

# Leone Literary Patreon by Thomas Bell

## (18/May/2022 - 13/April/2025)

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[Welcome!](#)

[May 18, 2022](#)

This is a big step for me, so thank you to all of you for taking it with me! By supporting this patreon, you're not only supporting me, but also supporting my future projects. I hope that this patreon will add to your enjoyment of the story and that we can continue to create a great community around these stories!!

Patreons can expect:

Short stories from side characters

Backstories on some of the main characters

Humorous short stories from the vibrant city of Cusmo

Weekly check-ins with me

Polls and more!

Thank you again for stopping by and I hope you enjoy!

[Character Conversations: Ties That Unravel \(Amatus and Idir\)](#)

[Sep 9, 2022](#)

People filtered in and out of the Silken Sands as Amatus checked the logs and ledgers from the guild, some stopping by his table, either to give him morsels of information or to just share a greeting.

Only one sat down.

Amatus didn't even bother to look up, already knowing who was casting a shadow over his papers.

The familiarly inked hand of Idir snatched a paper from in front of him, and Amatus finally looked up, already tired.

"I barely recognized you with your face in those papers like that," Idir grimaced at the writing and notation on the paper and frowned before putting it face down on the table. "I miss when you couldn't read."

Amatus scoffed at that and leaned back with his arms crossed, finally giving Idir his attention.

"Oh yes, if I were to track my decline, I think it all started when I became literate."

"You're laughing but it's true. You always thought you were smart but once you started," Idir picked up a paper and crumpled it. "Once you started this shit, you stopped being any good to anyone."

At this Amatus just narrowed his eyes and snatched the paper back. The still-wet ink on it staining both men's hands.

"What do you want Idir? You come into my territory, without my permission, so I'm guessing you're seeking death."

Idir chuckles and smiles, his grin both wistful and unkind. "I think about it all the time. I sent you off to rob some old high-born fool who thought it would be wise to move to the edge of Lower Cusmo and what did you do?"

"What do you want Idir?"

"You came back empty-handed, but your head was full of how to betray me!" He slammed his hand against the table and others turned their heads toward the sound but quickly snapped them away once they saw who made it.

Amatus slowly reached his hand into the fold of his cloak where his dagger was secured and raised an eyebrow. "Do you really want to do this here?"

Idir's eyes panned down at the movement, before slowly going back up to his face.

"Do what?" He asked as if his previous anger never existed at all. "I just came to tell you to expect a visit from Sutek. Please be kind to the boy. After all, he had to pick up the slack after you left."

Idir stands up from the table and stretches with a grunt, looking bored. "Oh, and one more thing. I'd watch that favorite duckling of yours. Wouldn't want some stray wild dog to snatch up such a cute baby bird."

After Idir left, Amatus tried to go back to the task at hand, but the rustling of papers was unable to drown out the lingering sound of that cold barking laughter.

## [Weekly Writer Update 9/19/2022](#)

[Sep 19, 2022](#)

Hey y'all!

First things first, I'd like to thank y'all for joining my patreon! I'm still so happy and amazed to have y'all here!

So the update for the demo was on the 15th and I have several plans for this week on two fronts.

Writing in general:

- Add in missing stats and make sure that they don't break the game.
- Rewrite some scenes that got lost

For Patreon:

- I'm going to put a poll up, so that y'all can vote and decide between two concepts for short Halloween themed game
- I'm going to make two lore posts
- Need to write one market misadventure

Feel free to comment if there is a character in particular you'd like more side stories about and thank you again!

## [Halloween Game](#)

[Sep 22, 2022](#)

So I'm considering dipping my toes into twine with a short Halloween themed game! Here are the two concepts:

### **Old Haunts**

As it draws closer to Halloween, you begin to see things behind your imagination and perhaps the land of the living. Cross paths with chill spirits and over worked reapers, and buckle up for a ride that is to die for!

### **Magician Maintenance**

You work at a magic emergency room. Things already get wild at the witching hour, but Halloween is by far the busiest night of the year. Deal with spells gone wrong, full moon mishaps, potion reactions, and be the first to respond when magic goes wrong!

Old Haunts

Magician Maintenance

6 votes total



## [Guess Who](#)

[Sep 23, 2022](#)

I figured y'all should be the first to know about it. A certain someone will appear later on in the story, all grown up.

(It's Poldi btw)

## [Character Conversations: Son of Mine \(Aretas and Avith\)](#)

[Oct 3, 2022](#)

As the sun set on his sixth birthday, Aretas tipped out of the room her shared with his mother. Softly, he crept down the hall, the eyes of the guards following him, but saying nothing.

Finally, reaching a pair of heavy doors, he attempts to push them open with his small hands, huffing with effort, until a guard wordlessly opens them for him. Inside opens up into a room with an impossibly high ceiling and gold coats the walls. Looming statues and engravings cover the walls and various weapons and trinkets gleam from where they're displayed.

Aretas walks over to where a large spear is held, the head of it almost as long as his arm, and catches the reflection of his eyes in the polished metal tip.

"Do you like that one?" A low voice calls out from the dark and Aretas startles, backing away.

A lantern is lit, and eyes so similar to his own look back at him.

"Father!" Aretas manages a clumsy bow, trying to remember how he was supposed to address the imposing man.

Sitting in darkness apart from the recently lit lantern sat his father, not on the one chair in the treasure room, but at the feet of a large statue.

He smiled and beckoned Aretas to approach.

"Come here my son, you are exactly what I needed to see."

Aretas approaches and is surprised when his father opens his arms to embrace him.

"Look at you! Growing strong, and you don't seem slow."

Aretas smiles shyly at his father's praise and that makes the emperor pat his head.

"You look like me. You'll be like me you know." He looks up at the statue and lets Aretas go, choosing instead to pick up the lantern and hold it so that the face of the enormous statue was slightly more illuminated.

"Do you know who this is Aretas?"

Aretas shakes his head, but his father doesn't see it, too occupied with gazing into the statue's cold stone eyes.

"This is the father of your father's father. He is known to be the grandest king that has ever been."

Aretas didn't know how many fathers came before his father, but he knew that his father was the king and that everything and everyone belonged to him.

"How can he be a bigger king than you, father?" Aretas asked, his nose scrunching at the thought and his father laughed, filling the room with the full and gravelly sound.

Without warning, he picked Aretas up by the collar of his nightshirt and held him up to his eye level.

"You're right Aretas. How can he be? How can a mere king compare to an emperor?" His smile is wide and so are his eyes as he stares at Aretas, as if both waiting for a reasonable answer, but expecting to find something different in Aretas' face.

The moment lasts for so long and his father is holding him so high off the ground that Aretas finds himself beginning to tear up, but he holds it in. His father is the strongest, so he has to be strong too. His father doesn't see Aretas' wet eyes and quiet sniffs, instead, his head snaps toward the spear Aretas was peaking at earlier, as if he heard it call out to him.

He carries Aretas over to it, and holds him in front of it, forcing him to look at the sharp point of it.

"The owner of this gave it to me. This symbol of craftsmanship, family pride—this treasure, was simply handed to me. Do you know why?"

Aretas shakes his head, unsure of where to look or if the cold coil of fear in his stomach was real.

"He gave it to me because he knew I wanted it and because he knows what happens when I'm forced to take what I want."

He turns his full attention to Aretas.

"Do you want this spear Aretas?"

Aretas quickly shook his head to say no. Right now, Aretas just wanted to be away from his father and back in bed.

"A flicker of rage comes and goes across his father's face, but it is replaced by an almost doting smile.

"You will. Soon you'll want more than the world is ready to give you and then you'll learn how to take. You are a true son of mine."

He kissed Aretas on the forehead and set him back down on the floor, paying no heed to his child's fearful shivers. He pulls him into another hug.

"Aretas. Dear, awaited son. You are my future and my legacy and the world is ours for the taking."

[Weekly Writer Update 10/05/2022](#)

[Oct 5, 2022](#)

Hey y'all!

So I have fallen behind on the lore posts and also was wrestling with myself on how to balance writing snippets for the ROs on the patreon. I haven't fallen behind however on writing!

I realized that I can also write the ROs perspectives for certain events that have already happened, so I'll be working on publishing those this week.

Oh! And I'll put the ros from the upcoming spooky special, Magician Maintenance, and their portraits.

I've realized that worldbuilding for this story comes easy, but figuring out fun ways to share it with y'all is a lot harder, but we're figuring it out together!



[Magician Maintenance](#)

[Oct 8, 2022](#)

In this short fun Halloween game, you'll play as a medical professional working at Sacred Veil Hospital, a hospital that straddles the line between magical and mundane.

In this game you can:

- Diagnose and even cure curses
- Help the authorities track down a rogue supernatural that's been clogging your ER with patients
- Deliver some extra special babies
- Maybe even find love

Characters you can meet:

**Nurse Phil Loup:**

A werewolf and resident doctor at Sacred Veil. He's very new and very excited to be here.



**Nurse Elva Haig:**

She is a seasoned nurse and witch. Magic really helps her get people and creatures out of Sacred Veil as soon as possible.

**Dr. Dunstan Mason:**

A very old and very grumpy gargoyle. Also an ER doctor at Sacred Veil Hospital.

**Agent Kyveli:**

A gorgon who has decided to pursue a career in supernatural law enforcement. A regular at Sacred Veil, but not to get care.

[Weekly Writer Update 10/18/2022](#)

[Oct 18, 2022](#)

Whew, so things are coming along!

I'm refining several scenes and I'm going back to look at some stats. I think that I might just add tone indicators for romance, that way it'll be easier to flag when the mc is digging a character. Then they can flirt with you too!

My halloween deadline is fast approaching, but I found an awesome twine template, so I think this actually might work!

Also I decided to use world anvil to compile lore, so y'all can expect a super exclusive link to that! So many articles to put there and timelines. Even family trees!

(Also, unrelated to IF, but a stray cat arrived in our yard several moths ago. We fed her, we tried and failed to catch her, she got pregnant, gave birth, we had to rescue the kittens from a flood...it was a lot. She left and all her kittens disappeared except for one, who proceeded to cry out for his siblings on our front porch. All of this is to say we have a new kitten, name pending.)

[Weekly Writer Update 10/25/2022](#)

[Oct 25, 2022](#)

The early access demo update comes out tonight!

I'll post the link to it when I get in tonight and hopefully y'all will enjoy it.

That's really the biggest news of the week lol

[Advanced Demo 10/25/2022](#)

[Oct 26, 2022](#)

Alright the early access demo is up and ready to go. Feel free to leave feedback here or message me!

Because there are so many ROs, introducing them in a way that feels organic and not too overwhelming is a bit of a challenge, so let me know how the pacing feels for this demo.

(Also, y'all will get an extra demo update when the public access update comes out, because I really appreciate the support and patience y'all have shown me! ♥)

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Pacing Poll](#)

[Oct 27, 2022](#)

So in the early access demo update, you officially meet Merikh, Aretas, and Sarai. I was wondering if there should be more time between meeting Merikh and attending the feast.

I know that this is a first draft of sorts but it's been bugging me, so let me know what y'all think!

Add more before the feast

This pacing between the two is okay

Some other issue (Comment what it is below)

9 votes total

## [Writing Update](#)

[Oct 31, 2022](#)

So I've decided to pause the billing for the month of November.

This is mainly because I've fallen behind on several things I want to provide for y'all and I don't want to not give all of you your money's worth. I'll still be posting this month, and providing extras for y'all, the billing cycle will just be paused so you won't be charged while I get some things in order.

Thank you again for your patience and your continued support! Really means the world to me!

[Weekly Writer Update 11/15/2022](#)

[Nov 15, 2022](#)

Some personal issues came up that disrupted my writing schedule and I still need to fix some issues with the stats page, so I've moved the early demo update back to 11/18/2022.

Despite that disappointment, a lore post about Sarai will be out tonight along with my humble attempt at some visuals!

Aretas' point of view from the feast should be out after the update as well.

Thank y'all for being patient!





[Nov 15, 2022](#)

Historian's Chronicle, 789 RC (Rule of Crowns):

Into the first year of King Avith's reign, Princess Sarai arrived to court, pregnant, already in labor, and ill from the journey across The Sea of Great Sands.

Despite this, she was brought before the King immediately, who greeted her with laughter and praised her for her dedication to delivering his son to him.

She was directed to his chamber and King Avith summoned his other Queens to kneel outside as Princess Sarai labored.

The chronicle records the King's words:

"See how Sarai has come bearing the gifts that I desire. See how she has already outpaced you? Seniority is nothing compared to my favor, and this is why Sarai shall be a higher queen than all of you."

And so on the same day as the birth of Crown Prince Aretas, the list of queens became as follows:

- Queen Oluchi: Daughter of the Orubo People, Mother of Prince Dakari and two princesses
- Queen Deianira: Daughter of the Isle of Kysolia, Mother of two princesses
- Queen Asherah: Daughter of the Teber People
- Queen Hodan: Daughter of the Gypet, Mother of one princess
- Queen Tejal: Daughter of Durgat
- Queen Sarai: Daughter of the Zilmuk Tribe, Mother to Crown Prince Aretas**

[Advanced Demo 11/18/2022](#)

[Nov 19, 2022](#)

The next early access demo update is live!

Hopefully there isn't anything game breaking, but let me know if there are any bugs

I hope y'all enjoy the update and your time at the feast

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[First Sight: Aretas](#)

[Dec 1, 2022](#)

Here is the feast from Aretas' point of view!

<https://leoneliterary.itch.io/first-sight-aretas-view>

Password to play is: Just1LookAretas

Hope y'all like it!

[Weekly Writer Update 12/07/2022](#)

[Dec 7, 2022](#)

Well I'm officially back home after visiting family and I'm glad to be back with y'all!

So here is my plan for the back end of this week and the beginning of next week:

-Sarai's Point of View for the feast

-I think I really am going to make that cheesy Sutek Football AU a reality haha! Feel free to drop name ideas for it, because I've already started drafting it

-As for the upcoming update for HAT, I'm working on building the different missions that y'all will be able to do based on what y'all learned at the feast.

-I need to add more Nari and Sutek scenes and also more guild members.

[First Sight: Sarai](#)

[Dec 20, 2022](#)



So sorry this took so long! Work definitely got ahead of me but hopefully y'all enjoy this! The demo is late because I realized that it would have cut off at a very unsatisfying place, but it is also on it's way soon!

Thank y'all for your patience and here is Sarai's point of view from the feast!

<https://leoneliterary.itch.io/first-sight-sarais-view>

Password to play is: Just1LookSarai

Also password has been updated on Aretas' point of view post.

[Advanced Demo 12/25/2022](#)

[Dec 25, 2022](#)

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!!

I hope y'all are spending time with the ones you love and are safe and warm wherever you are!!

Let me know if you run into any issues! I'll probably be squashing bugs for it all week haha

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Early access to demo](#)

[Weekly Writer Update 1/07/2023](#)

[Jan 7, 2023](#)

Hey y'all! We're through the first week of the New Year, and I hope y'all kicked it off on a high note!

I'm looking at fleshing Poldi's interactions with the MC for the MCs that had mentors beside Alim, because several readers have brought the lack of it to my attention.

I'm also working on some childhood adventures from the MC's childhood, but feel free to let me know if there is any specific stuff y'all are interested in!

## [Quick Note](#)

[Jan 15, 2023](#)

The update to the demo is going to be a bit late, but only by about a day, so don't worry!!

[Advanced Demo 1/19/2022](#)

[Jan 19, 2023](#)

First I would like to apologize for this being both late and short. Work was havoc for my writing and editing schedule!

This will also be a kind of part one for this update, because y'all will get another update this weekend!

I just didn't want to leave y'all on the Sutek cliffhanger for any longer.

As always your feed back is appreciated!!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Weekly Writer Update 1/30/2023](#)

[Jan 30, 2023](#)

Whew so the first month of the new year is almost over and I have several things I want to get done by the end of February.

1. Y'all deserve side stories and I need to give them to you. There are somethings that are just going to be mentioned in the story, but y'all will get the details here.
2. I need to fix the stat page and figure out better chapter structure. The stat page is a mess but I will conquer it!
3. Get further into the demo in general. Let's see how far we can get by the end of February!



## [Stories and Trees](#)

[Feb 11, 2023](#)

Currently working on some side stories, including one for Yusra and also fleshing out some of the family trees!

I knew I was going to have to be consistent about who is related to who, but some of these family tree things are a bit more expansive than I thought.

Aretas (and Sarai), Laverna, and Merikh are standing out as the ones with really intense family trees.

## [Character Conversations: Sutek and Steve](#)

[Feb 20, 2023](#)

"So let me understand," Steve says from where he's sitting on the rooftop. He pulls the cork out of a wine skin and offers it out to Sutek, who turns it down with a slight grimace.

Steve takes a long swig from it and sighs. "You want me to take the little portrait Makaria made of one of the Talons that's always around Amatus?"

Sutek frowned at the mention of Amatus' name but nods. "Yes, and make sure you get me the name of who commissioned it."

He looked over the city towards, where you and the Talons were, the sounds of the city quieter from the height. .

He leaned forward, part of him wondering if he could spot you in the throngs of people.

Steve purses his lips before shuddering with relief. "That's nothing boss! I thought you invited me up here to push me off or something," he says with a laugh before taking another deep drink.

Sutek snaps his head away from the scenery to give Steve an bewildered look.

"Why would I do that? Did you do something that would make me do that?"

Steve blinks a couple of times and looks off, as if trying to remember, before shaking his head.

"No, no, it's just, well you remember when Big Boss Idir brought us in and we watched him throw that guy off the roof?"

