heat was filling the room. He could not feel it, but his forehead was beginning to sweat. There was a mob of maid-servants nursing him. Servants would walk in and out. Some with food that no one ate, others with linens, and others with basins.

Sayyid had fallen asleep on the woven sisal seat that was next to one of the two large windows in the majestic room. There were long waving cream curtains that would let in the light and dance to the wind. The sunlight reflected on the pearly walls and floors of it, filling the room with a heavenly glow.

On the floor, there were elderly men; three of them. They wore

beige robes and handmade hats, decorated with silk threads. They had been there since early that morning, making libations and spells. They sat on a woollen carpet, around a kettle that never stopped burning, filling the room with incense. They were healers who for a long time had been kept away from the palace, as the Sorceress' power had managed to surpass their capabilities, a hundredfold. If she had arrived, then Harem could have already woken up.

This was yet to be seen.

(The crow men had faced tragedy when the Sorceress' power began to fail and they fell East of the city and died. The next dispatch was sent out because there had been no report from them yet.)

Sayyid had to act fast, as even after sending for the healers, his father was not improving. *Sayyid, later on, laid his head down, so he could have enough energy when Bacha returned with his report.*

The relationship between Harem and his son Sayyid was distant.

There was no queen because Harem chose a path unlike his father's, Amresh. He had enjoyed the throne from a very young age and was never really tested in battle or true wisdom. Sayyid was born of Harem's most beloved Concubine, Hadassah. The concubines never lived with him. He had them in a separate dwelling a few yards from the Palace. Harem only visited them when he needed their comfort.

When Hadassah sired him the boy, Harem was not happy about this as he expected a daughter. He had in his heart that He would reign forever, and with the Sorceress assuring him of this, he continued to thrive depending on her restoring power. A son only meant succession was due. Sayyid could probably make a better King. He had many accolades and strengths to his name and became famous among the people of the city. The probability of a better King succeeding Harem was to him like a thorn. To Harem, only He was the *better* King!

It would be a matter of time before Bacha returned. Steadily, chaos

was returning to the City. The markets were beginning to flood. The men around Harem were lovers of war. They tempted him to rise against other lands many times. Harem may have been selfish, but he did not see war as a viable thing. He was a coward when it came to swords and guns. A great one for that matter. The politics of his council had been heavily leaning on the fact that the King was too reluctant to do such things that had brought others in far lands indispensable wealth. Now that he lay unconscious, with the passing of the cloud of influence that protected his feared image, war was not a far-fetched idea.

Bacha rode his black stallion ahead of his men into the City. They stormed into the palace gates without requesting entry. The gates remained open for the better part of the day. Some of the people leaving the premises after attending to the King's guests were rudely moved out of the way to allow their passage by the guards. These were the cooks and decorators mainly. Most of the guests had left, including the Welsh men.

Bacha passed the halls, leaving his men behind. He carried important news for the Throne. "Where is the King?" his voice echoed through the corridors. The maidservants stopped in their activities, turning to his audacious voice. "The King hasn't woken up yet," a voice came up. Incognisant of who answered, Bacha swiftly changed course for the King's room. As he got closer, he slowed his footsteps and listened to hear if Harem's voice could be heard. There were low chants and baritones yet no voice of the King. He would have known the King's distinct deep and silky voice. He walked in with a lowered head all in all.

"I bring you news, my king!"

These words woke Sayyid from his sleep. He began to realise what had happened and then sat on the chair. He responded once he had gathered his first thoughts, "You may approach." On hearing

Sayyid's voice, Bacha confirmed to himself, 'Ah! It is true. He hasn't woken up yet.' He slowly lifted his head with a confident and cheeky smile on his face. "So, now you are King? Sayyid- is this what the council agreed upon?"

"Well, Bacha, you know very well of your position as chief of the guards, and I know mine."

"Well, K-I-N-G, I mean not to anger you, but the real one rests right there-"

"Have you not read the statutes, or are you as empty of brains as you are of respect?" Another voice boomed from the outside. Bacha's face turned sour. He knew the Ustadh's voice and it did not please him one bit! An elderly man walked in, his clothes hanging low to his ankles, exuding perfume and of a good age. "I am to be Master Sayyid's royal council on all matters, as the King recovers. Other than that, the young man has been up all night by his father's side. Do not trouble him, Bacha."

"Very well," Bacha responded and became silent.

"You had news to share..." revised Sayyid as he walked up towards the King's bed. The Ustadh then moved to the sisal seat where Sayyid had sat. Bacha cleared his throat and continued, "If it pleases you then:

It seems like the Akanga men, whom the King had as guests, have dishonoured Kush gravely!"

"I am aware of this," came Sayyid as he checked on his father, "Didn't the Sorceress finish her business with them? We were asked not to anticipate their return. Did she not return with you?"

"She is no more," Bacha took out from his skin bag, the bloody shard from the fortress. "This is a weapon fashioned by her hand. The blood on it must belong to someone who's met her. There was no sign of her in the fortress, only a large figure of one of her beasts- and broken cages. We suspected that the men found a way out,

and may have harmed- even killed the Sorceress.”

This statement raised eyebrows all around the room. Sayyid then signalled every other person in the room to leave, apart from the three. "How can you know that the Sorceress is dead? No one could manage such a feat!" The Ustadh came.

"I am telling you what I saw. My men can attest to this. If at all she is alive, then she is not there. Perhaps they took her...I suggest that we search the land for the men without wasting any more time."

"In what capacity, do you advise that this be done?!" The Ustadh came up against Bacha.

"The horses of the men sent earlier were gone as well, save one that belonged to the lady of the fortress. I would like to assume that the Sorceress took them to bury the men's bodies, but even that is a foolish thought!" Bacha ignored the Ustadh.

"Then we shall start with the city. Alert riders to go to Adwa. Get all the scouts, spies, and men in the field to be on high alert. If they see these men, they should not spare an arrow, gunshot, spear, or even sword against them. I want them dead by dusk!" Sayyid squeezed out some authority.

"Would you not rather have at least one spared? The Prince would do well as a bargain with the Chief of Akanga. Imagine what effort they would raise to avenge the death of their future Chief," Bacha came suggestively.

"Yes! There, I agree with Bacha. The boy would mean bargaining power, and our terms with the Welsh would be met easily with less force. We can use it to our advantage!" added the Ustadh.

"Very well. Go ahead and do so. Bring him to me- alive!" Sayyid wondered if this was the right thing to do, especially with the kind of friend he had found in Batu. The pressure for him to assume the place of his father would suggest a less subtle leadership. One that people like Bacha would not have to question, but still support

morally. In his mind, he assumed that before anyone reached them, they would have safely passed to the Plainlands and gone. He was wrong.

A horn was sounded from the high peaks of the City citadels. It was a sign for all the men under Bacha's command. It was blown 3 times to signify a grave emergency. This would then rally all the scouts around the city that heard the sound, to raise smoke signals alerting those who were far, and awaiting the riders to pass by them. Bacha sent out some of his best assassins, each on horseback, assigned a town or village to go to in the land. Bearing instructions of what to do if they found the company.

The pursuit was on.



GER HAKHAN!

THE SUN HUNG closer to the west. The horses were losing momentum; the men were tired. The ride was long and excruciating. However, Amaket seemed to get the more refreshed, the further they went. “Can we stop for a while? There is no strength in us or the horses,” came Jero.