Sutek frowned. Of course he did. He had been barely in his eleventh year of living when Idir recruited him, but he would never forget the fear in the man's eyes as Idir told him the stand at the edge of the rooftop.

"Well," Steve continued, "Big Boss Idir did that to send a message to Amatus right? So I don't know, I thought maybe you wanted to send a message too, now that Idir has made you the Big Boss."

Sutek scoffs and roughly slaps Steve on the back.

"I would not kill you that way, and what message would your death send to the Talon's anyway? They don't know you."

Steve gawked at him, looking highly offended.

"What do you mean they don't know me? Who in this city doesn't know and fear me? They see me coming and cower!"

Sutek nods placatingly, allowing a small smile to tug at his lips.

"Of course, which is why I'm trusting you with an important task,"

Steve's ears perked up.

"Of course boss, just point and it'll be done!"

"After you take that portrait from Makaria, take a walk near the Silken Sands, and do it with your cowl on,"

Steve's smile dropped.

"So you are trying to get me killed," he said dejectedly.

Sutek sighed and looked back over the city, the sun starting to set.

"They won't kill you. Not when they see that portrait. Amatus will prevent that, and I'll let you know when to escape. Can you do that for me?"

At this Steve grins and drinks the last of his wine.

"Won't be a problem boss."

## [Writer Update](#)

[Mar 17, 2023](#)

This is mostly just to reassure y'all that I'm alive haha!

A project at work consumed literally months of my time, which is why I turned off billing.

That event ended (and went well!!) so now y'all will be able to hear a bit more from me!

I'm going to leave billing off for awhile, mostly because I feel so bad for being so silent, and I want to show how grateful I am for your continued support ♥

## [Writer Update](#)

[Mar 22, 2023](#)

The demo is finally about to be updated on March 29th!!

I'm excited about the upcoming events and of course more opportunities to get your thief on and interact with the ROs!

Also tomorrow y'all will get a short story about Merikh's childhood and a lore post about where he's from. Maybe it will give y'all some insight into why he's so grumpy haha

## [Character Conversations: Birth of A Soldier \(Merikh and Diomedes\)](#)

[Mar 23, 2023](#)

The mornings on the Isle of Kylosia were filled with familiar routines. Nets being mended, boats being pushed out, and the calls of gulls and fishermen mingling together in a familiar song.

Merikh was already waist-deep in the salty water, holding one net while his friend Bashar held another.

"Care to wager? I think I could bring in half the sea today!" He asked, preparing to cast his net out.

"Merikh, I just got back from Matrica. The city took all of my coin! What would I have to wager?"

Merikh laughs at his friend's sour look and throws his net out. As it hits the surface with a soft splash, he takes a moment to enjoy the feel of the cool waves lapping against him and the sun on his face.

"Looks like your mother is calling you."

Merikh turns toward the shore and sees his mother waving him over, the wind catching her dark curly hair.

"Watch my net," he said, already starting to wade back to the shore.

She's waiting for him when he gets there, nose wrinkled and her hands on her hips.

Her hands start moving sharply.

"You left without eating," she signs, an accusatory look in her eyes.

He laughs sheepishly.

"I wanted to work early," he signs back.

She raises her eyebrows at that and scoffs.

"If that were true, then you would have been up before the sun, like Rais and your older brothers," she signs.

At the mention of his stepfather, he reflexively looks over his shoulder, expecting to see the man standing behind him with a net full of fish and a knife to clean them with.

"You know they don't wait for me," he signs, but his mother shakes her head, already ushering him back to the house.

He can hear the commotion inside before the door is even opened. They both knew that his leaving the house without eating, was less about an eagerness to fish and more about trying to avoid helping with breakfast.

As soon as he steps through the door, a small, sticky hand grabs his.

"Hasna ate my jam," Reza, his younger brother, signs clumsily.

With his dark eyes wet with tears and his cheeks smeared with purple jam, the five-year-old points a sticky finger at Hasna.

"He's a fat liar!" Hasna shouts from her seat at the breakfast table, familiar purple jam on her cheeks as well.

His mother looks at them both before looking at the only child at the table not making accusations.

"Did someone's jam get stolen?", she signs to Merikh's other brother Yunus.

The thirteen-year-old looks up from his plate with a sigh.

"I gave them each a piece of toast and they saw the other eat. Now they think the other one was eating theirs," he signed dispassionately before turning his attention back to his plate.

His aunt comes in the room, her dark long curls of hair, so similar to his mother's and siblings, tied and twisted out of the way, and in her arms is a basket of flatbreads stuffed with cheese.

Her tone is clipped and no-nonsense as usual as she places the basket on the table and picks up Reza without missing a step.

"Oh good Merikh, if you're back from pretending to fish, you can bring in the fish from the oven and feed the goats while you're at it!" she says, barely looking at him, instead focusing on trying to wipe the stubborn jam from Reza's face.

"I thought I was here to eat too," he signs but still heads out to the back to bring in the fish from the outdoor stone oven.

"Fish again. How creative," he mutters to himself as he gets the fish, but his mouth still waters at the smell and sight of their crisp, spice-coated skin.

His aunt takes them from him and to the table at a speed that makes him wonder if she has wings attached to her feet.

"Goats," she says flatly.

"Okay, okay..." raising his hands in defeat.

Being the oldest wasn't very fun.

Well, he wasn't the oldest.

His mother's husband Rais has three sons older than him, but they always managed to get up earlier than him and go with the other fisherman, and he was starting to think that they let him sleep in just so they wouldn't have to involve themselves with sticky hands and goat poop.

By the time he finished, the time for breakfast had long passed and the

"You won't be seeing me tomorrow morning, that I can promise," he said to one of the goats as sat leaning against the fence, vowing to himself that tomorrow he'd get up early enough.

"Spiro, he's talking to the goats again,"

Merikh looks up at the sound of his stepbrother, Alkaios.

Both of his stepbrothers were leaning against the fence snickering at him.

"We would help you brother, but some of us have to go out and catch those fish. Put food on the table," Spiro, joked as he hopped over the fish.

"And someone has to take care of the goats," Merikh retorted.

"Yeah, work for babies—"

"Alright, we don't need to be fighting. I'm going to see Zenais tonight and I don't want to smell like goat and stupid. We're going sailing, you coming?"

Merikh grins and stands up, "Why didn't you just say that,"

\*\*\*

The water is lively as the villagers gather at the shore and several begin to push their boats into the water.

"Oh, so that's why you invited me," Merikh smirks as he looks at the types of boats being pushed into the water.

These boats weren't made for fishing, instead, these are made for speed, with large sails and light bodies.

"Don't get too excited, we just need an even number," Spiro says, but a small smile is tugging at his lips.

Merikh has made his own boat with Rais but never participated in the group races. He'd never admit it, but he envied some of the other boys in the village, like his friend Bashar, whose brothers let him participate, even if he just got to help with rowing.

Spiro had started racing at fifteen and Alkaios started even earlier at thirteen. Merikh was now sixteen and was starting to wonder if they just didn't want him to race with them.

Alkaios ruffled his hair and draped an arm around him.

"Let's show the village which brothers run the seas!"

They board their boat, tie their knots, and hoist their sail, taking an early lead, catching the wind just right.

With the wind filling their sail, cheers pouring into their ears like echoes from the shore, and the setting sun ahead of them, it felt like nothing was in his way.

And then a fleet came into view. Like a floating army and a mass of towering masts and flags.

"Merikh help me adjust the sail, we need to get back to shore!" Alkaios says, his voice ringing out over the waves and wind, but not over the cold stone of dread sitting in the pit of his stomach.

"Are those warships?" he asks and Spiro grimaces, and starts to row faster.

They reach the shore to cheers but the looks on their faces quiet the crowd.

"Warships," Alkaios says as soon as his feet hit the sand.

Their father steps forward.

"Did you see a crest?" he signs but all three shake their head.

"The flags are blue," Merikh says right as the sound of a horn tears its way across the waves.

The boats are moving faster than any he's seen, too fast for the modest breeze.

"That is our lord's army," Rais signs, but the tension in his shoulders and jaw remains.

One by one, the boats land, and the shore that once was so alive was silent. Like the sea before a storm.

"Did we interrupt a party?" A hooded figure calls out as he jumps down from the ship, his hood catching the wind and flying back to reveal a young man with golden hair, like Merikh's but brighter.

Merikh can't see the young man clearly, only the back of his head, but he didn't seem like he could be older than Merikh himself, and while the stranger spoke with an authority far beyond his years, his voice was brimming with amusement and mischief.

"I am Diomedes, son of Menandros. I believe you've heard of him as he is your lord. This is the part where you kneel."

His voice echoes across the beach and Merikh watches as everyone in his village's knees hit the sand. Alkaios pulls him down as well.

"There you go! Down you go to your rightful place," he says and Merikh can hear the sneer in his voice.

"Speaking of rightful places, I've just returned from war, doing my duty as a son of Labaton. Imagine my shock to learn that there is a son of Labaton here, in this waterlogged village, shirking his," he says, his voice feigning disappointment.

Merikh sees the boots of more soldiers step onto the sand and can see more boats landing on the beach. He also sees the way his stepbrother's fist clenches at the mention of a son of Labaton being in their village.

"I'm looking for a bastard. If you produce him, you'll be rewarded. Try to shelter him, and well,"

Soon heat is felt across the beach and Merikh jerks up his head in time to see several of the docked boats being set alight.

"I have plenty of fire and you only have so many boats," he calls out over the cries of distress starting to claw their way out of the villagers.

Merikh starts to get up but this time Spiro keeps him down.

"Don't move. It will pass," he says, quieter than Merikh has ever heard him.

"Oh now, this. This is a nice boat. Well nice, as far as the driftwood these common people love so much is concerned. It's all shit, but this might be a bit more expensive shit,"

Merikh remains on his knees but looks up in time to see the Diomedes walk over to the ship the fishermen had all collaborated to build so that they could fish in deeper waters.

Diomedes runs a hand over the hull and whistles.

"Is this mahogany?" he asks and when no one answers he turns around.

Merikh's breath catches in his throat.

They look very much alike. Too much alike.

Merikh's hair is a darker blonde, his jaw is wider, and Merikh has been told that he has his mother's eyes, apart from the color, but this boy in front of him looks like a distorted version of Merikh's own reflection.

And he's setting the boat on fire.

"That was a genuine question you know," Diomedes sighs. "It's not like I know something about woodworking,"

He grins at them all, and Merikh feels sick at just how happy this boy looks with flames dancing across his eyes.

"I do know that if burning boats doesn't work, I'll have to switch to people," he coos and that's enough to cause someone to try and run.

The rustle of skirts and the whiz of an arrow is all it takes.

Merikh watches as Ligeia, a girl he's grown up with, falls.

The arrow sticks out of her back like the stem of an evil flower about to bloom.



"Nice shot! Whoever made that gets forty silver from me!" Diomedes calls out gleefully to his troops, and their cheers and laughter ring in his head.

He stands up, breaking free from his brother's hold.

"Let them go! It's me! If you're looking for a bastard, then you're looking for me!"

Diomedes turns to him with eyes so wild, Merikh finds himself taking a step back.

"Merikh what are you doing," Spiro whispers harshly, trying to pull him back down, but it's too late.

The brother he never knew and never wanted stands before him, the grin on his face anything but kind.

"Dear brother," he says and reaches out a hand. He hesitates slightly before deciding to place it on Merikh's head, gripping tightly.

"I can see your blood. It's our fathers. It's mine," he hisses, his grip on Merikh's hair so tight that he feels as though his scalp is on fire.

He wants to strike this nightmare but he can hear the cries of his village and he can also see flames reflected in their tears.

So he balls his fists, closes his eyes, and waits for death.

"What is your name?" Diomedes asks, and Merikh resists the urge to spit in his face.

He keeps his eyes closed but answers.

"I am Merikh. And I am no brother of yours. You can keep your blood, for I don't claim it and never will."

"Merikh, Merikh, you're a Labaton. This blood has a price, dear brother! Now," Diomedes pulls him by the hair and forces him to look at his village.

"Look at your people my dear bastard brother. Look upon this village and try to commit it to memory. I don't think you'll see it again."

A punch to the gut brings Merikh to the ground, and while the air leaves his lungs, the sight of his village fills his eyes.

People are crying. For him. For his family. And he realizes how fortunate it is that he is not an only child and that his mother cannot hear.

She won't be alone, and she won't have heard the cries coming from the beach.

He feels his hands being bound and a kick makes his vision spotty.

He's being moved, further and further away from his brothers and the man he's called father for years.

When the saltwater causes a cut above his brow to sting, he knows it will be a long time before he can see the shore of his village, or feel the embrace of his mother.

He's thrown on the deck like a fresh catch and Diomedes squats to look at him.

"I hope you are a better fighter than this Merikh. It would be nice to have a brother just like me. Do you understand Merikh? You're a bastard, can you still be like me?"

Diomedes' grin is wide and Merikh feels nauseous at how genuine the other boy's happiness sounds. He winces as he's hugged by this monster that calls him brother.

"You're a soldier now," Diomedes says into his ear. "You need to be strong and live. If you fall in battle I'll burn this place to the ground and drive everyone into the sea."

Merikh wants to curse, or scream, or anything, but all he can do is lean against the boat railing and try to commit every grain of sand to memory.

*I will survive, and come home, and kill you.*

It takes root in his heart, while Diomedes' threats take root in his mind.

*I will survive, and come home, and kill you.*

The boat traveled far until it had made his life before it a memory. When it finally docked, only Merikh was taken off of it and placed immediately into a regiment.

Diomedes' parting words for him were shouted as the boat departed, leaving him to a new life.

"I mean it Merikh! I hate you, dear brother, so you need to live!"

And Merikh's reply was silent.

*I will survive, and come home, and kill you.*

[Advanced Demo 3/29/2023](#)

[Mar 29, 2023](#)

This is the first part of the early update. The back end had some issues with the branching so hopefully I'll put that up this weekend after I run some more tests. I promise y'all will get to steal something soon!

As always your feed back is appreciated!!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Next Short Story](#)

[Apr 7, 2023](#)

Which of the RO's would y'all like the next short story to focus on?

All of them will get their time in the sun, but I figured it would be fun to see which one y'all would like to see next!

(Also tonight the advanced demo is getting another update, because I think I resolved some of the technical issues. I'll post on here when fixed!)

Laverna

10%

Heka

0%

Aretas

20%

Sarai

0%

Sutek

40%

Nari

10%

Merikh

10%

Desma

10%

Poll ended Apr 14, 2023 · 10 votes total

### [Advanced Demo Update](#)

[Apr 8, 2023](#)

I think I fixed the stats screen!! At least partially.

I haven't added the stats in yet to some of the choices, just to prevent it breaking again, but your weapon of choice should now show up. I also removed a block that was preventing further gameplay so give it a shot and let me know if you run into any issues!

### [Writing Update 4/24/2023](#)

[Apr 24, 2023](#)

So Sutek definitely won that poll and by a pretty big margin!

Message received loud and clear haha!

His short story will be out by the end of this week and I got caught up, fixing the previous update, so the next update has been pushed back to this Friday on the 28th.

### [Author's Note](#)

[May 1, 2023](#)

Y'all, I'm really not feeling the best and don't think I'll be able to post for awhile. I tried to pause billing before may hit and refund y'all for April. Let me know if you haven't received a refund for April and I'm grateful for each and every one of you supporting me and my writing.

Hopefully I'll be back in the saddle sooner rather than later!

### [Writer Update 7/16/2023](#)

[Jul 16, 2023](#)

Y'all are the best.

That's really all I can say. I want to express how grateful I am to have wonderful readers like y'all and I want to thank each and every one of you for staying so invested in my story.

I really wanted to be more active on here and in general, but between my health and my actual job, my tank was utterly empty, but to come back and to see all of you, still rooting for me and my story means the world!

Now I was able to get some stuff done!

- Sutek won the poll and is getting his own snippet. It's actually a two-parter and part one will be posted immediately after this update. Hopefully y'all will enjoy having a look into his childhood and areas of Hashind outside of Cusmo!
- The stat page is being updated. Better visuals, page break illustrations, and character opinions have been added and the heist section is almost complete! A new stat has also been included which will make your character have to answer the age old question: Is it better to be feared or loved?

### [Character Conversations: Coming of Age \(Pt. 1-Sutek and Family\)](#)

[Jul 16, 2023](#)

The slow swaying pace of his camel was about to put him to sleep when the bird-song-like sound of his sister's whistle jolted him back to awareness.

He sat up straight, looking ahead and behind him to make sure that he hadn't strayed from the caravan, but the familiar line of camels with their backs laden with everything his tribe owned reassured him that he had not.

The whistle came again, further ahead in the line, so Sutek gently nudged his camel forward in pursuit of his sister.

He pushed forward, nodding in greeting at some of his tribe members and stifling a laugh at some of the ones that had managed to fall asleep.

His sister finally came into view, the silver rings woven into her four long dark braids catching the light like a beacon. She sat straight atop her camel like a pillar, her dark robes catching around her as she turned to look at him, her dark heavy brows raising when she spots him.

"Did you have to come all the way from the back?" she asks with a smirk, her dark brown eyes lighting up at the chance to mess with him.

"I was in the same place I was when we first started. How was I supposed to know that you'd rush to the front?" he retorted.

She snorted at this and leaned over to nudge him. He grumbled but couldn't help but smile. His older sister Tinaash never missed an opportunity to mess with him, but she also never ignored him like he saw some of his friend's older siblings do. As the oldest daughter of their mother, the chief, she could have used her responsibilities as an excuse to give him a wide berth. Instead, she made it a habit of taking him everywhere.