“No! We must keep going. By now, the King might have heard of our whereabouts. We must reach Adwa before nightfall, lest a search party has been disbursed to sniff us out!” Amaket responded.

“Yet, you seem well to do! Can’t you use your *wizardry* to get us away from here?”

“Firstly, it is no wizardry! Second, to answer your ignorant self, after a full moon and a draining duel like that, my power is very unstable. I may seem strong, but I am yet to be fully restored.”

"We just passed the streams, and still none of us has had a drink of water-"

"There was meat at the fortress. You chose money for your pockets over food for your stomach. Do I owe you as much as you say?"

"Look at Kenan..." Batu raised his weary head, his voice sounded faint. "...will you surely let him fall off the horse before we get to safety?" Kenan lay on his horse far behind them. The road did not have many trees, and the sun was scorching through the scattered cloud cover. There was heavy moisture moving towards the peaks of Abadia from their direction as well.

"Get off your horses!" Amaket's sympathy wavered. He refocused all the strength he had, to suffice the men. "This might take some time, but if I must, you all need to reach Adwa- alive."

He looked around, gathering together a few twigs from thickets around in a pile. He then sat on the gravel, rubbing his hands together intensely, until blue sparks flew from his palms.

"Hold out your hands." And they did. He lifted the blue flame off the twigs and shrubs like it was liquid, then he rubbed it on their arms, with a fair amount also on Kenan, reviving a little strength in their bones.

Just then, echoes of horns from watchtowers far behind them blared out! Immediately, he stopped. "You have enough. Get back on your horses, now!" The quickness of Amaket's rise was alerting enough. They were an hour and a half's journey away from Adwa. "The King's men are ruthless, and with no magic to protect you, then there shall be no much of a fight-"

"What does he speak of?" asked Uriam. Batu, riding off before him, warned them in a worrying tone, "Bacha!"

A weariness was drawn in the warriors' eyes, at the mention of his name. They had been told of the terrible deeds of Bacha. How not even 10 men could challenge his stance and remain standing. He was

revered among the warriors!

The horns were heard South of here, as Kambo, Gupta, and Arman drove to Adwa. Gupta and Arman had exchanged seats and now Arman drove. When they started the journey, the vehicle was clean and span; now it was all dusty and hot inside. Even with the windows open, the men were breaking sweat profusely. Kambo heard the resound of the horns from the back. He assumed that the heat had driven him to a point of mild insanity.

Arman then spoke, "It appears the King has an emergency. I hope they don't get the guards on the gates as they did the last time." Gupta nodded. It was confirmed to Kambo that indeed, he had heard right. Even so, why would there be a search, if his company had perished? He panicked. 'Maybe it is I whom they seek!'

He then started racking his brain, plotting how he would get off the vehicle, so he could flee before the guards found him there, with the two men. It would take a few more hours for the riders sent to Adwa. *The riders would relay between each stopping point, making sure that a fresh horse was always on the road. This would make their cause even faster to achieve.* Kambo thought of Shama- he kept their donkey, and perhaps he would keep him hidden for a while until the trouble had passed!

"I just remembered something..."

"What is it? Do you want us to stop again?" Gupta replied angrily, "You need to get a hold of your bladder old man, or we will leave you behind!"

"No- I no longer need to. I just remembered that there is a friend of mine, just outside the gates of Adwa whom I promised to see before I left Kush!"

"Ah! Can this friend of yours also have room for two more?" asked Arman. Kambo did not know what to answer. If he said yes, then how would he explain these two to Shama. He wasn't as close a

companion to Shama at all! If he said no, then maybe they would judge him for not lending back a kind hand. He figured; a shrewd man is a shrewd man. Arman was relenting, Gupta was hasty; they would never even think of him as such!

"I am not accustomed to his house, so I may not know if he has room for more, and I would hate to make him or you uncomfortable. I wouldn't mind sleeping in his shed- I don't know about you."

"Nonsense! The people here are very welcoming. Am sure he wouldn't mind a meal for two more." Arman responded confidently. Kambo tried severally to reevaluate this situation, but in his mind, the fact that this was a free ride would patronise him. Maybe they could try first. 'Shama might let them in for a meal. It might be fine if they do not ask for a place to sleep.'

"You know, we can wait there as we take a look at the engine before we head to the inn at Adwa." Suggested Gupta. "Yes! Very well thought, Gupta," agreed Arman. "How far is the place from Adwa? You said just outside...where specifically?"

"Eer...it is a little far from the gates of the town. Why not just go the whole way and then check the engine at Adwa? Am sure there will be better material to repair it at Adwa!"

"Not really- we have some spares in the back. These motor vehicles are not very strong for long, you know," Arman responded, then quickly changed his tone towards Kambo. "Why do I feel like you do not want us to come with you? or are you afraid that we will cause trouble?"

"No no...I am just looking out for what's best for everyone. Imagine having abrupt guests, with no message sent beforehand, or even delaying you from booking your place of stay. Those slight inconveniences can change one's plans."

"Ah! Yes- good you put it that way." Arman said, not giving a conclusive answer. Kambo looked outside the window. The sun was

setting and the leather beneath him was itching up his skin. The day was almost done. In Front of them, small houses spaced far between each other cropped up. Dark clouds were forming slowly in the South. They had been worried about the rains catching them on the road, as the vehicle's engine would fail from rainwater, but the sun had favoured them.

As they got nearer to the gates of Adwa, Kambo tapped Arman on his shoulder, "It's right up ahead. Should be a short distance from this path, I can take the rest on foot."

"Ooooo-Kay, should this be right?" The vehicle slowed down. "We cannot stop the engine, lest it slumps, you'll have to jump out when we tell you." Kambo found this troublesome, but he managed to get off just fine. He waved to the men in much appreciation, blessing them as the two drove away to Adwa.

Kambo smiled at himself. He had gotten himself out of the trouble ahead.

As he stood there, stretching his back and wiping the sweat from his forehead, he seemed to have forgotten that he was standing on the road. Then from behind him, loud thumps and galloping would be heard. He looked around, very few men were outside, some bringing back their cattle from the grazing fields.

He then saw from afar, a black figure on a racing horse, fast approaching. There was a little metallic glimmer from the side of it that got more visible as the rider approached. Kambo got off the road. He felt this urgent fear in his heart and fastened his pace towards a hiding place, near the side path. The galloping got louder. He carefully turned around, and saw a horseman in a black cloak, feet of Iron, and a head covered in metal; a description of the most revered men of Harem's army; the Assassins, as told to him by Madinka. On his side, was a large sword, guarded by brass and iron on all sides. This ghastly figure rode fast past him, towards the town of Adwa.

‘He sent the Assassins to find me?!’ Kambo did not wait to see any more. He ran as fast as he could, to Shama’s house.

Shama was tending to his goats when he heard loud wheezing, panting, spitting, and gasping at his gate. He went over to see what it was, then found an old man leaning hard on it as if he had been chased by wild jackals. “Kambo! I never thought you would be back so soon.” He helped Kambo upon his shoulders, carrying him to his house. Kambo did not speak a word to him. He was out of breath. Shama laid him on the wooden bench under his house’s shade and quickly grabbed him a gourd of water. Kambo sat up and gulped down the entire gourd given to him. “Oh! What thirst is this? Did you walk all the way from the City?”

Still gasping, Kambo replied: “No- I got a ride here. Shama, I have bad news...”

He leaned in, “The King is gravely ill and I heard from a trustworthy source there at the palace that it was my men who attacked him. I think they may have killed the men. The heir of the throne to Akanga could be dead, and if so, his head is in the hands of Harem’s men!” Shama held his head in utter shock, his knees to the ground, and began pulling his hair. Kambo said no more. He was weak all of a sudden, falling into Kambo’s position as well. If it were true as Kambo had said, then it would’ve been better for him to escape to Takoa than to face Konelia.

The Northern gate

The one and a half hours leading to Adwa were a little bearable. The horses forced through the stretch up to the Northern entrance to the town. There, the wall of Adwa had not been finished yet. There were men still working to complete it, as guards supervised. Amaket was less of a familiar face here, unlike in Harem’s city. However, he did

not want to take any chances, holding up his hand over his face, transfiguring into another face. A more lean, elderly one. This shocked the men, who up to that point had never been in the presence of a shape-shifting spirit.

Two guards were standing there: one on either side. There was not much activity here, as few would use this route, if at all necessary. The one on the left saw the men approach in their weariness, assuming they were long-distance travellers. He decided to stop them. Amaket rode ahead of the rest to plead with the guard.

He noticed the tattered cloak.

“Looks like it was a long, troublesome one!”

“It was. My men are very tired and we need to go and find a place to rest for the night,” replied Amaket in Kambo’s voice and image!

“Alright then, state your business.”

“Ah! We come from the North-Eastern villages of Abadia. We are on our way to Akanga. I see how much change has come to this side of the Kingdom; you are doing very well for yourselves!” The guard started checking the other men, as some covered their faces. He went by, one by one, till he got to the fourth one, then something struck him about the man. He was somewhat peculiar.

“Do I know you?” Kenan hesitated to answer him. The guard saw the unwilling glance from him, then lowered his eyes to see what possessions he had on the horse. He saw a leather pouch hanging from his side. It looked like one with gravel in it. The guard then slowly lifted his hand to feel its contents. Roba was behind Kenan, and on seeing this, he choked, “It’s getting late. Perhaps you should let us enter, so we can book our room while there is still any.”

The guard shifted his glance and gazed at Roba for a while. He then smiled, walking away from Kenan’s horse. “You may pass. Stay away from those cheap taverns. You, Easterners, have an appetite for trouble when drunk and I would hate arresting you noblemen

tonight!”

As soon as the horses passed the gate, another guard passed them and headed for the gates, with a parcel in his hands. Amaket tried to trace the guard's origins and spotted the markings of a rider's horse not far away from where they stood. He assertively led the men, quickening the pace of his horse, and they were sure to follow. They rode into the town's heart.

“Where did you stay the last time?” Amaket asked Batu. From behind, he pointed out “Megbil.”

Amaket's voice changed again, prompting Batu's questioning, “Are you well?”

“No, I am as well as a fine oak! You did well to stay there. I am sure the man at the inn will recognise you.”

“Do you know him?”

“We were once great friends, young and full of mischief, just like you, but that was a long time ago,” Amaket said with a sheepish smile on his face and continued into the inn. They unsaddled their horses and tied them outside. Kenan had been very quiet all through. He was reserving his strength. Uriam helped him into Megbil.

Night had arrived, and the guards of the town had increased exponentially. People were being hurled off the streets, and stalls were closed earlier than usual. The men pushed through the crowd of drunks and found a place to sit at the far end of the inn. Amaket then raised his arm to one of the men tending the place. *He still held the form of Kambo.* The man walked through the busy tables, to where they sat. The ‘wizard’- as they had begun referring to him, whispered something to the man's ear, and didn't give away what he was asking for, and the waiter went away.

Kenan sat in the middle and Jero on the far right. The only one in good spirits was Amaket. Batu asked him, “In these rags, don't you think the guards will be suspicious of us? Shouldn't we get a change

of coats first?”

“Batu...can't you see that these men are hungry? Care for your bellies first. This could be the only time you have to refuel! Worry about the rest later!”

“You know, before we left this place, Kenan lost his pouch and it was never recovered. Thieves lurk among these crowds,” Uriam warned.

“The likes are petty and they are everywhere. Not even Akanga is spared!” A huge platter was brought steaming hot from the back of the inn. Amaket delighted in what he saw like he had desired it for so long, “Ah- It is time to indulge!”

There was unleavened bread, and burnt beets, carrots, and herbs on it; as well as chunks of gazelle meat, usually cooked slowly over coal and salted with lime. Behind the man carrying the platter, was another with a silver jug, a blade, and metal cups, like those from the palace. Amaket rubbed his hands with desire, as he awaited this feast. The men welcomed this with much greed and salivation. Those around them did not care. They were already too merry for their minding of it. As the platter was placed in the middle of the table, each with a cup of sweet water, the men raised their arms in a rush to reach the fattest bits of the meat. Amaket saw this and barked, “Sit Back!” and they were all held back by their seats. “It is good manners to wait until you are served!” Amaket hovered over the platter, holding the blade that had come with the attendant. “But there is no need for service!” Webi crossed his arms. “We are not children.”

Amaket quickly pointed to a ghostly figure that stood at the other corner of the inn, watching them. Before they could turn to see, Amaket shouted, “BEGIN!” As they mulled through their portions of food, only Kenan was left gazing at the image of Hergesa. He looked different, especially that his hair had turned silver, and he wasn't as youthful as before. Hergesa then signalled him with his

arms. A sign of peace. Kenan's heart rested, and he ate with the rest. The guards on the outside had started entering each building and establishment, like blood-thirsty hounds, looking for men described by the rider who had come to warn them of their sighting. The guard at the gate had reported seeing 6 men come through the Northern entrance, and the rider insisted on staying until the men were found. Frantically, they searched one stall to another, one house after another, still no sign of them. The search had come to the heart of the city.

Outside the inn, a motor vehicle revved into a small space on the side of the many horses there. The engine stopped. The people here were used to hearing these *things*. A huge black man came from the driver's side and a shorter, neat Kirean from the other. They took a few bags from the vehicle and entered Megbil. They walked to the man at the counter. Shortly after, they were led across the full room, to the back door that led to the rooms. As they moved, one of them, the bigger one, noticed the table the men with Amaket sat on. Jero lifted his face from his bone and saw the man cross-eyeing Amaket. He did not think much of it.

After a while, the two were in their room, and as they settled in, Arman commented out loud, "Strange..."

"What is?" Gupta assumed his involvement. "...I thought I saw that old man, Kambo, in the Inn with other men eating. He was wearing a very odd change of clothes..."

"I keep telling you; these people- they're all the same! Why do you keep insisting on carrying these men? Who knows what he was up to, or what he is plotting with those men?" Gupta concluded.

Arman: "Or maybe his friend got him to the town while the guards checked us at the gates?"

Gupta: "I think that for you to conclude otherwise, you're either a fool or are bewitched by them!"

Arman sat on his bed, baffled by what he had seen. He finally decided to go back and see, just to make sure. 'If it is him that I saw, then this man must surely be very important. Those men he sat with were very mighty!' He thought to himself as he walked out of the room.

Amaket was slow in his eating. The men cleared their portions swiftly, digging their dagger-like fingers into the delicacies, using their sleeves to wipe their oily and constantly chewing mouths. This to the extent of also clearing part of Amaket's portion. Hergesa had waited until they were full and then proceeded to their table. Amaket smiled and rose to greet him with a jolly heart.

"They tell me you took something from them?"

"-and I see you lost one of them!" Hergesa responded. Amaket sat back down, and Kenan swiftly took a turn asking Hergesa, "Why did you take it?"