"Look over there, just beyond the dune," she said as she gestured with her chin and he obeyed.

With a hand raised to block the glare of the sun, he squinted past the dunes.

In the distance, he could see where the sand began to give way to rock, and smatterings of green began to adorn the otherwise barren landscape.

"That's the city of Tahet. They've long abandoned their tents in favor of resting behind their stone walls,"

He could hear the distaste in his sister's voice but wasn't sure if he felt the same way.

"Abandoned? They just decided to settle down,"

She shakes her head, the silver rings in her hair knocking against each other at the sudden movement.

"How can she call herself a Zilmatican tribeswoman when she chose a husband with strong walls over a husband whose warriors have been holding Avith at bay?"

Tinaash glared at the distant city.

"It's like Father always says, we don't worry that the walls of our tents are soft because of what's here —" she pounded on her chest. "The spirit of a Zilmatican tribe is stronger than any stone,"

She urged her camel forward and Sutek followed. He didn't doubt that his sister had a heart stronger than any fortress, something she inherited from their mother, but as Sutek placed his hand over his heart, he couldn't help but worry that he didn't possess that same strength.

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Date and palm trees lined the way as they grew closer to the city walls that cast a shadow over their caravan. A distinct whistle pierced through the air, getting both his and his sister's attention. Hearing that it came from the direction of their mother's cart, they rode further ahead toward it.

She smiled as she saw them coming and raised a tattooed hand to beckon them forward.

"Are you excited to meet your aunt?" she asked once they reached the cart.

"Yes."

"I guess," his sister responded at the same time, although begrudgingly.

Their mother snorted at their responses but tried to cover her smile with her hand.

She looked a great deal like his sister, or rather, his sister would look like her when she got older.

His mother's four thick braids were woven together and pierced with gold rings and where he and his sister's arms were almost bare, dark lines and swirls of ink stood out against the amber skin of her arms and legs.

"You're both as enthusiastic about the trip as your father," she said fondly.

"He's just mad that you made him go ahead of the caravan," his sister said.

Their mother had asked their father to travel ahead of them with a small band of men to give their aunt a warning that they were coming, but their father didn't like anything that put distance between him and his wife and children.

"But he still did it, because he knows that it's for the best. Just like the two of you will be on your best behavior when we meet your aunt and your cousins, right?" she said, with an eyebrow raised in challenge.

Both Sutek and Tinaash quickly nodded.

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When they reached the gates to the city, the heavy wooden doors were immediately opened for them and a willowy-looking man with pale hair wearing drab colored robes greeted them.

"I am Pallu. The servant of Chieftess Hulda. Please follow me," he said as he bowed lowly.

His voice was thin and tired, his eyes downcast. With his cheeks hollowed and his eyes sunken, he looked like hunger itself, despite the trees heavy with dates and livestock that they passed on their way.

He led them through another set of gates into the main fortress at the center of the city and then through the quiet halls of the fort itself, never once raising his head or speaking a word. Tinaash peeked at Sutek and nudged him, gesturing her head toward the odd servant of their aunt.

"I won't tease you for being too quiet anymore. Now I know it could be worse," she said, a nervous smile tugging at her lips as she tried to lighten the stifling atmosphere.

Sutek let out a sigh and nervous laugh of his own. He had never been that much of a talker. Most of what he wanted to say was said to his family, his sister, mother, father, or maybe to one of the friends he hunted with. He was in no position to call anyone strange for being quiet. But as they passed servants, all shabbily dressed, hollow-eyed, and silent he also began to feel like disrupting the quiet.

"What was Aunt Hulda like when the two of you were younger?" he asked, he and his sister speeding up to walk closer to their mother.

His mother looks relieved to hear his voice and the pensive expression on her face melts into a smile as she recalls her childhood.

"Hulda was always the smart one. She never skipped out on our lessons, but she never told on me when I did. She is my big sister, so I'm sure you know how we treated each other," she said.

She sighed and fidgeted with one of her bracelets and Sutek realized that this is the first time he had ever seen his mother nervous.

"It has been a very long time, but I am sure that at least this will be the same,"

As she said that Pallu stopped abruptly and dropped to his knees in front of a large bolted door.

"Why did you stop? Are you alright?" Tinaash asked.

"Someone with my inferior fate cannot tread here. Chieftess Hulda and Chieftain Gershon await you inside,"

At the mention of his father's name, Sutek looked at his mother and sister. At least they knew that his father and some of their tribesmen had arrived safely ahead of them.

The doors opened to reveal a room dimly lit by torches and thin streams of light pouring in from the narrow windows. Smoke billowed up from a fire pit in the center and his father sat uncomfortably next to it, avoiding looking directly at the column of smoke.

His father, a tall and broad man, whose tattoos adorned both the sides of his face and the majority of his arms and legs was wearing clothing similar to what Pallu had been wearing, albeit better quality. His



inky black hair, which was shaved on the sides to show some of the tattoos on his scalp, lacked the adornments Sutek was used to seeing him wear at family gatherings, nor did he have the turban he wore when out doing the tribe's bidding. It was strange to see him so...bare.

When his father saw them he hurried to them, wrapping both Sutek and his sister in a bone-crushing embrace before gently pressing his forehead to their mother.

"Do not put a desert between us again, my love," he said out loud, but Sutek heard as he whispered something else to his mother under his breath.

*"Your sister is not well,"*

"It will be fine," his mother said reassuringly, but Sutek noticed the strain on her face, a discomfort that had begun as soon as Pallu had greeted all of them at the gates.

His mother extracted herself out of his father's tight embrace, a feat Sutek and his sister couldn't accomplish and turned toward the woman still standing behind the column of smoke.

She rose slowly, her frame thin, but her posture stiff and straight. As she walked from behind the smoke which obscured her, Sutek heard his sister let out a quiet gasp.

Sutek didn't gasp, but he did feel an overwhelming sense of unease.

His aunt resembled their mother in a superficial way. Similar nose, brows, and hair. But where his mother was strongly built, with a smiling face and eyes, Chieftess Hulda was startlingly slim, with her gauntness giving her face an eerie sharpness to it. Her eyes were hard and cold, and while some of the tattoos that he could see of hers matched those from his mother's tribe, others that marked her neck and cheeks were foreign to him.

If his mother was put off by her sister's appearance she didn't show it. As his aunt walked over to them his mother opened her arms wide.

"Sister! I'm so glad to see you,"

She didn't brush away his mother's embrace, but she didn't return it either, her body tensed as his mother wrapped her arms around her.

"Your husband has told me that you're trying to outrun your fate. Do you really think my walls are strong enough to shield you?" the Chieftess Hulda said, her voice a dull thud compared to his mother's enthusiasm.

"Sister, I come to you looking for shelter. King Avith's men draw closer and closer to us and have barred us from our usual trading posts,"

"Is this not your tribe's fate?" his aunt responded, her head cocked to the side, eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

"Hulda, please, I'm trying to tell you—"

"You turned away then. Turned away from the insight I had been granted. But it didn't matter then and it doesn't matter now. My fate is big, and yours brings you crawling to my door,"

His aunt smiles abruptly, her expression not matching her sharp words and her sharp smile not matching her dull eyes.

"Don't talk to my mother like that!"

Tinaash steps forward but is stopped by their father.

"Come children. Let them speak without disruption," his father said as he led them out of the room, leaving behind the two chieftesses.

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In the months that followed, Sutek didn't see his aunt or any of the other family members that were said to inhabit the fortress. His sister had been hopeful that they would be returning to their own lands after their aunt's stony reception, but they weren't kicked out.

Their mother laughed off the interaction, saying that their aunt had promised her when they were children that her tent would always be open to her and her family and that the promise still stood now as long as their people didn't make things hard for her people.

"We keep our promises and we pay our debts. Whether in feast or famine, this can never change,"

Sutek felt comforted by this and ignored the nagging feeling of unease that would appear every time he thought of his aunt, but Tinaash continued to be resistant, pointing out that their aunt no longer lived in a tent.

"We can keep our word, but we can't force others to do the same," is what she would mutter as a rebuttal, once their mother was out of earshot.

Despite the growing tension between his mother and sister, and the precariousness of their living arrangement, there was much to keep him preoccupied.

He still hunted with his friends, and some of the boys from the city had even begun to join them. They shared stories and games, and although conversations with the local boys often left him with more questions than answers as they called each other things, such as 'big fated' and 'small fated', and outright refused to speak about his family or the fortress.

But as his fifteenth summer approached, he was having more and more discussions with his parents about finally donning the turban and veil and getting the tattoo that marked his coming of age.

"Do you feel ready for your rite of passage," his father asked him one night as they all ate around a crackling fire, the stone walls serving as the only reminder that they were not truly home.

"Yes, Father," he nodded.

His father smiled at him but still raised an eyebrow.

"Good. But remember, this isn't like hunting with me or your friends. You will have to travel alone for days in search of game, and then you will have to bring it back on your own. You will only be able to rely on yourself,"

His father's words were blunt but Sutek could see the concern in his eyes as he said them.

"You have prepared me well," he replied and his father grinned, tousling his hair.

"My boy!" he laughed and Sutek's mother joined in, but suddenly Tinaash slammed down her plate of food and stood up.

"Why will he come of age here? Why are we still here?"

Her raised voice easily carried outside the tent and Chieftess Halimat quickly grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down.

"Sit down and watch your tone! Have you lost your mind?" Their mother hissed through clenched teeth, but Tinaash was not cowed.

"Have you? Why have you brought us to this stone prison? Our aunt is a madwoman, her husband is a bedridden old man who can do nothing but hide behind these walls, and every day we're here is another day that demon who calls himself emperor can claim to have beaten us. Mother, where is—"

Before she could finish Chieftess Halimat grabs her jaw, stopping her tirade and forcing her to look at her.

"Be quiet. You are a smart child Halimat, but not smart enough to keep your mouth shut about things you have no understanding of. You want to go home? Fine. You disagree with me? Fine. But you will not raise your voice at your mother's table. You will not contradict the words of your chieftess. And you absolutely will not speak ill of your host within her own walls! Do you understand this?" She finished, her voice only growing above a whisper at the end.

Tinaash blinked back tears and nodded.

"I understand."

Chieftess Halimat roughly let go of her jaw and wordlessly went back to eating.

After the dinner ended in silence, Tinaash hurried away from the tent with Sutek following behind.

He expected her to go to her own tent and intended to follow her there to console her about what happened over dinner, but instead of stopping in front of her tent, she looked around and went past it.

Sutek slowed his steps.

He and his family moved to the main fortress, but they simply set their tents up in the yard, just behind its walls, which meant that the relatives they lived with might as well have been ghosts to him. He only ever caught shadows of them. A silhouette of his Aunt outside of his parent's tent. The ever-silent servants of the fortress hurrying into the fortress to tend to the chieftess' son.

Neither he nor his sister had stepped foot in the actual halls of the fortress since that day, but as he watched his sister carefully slip into the fortress, he knew that would change.

He followed her, just out of sight, down the desolate grey halls until she stopped short just outside a room with the door slightly cracked open. Smoke leaked from the gap, seeming to curl around the two of them and the faint sound of chanting and rattling could be heard from the inside.

His sister looked behind her and saw him. Her eyes widened slightly as she hurriedly waved him forward.

Wordlessly, they both crouched, peeping through the cracked door.

He saw his aunt, chanting as she kneeled in front of a bed, its inhabitants obscured by a gauzy curtain. In front of her was a bowl filled to the brim with a dark red liquid. A man sat by her side, his robes, although well-made, hung off of him and his face was twisted with worry and unease.

"Will he get better?" the man asked, his voice as feeble as his appearance.

She stopped chanting and held the bowl up to the bed, her eyes downcast as an emaciated hand reached through the curtain to take it.

"Our son is a fragile seedling competing for sun beneath the shadow of towering palms,"

Suddenly her eyes darted to the door, a gleam in them that cut through the smoke.

"But I will clear a path towards the light for him,"

She turns sharply to the side, her eyes appearing to cut through the darkness as she stared in their direction.

Tinaash pulled Sutek away from the door in a hurry, the two of them running until they were back near their tents, both of them taking deep breaths of the night air.

"What was that?" he asked his sister once they were in the clear, his heart hammering, unsure of what they had witnessed but certain it wasn't anything good.

"Nothing good. That woman is doing something evil. This whole place is evil, and I don't know why Mama can't see that!"

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"Eyes open, and keep your footsteps light," his father told him as they reached the part of the terrain where sand gave way to shrubs and gravel.

Sutek nodded and kept quiet, listening closely for the sound of water. His father told him that there was a spot where the river found itself trapped and where vegetation and game were made abundant by its capture. He tried to remember the path to get there so that when he had to hunt alone during his coming of age, he would know the way.

"When you hunt for your coming of age, you'll be alone for days. This day has been coming for a long time, but I still can't make sense of it. When you were a baby, you could fit in my hand. You didn't cry like your sister. You were so small and quiet,"

"So Tinaash was loud even back then,"

His father keeps his eyes forward, but Sutek can hear him snort and the smile in his voice.

"She has always been outspoken, yes."

They stop once they reach where the river pools, the air smelling fresher, and a cool breeze blows across the water and through the increasingly dense greenery.

His father turns to him, his smile soft and only slightly colored with sadness.

"Sutek, you were so small and silent that it was hard for me to tell if you were doing poorly or not. I would stay awake, just to make sure you were still alive. Then one day, as I held you, you squeezed my finger with such strength I was sure that you would survive,"

He smiles wistfully and reaches out to give Sutek a chest-rattling thump on the back.

"You are my strong son! I now have no doubt that you will survive. I can already see you returning in victory, heavy with bounty,"

His father beamed at him, brimming with pride and Sutek couldn't help but smile back.

"I will do my best," he mumbled as he fidgeted with his bow, a little overwhelmed by his father's sudden burst of sentimentality.

"You always do. Now we will meet up here at sundown,"

"We're splitting up?"

"Consider it practice, but remember, be back by sundown,"

With a nod, their paths diverged, with his father following the river and Sutek choosing to stay close to the perimeter, hoping to catch a gazelle when it came to drink.

His chance came when one ambled up, its cautious glances missing him as it dips its head to drink.

Taking a deep breath he draws his bow and holds just for a moment before releasing. It should have been a clean shot, but the gazelle jerks its head up at the last moment causing the arrow to hit its shoulder instead of its heart.

Startled and wounded it bolts from him and into the desert.

With a grunt of frustration, Sutek gathers his bow and sets off in pursuit of it.

It shouldn't have been able to get that far, yet dusk was beginning to settle and he was still tracking it. Too close to sundown for him to find another quarry, he continued to follow the tracks, even as they led him further and further away from the river.

The drops of blood clotted the sand, and he knew he had almost reached it. He notched an arrow, just in case it had already been found by scavengers.

The gazelle wasn't alone when he reached it.

Kneeling next to it was his aunt. The way she looked at him as he drew closer, eyes sharp and smile tight, made him feel less like a cautious hunter and more like prey that had strayed too far out of its den.

His grip on his bow tightened.

"It is fate that you're here," she said as she gestured to the laid-out gazelle, the creature's breathing labored.

"What are you doing out here?"

Sutek didn't mean for the question to sound so blunt and he quickly dipped his head, not wanting to disrespect her, no matter how uneasy her presence made him feel.

"There is something I needed to do for my son. He's ill, you see,"

Sutek nodded, although it still didn't make sense to him. She was a chieftess. She had servants. What was in the desert that she had to fetch personally?

"I would put it out of its misery, but I lack the tools," she said, once again motioning to the gazelle.

"I have to meet my father by sundown. We can walk together since it's dangerous to be out here alone," Sutek said as he took out his knife and approached, joining her in kneeling beside it.

"He's great at tracking. Maybe he can help you find what you're looking for?"

The gazelle looked at him with glassy eyes and he placed his hand just below where the arrow struck in both apology and thanks.

"I have already found it," his aunt said, and as he turned to her he was met with a cloud of powder.

With his eyes watering and his throat burning he tried to look at her to see if she had been affected too.

Her smile did not falter, even as his vision blurred and the world tilted.

He felt his back hit the sand and could only lie there as he felt his aunt pry his fingers from his dagger.



[Scene Breaks: I'm learning to use them](#)

[Jul 28, 2023](#)

The fancy lines in books always made sense when I was reading, but somehow, utilizing them in my own writing was confusing for me.

I was using entire page breaks when I probably should have been using scene breaks.

So I started using scene breaks in the form of three asterisks:

\*\*\* (Utilitarian but gets the job done)

But then I thought, 'I should make a fancy squiggle-line-thingy like I've seen in books'. So here we are!

Instead of three asterisks or a line, we have a bird in flight. Keeping on theme, just like Amatus would want!

## [Advanced Demo 8/11/2023](#)

[Aug 12, 2023](#)

Alright here is the update!

Two out of three heist options are good to go, so let me know if you run into any problems with those!

As always your feed back is appreciated!!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Writer Update 9/2/2023](#)

[Sep 2, 2023](#)

Whew, so we're in September now and I'll let you know the short stories coming up in the next few weeks.

- Part two of Sutek's short story will soon be up.
- I'm also working on a certain Strawberry Prince's short story.
- I'm going to be posting some artbreeder portraits and bios of some side characters we haven't been introduced to yet.