"You had to pay with something. Besides, the contents of it were less than a day's wages. I am sure you were fine."

"You still do these things?" asked a disappointed Amaket looking up at Hergesa.

"Sometimes, I like to take a little insurance from my guests. A reason for them to return to me..."

"If you had taken the pouch with the Orb, then we would all be dead. Does that sound like an insuring thing to you?" Kenan raised his voice at Hergesa.

"..but you aren't dead, are you? The road you took has many more callous dangers on it. I was aware of your quest after seeing you that day. You were headed for the very snare of the snake!"

"And what did your peculiar antics do for us? You remained here serving drunks and waiting rooms..." protested Batu.

"You speak so ignorantly! Harem was under the Sorceress' power. As soon as you walked into Kush, her eyes were on you. How prepared do you think you were against his legions? Even so, why do

you run away now? If I am of no use to you, then go now, back to those streets, and see how many torches and knives will be drawn on your stomachs for your death!" Hergesa spoke bluntly.

Little time had passed, when the guards stepped into Megbil. One of them marched to the counter. Hergesa saw him from the corner of his eye, and rushed the men through the backdoor, amidst the busy crowds.

"We have orders to search your inn for 6 men who entered the town earlier," Hergesa slyly sneaked back to the counter, constantly looking over his many customers to ensure no suspicion had been raised. "I am the owner of this establishment, so in any case of a warrant, I am he who you should approach."

"Very well, old man. Step aside, and let me carry out my orders." The guard then turned to the crowd, signalling his fellow guards to start their search. "By whose permission are you doing this? Has Harem lost his mind?" muttered Hergesa. The guard unsheathed his blade, pinning Hergesa to the wall, "If we find those backward dogs in your inn, you will follow them to the gallows!"

As Arman made his way back to the inn, he witnessed the man he had assumed to be Kambo lead the men out through the back door past the rooms. Arman signalled them in his direction, calling out for Kambo.

"Do you know who he is?" None of the men could answer, but in that desperate moment, they were quick to meet Arman. Megbil had been turned upside down! The people were whipped, and some were thrown out. Tables were turned, and utensils trashed. The guards still did not find anything.

The lead guard happened to turn towards the back door of the inn. He missed Amaket's heel slightly. It was then that he saw bones and scraps from the meal the Akanga men had just had. Many people from Kush did not eat meat at all. Also, there was a tattered cloak left

on one of the seats. He moved to grab the cloak. He checked the shreds and there were bloodstains and markings tainted with dirt and ash. He questioned, widening his bloodshot eyes:

“Who sat here?!”

Two guards grabbed Hergesa by both arms. He protested.

“Many men come here to run away from their wives. It could be anyone- even one of yours.”

The lead guard stomped in his strides to intimidate Hergesa. “I have more reason to believe that you are aiding something here old man!” He sniffed on the inn owner, then in an eerie scene, broke his nose in a blow. The waiters were shaking.

“Tell me where they went, or this inn will be burnt to the ground, this instant!”

With every unanswered question, the assault continued, as the helpless old man fell on his back, only to be lifted back up by the guards, who beat his bloodied body brutally. Fists and lashes befell Hergesa. The waiters could not take it anymore- either way, the inn was going to suffer greatly.

“That way! They left that way...” The waiter from the Akanga men’s table yelped.

“Check the back!” A command was raised, as Hergesa was dropped to the floor, his body like a bag of bones. The guards went out through the back door, sniffing out the Akanga men like a Welsh Bullhound.

‘They are not far.’

“I was with you today...we just parted a few moments ago!” Arman implied familiarity to a disoriented Amaket as he locked the door behind him. The men were already in. Amaket, aware of the trouble outside, switched back to his old face, “So, you have met Kambo! Is he here?”

Arman became like a stone. He turned to a straight-faced dark skin

man, with short grey and black patched locks, in what he thought were Kambo's Change of Clothes. Gupta had seen the transformation happening, and was even more shaken, "WIZARDS! WIZARDS! You brought wizards to our room, you fool!"

"No...he is the wizard...we are friends of Kambo, we mean you no harm..." Uriam protested. Arman reached for his bag, pulling out a huge metal rod, like those from the rails. Gupta jumped out of his bed and onto the wall behind it.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Kambo?"

Jero saw the vicious grip Arman held that rod, and in a careful manner explained, "You called us to your room! We did not intend to enter..." Batu then stood in front of him. "We do not know who you are. If there is no alliance between you and Kambo, then let us be on our way. No one has to get hurt!" Arman relented on the metal as his grip eased. How could he sum up against such men? "Kambo...is he your friend as you say?" He tried to affirm it one more time. "He is, and we lost him back in the palace of Harem. You said you were with him today..." Kenan spoke.

"This is all very confusing. We left him a short distance outside the gates of Adwa. He said there was a friend of his who lived there..."

"Shama's place!" Uriam cut in Gupta's explanation. "Where we left the donkey" Webi contributed.

"Most likely," confirmed Batu.

Before all was settled, shadows moved outside the window on the front side of the room. Big, mighty shadows!

"Quick! we need to go. The guards are here," Webi searched for another exit. Arman was met by a loud bang on the door, "Open up!" He looked at the Akanga men. They were readying themselves for a brawl. The booming voice at the door then threatened to shoot down the door. Amaket drew the men, "Stand behind me."

Arman went ahead to unlock the door, though a little hesitant. A

muscular, short and heavily armed man stood there, with a gun in hand. "No need for violence- How can I help you?" He spoke calmly, even though the rod was still in his hand. The guard barged in, "Stand aside!" He then went ahead to search the room. Something was off. All he saw was the two men. One at the door, and the other terrified with his back against the wall. He then instinctively called for Arman to drop the rod, "Why do you mean to hurt him?" Arman realised the implication, and dropped the metal rod to the floor, "No..no, there- there was a snake on the floor...it was huge, and the...floor was- it was teeming with crawling beetles!" The guard checked again. There was no sign of a snake.

Then there at one corner, he saw something like a toe poking out of the floor. He got suspicious. Amaket's power was still shaky. The guard took out his gun and slowly pointed it at the position of the toe. As he aimed, Arman threw his heavy body on the guard. As they wrestled on the floor, a gunshot was heard, lauding the other guards. Amaket quickly grabbed the rifle, bending its nose away from the men, and another shot hit the roof of the room. He turned its butt plate, grinding it on the guard's face, making his skin tear. Arman then called on the men behind his failing invincible wall, "Go!" They quickly appeared as if from the air. The guard in turn tried to muscle out Arman, who was doing his best to keep him on the ground.

"Your kindness to us will be remembered!" Amaket blessed him, as he jumped out the door. Arman then lost his footing and the guard threw him off with a strong thrust from his legs, over to the side of the bed. The guard got up, and ran outside, only to see a clear coast! He called out to his fellow guards, "Go get your horses! Intercept them!"

Hergesa too had seen the men run. He raised himself from the floor, in his bloodied garments. He looked around him, everyone had left

the facility- even his waiters. He precariously reached for the counter and felt behind it for a small silver key. Before he could fully stand, several guards rushed past the counter, following the other guard's word. He hid there until they had all passed. It was then that he unlocked a small cabinet right below the counter, with the key. He took out a small porcelain vase and uncovered it. He looked within, jerking his neck suddenly from the smell of its contents. He intended to drink from it. As soon as he sipped from it, a glint of radiance – life from within him flashed in his eyes. Like medicine, it healed his body, returning every broken bone to wellness, till he could stand again.