[Character Conversations: Birth of A Jackal \(Pt. 2-Sutek ft. Idir and Jackal Steve\)](#)

[Sep 16, 2023](#)

His eyes snapped open and he tried to take a breath, only to be met with pain. Pain was everywhere, from the hot sand that covered more and more of him with each sweltering gust of wind, to the sharp sting and ache gripping his throat.



The sun beat down on him, and when he held up a hand to shield his eyes from it, he saw that his hand was covered in dried blood.

He tried to turn his head to look around, but once again was met with pain. Still he was able to roll onto his side. There he was met with the dull dead eyes of the gazelle and the yellow eyes of the jackal currently feasting on it.

It looked at him without so much as licking its chops. Without even snarling, it went back to eating and Sutek realized why.

As he reached his hand up again, this time to touch his neck, he felt a gash, deep in wide, across his throat. The beast knew that there was no need to fear him, because he may as well have been another carcass. With a slit throat, blurry vision, and so much of his blood soaking the sand that it looked more like soil, he knew he was bound for death.

And he knew that once the Jackal was satiated with the gazelle it would turn on him.

He closed his eyes, both to block out the painful glare of the sun and to block out the view of what would happen to him soon enough.

*"You are my strong son! I now have no doubt that you will survive. I can already see you returning in victory, heavy with bounty,"*

His father's words rang out through his mind and his eyes snapped open.

He needed to go home, if only to deliver his family a complete corpse.

He rolled all the way onto his front, a pained groan tearing its way out of him, sand coating his wounds. He opened his eyes and found the jackal looking at him with new interest. With a pained effort, he pushed himself off the ground and the beasts peeled it's lips back in a low snarl.

Sutek hobbled to his feet and let out one of his own.

The jackal cowered and Sutek began to walk, slowly, one foot in front of the other, the hanging sun in the sky showing the way home.

One step after another, willing himself forward, his eyes never wavered but his feet did.

The jackal was far behind him when he finally fell, sand coating and burning his wound. The edges of his vision began to darken until finally, he felt himself slip away into the dark.

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He heard voices but they're muffled, like he was listening to them from far away.

"What is it?"

"A corpse."

"Can you do anything with it?"

"Maybe the mage will want it,"

"Alright. Haul it in the cart with the rest,"

The feeling of being dragged through the hot sand felt like floating through fire. And he felt himself being hoisted and placed on something wooden, something obscured the sun, and everything felt marginally cooler.

Without the glare of the sun he thought that he might be able to crack his eyes open.

Bleary-eyed, he tried to take in his surroundings, but could only see the fabric covering that shielded the cart he had been placed in.

The sound of heavy chains dragging against the wood made him attempt to turn his head to the side, but that same searing pain from before stopped his attempt.

Instead, all that came out was a sharp raspy gasp followed by a groan.

Once again there was the sound of heavy chains dragging against wood, this time faster like something was retreating.

"Not dead!" a young but hoarse sounding voice cried out and soon the sound of chains dragging was accompanied by the rocking of the cart as the owner of the voice and whoever he was talking to scrambled away.

At least Sutek knew he was still alive. For now anyway.

An older woman's face came into view, blurry above him, her eyes dark and endless and her greying dark hair reddened with blood near one temple. She reminded him of the way his grandmother looked when he was younger, a feeling that only intensified as she gingerly lifted his head and placed it on her lap, using her skirt to try to apply pressure to his neck.

"I think I have just enough left for you," she murmured and she moved her now blood soaked skirt away, placing her hands on his wound.

A coolness spread from her hands to his wound, and finally through the rest of his body and he felt a sweet relief from the pain. He looked up at the woman, and with his vision now clearer he noticed that the tattoos that covered all of what he could see of the light brown skin of her neck, all the way up to her jaw, were in Zilmatic, the language of his people.

"You'll live son. You will,"

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It was hard for him to tell how much time had passed with the fabric cart covering being the only thing in his line of sight.

He felt himself fade in and out of consciousness, mind addled from thirst and blood loss, but he was still alive.

Sometimes he was awake enough to hear bits and pieces of conversation.

He learned that the woman who healed him was named Zeruiah and she was from Eba. Sutek knew that one of the reasons his mother went to seek refuge with his aunt was because Emperor Avith had attacked many of the Zilmatican tribes that were settled in and around the mountains of Eba. Now he had a first hand view of what their fate was.

Although the cart was filled with a quiet sadness, most of them wanted him to live, even if it meant sharing what little water their captives gave them, or shuffling close just to talk to him, especially once they realized he was awake.

"When my father would take me and my brothers to other cities, it was a lot more fun. Less shackles and more sights, you know,"

The boy talking to Sutek, spoke to him almost every day and at great length. Despite being unable to exactly participate in the conversation, Sutek did his best to grunt in blink where it felt appropriate. He learned that the boy's name was Stephanos, but everyone on the cart called him Steve. He was the only prisoner on the cart who wasn't Zilmatican, but was instead the son of a merchant that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I wonder if my brothers made it back to Matrica. When the killing started I hid the youngest under some rugs, so he should have been able to tell the others what happened. Right?"

Stephanos hid his unease and uncertainty with a forced laugh and Sutek understood how he felt. Both of them were now who knows how far away from home and with each stretch of land, the odds of them ever seeing their families again diminished.

He opened his eyes and willed strength into his weak limbs, slowly propping himself up. Finally Stephanos came into view.

He was shorter and slimmer than Sutek, he appeared to be around the same age. His bronze skin was battered and bruised, one of his pale green eyes was completely swollen shut, and dried blood was still caked and cracked around his crooked nose. Despite all of this, the boy's smile was as wide as someone could manage with half of their face swollen.

"Woah you're up! Everyone, he's up!" he said, starting to shake the other shackled people either awake or out of their despair fueled stupor.

Zeruiah shuffled over, checking his wound and gently turning his head from right to left.

A wide and deep grin spread across her face and soon the entire cart was filled with a new energy.

It was quiet and understated, but as Sutek rasped out his name, and were he was from to his fellow captives, he felt a small sapling of hope breakthrough to cold soil of his situation.

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Hope wasn't the only thing taking shape. Mutiny was as well.

The more Sutek healed, the more he and his fellow captives realized that their captors had made a mistake.

He wasn't shackled.

With Zeruiah's healing, his wound was nearly completely closed, but he didn't join the others when they were let out to eat and walk around. Instead he stayed still, and silent in the cart like he was still the corpse they assumed him to be, and ate whatever scraps Stephanos could smuggle back to him.

Soldiers may have captured most of the people, but now they had changed hands and were with slavers, most hailing from Oso.

"Oso is across the water from Cusmo, the big city at the heart of Hashind, where Emperor Avith sits," Zeruiah whispered as she tore off a portion of her skirt to change the dressing of his wound.

"My father talked about slavers like this. They'll sell us in Cusmo, and then sail across the water to their homes," Stephanos said his voice low, but the excitement in it undeniable.

"How many days do you think we have until we get there?" he asked and one of the men in the cart spoke up.

"I can see it. I think we have a few days before we reach the city,"

Sutek thought of his mother, of his sister, and of his father who was so sure that he was strong enough to make it home.

"If I can get the keys, what should we do next?" he quietly asked.

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The slavers weren't taking them to the main city gates. That was what one of the women overheard when they were all let out of the cart for meals.

Hope that they could attract the attention of someone at the main gates and get help was one of the few things keeping them from either giving up completely or taking a big risk.

With Sutek unchained and and unknown but undoubtedly dire fate ahead of them, they settled on taking the big risk.

"I wouldn't be mad if you just ran away," Stephanos said to him after giving him his share of food.

"I wouldn't leave everyone behind,"

"No one would blame you,"

"I would blame me," Sutek said as he finished off the rest of the meager food and leaned down to look at the shackles on Stephanos' feet. His eyes followed the chain that connected them over to where an old man was shackled. The chains each overlapped and crisscrossed into a spiderweb of chains and he worried if he would be able to unchain everyone before their captors noticed.

Zeruiah shuffled over to sit next to him and Stephanos, offering the other boy her portion.

"This is not the same as hunting. They will either kill you or chain you up and sell you with the rest of us if you are caught. Give me your word that you will do what you need to do in order to live,"

He avoided her eyes and nodded but she grabbed onto his arm.

"I mean it Sutek! Kill, flee, play dead, this goes for the both of you. Whatever it takes,"

The insistence in her voice and the power in her dark eyes made both of the boys nod hastily.

That night, Sutek slipped out of the cart on unsteady, shaking legs, and slipped into the shadows.

The plan was to get the keys and maybe a weapon and bring it back to the cart. There they would quietly free themselves and the surprise and overwhelm their captors.

But first he needed to get the keys.

The fire is still lit and he can hear hushed voices talking a little ways away from camp.

"Mother Mara is our last bet for a decent price,"

"What happened to just selling and giving a cut to Idir,"

"He gave Amatus free reign over the area we used to sell out of and he hates us more than he loves money,"

Sutek listens to them, just to make sure they aren't getting closer to the fire as he moves closer.

Zeruiah described the man who held the keys as scarred, tanned, and freckled, with light eyebrows and a dark beard.

He saw him sleeping by the fire, still sitting upright, brow furrowed and his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The keys gleamed and winked at Sutek in the firelight and he prayed to be quieter than he'd ever been.

He reached with trembling hands towards the keys and he had barely laid a finger on them when the man's eyes snapped open.

"You should have stayed dead, boy,"

Sutek is seized by his throat and his visions almost go black with the pain as the man's grip aggravates the gash on his neck.

The man watches with interest as Sutek struggles to breathe, while the other slavers are either lost in sleep or conversation.

Something besides the keys catches the firelight and Sutek's attention.

The hilt of the man's sword.

*"...do what you need to do in order to live,"*

His arms were just long enough to reach it and the man seemed to mistake his struggling as vain efforts to escape or find air.

He pulled the sword out of its sheath and had to struggle to not drop it.

Startled the man dropped him, but laughed as he watched Sutek struggle to lift the weapon.

The laugh was cut short as Sutek rushed forward with a burst of energy he didn't even know he had, burying the sword in the soft flesh of the man's gut.

Unfortunately for both him and the man, the blow did not lead to a quick and painless death. The man bellowed like a wounded boar and as his comrades began to awaken, Sutek realized that the blade was embedded so deeply that he couldn't pull it out.

He was grabbed from behind as another slaver barked out orders to circle the cart.

Sutek clawed at the hands of his attacker, looking frantically towards the cart, watching as one of the slavers approached, only to have a chain thrown around his neck and pulled tight. Another rushed to his aid, as mayhem descended on the camp.

Whoever was holding him released him, just to deliver a savage punch to his stomach, leaving him to struggle for breath.

He waited for the finishing blow, eyes shut tightly, but it never came.

Instead the man fell heavily beside him, an arrow lodged through his neck.

Sharp howls cut through the night and men with hoods like jackals charged towards the camp, cutting down the slavers.

Arrows left their bows and found their targets in the hearts of their captors.

In the commotion, Sutek ran towards the cart, past the falling bodies, and urged all of them further back into the cart, hopefully out of the range of any stray arrows.

It grew quiet.

Finally a figure approached, the shadow of the cowl resembling horns more than a dog's head like he had seen when they first attacked.

The figure pulled back the opening to the cart.

"Allow me to be the first, to welcome you to Cusmo. Lower Cusmo, to be exact," the man said, his voice low and serene, edged with an amusement that made Sutek get the impression that he was laughing at their expense.

The man pulled back his cowl to reveal hair that was cut to his shoulders and greying at the temples. He didn't know what color the man's eyes actually were but in the dim light they looked yellow. The man was smiling, but his gaze hardened when he looked in Zeruiah's direction.

"Oh dear, do I spot the markings of my tribeswoman? And such a powerful one no less? Never did I expect to see the day when even one of your ilk would be humbled and thrown in chains," he says, a fake pout on his face.

His false reverence and derisive tone caused her to bristle, but she lowered her head.

"Thank you for saving us, warrior,"

"Do not call me that!" he snapped harshly. He glared at all of them, his attempt at a pleasant welcome over.

"Let me explain something to all of you. In this city, whatever tribe, kingdom, whoever you call your kinsmen—" his eyes dart to Sutek and he smirks. "None of that matters. The only thing people will ask you about around here is the price. Nothing in Cusmo is free, especially not you,"

He whistled and more of his men approached the cart, forcing Sutek and the others out and into the night.

"You all are now property of the Jackals. Every thing you make from this moment on, will go towards whether or not you will ever be able to step outside of this city."

He looked around at the bodies strewn about the camp.

"Whose kill is this?" he asked, nudging the body of the slaver who had the keys.

"His," Zeruiah said, while pushing Sutek forward.

The man circles him, looking him over.

"You look half dead and too young to have even returned from your first great hunt," the man scoffed and Sutek noticed that his arms and his legs were covered in tattoos. He recognized some. Like the ones that represented lineage, marriage, and mourning.

And tattoos one could only be awarded to a warrior that went to war for his tribe.

"He isn't and if you truly are my tribesman, then you will do right by him," Zeruiah insisted and the man scowled at her.

"Don't go looking for favors because you'll find none here. And don't look for tribal loyalty. You and this boy are strangers to me. But I am...nostalgic,"

He turns back to Sutek and holds up his hand.

"I, Idir, will offer aid and help to this group. I will even give them the chance to work towards the goal of freedom. I will give you this as my word, but like everything else here, my word isn't free,"

Sutek looks around, at the armed masked figures in the night, at the city walls just within reach, and at the endless expanse of desert behind them.

"What is the price," he manages and the man laughs ruefully.

"Fast learner! The price is that you, and the boy pretending to be dead under there—" he gestures behind them and Sutek turns to see Stephanos lying motionless under the cart. He almost panics until he sees him open one eye before shutting it quickly.

"If I give my word, then the two of you must also give yours. You'll live as my Jackals until your debt to me is repaid,"

Sutek looked down at the ground and saw the chain that linked Zeruiah's shackles to the others and knew that raising his hand and giving his word would forge a shackle of his own. He would be tied to this city and these people.

With one more look towards the edge of the desert, he raised his hand.



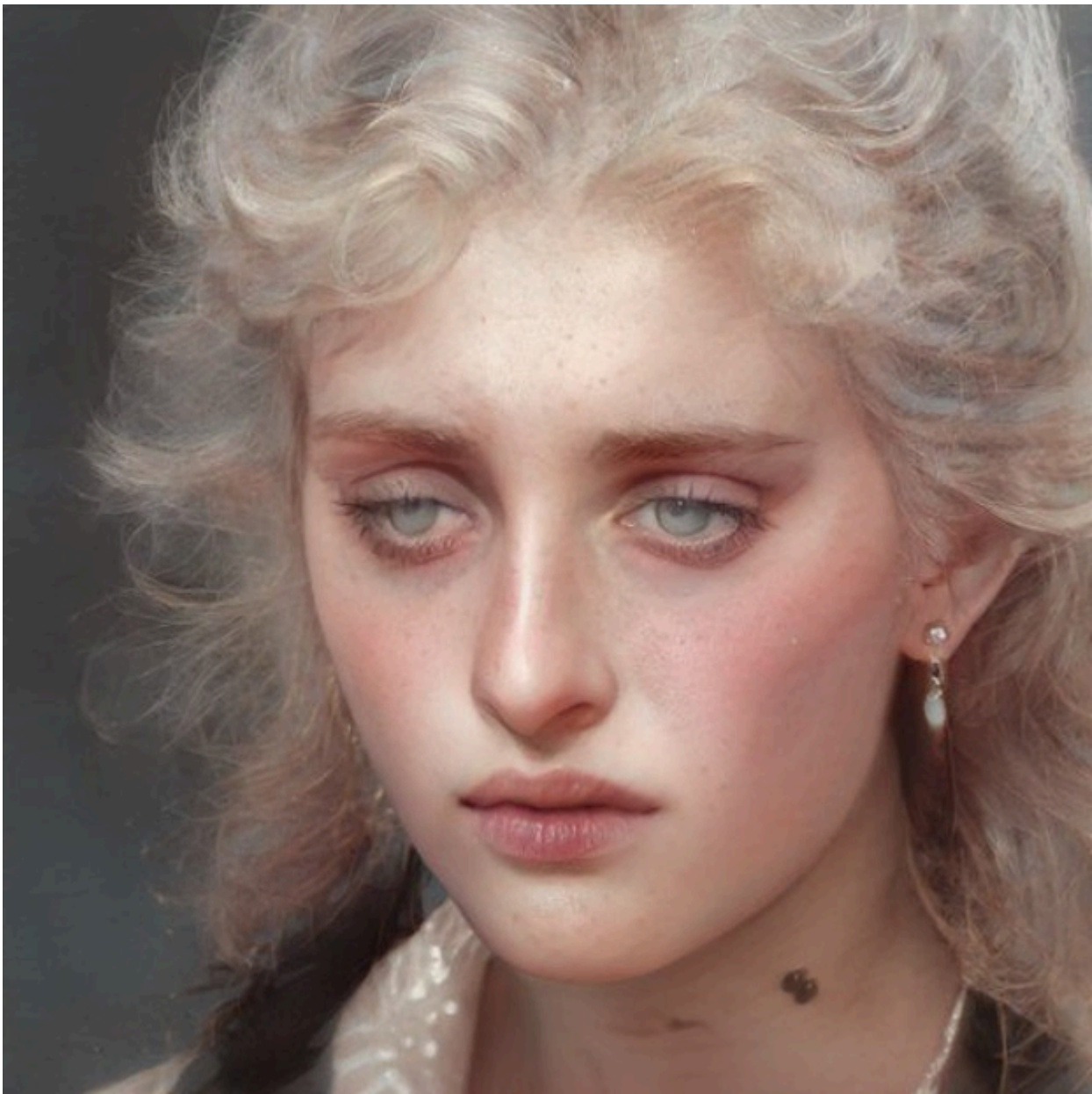
[Oct 4, 2023](#)

Well we have now entered the spookiest month of the year!!

I don't know what spooky specials I'll do for each RO, but we have to do something for the season, right? (I'm thinking alternate universes with the ROs each being something supernatural and spooky...)

As far as HAT,

- The stat page is still a mess, which is making me consider reducing the number of stats as a whole.
- The heist scenes are under revision, as several bugs were spotted and I'm adding additional options as well.
- A lot more places to go and people to meet in the next update, including villains, encounters with Sutek, Heka, and Aretas.



[Eualia, The Forgotten Daughter of House Labaton](#)

[Oct 4, 2023](#)

[\*\*Pinterest\*\*](#)

The sons of House Labaton are revered, reviled, and respected. But the lone daughter of the main house, the eldest child, is all but forgotten. She married well, serves the house dutifully, and is little but a specter in the world of court politics. Her family name is heavy, but her words carry no weight.

Will she be an ally, an enemy, or is there anything left in this shell of a woman to be considered as either?



[Pomona, The Bright-Eyed Rebel Daughter of House Thandetes](#)

[Oct 6, 2023](#)

The House of Thandetes has a reputation for excellence and that extends to its daughters, but if those who were awaiting Pomona to come of age were hoping for a doe-eyed, well-mannered young lady, that could be easily manipulated, they were sorely mistaken. The only thing sharper than her wit is her tongue, and she thoroughly enjoys running circles around both her family and any would be suitor with her dear friend Lady Bora of House Bak.

Very few things get past her, but maybe you will avoid raising her suspicions. Or maybe you'll even persuade her to be your partner in crime.

[Writing Update 10/23/2023](#)

[Oct 23, 2023](#)

So we have some good news and some bad news!

The good news is, the first Poldi story will be released immediately after this post! Also in the eight days leading to Halloween, we will have some spookily sweet short stories for the ROs. So if you've ever wondered what it would be like to romance the monster under your bed or anything else that goes bump in the night, you'll be able to enjoy that with a HAT style twist!

Now the bad news is that a freak accident has jacked up my files, and if it wasn't for Dashingdon, HAT would be almost completely gone! This means that transferring some files around and rewriting what I've lost is going to hinder and demo updates for a bit.

This is just a snag, and although I'm disheartened, it gives me the opportunity to revise and fix some bugs too! Hopefully when I'm able to update again, it will be more than just a one chapter update.

[The Mind and Memory of Sancus Poldimus of House Poldimus](#)

[Oct 23, 2023](#)

Sancus leaned back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the low table in front of him impatiently. While his peers, and other pupils at the academy, squirmed in their seats, he just felt bored.

He would receive the highest mark in the class, again. And Teacher Alim would be unmoved. Again.

The scribe handing out the results placed his scroll in front of him.

"As expected of Teacher Alim's pupil," the young man said with a smile and Sancus forced himself to return it.

"Of course. Could it be any other way?"

His fake smile devolved into a very real smug smirk as he looked at some of the classmates foolish enough to consider themselves his rivals and quickly got up, hurrying past them.

He slipped on his sandals at the door, leaving the academy grounds and heading out into the streets of Upper Cusmo.

The wide, cobbled roads felt familiar. After all, Sancus had been coming here to study to be a court scholar since he was in his tenth year, traveling back home to be with his family frequently. After he showed signs of being a mage, Teacher Alim reached out to his family and took him under his wing, making him his only pupil.

As the only son of House Poldimus, his family already had high hopes for him, and as he grew older his status as a prodigy raised them to the heavens. Teacher Alim's interest in him only confirmed what everyone who met him said. Sancus was a once-in-a-generation talent, his family's path to higher status amongst the nobility, and surely someone who would go on to serve the king well.

Sancus let out a sigh as the market came into view.

There were many things he didn't understand about Teacher Alim. He didn't understand why he chose to live near the market when surely his position in court could afford him the finest villa in Upper Cusmo. He didn't seem to have any land outside of the city either, and while this fascinated Sancus when he was younger, now he was beginning to question his teacher's judgment.

Especially when it came to how his teacher instructed him.

Alim was obsessed with the past and filled lessons with stories and anecdotes from old reigns and wars, with him choosing to dwell on some of the most insignificant details. The old man had no reaction when Sancus brought him the highest marks in his class but appeared profoundly disappointed when he didn't see the point in remembering which family occupied which land first. And what Sancus found most infuriating was that Teacher Alim had told his parents that he had a strong affinity for magic, and yet the old man appeared to have no intention to instruct him in it.

He felt his frustration ebb slightly as he walked through the market, spotting the sour candies he liked. He bought enough to share with you.

Out of pity, of course.

He smiled to himself. Although Teacher Alim didn't care about his grades, he could use the completed coursework in his lessons with you, one of the few responsibilities the old man entrusted him with. And as much as he hated to admit it when he first met you, the old man was right to see something in you.

You were sharp, understanding concepts even his friends struggled with. It was a shame that someone like you would never be able to gain admittance to the academy and no matter how much Teacher Alim insisted on teaching you about the royal court, a street child like you would never step foot there. He knew he would be the closest you would get. You needed him to make a way for you because heavens know the old man wouldn't.

*Sancus. Young lord, hear my call...*

He felt himself jolt awake, an unknown voice still ringing in his ear, the feeling of a bad dream still clinging to him as he blinked himself awake. With a grimace, he peeled a piece of parchment that had become stuck to his cheek off, surprised that he had fallen asleep at his desk. He had felt wide awake during and after your lesson together that morning, but now he couldn't remember sitting down at his desk, let alone falling asleep.

These dreams were becoming more and more frequent, but he never could remember them, only the way he felt during them. Powerful, yet afraid.

With a yawn, he grabbed the water jug by his desk, grumbling when he found it to be empty. He had just stood, jug in hand, when a searing pain hit him, making him feel like his mind was on fire and his skull too tight.

Doubling over in pain, he dropped the jug, the sound of ceramic shattering doing nothing to snap him out of the darkness starting to cloud his vision. He felt himself falling and his eyes snapped closed.

Suddenly, the pain was gone as soon as it started and he opened his eyes, but instead of finding the familiar surroundings of his bedroom, he was standing in a white abyss.

Yellow smoke shimmered into existence and swirled amongst itself, undulating like a heartbeat until it settled into several familiar figures.

It showed Teacher Alim addressing several scholars. It wasn't an odd scene. Teacher Alim and several of the scholars that hung around him looked to be enjoying tea in the back garden.

"Is he progressing as you hoped?"

Teacher Alim smiled and took a drink of his tea.

"Sancus is doing well in his studies at the academy,"

"You know that is not what I meant," one of the scholars says pointedly and Teacher Alim chuckles but does not answer further.

"Is Poldi really that strong? It's obvious his mind is, but his magic? I can feel nothing from the boy," one of the scholars, Paz, said.

Sancus stopped being in awe at this new manifestation of his power to scoff at the nickname. So they call him that even when he isn't there. He heard it from his peers, his teacher, and even you. It no longer felt derisive, but he looked forward to the day when people would have to honor his full title. He was Lord Sancus Poldimus of House Poldimus and soon the circle of people that would call him otherwise would be very, very small.

"He is very strong. The strongest I've felt in years," Teacher Alim replied and Sancus felt himself puff up with pride, only to be immediately deflated at what he said next.

"I, however, lack that same amount of confidence in his mind. I will remind all of you not to prod him. Do not try to see his strength,"

"We will not disobey you. You determine the pace of his magical instruction," Paz conceded, but Teacher Alim shook his head.

"I have no intention of teaching Poldi anything in that arena, except restraint. And I expect the same from all of you. None of you are to teach him a single spell, ritual, or incantation,"

Sancus felt his chest tighten, wounded by his teacher's words.

The white abyss of his surroundings started to crumble around him, collapsing on itself until he was back in his room.

Hurt turned to rage. White hot rage, and before he could think he was tearing out the door and through the house, heading into the market when he couldn't find him inside, searching for his teacher.

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He found him speaking with a different group of scholars in what appeared to be an impromptu lesson on the outskirts of the market.

He caught the tail end of a statement that only made him angrier.

"—and we know that some people should not get what they want. Some people cannot handle power and should be kept from it at all costs," his teacher told the group of men solemnly.

"Do you think I'm one of them?" Sancus interrupted, shaking with rage.

"Please give me a moment to speak with my student," Teacher Alim told the group, reassuring some of them who looked hesitant to leave him alone with a clearly enraged Sancus.

"What is this about Poldi?" he said, attempting to put his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me old man and don't call me that! Answer the question!"

Teacher Alim frowned and sighed.

"I think you are not ready to practice the magic you want to practice. You are powerful Poldi, but I fear that the contents are too strong for the vessel,"

"I was told that if I learned and practiced in moderation—"



"Sancus! There is nothing moderate about you! We are having this conversation because you want to rush!"

"We're having this conversation because you're a liar. And—and jealous of me! You don't want me to reach my full potential! That's what it is, right? You want to keep me caged and stuck, babysitting street-dwelling low-born trash, so that I don't surpass you!"

Sancus couldn't catch the words before he spoke them, like someone else was speaking with his mouth, and recoiled in terror as soon as the words tore their way out of him.

Teacher Alim looked as disappointed as Sancus was horrified.

"Oh, Sancus."

"I—I didn't mean that. I just,—what I was trying to say,"

"I understand your anger at me, but Sancus. To speak about your friend that way,"

Sancus grows quiet as he thinks about what he just said about you. He felt at war with himself.

His thoughts are interrupted by a familiar and cloying voice.

*Sancus. Young lord, hear my call...*

*Your destiny cannot be compared. Your greatness cannot be measured.*

Things became clear in an instant.

Yes, he enjoyed being around you, and at times he felt like you were the only one he could call a peer.

But you weren't his peer. You were common, of unknown lineage, and would be reliant on him in the future, not the other way around.

"My destiny cannot be compared to someone who was pulled off the street, someone who needs my guidance and protection!"

Teacher Alim looks angrier than he's ever seen him.

"Go back to the house Sancus. Quietly, go back," he said lowly, a growl to his voice.

Sancus wants to argue. To scream and yell, and shake the market to its foundation, but he doesn't.

He can't. Not when wet, hot tears, are streaming down his face.

Roughly wiping his face he runs away, not to the house but into the bustle of the market, searching for a place to hide his shame.



He settled for the shade of an alleyway, sliding down the wall, his thoughts pouring over him.

What were his thoughts? How he felt about you, his teacher, or even himself were jumbled and loud, screeching over each other.

He roughly gripped his hair, the sharp pain back again, and once again the familiar voice spoke. This time louder and clearer, as if someone had leaned over his shoulder to whisper in his ear.

*Sancus. Young lord, hear my call...*

*Answer me and receive what has been stolen from you.*

*Answer me...*

"I don't—what are you?" he struggled out.

*There was a pause before the voice spoke again.*

*"I am yours. I am what was denied you. I am what you need to protect your own. Even the ones that doubt you,"*

*Talking to the voice seemed to make the pain subside.*

"You're my magic?" he said hesitantly, excitement building.

*"I am yours," the voice affirmed, sounding more and more like him with each word.*

"Wait, who needs protecting?"

*"Your proud teacher. Our miserable friend. All those who call our proud teacher friend. Accept me, young lord. Accept your power,"*

*"I accept, now show me!"*

Before he could ask any more questions, everything stopped. The searing pain in his skull, the chirping of birds, even his heartbeat.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them, instead of seeing smokey shapes of his teacher and his teacher's followers, they looked clear as day. None of them seemed to notice him and when he looked down at himself, he saw that he was the smokey figure this time, his form comprised of the familiar yellow smoke.

"The king is too volatile and the court is unstable. Working from within is no longer an option. I will go to the palace tonight, but be prepared for the soldiers to be upon us by nightfall. Clear out all centers of activity,"

Sancus watched as his teacher spoke and the others in the room agreed.

"We have already arranged to depart at the docks once you return from the palace tonight," one of the men said.

"Good. Make arrangements for an additional passenger,"

"Just one? Are we only taking one of the children with us,"

Sancus couldn't breathe. What was his teacher plotting? Was he planning to commit treason and flee? And he was taking you with him?

"The young one will be joining us and Poldi..."

His teacher looked remorseful but resolute.

"It is time for young Lord Sancus to return to House Poldimus,"

The vision ended and Sancus felt himself jolt into his physical body, drenched in a cold sweat.

His teacher was going to commit treason and subject you to the life of a fugitive and it seemed like everyone he knew was in on it. His teacher wanted to take you and return him home. He wanted to bring the wrath of the crown on himself and everyone else involved.

No.

Sancus had to get to you first before they took you to the docks. He had to stop this.

He needed to fix things. He could fix things.

[Belated Boo-tacular: Spooky Side Stories](#)

[Nov 15, 2023](#)

To celebrate the spooky season, please enjoy these short stories that imagine the love interests of Honor Amongst Thieves in a more seasonal and supernatural setting!

\*\*\*

**Laverna: Which is Witch?**

They say that the only downside to working for a family business is working for family, and that feels especially true as Amatus hovers radios you while you're taking inventory.

"Duckling One, I customer assistance upfront. I repeat, Big Bird to Duckling One, I customer assistance upfront,"

His professional voice clicks in, full of static from the radios he insists all of you carry. When all of you insisted that a walkie-talkie system is overkill for a small grocery store like yours, he said,

"Have you seen what we have in the backroom? People would kill to get their hands on some of this stuff! We need to have open lines of communication,"

With a sigh you went up front, stopping in your tracks when you saw the customer that Amatus wanted you to help.

She looks ethereal under the flickering fluorescent lights. She is petite with a soft build and skin as dark as the night. She's enormously overdressed, with a floor-length black gown, glittering jewelry, and a fur coat draped over one shoulder. Her large, deep brown eyes twinkle as she smiles when she sees you.

"I'm so glad your establishment offers a shopping assistant! Jackalmart across town was simply no help," she says cheerfully and Amatus nods.

"Of course ma'am! We pride ourselves on a personal and custom-tailored shopping experience," he lies smoothly, glaring at Tamu who lets out a snort behind the deli counter.

"Ahem! This right here is our best employee. Employee of the Month, take care of anything she needs,"

With a firm pat on your back, he heads off down one of the aisles.

"Um, what's the occasion?" you say and she looks at you blankly.

"Pardon?" she asks, her smile falling slightly.

"I just thought you must be heading somewhere since you're—"

"Oh! I forget that this is considered formal. Just a little something I conjured up to run some errands. A little thrown together,"

"Well you look great," you counter, and her bright smile returns.

"I bet you clean up nicely yourself," her gaze darkens as she looks you over quickly, but the hungry expression is gone so quickly that you're sure you imagined it.

"You are such a lifesaver," the mystery customer says, taking ahold of your arm and resting hers in it like you were escorting her down an old cobblestone road instead of past some breakfast cereal.

Her hands feel warm on your arm and the fur of her coat tickles your nose.

"Bless you," she says, right before you sneeze.

You look at her, bewildered, and shake your head.

"We don't have a lot of fancy items here,"

"I'm Laverna by the way—and it's a modest little get-together. I'm just new to the area and haven't had the chance to pick up any new bits and bobbles. I just need to pick up some essentials. It'll be my first time attending a dinner with all of my coven—I mean my colleagues. My colleagues."

Her voice raises a bit at the end and for the first time since you met her, she looks nervous. You raise your eyebrows a tad, but she moves past it.

"I already have my list, I just need help deciding which one,"

It was a bizarre request from during an already odd encounter, but helping a beautiful woman shop beat doing inventory or watching Desma get yelled at for selling weed behind the store.

"Sure, what are we looking at first?"

\*\*\*

"No newts, squash but no pumpkins, and not a single toad to speak of?"

"We have none of that. Because this is a grocery store,"

She huffs and squats down until she's at eye level with a display of apples.

"I knew I should have brought my stuff from home, but it's such a pain to fly with. I thought I could save time," she grumbles, standing upright and picking up an apple.

"I'm sorry, what is it exactly that you and your colleagues do?" You ask as she stares at an apple.

"I guess you could say we work in public relations, human resources, and contracts," she says and dismissively drops the apple back in the bin.

"Those are three different fields. Maybe I'd be able to help you shop if I had a better understanding of the situation or you..."

"Do you all carry cauldrons?" She asks abruptly, tucking one of her curls back into her updo.

You're starting to wonder if you've passed out in the backroom and all of this is a fever dream.

"I'm sorry—do we carry what?"

She laughs at you and lightly pats you on the shoulder.

"I meant, can you show me your cookware, silly,"

Deciding that you don't get paid enough to question it, you lead her to the aisle with the pots and pans.

She wrinkles her nose at the stainless steel and nonstick options.

"Whatever happened to the good old cast iron?" she sighs and you perk up a little. Finally, something that makes sense.

"We have cast iron frying pans if that's what you're looking for,"

She practically wilts.

"I don't suppose there is a blacksmith nearby?"

You blink.

"No."

She sighed but then smiled at you.

"Sorry to waste your time then, but I do thank you. Those fools at Jackalmart were so rude I had to teach them a little lesson," she says, laughing to herself, but then she turns to face you, taking your hand in hers.

"I will reward you for your kindness and your patience,"

She stares at you so earnestly that you feel yourself nodding, although you aren't sure what a reward from her would entail.