Smoke began billowing from his establishment.

"Those wretched fools!"

Despite the fire rising behind him, he chose to turn in the direction the men had taken.

"As it was, so it begins. The bitter end."

He followed the path, swifter than any man -almost like a leopard in the grasslands. From his height, he couldn't see past the walls, manoeuvring Adwa's streets. He made a mighty pounce, jumping onto roofs and flying over walls, determined to reach and aid the men. In a ghostly dash, Hergesa set down upon their path, holding in his hands a change of coats. Batu, who went ahead of the pack, clearing the back paths of Adwa's choking slums, stopped right at Hergesa's feet!

"Put these on, and follow me. I will get you out of the town," Hergesa said, handing the clothes to them, each as they arrived. *Kenan was careful not to lose the Talisman in the course of changing.* When Amaket got to him, Hergesa asked him, "I see she took much of what you had left, huh?" Panting, Amaket cheered, "You have enough moonlight for one last rescue?"

"I've had plenty!"

They changed quickly, only to hear the horse hooves approaching.

Ger Hakhan!

“Hold on to my arm.”

They all put their hands on Hergesa's. Immediately, they were lifted off the ground, wind gusting and lights beaming.

Finally, they saw the other side of Adwa's great wall. Most gently, Hergesa let them down, “You must leave that way. I am sure that more of Harem's men are going to pour into the town. Travel through the night, and get back to Akanga.

Amaket-”

“The old Adwa slave hideaway remains. She has fallen, and her followers have been made aware. Careful where you tread. Lead them Southward, and if at all any strength returns to you, do not hesitate. I must return now. Farewell.”

He left them, and as he rose from the ground there, Amaket saluted him with a fist in the air, “GER HAKHAN!”

“GER HAKHAN!” Hergesa responded.

On the other side of the wall, the search would soon expand to the villages. There remained only a small window for them to escape. They rushed through the sneaky paths, up and below sheds and homesteads into the back of a warmly lit house, one belonging to Shama. They ran over to the gate and entered without announcing. Shama was still with Kambo, and their faces were saddened and in low spirits. They were so deeply drowned in their account, that they did not hear the ruckus. Batu entered the small house calling,

“Kambo! where are you?”

Kambo turned to Shama perturbed, “Do you hear that? Even in death, they call to me.”

Batu was in the dark of the night, not well seen in the light from the lantern shedding into the house.

“I wish I died with them. Why didn't the gods just take me? Why those young souls, boisterous and full of life...”

“Kambo! It’s me Batu- get up, we need to leave!”

Batu stormed in. Shama saw him and was greatly puzzled. He rose from the floor slowly, his face, like one who had seen a *Jinn*.

“How...how are you still alive?”

He reached out to feel his clothes, bewildered by all that was materialising before him.

“Kambo! They are not dead!” Pointed out an overly excited Shama. Kambo refuted the evidence, “Do not be in denial, Shama. I heard the guards in the palace say...” he turned and saw the faces of the others revealed to the light. He fell from the bench where he sat, “It cannot be!”

Batu rushed to grab him, lifting him up. As he pushed him to the outside, Kambo met Kenan’s face, and what a rejoicing moment it was for him!

“OH! My prince! Uriam! Webi! Jero! Thank the gods!” Kambo was so elated, he did not realise that Shaka was missing from the company. As it sunk in, it was more apparent that so much had transpired in the time they were apart. Amaket had become part of the company. At that moment, Shaka’s absence was explained and new faith smouldered within. What remained was a means to ride back.

“Shama, can you accord us horses for our return?”

Jero’s pockets were tearing with gold coins from the fortress. The villagers close by untied their beasts with no question. The shine of the coins was more than convincing. They resolved to carry none of their spoils, as they would weigh them down. As soon as this was done, they felt the first drops of rain hit their heads.

“The open grassland and its endless green awaits us. There is no more for us in this land. For whatever has met us is now complete, may every hand that lent itself to us for good, be increased in good favour and for evil, the same bequeathed!”

They fled on their horses through the southern pathway Hergesa had

recommended. The rains swelled, but even that did not slow them down. They moved through the terrain swiftly. It was good that it rained. The vision of the King's scouts was clouded, and the men were well hidden by the pitch darkness. Like a curtain that not only veiled sighting of them, but also hearing. Amaket covered them with all that he had, as best as he could. The guards of Kush were on high alert! Yet in all their escape, just as Hergesa had urged him, arrows were evaded as if even then, *his* eyes also *moved* with them. The Amulets on their chests remained warm, especially now. Seemingly, the Talisman was forgotten. Kenan no longer bothered about it.

The drops were especially heavy entering the grasslands.

Late into the evening, the plainlands were appearing fast on their path. It was a great feeling to see familiar grounds again. HOME was not too far away..

They could already imagine it.

They had finished their quest, and were headed back home.

Son Of Akanga



SEASONS OF PEACE

ONE OF THE AZMATHES watching that evening rose from his sitting. He ran out fast, through the passageway of the den, not caring for the students who were asleep, as well as the other principal order members. He rushed by bunks and rafts, lit lamps and torches. He even missed a few steps, almost falling over as he made the last turn to Kasha's bed. "They are crossing! They are crossing over! wake up! wake up!" Kasha was not sleeping. He had been deep in thought. "They made it?!" This, however, was not their doing.

Their amulets had faded off halfway through the road from Kush to Adwa. This is what had gotten him so troubled.

The rains outside were still pouring. There was rising jubilation from within the den. Away from Kasha, Seseka rested. She had been nursed for most of the day and was yet to regain her strength. She did

not hear of the announcements and ruckus from the other side of the den.

“Shall we prepare a horse then?” the Azmathe asked. “No-not yet. Shifü has to see this for himself, once they return to him. Don’t you think so?” The Azmathe agreed. After he left, Kasha remained still, staring into the dark. There was hope again. ‘That drunk succeeded!’ The horses strode past the Sacred tree, and an overjoyed Kenan shouted, “I cannot believe it!” Kambo, who was right behind him, had been smiling the whole time. It was either that or his face muscles trying to keep the rainwater away from his eyes.

Each had something waiting for them: Shifü would see his sons, and restore the honour they had lost. Madinka would see his son for the strong and brave man he was, and Amaket would get his reward. But for Kenan, one thing remained stagnant in his mind. Nothing pleased him more than knowing that he would see Sheera, once again.

The night passed swiftly, and Dawn was upon the land of the hills. The darkness was lightening, and the rain was ceasing. The horses had done a great deal of a race all through. The donkey remained with Shama. Each man came in with new things. Their *njoras* were left in the palace, their packed food there as well. Their amulets were still on their necks, hidden by the clothes they had worn. Now that they had crossed over to Akanga, the Azmathes could see them without the help of these amulets. Kenan was still holding on to the most precious of jewels; the Talisman. He was too overjoyed to return, that he forgot he had it!

The homestead of the Chief remained silent.

There were only guards outside, pacing the compound and manning the entrance. From the winding path leading to the homestead, the men could hear noises like prancing on water. The guards at the entrance were not asked to expect any visitors during those wee hours

of the morning. One at the gate whistled twice, to let the others close by know that someone was approaching. They took their positions, hiding in the dark tree shades and fence edges, ready for action. The noises then suddenly turned to loud shouts, like those of joy. Men were riding towards the homestead. About 6 to 8 men at most. The guards held their weapons tightly. Their spears, their arrows, their njoras; whatever they had, waiting to face the coming party.