She stares at you so earnestly that you feel yourself nodding, although you aren't sure what a reward from her would entail.

Her eyes lock on something behind you and her grip on your hands tightens.

"Oh. My. Days! What is that?" she squeals, letting you go and throwing off her fur coat to you as she runs toward the aisle with the cleaning supplies.

You follow after her and find her staring at a vacuum cleaner, utterly enraptured.

"Tell me, my pretty, what manner of object is this? I see it is amongst the brooms, yet never have I beheld such an instrument,"

"Uhh, it's a Dyson vacuum cleaner. And did you just call me, my pretty—"

"I must have it!" she says firmly and grabs the vacuum off of the display.

She watches excitedly as you show her how it works and hugs you tightly before taking it in her arms and heading with you to the front.

You'd never seen someone so excited over a vacuum, but you were just happy that she'd found something she liked.

"I'd just like to say that I've had a wonderful time with you, despite your store's limited collection of essential items, so much so that I'd hate for it to end so soon,"

You're about to dispute whether or not newts and cauldrons are essential when she gently takes your hand.

"I would like to see you again if that's alright?"

Your face grows hot and you nod, still unsure why you're still interested in this eccentric woman.

She smiles again and you understand.

"Farewell," she says and heads out the front door, and you stare after her until a cold piece of deli meat hits you.

You turn and Sefu is laughing at you, while Tamu's shoulders shake as he tries not to.

"I know you didn't just let her walk out with a whole vacuum cleaner!"

Eye widening, you rush out after her.

Just as the automatic doors open you see her produce a pointed black hat from who knows where and straddle the vacuum.

She spots you and smiles once again, waves, and takes off into the air, a joyous and haunting cackle trailing after her as she rides off into the dusky sky.

Stunned, you grab your walkie-talkie.

"Duckling One to Big Bird, we've just been robbed by a witch. I repeat we have been robbed by a witch,"

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[Nov 15, 2023](#)

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### **Sutek: The Big, Not so Bad, Wolf**

The truck tires crunched through fallen pine needles and cones as you and your colleague pulled up to the metal fences of the Big Falls Wolf Sanctuary.

"I'll bet you anything that you've never seen anything like him," your colleague, Steve, babbled excitedly as the automatic gate to the sanctuary opened.

You'd been brought to the Big Falls Wolf Sanctuary because of your status as lead researcher in the Artep National Park Repopulation Project, which seeks to reintroduce endangered species back to the park and heal the ecosystem. Your team had a good working relationship with the sanctuary, so when they called about an exceptional specimen, you came running.

"Susan didn't mention the type of world on the phone," you say as you hop out of the truck and Dan hurries around it to you as you approach one of the enclosures.

"That's the thing! We don't know! Yemoja is willing to bet money on *Canis lupus pambasileus*, but I see more similarities with *Canis lupus occidentalis*,"

A large grey wolf dog barks excitedly at you, padding its way over to you and Steve, causing you both to stop and pet it.

A sharp and eerie howl rings out, echoing over the entire sanctuary and beyond, setting off all of the other canines on the property in a symphony of barks and howls.

"Looks like he's awake!" Steve shouts over the noise, hands pressed over his ears. He waves you over to a door, scanning a sensor with his keycard.

While the rest of the sanctuary is rustic and homey, this area feels much more clinical, like a vet's office and science lab combined.

"Here's where you'll be set up Doc," Steve said as he showed you around, flicking on the fluorescent lights as the two of you walked through. "And here is where he'll be,"

The two of you approach a clear glass window that takes up the majority of the lab and immediately you feel a shiver run down your spine.

"We had to improvise an enclosure for him, so we kind of just pressed him into this area and gated off any way of escape, but hopefully you'll be able to transfer him before he realizes the gate facing the

woods isn't the most stable,"

You can't see anything out of the window, just an abyss of darkness, but you can feel the cold eyes of a predator on you.

Steve flicks another switch on and floodlights illuminate the previously pitch-black space, bringing into view foliage, trees, rocks, and the biggest wolf you've ever seen in your entire life.

It's standing extremely close to the glass, putting you almost face-to-face with it.

Dark fur covers its large, bulky body, and its amber eyes stare into yours.

It snarls before lunging at the glass, teeth bared.

"Oh shoot! He burns through the sedative like it's nothing," Steve grumbles, just as his walkie-talkie buzzes to life.

"Did you just say that you want me to shoot him?" a staticky voice says over the line and Steve fumbles with the device, frantically trying to answer.

"No, Sefu! Over—I repeat, no use of deadly force!"

As the two of them argued, you took another cautious step toward the glass, causing the big beast to snarl at you even more, gnashing his teeth. He brought a heavy paw up against the glass and you watched in shock as hairline cracks, like a spider's web, began to form under it.

The cracks begin to get bigger and you stagger back before reflexively shouting,

"Stop! Bad boy!"

The snarling stops abruptly and the beast looks more confused and possibly offended than you thought a wolf could look.

He cocks his head to the side, snarling slightly.

"Do not break this glass! Are you going to clean it up? Be a good boy and calm down," you said, using the same tone you would use with your friend Tamu's cat.

This wolf was more responsive than the cat, however, and stopped snarling, Amber eyes boring into you.

"Good boy," you smiled right as a shot rang out and the beast yelped before snarling, whipping around to where the shot originated, only for another one to ring out.

"Wait, what are they doing?!" you say in a panic but Steve stops you.



"It's just a couple of tranqs to bring him down so we can get you your samples. Trust me, it's not easy to kill the big guy,"

A few more shots and the wolf's amber eyes grow cloudy and he looks at you one last time before closing them and slumping to the ground.

\*\*\*

You weren't afraid.

At least that's what you told yourself as you entered the makeshift enclosure with your supplies.

The still body of the wolf looked far less threatening now that he was asleep, but even bigger now that you were seeing it up close.

You needed blood samples, and to attach the collar you and your team would use to track him once he was released.

Months had passed and you began to view the wolf almost as a friend. He was remarkably smart, more than usual for a dog or a wolf, but you still weren't sure what he was, with each attempt at running a blood test turning up no result.

He seemed fond of you too, often choosing to lay in front of the large glass window to watch you as you went about your work in the lab.

"Easy there big guy," you say as you draw your first sample, firmly patting the beast's furry side.

The beast's blood seems to shimmer as it goes into the vial. You shake your head and attribute it to being a trick of the light.

"We're trying this again," Sefu sighed as you placed the vial in your bag and grabbed another one, his rifle slung over his shoulder as he lethargically scanned the area.

"We try it until we get it," you say, connecting a new vial and watching it fill with blood. "The sooner we know what he is, the sooner he can be released. After all, such a good boy doesn't need to be in a cage. That's right, no he doesn't," you say and playfully ruffle the soft fur of the sleeping wolf's neck.

You detach the vial, but a low growl almost makes you drop it.

"Doc, get behind me," Sefu says quietly. as the two of you watch the wolf rise, shaking off his artificial slumber.

Then he seems to shrink and grow simultaneously, his fur loosening and starting to fall.

"Nope. Run Doc!" Sefu says but you feel pinned in place as the hide of the wolf you've been watching all of these months falls to the dirt, revealing the tattooed, amber-brown skin of a man. He turned to you

sharply, his muscles tensed like he was ready to attack, his dark brows furrowed.

He lunges at you, knocking you to the ground right as Sefu's rifle goes off. You hear your friend reload, but it's too late.

With inhuman strength and speed, you feel yourself hoisted, as the wolf, no the man, vaults over the fence into the tree line. Several more shots ring out, but none of them land as you're carried off into the darkness of the woods.

\*\*\*

You aren't sure what you expected, but sitting at a fire, across from the wolf you've been studying for months, who has suddenly become a man, was not one of them.

"Excuse me, do you understand me," you try asking.

He looks at you and nods curtly.

"Yes."

When he speaks, fear quickly gives way to academic curiosity.

"This is amazing! Ethically concerning, but amazing. Are you a wolf that can turn into a man? Or—oh, are you a man that can turn into a wolf? Does your mind change? I have so many questions!" you begin to babble, but he cuts you off.

"And I have a *name*,"

"I'm sorry?"

He bristles indignantly, an expression you recognize from him being a wolf.

"My name is Sutek. Not good boy, or bad boy, or fluffy butt. You think you can scratch behind my ears, rub my belly, and then turn around and shoot me!"

You cringe as you remember talking to him when he was a wolf.

"Sorry, um, Sutek is it? I think there is a misunderstanding. Let's start over," you say, and reach out your hand to shake, hoping to salvage the interaction.

He stares at your hand before abruptly turning away.

"Offering to rub my belly in this form is inappropriate and won't make me forget that you held me hostage,"

"No! I wasn't—I was just trying to—"

"And I've been observing you for a while now. You and your wolf abducting operation."

He takes a menacing step towards you, his eyes glowing in the night.

"Things have changed. Now you're my prisoner," he growls.

## [Writer Update](#)

[Dec 6, 2023](#)

Whew, December is a busy month so I hope it's going well for y'all so far and that it continues to go well!

### **Good News!**

I've successfully moved all of the stuff I had from Dashington over to a new choicescript project. This was mostly just copy paste, but hey, small victories. I've been going through and editing, clearing up plot discrepancies, and adding in choices that should have been in there.

Another thing that's different is that I'm trimming down the stat page. Affable/Sarcastic is gone because it had a bit too much overlap with Warmhearted/Cold and Soft/Cruel. You'll still have chances to be sarcastic, it just won't be a featured stat.

The one thing that I couldn't recover is the graphics used. Some were saved elsewhere, but I will have to remake the chapter title graphics and the stats page graphics. It's not a tragedy though! Just means I'll have a chance to make them better!

1905	
1906	You quickly nod to <u>Tamu</u> and he blow a bird shaped whistle, alerting <u>Desma</u> , <u>Sefu</u> and the others that it was time to <u>joining</u> the fray.
1907	
1908	A sickle slices through the air towards you and you manage to sidestep it, reaching for your own weapons.
1909	
1910	
1911	▼ *if possess_dagger
1912	Bronze daggers come out to greet the sickles and chains of the Wharf Rats and you work on clearing a path to <u>Youri</u> , ignoring the warm wet spray of blood that covers you as you push forward.
1913	
1914	▼ *if possess_hatchet
1915	The sharp edge of the hatchet shatters chain and sickle alike as you fend of the Wharf Rats, while the blunt sides deflect their attempts to break your guard. You work on clearing a path to <u>Youri</u> , ignoring the warm wet spray of blood that covers you as you push forward.
1916	
1917	▼ *if curved_sword
1918	The curve of your sword interlocks with the sickles and chains of the Wharf Rats, overcoming them and their owners. You work on clearing a path to <u>Youri</u> , ignoring the warm wet spray of blood that covers you as you push forward.
1919	
1920	▼ *if possess_shield
1921	A blow glances off your small but sturdy shield, doubtlessly saving you from losing an arm, and you respond in kind by bashing the offender in the face with it.
1922	
1923	▼ *if possess_guildedclaws
1924	One rat comes close to disarming you, moving your weapon aside, only to be met with your talon dressed hand slashing across his face and chest.
1925	
1926	▼ *if possess_club
1927	There is a sickening crack of your club as it meets bone and many rats clutch their wrists in agony, their weapons long forgotten in the face of fracture.
1928	
1929	As the fray continues, it's clear to see that the Wharf Rats are clearly outclassed by your guild, with many of them turning tail and running away.
1930	
1931	You call out over the fighting.
1932	
>_  Ln 977, Col 63   Char Count: 142431   Word Count: 23104 [excl. cmds]	

[Bug Report](#)

[Dec 11, 2023](#)

So for a long while, the stat page was a mess (it still kinda is) but one of the bigger bugs was that the weapon selection didn't display correctly. While reviewing the previous chapters I found multiple places where the variable showed the wrong text.

So I can't even claim technical difficulties on this. This is just me finding new ways to make a typo haha

## [Writer Update](#)

[Jan 7, 2024](#)

Well Happy New Year!!

I for one am happy that we've survived to see another year and that y'all are still rocking with me. Let's talk a little about what the new year has in store!

An updated demo will be posted 1/12/2024, also known as this Friday.

Some background info is that I'll be tinkering around with what a twine version looks like.

I really hope to try and finish HAT by the end of 2024, but even then I know there will be proofreading to do and art to commission...still your patience and support makes this task much less overwhelming so thank you and I hope y'all had a happy holidays!

## [Demo Update](#)

[Jan 13, 2024](#)

So this is a small update!

The royal library heist option has been added and some bugs have been fixed, but I don't doubt there are some new ones.

In about a week, the second part of this update will be up involving the hunt and temple visit, but I really wanted to get the palace library heist option out!

Here's the link:

<https://moody.ink/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced-demo/mygame/>

Let me know if y'all run into any problems!

### [Demo Update 2/11/2024](#)

[Feb 12, 2024](#)

Thank y'all for your patience! I got in pretty late last night but here is the update!

- I tried to get all of the squiggle typos, but let me know if I missed any.
- Hope y'all are ready for some Heka time!

<https://moody.ink/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced-demo/mygame/>

### [Writer Update](#)

[Mar 4, 2024](#)

Whew!

So we tried out moody and that was kind of a bust, but now we're back on Dashingdon!

I have the next update cooking, but I also want to put some short stories out for y'all in the coming weeks. Maybe I'll write some of those alternate universe ideas we were talking about on tumblr. Or would y'all rather have more insight into the the pasts of the ROs. Heka and Laverna are probably overdue for some backstory.

Anyway, between work and the moody launch going to pieces, things have been hectic, but I'm always happy to see y'all reading and playing this game. Feel free to let me know what y'all would like to see next as I prepare the next demo installment!

### [Character Conversations: A Queen's Destiny \(Sarai and Avith\)](#)

[Mar 22, 2024](#)

She rode hard, watching as the sand gave way to dry grasses. She finally reached the ridge and looked out over the sea of brightly painted round homes that dotted the progressively greener land.

Quickly dismounting, she didn't even bother to tether her horse. She paused only long enough to give her steed a gentle pat on the flank before hurrying down the hill.

Her family's home stood out, as a chief's home should, with banners and stairs that led up to it. The men who stood guard at the gate bowed to her, opening the heavy wooden doors so that she could pass through.

"Where's father?" She asked as soon as she entered the great hall, not taking the time to greet her mother and sisters, who were in the middle of lunch.

"He's out hunting with your brothers, but Sarai, why are you covered in dust, and where is your escort? Wait-where is your sister?!"

Her mother stood, placing a concerned hand on Sarai's elbow, but Sarai shrugged it away.

"I saw men while out on my ride. Too many for a trading party and too well armed for nomads traveling for the season," she said as she raced back outside.

She climbed the stairs outside that led to an observation platform that the guards used to look out over a distance to spot danger. She couldn't spot them from here, not yet anyway, but she knew what she saw. Her father and brothers weren't visible either, but she had another way of reaching them.

"Blow the horns," she told the guardsmen on the wall.

Soon the low sound of the horns filled the air and tumbled over the wall and across the plains, and hopefully to her father's ears. He knew to return quickly if he heard the call of their people's horns.

"Sarai! Get down from there right now and answer me!"

Her mother's voice carried even over the sound of the horns, and Sarai looked down to see her mother at the foot of the steps looking furious, accompanied by two of her sisters.

She braced herself for the verbal flogging that was soon to follow and begrudgingly went down the stairs.

Chieftess Lulit was usually the picture of elegance and grace. With her luminous dark brown skin, thin brows that always held a gentle but inquisitive arch, and thick dark hair secured under vibrant scarves and jewels, she was meticulous about how she presented herself. When Sarai saw her now, with beads of sweat gathered at her temples and her scarf, half fastened and blowing in the wind, Sarai knew that she was in trouble.

"Inside. Now!" Her mother shouted, and Sarai could have sworn she saw one of the guardsmen jump.

"Hope you said goodbye to your horse because you're not going to be riding off anytime soon," her sister Sekai snickered, as they went back inside.

"You and your sister went out with four guards, and you return alone? Explain this to me, Sarai?"

"I rode faster than them," Sarai offered meekly, and she heard her other sister, Seble, snort.

When their mother whipped her head around to look at her, she tried to disguise it with a cough and hurried to change the subject.

"You said you saw a group of men? Was it an army?"

Sarai perked up.

"Too small to be an army, but maybe a portion of one. I think we should alert our forces and send a fast rider to alert uncle and then-"

"Would you listen to her? Not even old enough to sit at the main table and yet acting like a chieftess,"

Sarai gritted her teeth.

"Fine, I'm younger than you, but I'm not blind. I know what I saw!"

It's true that she was the youngest of her sisters and was still in her seventeenth year, but she resented being babied. They were quick to call her rash, but she couldn't accept how unfair it was that her sisters and brothers were given land to rule, and room to form their own tribes, and yet she was stuck under the wings of their mother and father. Shouldn't she be able to stretch her own?

Chieftess Lulit pursed her lips and her brow furrowed as she contemplated Sarai's words.

"I will send word to uncle, and we will await your father's return, but you will do your waiting in your room," she finally said.

"What?! But I'm the one who spotted them! Shouldn't I help you plan or-"

"You did well. But you also put yourself in danger and abandoned those you were traveling with. You were right to alert us, Sarai, but you were also rash. Go to your room and think about my words.

\*\*\*

Her father and brothers arrived around the same time as her uncle and his men. Her sister and their escort arrived with them, already having informed them of the situation.

Sarai could do nothing but sulk as she was scolded by her father as well for running off alone.