The sharp, hollow sounds got closer.

At first, two horses appeared, with their riders in wavy cloaks. Behind them were two more, paired together as well, then three appeared, with the last one lagging fairly behind. The voices from the riders became very familiar. One of the guards had gone to wake Jamba who slept close to the homestead's entrance.

The horses slowed down as they approached.

The rider at the front seemed unwilling to continue and let the second one pass ahead of him. They cumulatively stopped their horses, and stood a distance from the homestead, then waited.

As expected, Jamba walked forth, wielding an axe with an armour-bearer behind him. He walked a few steps towards the men, and then called out in a mighty voice:

"Who are you, from whence do you come and why do you come here?" His voice echoed, reaching the very edge of Shifü's bed, and he woke. The rider of the horse dismounted it and walked ahead, taking a knee before the man:

"I AM BATU, son of the leader of the legions and armies of Akanga. I have come from the land of Kush, where the Chief of the Akanga summoned me and these men to go and meet Harem's sorceress. Our quest is finished. We request safe entrance into the Chief's homestead".

On hearing this, Jamba could not believe his ears. He charged his armour-bearer to go ahead and meet him. As he got to the clearing,

the man taking a knee took off the covering on his head. The light from the flaming rays of the gibbous moon shone upon his face, and clearly, it was Batu. The armour bearer stretched forth his hand and raised him. As soon as this mutual ground was established, the other men dismounted their horses and came forward as well.

As this reunion continued, heavy slow footsteps were heard racing through the huts of the homestead.

From behind Jamba, Shifü came running. He went past all the guards, who were now coming from their hiding places, and went forward. Kenan and Jero saw him, and they moved forward as well, separating themselves from the others. The light made them known to him, and Shifü ran to his sons and his sons to him. Like one who had sentenced his own to die in the hands of his ruthless enemy. Like one deprived of breath and finally gasped his first. Like one who had lost sight, and finally saw the breaking of day. Tears from Shifü's eyes were glistening on his wrinkled cheeks, and his heart was glad beyond words.

They embraced for a long long time. "My sons!" he kept on saying as he kissed them. The other guards then went to meet the others, and there was a complete joy that morning.

They did not want to wake anyone else, but they were not quiet either. Ma'Lena followed the sound of Shifü, as he exclaimed in joy outside the homestead. She waited until they all came close enough for her to see them well. "Ah! my queen. I thought you were still asleep. Look- the gods have been true to their word!" He stepped aside, and she wrapped her eager arms around her sons. "Is it you?"

Jero responded in a soft and teary voice, "I can't believe it either mother..." More came to meet them at the entrance; Anyiko, some of the maids as well. Kenan then remembered, "Where is she?" Shifü pointed him to the hut on the left of his. Kenan left the welcome party and walked towards it. He was careful not to wake her as he

stepped gently.

The hut was small, with a torch lighting the outside. He stepped inside and felt around for a lantern. He used some fire from the torch to light it, and then illuminated the room. There on the bed, a little angel curled up in her bed, dreaming. He smiled and turned away. Just when he stepped outside, he heard her call to him. Her voice was gentle, yet croaky. His heart melted. She was the reason they faced so much tribulation and now, she was here, finally where she belongs. He took a step back and sat by her bed. He held her warm arms, trying to be strong. She could not understand why he cried. Her tiny hands reached to wipe his tears from his left cheek, "Brother, don't cry. Big boys don't cry..." He did not say a word. He held her tightly, blessing the gods for this moment.

The sun rose again, yet the clouds seemed to pass by and build from time to time. Even so, this did not bother anyone. If you worked in the field, the cool wind and a break from the scorching sun would be a great relief. The news travelled fast. Madinka came early that morning to see his son. For the first time, Batu saw his father approve of him. This time, many testimonies stood behind him. He had been brave even when everyone else wasn't.

Kambo was no exemption! His wife had sent his servant, who came with some porridge and a donkey for him to ride home. Despite his heroic effort, she still expected him to pass by the market and return home with supplies! "Oh, Keila! Does she not know where I have been! I almost died at the hands of those Kushites- and she doesn't even come to meet me?" Even so, he was glad to be back on his home soil.

Uriam, Webi and Roba met with Madinka. He was grateful to them, and the Shifü honoured them with a paw of champions on their chests. After this, they would become part of the mature league of warriors. He then freed them to go and rest and be with their

families- which they did.

Amaket slept under the tree in the courtyard. He was waiting.

The meeting

Shifü asked for a meeting with the council, immediately! Kenan was impatient. He wanted to go see his Sheera at the river. He estimated that maybe he would miss her at midday, so he could not afford to miss her during the evening time. Jero was already resting his body. He knew that soon, it would be back to non-stop errands across the Kingdoms. Anyiko sat in the sun outside her hut, plaiting Chemu's hair. Batu looked on from a distance. Maybe one day he would be brave enough to finally tell her. Maybe that day was today, he thought. He had faced Marauders and giants without a shred of fear, yet he cowers away from a woman he liked?

The council members arrived one by one, each greeting Shifü as they entered. Seseka did not come. In her stead Kasha came, looking rather distraught. When all had arrived, Shifü sat on his throne, and the others in their place for the meeting. Amaket was woken up and led to the meeting place in the administrative chambers, and so were Jero and Kenan. Kambo had not left yet, as it was easier for him to just get everything over with. Batu was also invited to join in. There was a consensus and this pleased the Chief.

"I called you here today, out of a heart of celebration. As you see, my house is restored. A few days ago, I charged **my sons** with a task that seemed impossible to bear, but by the hand of the gods, they have returned to me victorious! This, however, they could not accomplish alone. *Batu, son of Madinka*, a great warrior, led the men through all the snares of Kush!" Madinka growled with pride amongst the council members. "The warriors of Akanga; Uriam and Webi: the brothers of Torment, sons of our star archer Nzipan; Roba the son of

Wambui as well; and with much gratitude and respect to Miano's son Shaka, whose life was lost in this quest. We honour each of these men today for their bravery, and I especially, for their golden hearts!" Each council member nodded their head in reverence. "Then, there was Kambo. Thank you, my friend. I am grateful to your house. Also, Kasha and the Azmathes who watched over them all through, without failure! Your service to me cannot be taken for granted," Kasha was pleased by the recognition.

"Now, there was an odd member of this company, who joined them later on. I will introduce him afterwards, but we must first know what the report of this quest is. Kambo, you may approach."

Kambo was startled!

Every council member turned to him, expectant. He stood from among the 14 who had come, and went forward:

"I am afraid that I was separated from the company at some point in the journey, and for this, I can only give the report I have, as it pertains to my time away from them. I am sure one of the others will share their part of the report as well." The council agreed to this. "I spent the most time at the palace, and I must say, it is not like this of our Shifü. No, it is far more majestic! There are doors of Iron, walls of gold, floors of mosaic and stone, great halls for banquets, rooms for hundreds of guests, and great thrones of Ivory, the likes of which the Arabs tell stories of! Their cities have developed. They are not shacks of mud with twigs and wood, sealed with dung and sand, like ours. No! They have built strong establishments that tower the streets, and above all, their moving contraptions- yes, they call them motor vehicles! I drove in one, and they can get very hot inside, you know!" Kambo's enthusiasm for telling it, made it sound so profound in a way.

"Many of you have heard of these things already. But, there is more -The Welsh men! We saw them dine with the King there at the palace.