"You did many things right but the thing you did wrong was far too big," Her father said as he grabbed his spear.



Her father, Chieftain Thulani had a reputation for being a wild horse of a man. With large dark eyes, long limbs, and thick, long, inky black hair, Sarai's mother said that she used to think the reason for this reputation was purely physical until she saw him angry.

Most of his time Chief Thulani was like a lake with few ripples, but certain things set him off. Threats to his family and outsiders. Then he was like a mad spooked horse, ready to trample anything in his way.

Now it looked like both were at hand and Sarai would have to deal with the runoff for both.

"I still can't believe you just took off without Saynab!" he shouted before taking a deep breath and composing himself.

"What were you thinking?" he asked and Sarai opened her mouth to speak before he cut her off again.

"Nevermind, I know from your actions that you weren't,"

Sarai squawked in anger. She thought that there wasn't a moment to waste! She took action and yet everyone was treating her like she had a tantrum and stormed off from her sister instead of alerting all of them to a potential threat.

"Chieftain, scouts say it is a prince from Hashind!" One of her father's men came in to report, interrupting Sarai's condemnation.

"Tell the men to not lower their guard and tell the kitchen to prepare a meal," he said after a moment and turned to Sarai.

Go get presentable, go to the great hall, and sit with your sisters. Sit silently," he added with narrowed eyes.

She narrowed her eyes back at him.

He raised a brow and she quickly wilted, hurrying back to her room.

She'd let him win this round.

\*\*\*

Her father was not the type to welcome people with open arms, but custom wouldn't allow him to shut the door in a guest's face. With the condition that the prince's soldiers stay outside, her father invited the prince to eat with them.

"Who is it?" she asked one of her sisters quietly as the prince entered.

"They said it's one of the princes from Hashind. They've crowned a new king and now the other princes can't stay there," Seble answered.

Sarai noticed that their father tried to set them as far back as possible from the prince and his people. They were more varied in appearance than she would have thought, with the one sitting closest to him having pale eyes, skin, and hair. He looked tense, his eyes flitting around the room, but the prince seemed to be at ease. He smiled at her father, raising his cup to him.

"They say my ancestor Kauket hailed from this land. Now I find myself returning to it. Thank you for your hospitality,"

Chieftain Thulani grimaced but begrudgingly raised a glass.

"It's custom. And thank you for reminding me to consider you a kinsman,"

"I'm afraid I will have to take up more of your kindness, as I'm sure you've heard about the events in Hashind,"

"You Hashind people make everything everyone's business. It matters not to me who sits where, and yet somehow it becomes a problem for all of the tribes surrounding you,"

Sarai sees her mother nudge her father and he frowns but says no more.

The prince nods, chuckling to himself as he takes another drink.

"You are wise to the current situation which makes your hospitality even more moving. After all, it is good to be a friend to the king of Hashind,"

"How hospitable will I have to be? When are you leaving?"

"We will not be staying," the prince said, not bothering to elaborate. Suddenly his eyes darted toward the back of the room where she and her sisters were seated.

"Will I be so fortunate to have an escort? A guide to show me around?"

Sarai could feel his eyes on her as he asked, and it made her shiver despite the warmth from the hearth.

For a moment, she thought that maybe he was just looking in her general direction or at one of her sisters, but when she dared to look up, his eyes were staring right at her with a calm smirk on his face.

Her father put his cup down with a clank, his face as rigid as a stone.

"Prince Avith, you found your way here without a guide, and our land, though rich and beautiful, is very flat. I have no doubt you will be able to find your way and if you do get lost, stand up and look around,"

If Prince Avith noticed her father's rudeness, he didn't show it. Instead, he just laughed and shook his head.

"I thank you for your wisdom. And for the marvelous views,"

\*\*\*

Prince Avith had been staying with them for months, and Sarai was beginning to feel the strain of their presence. Those in the village were wary of the soldiers, a sentiment shared by her father, who tightened the reins on her and her sisters. They could no longer ride freely, and they had their meals separately from when their father dined with the prince.

"I just want to know what the problem is," Sarai huffed for the hundredth time as she ate with her mother and sisters. One of her brothers, Taurai pulled a leg off of his plate and put it on hers to pacify her.

He was the youngest of her brothers and besides occasionally joining her other brothers and their father for outings, he preferred the company of his sisters and mother.

"Father doesn't want to quarrel with Hashind. Now the current king has exiled his brother and that exiled prince shows up on his doorstep," he explained.

"Then why doesn't he just throw him out?" she asked.

This time her sister Sekai answered.

"Because that would make us an enemy. Who knows, that prince could defeat his brother without our help, and he would remember us as people who turned him away in his hour of need. Better to treat him with hospitality and hope he goes on his way sooner or later,"

"And it looks like it's going to be later," Taurai said with a sigh.

Sarai had been kept close by her mother ever since the prince and his men arrived, but she still saw him. He looked like no man she'd ever seen before, with wispy dark brown curls and light brown skin. His nose was wide, but the bridge of it was uncommonly tall, and his brow was pronounced. When she had brought this up to her sister Seble, she had said that it was because his mother was from Kylosia. He always smiled when he saw her, in a way that made her feel like he was only looking at her.

"I wonder why he stays," she said to herself, but her mother answered.

"Because he wants something. I don't like the look in that man's eyes. I want all of you to stay away from him and let your father deal with this,"

Her voice was firm and all of them nodded in agreement, but as Sarai pushed her food around her plate, she couldn't help but wonder what a prince could want from her family.

\*\*\*

Several weeks into the dry season, Sarai finally got a taste of freedom that she was itching for. It was soon to be her cousin Lalia's coming-of-age ceremony, and she was permitted to attend.

"Do not leave your escort behind and don't do anything rash. Best behavior! Do you hear me?" Her mother said as Sarai mounted the horse.

Her other sisters were with her, yet she was the only one getting a year's worth of reminders in the time it took to load the cart with gifts.

"I got it, I got it! You can stop now,"

"I'll never stop trying to keep you on the right path," her mother said with a frown, but her face softened as she took her hand. "Just like I'll never stop loving you."

"I know, I know," Sarai said with a laugh, wrinkling her nose at her mother's sudden sappiness.

"Ah, I forgot the jewelry!" Her mother said, clasping her hands together in frustration.

She hurried off and Sarai set about fixing her saddle when a low whistle caught her attention.

When she turned around, Prince Avith was standing not far behind her, an amused smile on his face.

"Where are you going and who is so fortunate to get to enjoy your presence? I know I have felt starved without it myself,"

Sarai felt at a loss for words. She looked around, but it seemed like everyone else had suddenly become preoccupied, leaving her alone with him by the carriage.

"Greetings, Your Highness," she hurried out, unable to think of anything else to say. It sounded like he was flattering her, but why would he do that?

"No need for that, but I must admit when I see you I have to fight the urge to bow,"

Sarai's cheeks heated up and she shook her head. "There's no need for that! You are a prince and our guest,"

"Yes, but there is something about you. Maybe the way you walk or your eyes. In Hashind, people who read faces would say that you have a queen's destiny,"

He stepped closer and reached out, gently taking her hand and bowing slightly.

"In Hashind, your rank would be similar enough to a princess, so there is no need for things to be so formal between us. Besides, don't you feel stifled with so many people going on about what should be done and what's appropriate?"

He rolled his eyes and Sarai found herself laughing, not minding that he was still holding her hand.

He grinned, his grip tightening slightly.

"I knew that we were similar. I feel as though we've had a hundred conversations with just our eyes,"

Sarai was at a loss for words. She'd never had anyone say anything like that before and his eyes seemed endless as he stared into hers. How could her mother not like the look of this man?

"I'm glad you have the ability to do that because my mouth is failing me," she said awkwardly and he laughed, making her heart leap in her chest.

"I was told that our arrival was heralded by the daughter of the chief and that was why your people were so prepared in case I proved to be a foe. Is it true? Are you the quick and pretty one they call Sarai?"

He said her name like it was the smooth current of a stream or the low hiss of a snake and Sarai felt herself nod at his question.

"Shall we be friends? I find myself growing lonely here, Sarai. Your father isn't the best for conversation," he said like he was sharing a secret and she couldn't hold back a laugh. Every time she saw her father and this man conversing, Chief Thulani had a huge scowl on his face.

"It just takes time for him to warm up to outsiders," she tried to reassure him.

"I am sure I'll find a way to his heart. Sarai, you never answered where you were going and what all of this is for," he said as he gestured to the cart.

"It's my cousin Lalia's coming-of-age ceremony. I'll be attending and these are gifts from us to her,"

"Coming of age," he said, mulling the words over.

"Have you come of age Sarai?" he asked and she hesitated before shaking her head.

"Almost!" she added quickly.

"How interesting. And yet you look to be in full bloom,"

Sarai's heart skipped a beat but before she could respond, she could hear her mother's voice call for her.

"We will talk later, Sarai,"

He walked away and later, as she journeyed to her cousin's coming-of-age ceremony, she dreamed of her own and wondered what her destiny truly was. He had looked at her and he had not seen a rash young girl, but instead a flower in full bloom. He found her quick. He found her pretty. He wanted to be her friend. She thought of his kind voice and attentive eyes and for the first time, she thought about how nice being wanted felt.

## [Writing Update](#)

[Mar 30, 2024](#)

The updated demo should be out tomorrow on March 31st for y'all, and as usual, I would like to thank you for your patience.

Additionally, in the update we'll have more insight into the lore of Cusmo and Hashind, as well as the other nations and countries that Hashind interacts with.

Right now, I'm doing some much-needed grammar and spell checking. I get in such a hurry to type that all of that goes out the window. Not to mention those weird symbols that are still popping up after the file transfer.

## [Advanced Demo Update 3/31/2024](#)

[Apr 1, 2024](#)

Introducing the first demo update of April!!

This adds more to the temple chapter, including the start to a more fleshed out Heka scene as well as some court scheming with Aretas.

(Side note: I spent so many hours typo hunting in previous chapters and let me just say that y'all are some real ones for sticking with me through all of those.)

Here is the advanced demo: <https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

As always, let me know if you run into any issues and let me know what you think!

## [Market Misadventures: Yusra, Asfia, and Amatus](#)

[Apr 30, 2024](#)

She never liked to see him on his way to the mines. The image of his strong and broad back facing away from her, walking with a tired but purposeful stride towards a place she knows he must hate, always left her feeling uneasy.

Kamau's presence always felt like a slight breeze in the midst of a stifling day, a quiet reassurance that something, somewhere, was better.

He reminded her of those big guardian statues that stood outside the temple of her hometown, except he warded off her husband instead of evil spirits.

"Hey, look at me when I speak," her husband barked, snapping his fingers in front of her face.

She tore her gaze away from Kamau's back, which was growing further and further away, and instead focused on the reality of her husband's angry face.

"There we go," he said as she looked at him, his face heavy with scorn. "Don't do anything today that will make me look bad in front of our neighbors, and don't waste any of my hard-earned money around here. You want to make bread, you sell that shit, you hear me?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes on him, feeling smaller than the grains of sand beneath his feet.

He looked at her hard before finally seeming satisfied.

"Good. Your little stunt today means I'm probably going to be in for it from that big bastard at work today, so the least you could do is stand up straight as you see me off. At least try to look like you're worth the money it takes to feed you,"

Her husband, Lanre, always had her stand outside to watch him leave for his work, wanting the other men to see how devoted she was, and she didn't mind. Yusra's great shame is that, while the sight of Kamau heading towards the mines filled her with dread, the sight of her own husband leaving filled her with relief. As soon as he turned his back to her, air entered her lungs and all of her aches eased, if only in her mind.

So today, despite him almost killing her the night before, she stood on the threshold, head aching and swollen faced, waiting for him to leave.

He was leaving, and that meant that she would have a few precious hours of peace.

Asfia was resting on her hip and gurgled in delight, as if cheering her father's departure as Lanre walked further and further out of sight.

"I know, I know, and now we have the entire day to ourselves," Yusra cooed at her once he was out of earshot, caressing her chubby soft cheeks with her knuckle.

Even when Lanre was out of sight, Yusra still lingered, her eye still searched for Kamau. Just to thank him, she told herself. Just to show her gratitude for him saving her. But he was long gone. Lost in the stream of men heading off to start their day in the mines.

Some days, when she was up early, and she saw him, she daydreamed about calling out to him. But every time her voice caught in her throat. Others might see and talk. They might question his reputation.

No, it was better she kept her mouth shut and avoided the dark and tired eyes that always looked at her with concern, kindness, and deep disappointment.

Suddenly she felt embarrassed, and with her headache in full bloom she stepped back inside, closing the battered wooden door behind her.

The place she stayed with Lanre was just a step above a hovel. A small fireplace and table put it head and shoulders above what some of the other people in Lower Cusmo had.

She stepped over the shattered pottery and went to the fireplace that doubled as her kitchen. Smoothing away the soot she pried at the large stones that lined the back, revealing a small box.

She hid her dowry from Lanre, what was left of it anyway. He had already drank away most of it.

In the box was a couple of pieces of jewelry and a few strings of coins.

She inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders. With a smile, she secured Asfia to her back and opened the door to the outside world, her money tucked securely into her sash.

She could make something of this day.

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Lanre didn't know how right he was about selling bread. What he saw was the tail end of Yusra's efforts.

Since Asfia was born, Yusra had taken to buying the cheapest ingredients she could in Lower Cusmo and selling it for whatever she could get, pocketing some of the coins and leaving the rest for Lanre to find. She knew it was wrong to lie to her husband, or to pray that one day the drink would take him, but the monk from her hometown told her that the Architect of Heaven is understanding to those who sin in order to survive.

She sold what she could and the rest she gave to the children that littered the streets, both getting rid of the evidence of her little enterprise and easing her own aching heart at the sight of their hunger worn faces.

There would be none of that today, though. From now on, there was nothing to spare. She bought the cheapest wheat she could find and had enough to spare for an egg and a small pot of honey. Even



though she rushed home, it took her a while to cook her batch of bread. Her entire body ached, slowing her down, and Asfia was fussy, needing to be soothed throughout the process.

Finally, brow creased from pain, arms heavy with her breadbasket, and Asfia's weight firmly attached to her back, she began to make her rounds.

She went wherever they were buying, careful to stay out of some of the market vendor's sight, lest they have the guards chase her away.

Some of the straggling miners bought her bread, while other customers were women with heavily painted faces and more jewels adorning their bodies than Yusra had ever seen.

"If you're looking for some help, Mother Mara may have a room you could rent," one of them suggested with a smile that didn't meet her eyes.

Yusra smiled but shook her head. She was no longer new to Cusmo and its dangers. Lanre may have been bad, but her neighbors had assured her that Mara was worse.

The honey seemed to have helped her sales, and her basket was almost empty.

Asfia began to cry, and she sat her basket down by a secluded area of the docks, removing Asfia from her back to feed her. The waves crashed into the shoreline, a cool breeze carrying over to her across the sparkling blue water. She watched the gulls wistfully as they flew above the boats, and she wished she could feel half as free.

"There you are! From the way Kamau was talking about you, I thought you'd be resting, not running around the city,"

She jumped at the low voice behind her. She turned slowly, clutching Asfia close to her chest.

The man before her wasn't an unfamiliar face, nor was he a particularly unfamiliar one.

Skin with a light brown, almost golden tint, and smiling eyes, the man with a scarred smile held his hands up to her, as if to establish that he wasn't a threat, but she knew better.

He was a member of the Jackals, one of the gangs that ran the city. He had a reputation for being one of the kindest of the group, granting poor shopkeepers extensions on their payments, and other small acts of kindness. But just as the women in the neighborhood whispered and giggled about his friendliness, they also spoke of his acts of great violence. Yusra had enough of that in her life and prayed silently that his speaking to her wasn't the beginning of more of it.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, sitting down on the remnants of a stone wall next to her.

"...You are Amatus of the Jackals?"

He frowned and reached into the width of his belt. She flinched, but the only thing he removed was a smoking pipe.

He raised an eyebrow at her reaction before chuckling with a shake of his head.

"Just Amatus is fine. You don't know it, but we share a mutual friend,"

He was beginning to fill his pipe with herbs from his belt when his eyes flitted to Asfia clutched in her arms.

"Cute kid," he remarked before putting down his pipe.

"A friend? You're friend's with Kamau?" She asked hesitantly.

"Well, I call him friend, but he probably wouldn't want to claim me. We used to work together, but he couldn't stomach it, the type of work we did,"

He looked off at the gulls.

"Truthfully, I don't think I can either. Not anymore,"

She furrows her brow. Kamau is an honorable man and from what she's seen he goes to work and goes home. He has no dealings with thieves and murders like the man in front of her.

"Do I need to pay you in order to sell my bread?" she finally asks, still trying to make sense of why this man was speaking to her.

"That only applies to shopkeepers, stall vendors, and the crafting guilds. I'm not so low as to count a basket as a shop. But if you want to pay for protection, that's another matter,"

He looks her up and down, eyes lingering and narrowing as he takes in her visible wounds.

"Kamau was right. You look like you could use someone to help your problems go away,"

His voice took a sharp edge, and she took a step back.

"Did-did Kamau tell you that?" she asked, unable to keep the quiver out of her voice. She didn't know what this man was offering her or why, but it felt like some sort of illicit deal.

He holds her gaze before sighing.

"No. He said that you're a good woman in a bad situation and asked me to help you leave the city. I can't do that for you right now, but I can get rid of the beast in your house,"

Yusra looked at the gold hanging off Amatus's ear and listened to the way he spoke. He had riches that should only be worn by those that sat loftily above them, and yet here he was in an abyss with her,

walking and talking as if anything could happen if he willed it.