Yes! They have taken a place in the Kingdom- next to the King. Harem himself is setting himself up to be the next imperial emperor of our lands, and with his roads of Iron, and guns for his guards; there is one thing that many of us have not seen for what it is. Harem has magic!”

“We also have magic! You cannot simply imply that we are weaker. Our magic took you past all the strongholds of Kush and brought you back alive!” came one of the council members.

“Oh, no! no! Harem’s dark hand was silenced by another...” Kasha felt insulted by Kambo’s words. He had toiled the most, night and day to see to it that the men were protected, yet he was discredited by the very ones he fought so hard for.

“Amaket. Is this so?” Shifü summoned him, as he sat at the very back of the meeting. “Before, Amaket comes...can I say one last word, my Shifü?” Kambo’s interruption was allowed, as Amaket prepared to come forward. “While in the palace, I overheard some of the gossip. Those in the halls said that Harem was injured in a fight with our men, and had not woken up!”

Then voices and murmurs arose from the gathering. “They even purported that on getting well, King Harem of all Kush would wage a terrible war against us!”

“This is what they have always wanted...We must attack them now when they least expect it...” an uneasy council member spewed to the floor. Madinka heard these words and turned a sharp eye to his son. Batu met his gaze and swallowed hard. “Silence! Silence! Sit down, Kambo. You have brought us much worry. Amaket...”

Amaket stood amidst the ruffled men and women. They did not know who he was and he feared that they would recognise him, and alienate him as they did him in Mara. He took courage and spoke:

“I am Amaket. I am one with the GER HAKHAN.”

The room was silent. Mouths were wide open. The young men on

the balcony did not understand why he kept repeating those two words. This was not told in good accuracy to those their age. Kasha sensed forgery, "This cannot be! You are merely an honourable member among the Mara people. How dare you smear insults on the name of the GER HAKHAN?!"

Shifü re-ordered, "Speak Amaket!"

"Very well Shifü."

He turned back to the council, scanning every face in the gathering, like one counting heads of sheep.

He then transfigured.

His form took that of a much older man, with silver hair and dark skin. His garments burned into one solid linen made of silk, and a cloak of wool. Now he was sure that they would listen without fail!

"GER HAKHAN: We are the keepers of the lands. We have watched for many years as these evil times unfolded, quiet in the wisps of the wind, and the tears of the light. The evil of Nubia kept us scattered here, among the people and we have lived many lives. I chose one of trickery and many more before that. My brothers chose their own, others falling to the tricks of the ODD one called Kek!"

"It is true what Kambo says. The men were in true danger. After the passing of the rains, a war like never before will break forth in these lands. A long due battle, waged far before these hills were made. Yes! The sorceress is dead, But the ancient magic that spawned in her remains alive to this hour- and so does the coveted Talisman of Peruzio. That same deceptive one told in the ancient scrolls. KEK's release is at hand, as the prophecy of old says:

In those days, the tempter of men, one of the Odd and fallen, shall rest his head upon the North, his Wings upon the West, and his tail upon the South. He shall wage a battle against the sons of Kai, one to the end. An end that only a broken mirror can predict.

These words are true today!" His eyes met with Kenan's, whose face showed vividly the amazement within.

By the mention of the name of KEK, the room was rattled with panic.

"Shifü, I ask that you take counsel of these words I speak, as I will be away from you for a while. You will have two full moons of peace. At a time of a harvest just like the past, you shall hear of a Demigod who devours all that he touches. Hold your peace until I return, for victory against Kek can only be given by Kai's hand. If your people are to stand, you must make new allies, and you must do everything in your power to keep away the Welsh man's influence and brush away anything that could trigger fright among the people; here and beyond. If they do not see any reasons to fight, then they will quell."

He then turned to the council members, "I cannot stay here anymore. I have said enough. Our fight will not be in vain. There will come salvation!" He then raised his frail arms, and in a second, his garments burnt his form into smoke, and he vanished, right before their eyes. The councilmen were left in great wonder! Shifü stood from his throne in awe. Kenan, Jero and Batu could not believe what they had just witnessed. Everyone was in question, more so Kasha.

"Shifü! This is a great sign from the gods indeed! What shall we do then?" Madinka spoke, still unbelieving of what he had just witnessed.

"Wars do not happen without a wager. I am afraid that we had the first offence. We will wait," Another came.

"What about the Talisman? It could save us!" Another raised her voice.

"They have guns! Let's build an alliance with the Arabs and have them fight on our side." Many warmed up to this idea. Shifü let them weather down, and then he spoke, "We do not speak of just guns and flesh! Did you not hear? Our battle is with KEK! If the tales of Him

are true as told, then we must hurry to secure our land. Go and tell your people. The hills will be secured, those in far lands must return. The men of war must start training. We will be ready when the day comes, and we all must believe and stand for the land of Akanga!"

The meeting ended. Madinka walked out without Batu. Kambo went away with his donkey and servant.

Kasha went away even more distraught than before. The council members left the compound one after the other, shaking their heads, faces to the ground. Jero followed closely behind them. Kenan slugged behind. He wanted to talk to his father about something. Shifü remained on his throne in deep thought. Kenan looked within his heart. It was now or never! He turned back to his father.

Shifü looked on, as his heir approached, "My son. You see the kind of responsibility this throne has? The crown on my head is heavy, and you must wear it at a time not very far from now."

"I see father. I see very clearly." He took a knee and a bow before Shifü.

"There is no need for you to kneel, my son. You have done more than enough to deserve my forgiveness..."

"No, I have learnt much from what I have seen abroad. I have seen many things that I would never have experienced if the opportunity to go as a lowly traveller would never have come. The purpose of the gods may have been for this to happen," He paused, and then lifted his face. It was heavy with worry, "Before her demise, the sorceress spoke of blood. Blood on my head. Blood in your hands. Father, what does this mean?"

Shifü's mouth opened, but no words came out. He too did not understand this parable. He tugged his ear for a moment, then spoke, "I do not wish to speak a lie to you, as you already know of our history. I would allude to the death of your uncle, but that has been resolved. I fail to see what this blood she spoke of could be.

However..." He leaned closer, "I know that evil cannot be trusted to speak the truth. Let it not bother you. If you must, I can ask for Kasha tomorrow, and see what it could mean."

Kenan looked away. He knew what that meant. Kasha was no Seseka. He was but a mere illusionist in his eyes. He had seen greater power at work.

"I know one thing for sure, Father. For me to inherit your throne, I must have a wife by my side. A queen of my choosing..."

"I will not talk about this now! We are faced with a threat of war, and you come to speak to me over that servant girl?"

"Father, I hope you understand that it is what my heart has found pleasant. The Kings and Chiefs of other lands will be too consumed by talks of war, and no King will let his princess leave his stay..."

"If at all we are left standing my son! I will speak to you now, as your father and not as Chief. Give yourself some time. When the colours of war are clear as day before you, you will have moved on from this foolishness you call love. There will still be princesses and women after this war, others even many times fairer than Sheera."

"I have kept quiet to you for so long. I do not think I have the time to sit around and wait anymore. I have tasted death, and I have seen those 'fair ones' on the other side of our borders. I will still choose her over them."

"Fine! Have it your way. But I tell you now- She will not be married to a son of mine, for as long as my body is warm on this throne!"

"Then so be it!" Kenan rose from his knee and walked out of Shifü's presence. Shifü was beginning to doubt his convictions. He feared that he was losing his place in his son's heart. He had feared losing him for good, but here he was before him, still a thorn in his heel. He sat back on his throne.

'My son, there will come a day you will thank me for this that I do, even if it grieves you today. You will see.'

Sheera ran down the plantation with her jars. Her mind was away for some time, thinking about the weeding that they would have to do. The crop was weakening by the day. She knew that Shifü had promised to send Gawa, but to this second, he had not come. She rushed past the thickets, and down to the river. She filled her first jar, and as she filled her second, she became aware of the presence of a man behind her. She felt his touch on her arm. It was a bit rugged, and warm; very familiar. Then she heard, "Did you miss me?" She quickly pulled her hand from his hold and stepped back into the water. "You should not be here."

"What do you mean? I just arrived- I had to come and see you..."

"See me? Have you not been to Kush of Harem, to find yourself a bride? Is it not what you want? A queen worthy of a Chief's son?"

"What brides do you speak of?"

"I have wept for you. I have borne pain and humiliation in your absence. Kenan, I cannot let my heart through the coals again.

It is too much!"

Kenan was disgruntled, "What do you mean? I came to meet you after what could have been my end, and this is how you greet me?"

"I have no place for you anymore. I must keep to myself from now on. You must go before your father hears of this."

"...my father? what did he do..." he became very concerned.

"Go first and sort out your matters with Shifü. I will not be held accountable for what lengths I will go to keep you away from me and my family!"

"Since when has it become a crime to speak to you? Has father stooped this low?!"

She saw how his anger swole up, and she knew that he did not know. "Kenan, he means no harm. He wants what's best for you Kenan- what's best for all of us. Even though it hurts, we must go through this and understand that there will come good out of it. You

are a Prince! You must take your place and lead, just as the gods have planned...”

“I am tired of these gods! I am tired of being reminded of my duty! Can I not be a person? I suffered in Kush, waiting in bated breaths to see if the sword of death will miss, just so I can return. Have I not meant anything to you, Sheera. Did I do wrong to tell you my heart, or is that also forbidden?” He refused to calm down. She took a step from the water, and him, one back, “If truly you love me; if we truly share in this; then it shall wait for us and meet us where it sees right. If it means that you can no longer come to see me, that I may be safe from the taunt of those that cannot fathom what we have, then let it be. We can fight all we want, Kenan, but it is not for us to decide.” Tears blended from her eyes. He calmed and neared her. His hand stretched forth, meeting her left cheek. She saw the marks on his arm and felt regret for her anger.

“Next time, let me know you are leaving, even if it is for a day. You have to keep on returning to me. I already lost one to a blade.”

“I will. I pray with all my heart.”

She then offered him a jar, but he turned it down.

“What? A prince cannot carry a jar anymore?”

He chuckled and then took it from her hands, “You said we cannot be seen together. I was only here to help!”

Seseka was stronger. She could move and speak now. She sat on the floor, meditating. Her mother’s words never left her spirit. She was searching for answers from within. How right was she? How did a few moments with Sheba convince her heart so strongly? She had known that evil doesn’t have one singular colour. It has an intent and it has a purpose. Both are important to understand. As she sat there on the floor, Kasha walked in. He saw her meditating, seated on the floor. He was quiet for a while, then he went forward and stood

behind her.

“The prophecy was true. The war is coming.”

Seseka did not speak in response to this. She remained still. Kasha continued, assuming she heard him, “A GER HAKHAN was at the meeting. He is the one who spoke so terribly about the war.”

Still, no movement, no words from Seseka. “He said we have two full moons of peace. I suggest we find new ways to charm ourselves and our people.” Seeing that she did not speak, he came nearer and asked,

“Do you not worry about KEK?” She hesitated. “I worry about those who have come to fear him out of ignorance. The scrolls tell of more than just his deeds!”

“...are we to read from those? In the last many centuries, all our magic has been based on proven ancient practices and not those dusty scrolls. No one found a use for them.”

“I believe they were returned for a reason. Do you think that the heroes of old would face death, only to bring back idol artefacts?” She turned to him. There was an eerie glow in her eyes! “Perhaps, they were not for those before us. Perhaps, they are meant for such a time as this. Do not be one of the ignorant ones. They fear, because they do not know the full meaning of it.” She turned back to her meditation. It was then that Kasha noticed the old brown papyrus parchment laid before her feet.

“This war brings finality to everything. I hope that we are on the winning side.” Kasha then turned, and as he left the room, he heard her quietly- but clearly say, “We already have the strongest weapon with us. I suggest we wait until it is revealed to us. The enemy they speak of is not like a journey you plan for. We must always be ready.” On hearing this, somehow, his distraught feeling was shared and lightened. He looked back to his way and disappeared to the end of the passage.

Sayyid sat as King. Harem hadn't woken up. He was alive, but the physician from the Welsh suggested a kind of 'Brain death' had occurred in his body. They offered to treat him until he was well again. Bacha's men reported that some villagers had seen horses carrying hooded men as the riders had described, out of Adwa. He was confident of this, as many had been forced to speak, but nothing came out of them. He walked to the King's throne room and found Sayyid with the Ustadh there. He bowed before the throne and waited to be asked.

"What have you found?"

"My King, they left the lands. They've returned to their home soil."

"What word do you bring me?"

"They were found at an inn in Adwa. A few villagers also aided them with horses. They had a wizard among them who helped them escape."

"Is this all? I assumed that there were only men of war accompanying the Prince..."

"My men never fail." Bacha was confident of this.

"What punishment shall meet those treasonous fellows, my King?" The Ustadh beckoned Sayyid.

"They shall pay for their actions. They shall pay dearly! Put them in chains, and burn their homes and establishments. Put them and their families in prison!" Sayyid spoke bitterly.

"But my King...isn't that a little too harsh?" Asked the Ustadh.

"Ustadh, now is not a time for Mercy. It is time for the heavy arm of Kush to be felt! My father may have been too relenting towards the rest of the rulers of the East. So much so, that they brought their evil to his table. I am not my father. As long as his bed is his, then shall I see to the end of those that have made themselves enemies of Kush!" Something had changed in Sayyid. "Bacha! We have work to do."

Bacha walked out with a smile; his fist clenched hard. He had gotten

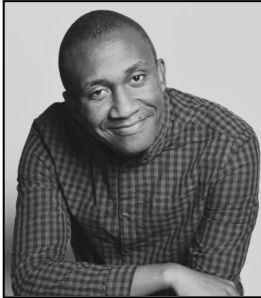
Seasons Of Peace

the command he had waited for years to hear. The throne of Kush had borne the poisonous fruit of the seed planted by the sorceress. As the throne room doors shut behind him, the 7 lands were now in the hands of the gods.

EAST OF ARIKANA



ABOUT AUTHOR:



W. B. Njeru was born on 17 February, one fateful morning under the concave morning sky of Kirinyaga. A Christian, and lover of Mythos—He grew up in a small village/town called Mbiri where the very vivid imagery of the BOOK/s came to life, with influences also from African Lore and Biblical text.

He attended High school in Kerugoya Boys High School.

Later on, he studied for a Diploma in Civil Engineering.

The Advent of the Arikana books started in the late 2010's, with original manuscripts lost *in a laptop robbery*. This however birthed a new, well-informed version of the story now enjoyed by the likes of you, dear reader. These stories are an expression of both belief and perspective.

Two more books are coming up to complete the **Arikana Saga**.

W. B. Njeru is married to Winfrey Bundi.

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