Yet he couldn't get her out of the city?

But he could get rid of Lanre.

She couldn't help but shake. The answer to her prayers and dreams was right there. She could never see him again, never lie awake at night in fear of him or the day his wrath would fall upon her Asfia.

And yet...

"How could I bear the weight of killing my child's father?" she asked quietly and Amatus laughed sharply.

"I would be the one doing the killing. And do you think such thoughts plague him?"

She felt like she was standing on the edge of the cliffs. One more word from him and she'd topple over into the cold depths.

"It is a sin," she tried again, sounding feeble even to her own ears.

Amatus smiled and stood.

"And I am a professional sinner. At your service." he bowed with a flourish and Yusra heard herself laugh.

It's high and watery, and she knows she's crying.

Why should she care about Lanre?

Asfia gurgled in her arms, squirming in her hold.

She didn't care about him, but she couldn't rob Asfia of her father. What if one day he changed? What if it was just her failings as a wife that brought out the monster in him?

"Can you...can you get us out of the house? I don't want you to kill him, I just need to be somewhere else. I can work, and she won't be any trouble to you!"

He cut off her rush of words with a wave of his hand.

"It's a deal. Besides, you're really helping me out,"

At her confused look he shrugged.

"A friend who hasn't spoken to me in years has done so on your behalf. And Yusra, you and I aren't different. We're both stuck in a place we don't want to be, with people that can't ever love us, but can't

stop hurting us,"

He doesn't look so imposing now. Now he just looks tired and discarded. The gold on him seemed to have lost its gleam.

Without thinking, she placed a hand on his shoulder.

His shoulders sagged and he looked at her with sad eyes before perking up when Asfia reached for him, her chubby fingers grasping in his direction.

His brow furrowed, but he smiled.

"You know I can't see the appeal," he said as he let Asfia squeeze his finger. "A friend of mine just scooped up a kid off the street and I just can't see the reason,"

Asfia squealed and he nodded, as if he'd understood.

For the first moment in years, Yusra felt the sense of urgency leave her. She didn't have to worry about bringing back enough coin, or hiding it, or getting back before Lanre. Because she would never be under the same roof as him again. For once, the constant roaring stream of thoughts that wailed about her and her child's survival quieted.

Now it was only the sound of Asfia's happy squeals, Amatus's chuckles, and the distant squawk of gulls.

"Kamau said that you were a good cook," Amatus said, from where he knelt in front of where she held Asfia on her lap. "I don't mean to kick you while you're down, but that bread looks flimsy," he said in between making faces at Asfia.

Yusra raised a brow.

"Try some," she said, a challenge clear in her voice.

He smiled at the sudden burst of confidence and grabbed some out of her basket, taking a bite.

His eyes widened in surprise.

"What's in this?!" he asked around a mouthful as he reached in for another piece.

"You should see what I can do with a full kitchen," she said as she laughed at his eagerness.

"Are you a natural born cook, or did someone teach you?" He asked and she leaned back, her smile widening at the memory.

"My mother taught me. She said that feeding nnot just yourself, but your family, neighbors, and even strangers is an act that feeds the soul. She said that cooking was an act of creation that especially

pleases the Architect of Heaven, because we take the hands and other creations given to us and use it to sustain life. I have not been able to attend the temple here, but a hearth is as good an alter as any and a kitchen can be a place of worship,"

She turned to look at Amatus, who looked back at her with wide eyes.

"I'm going to get you a huge kitchen," he finally said.

### [Writer Update](#)

[May 11, 2024](#)

If it were not for branching and stats, this book would be done.

Right now, I'm going in and adding back in the stats and variables, as well as the rest of the next few chapters. There probably won't be an update until the end of May, but it will be a substantial one when it comes.

While you wait, tomorrow will be a spotlight for our girl, Desma. You'll see where she was and what she was doing before you met.

Then, this week will have a Heka post, part two of Sarai's, and then the antics of Asfia and the kids of Lower Cusmo. See y'all soon!

### [We Can't Lose \(Desma ft. Berkant, Kreios, and Thalia\)](#)

[May 14, 2024](#)

She sat high on her father's shoulders, the loud roar of the crowd only slightly muffled by the thick arena doors.

Beyond the doors, the crowd cried for blood, and behind them wasn't too different. In the narrow pens where fighters waited to be called to enter, some jeered at her and her father's arrival, while others, encumbered by chains, looked between the doors and the other fighters in fear.

"You shouldn't have brought her with you tonight" one says from where he's standing, flexing his bulky arms in anticipation.

"Shame you brought her to watch you die, but don't worry. I'll take good care of her once I finish with you," the man said.

Her father didn't show any reaction, instead he pulled her off his shoulders, gently placing her on the dusty ground.

"You know what to do, yes?" he said, kneeling so that he was at her eye level. Desma smiled.

"Make myself scarce!" she chirped, and he nodded, his heavy brows raising slightly and crinkles forming at the corners of his eyes as he smiled at her. He gave her a rough pat on her head and she scampered off, dodging between legs before climbing up the post of one of the pens.

She climbed into the rafters and upward until she reached the roof, giving her a perfect view of the arena.

The roar of the crowd when he entered was deafening, and she could feel the entire arena rumble.

Her father walked and sat down on the sand, beckoning for them to send out his opponent, his face expressionless. But Desma knew he must be excited. How could he not be?

This was how he fed the two of them. Night after night and day after day, she watched her father get into a ring and make another man bleed. Sometimes they made him bleed too, but never as much.

She watched the blood stream down her father's face and stain the sand. The sight of blood made the crowd even more eager, but Desma knew their excitement was for nothing. Her father would win, just as he always had.

A shriek loud enough to break through the boom of the crowd broke out, and Desma smiled as she watched her father twisted the man's arm so far and so hard that it threatened to leave its socket. The sight of blood, the snap of bone, and the cheers of the crowd.

That was victory.

\*\*\*\*\*

She scurried undetected to the room they sent the victors to after the fight to find her father resting heavily in a chair by the fire.

Blood gushed from a gash above his brow, a wreath hung around his neck, and a jug of wine dangled from one hand limply as he rested there, his eyes shut.

She tried to sneak up on him, taking small, careful steps, but he cracked an eye open at the sound of her soft footsteps.

With a grin, he opened his arms, and she ran to him, launching herself into them.

The pained grunt he let out turned into a laugh as he moved some of her hair out of her face.

"Did you stay out of trouble while I was working?" he asked, the low rumble of his voice warm and find.

She hurried to nod.

"I didn't speak to anybody, and they didn't speak to me, and I went on the roof and watched you win!" she hurried out, sounding proud of herself.

He nodded along with her, pausing when she said that she watched him win.

"Desma," he began, his thick brows furrowed, but before he could say anything else Desma suddenly jabbed the gash above his brow.

He recoiled with a hiss of pain. "Desma!"

"Did that hurt?" She asked, leaning into his face intently, looking for a reaction.

"Why did you do that?"

He sounded more tired than mad, and Desma cocked her head to the side.

"You said that you're the strongest and that no one can hurt you, so why do you act like it hurts when I do this?" She went to poke his wound again, but her father caught her hand with a chuckle.

"Aren't you hungry?"

That question was enough to make her forget any other thoughts, and she leapt to her feet, nodding eagerly.

Smiling, he took her hand in one of his and a jug of wine in the other, and walked out of the room and arena.

\*\*\*\*\*

She doesn't remember much before they came to the city. Her first memories were on a boat and then the tall stone walls of the city. She didn't like the boat. They were hungry there, the salt stung her skin, and she couldn't understand what others were saying.

Here was better. Here you could eat as long as you one, and she and her father never lost.

She tore into a piece of meat before her, not even bothering to wrap it in the bread provided, looking out at the different people walking through the market before looking back at her father.

Her father wasn't eating, instead he was looking at the coin that he wore in a pouch around his neck. He frowned as he fiddled with it, the light glinting off of it and dancing in the darkness of his brown eyes.

"Where is that from?" she asked, and he looked at her as if he had forgotten she was there.

"It's a gift. Your mother gave it to me. It's supposed to bring luck," he said, his eyes looked faraway.

Desma stopped chewing. Her father mentioned her mother often, but never spoke about her for too long. Desma never got a chance to look in a mirror, but she knew that she had her mother's eyes.

"Does it help you win your fights?" she asked, and her father smirked.

"It doesn't hurt. Now finish your food,"

They finished eating and were about to return home when an old woman at another table stopped them.

"Berkant. The icy plains of Hermiris miss their proudest warrior," she said, her eyes narrow and lined with blue ink. Her curly white hair was almost as pale as she was, and she stretched a hand out to them, beckoning them closer.

Berkant sat down immediately, pulling Desma with him.

"How are you here?" he asked quietly, his eyes downcast.

Desma frowned. She had never seen her father like this. He never shrank before anyone. She slapped her hand on the table to both her father's and the strange woman's surprise.

"Who are you? You looking for a fight?" she said roughly as she leaned forward.

There was a moment of silence before the woman's lips pulled into a smile.

"I am a spell speaker. The one who has the sight and the ear of spirits. And you have your mother's face and your father's lack of sense. It's charming,"

Desma wrinkled her nose as she thought. She wasn't sure what most of what the woman said meant, but she caught some of it.

"Spells? Like you do magic?" She asked, thinking about some of the performers she and her father saw on the street that claimed to do the same thing.

"Do you bring news of Feray?" her father asked abruptly, finally snapping out of his silence.

"What remains of Feray in this world is right beside you. That is why I'm here. If you still have her in your heart, you would give this one to me, to her kin,"

At this, Desma latched onto her father's arm, practically snarling at the strange woman.

Her father patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.



"We stay together," her father said firmly. "I am more than capable of taking care of Desma. Feray would have wanted it that way,"

The woman looked Desma up and down.

"Clearly," she sneered before sighing. "Feray would have given you a reading as well. I shall do the same as this will be the last time you and I will see each other,"

She put her hand flat on the table and slid it across it in an arc, a card appearing each place her hand had been.

Desma moved to touch one, mouth open in wonder, but her father stopped her, an emotion in his eyes she had never seen before.

"You came here in the name of glory and honor, trying to cleanse yourself of the shame that came with turning your blade against your own," the woman said as she stared at the cards, turning them over one by one. Desma didn't recognize the symbols, but they seemed to glow the same cold, eerie blue glow of the woman's pale gray eyes.

She turned over another card.

"You will fail here, just as you failed then, for your enemies already know of your plans. The luck you were lent is almost used up,"

Her eyes flit to Desma.

"This one on the other hand is full of luck,"

She waved her hand and a coin appeared between her fingers.

She tossed it to Desma, the shine of it enchanting.

Desma caught it and held it to the light. It was not like the other coppers she had seen in the market. One side of the coin had a snake curled around a dead tree, while the other side had a wolf eating a snake.

"This is like yours! " She said, showing it to her dad with an excited grin, but her father didn't match it.

"Aidana, you have traveled far to curse me," he said quietly, and she cackled, smiling so wide that her eyes turned into crescents.

She swiped her hand again and the cards disappeared. Pulling up the hood of her coat, she got up from the table, her laughter never ceasing.

Desma got up, wanting to follow her but, her father stopped her, his heavy hand on her shoulder keeping her in her seat.

"There is a place we need to visit before we go home,"

He bought her some fruit tarts on their way to a house she had never seen before. When he knocked on the door, a pale woman with broad shoulders and pale hair that was shaved close to her scalp opened it.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a hushed whisper, looking around him. A large, red-faced man with mismatched eyes and reddish brown hair popped his head out too, resting it atop of the woman's.

"Berkant?" He asked. "We're supposed ta be acting like we don't know each other. Why are ya here?" The man tried to whisper.

Her father turned to her.

"Eat out here, and I'll be right back,"

The woman looked at her and her eyes widened.

"Whose child is this," she asked, her voice sharp with concern, but Desma's father stepped in front of her, blocking her view.

"We need to talk. Desma, eat your food and wait out here,"

Desma frowned, but went to lean against the wall to wait.

Too much was happening that she didn't understand, but things weren't bad. The magic lady gave her a coin, her dad won his fight, and she had eaten dinner and her father had even gotten her fruit tarts. She smiled and was just about to bite into one, when it was snatched from her. She blinked, before realizing what happened and looked to see a small figure trying to get away. Rage boiled inside her and the sight of the person running made it worse. Before she knew it she had caught up and tackled the thin person to the ground. It was a kid around her age, with hollowed cheeks and her tarts in his hand.

She struck him. Then she struck him again. Soon the tarts were forgotten as she wailed on the kid, getting angrier by the moment. She saw blood but she didn't stop, eyes darting around before they landed on a rock.

Hefting it, she raised it and had almost brought it down when she herself was lifted into the air and brought face to face with her terrified looking father.

She writhed in his grasp, whipping her head around looking for her prey, but the kid had already shambled off.

"Desma! What are you doing? Desma look at me!" Her father shouted, finally snapping her out of it.

"He stole my tart! Why did you stop me! I almost beat him! I almost won!" She shouted, still trying to get free.

"You did win, but you kept going. Where is the honor in that?"

His question made her pause and she cocked her head, brows furrowed.

"Honor? What is that? And you don't stop fighting once the other person is down,"

She watched a series of emotions flicker across her father's face, and he swallowed thickly before answering.

"The people in the arena with me are my equals, not my enemies. I fight free men for pay and for the honor that comes from a good, fair fight. Honor is...its when...."

He stopped short and sighed.

"I wish I could explain it to you better, but the most honorable fight is one that is in defense of others. Remember that,"

\*\*\*\*\*

After that night, her father stopped taking her to his matches. It was much more boring for her, but he always came back with a victory wreath and a hot meal for the both of them, so Desma tried not to complain.

Then one day he didn't come back.

She sat in front of their door, waiting to see him, but he didn't come back. Not when day turned to night and not when the sun rose.

On the third day, she realized she would have to disobey him. She went to the arena.

None of the fighters that knew him would look at her or answer her, except with pity.

Every thing changed after that.

She didn't know how to light the fire like her father did, so the house grew cold. What little food they had saved up soon ran out.

She had an empty belly and an empty home, so she left the latter.

It was easier to pick fights, so that's what she did. Her rage fed her as she took what she could from the loser. It wasn't honorable, but her father wasn't around to see it, so what did it matter.

She was going to do the same to you. You were dressed nice, like someone cared about you enough to cloth you. Like you smelled good and ate good. She wanted to hit you. Over and over.

Until she saw you get robbed.

It made her think of what her father had said.

She could do that. She could fight in an honorable way.

You looked so shiny standing there. Maybe defending you would feel better than hitting you.

[Asfia's Busy Day \(Asfia ft. the Talons, Ducklings, Locusts, and Yusra\)](#)

[Jun 6, 2024](#)

As one of the youngest members of the Talons, Asfia knows that she has many things to do. Not only does she have to help out in the kitchen, she also has to make sure the new recruits stay in line.

She finishes up delivering the last plate of food before running back into the kitchen where her mother is.

"That was the last one!" she said, standing on her tip toes to look over the counter top to see what else her mother was cooking.

"You didn't forget the sides?"

She shook her head, the beads at the end of her braids clacking.

"Nope. I never forget!" She said, her cheeks puffing out with pride.

It was true. She had a great memory, even Uncle Amatus said so. She knew how to count, read, and she never forgot anyone's favorite foods.

Her mother cupped her cheek, smiling and wrinkling her nose.

"I know our Fia is smart, but I have to check!"

Asfia soaked in the praise, but her mother's warmth reminded her of the next thing on her list of things to do.

"Can I make my deliveries now?" She asked, rocking back and forth on her feet with excitement.

Yusra smiled, reaching under one of the counters to produce a large basket of food.

She started to put it in Asfia's grasping hands but stopped short, holding it just out of reach.

"Now, what are the rules?"

Asfia pouted, but began to recite them.

"Stay close to the guild, don't follow anyone off anywhere and keep my whistle ready,"

"And?" Yusra said, still keeping the basket out of reach.

Asfia huffed. She knew the next part, she just didn't want to do it.

"But why do I have to take someone with me? I'm big! And I'm right by the guild!"

A raised eyebrow from her mother immediately quieted her protests.

"... Fine," she said, shoulders drooping slightly.

With a satisfied smile, Yusra placed the basket in her waiting arms and stooped down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

After returning it, Asfia was off, speeding through the halls of the guild, ducking through people's legs until she made it out.

\*\*\*\*\*

She was tempted to just deliver the food, but she knew she should do what her mother said, so she began to think. She could ask you to help, but you've been busy lately, always leaving the guild. She could ask Gurjer, but he might nap the whole time. Just as she was weighing her options, a groggy and disheveled looking Sefu and Desma exited.

"Hey Fia! You got any food in that basket?" Desma called out and Asfia instinctively put it behind her back.

"These are for the children," she said, squaring her shoulders, and Desma rolled her eyes, coming closer.

"So I can't have a little bit, just a piece? A little, little, tiny piece?" She asked, bending down and trying to look behind Asfia until Sefu moved her back, his big hand covering her face as he did so.

"You giving food to the locusts?" He asked, ignoring Desma's muffled complaints.

Asfia nodded.

"Alright Princess Fia, we'll be your escorts then,"

He picked up her, along with her basket, keeping it away from Desma who was still trying to sneak a hand full from it as they walked towards the back part of the guild, closer to the market where many

residents of Lower Cusmo congregated.

Asfia knew what a locust was, even though she had never been one. She had something many of her friends didn't, a pretty mother and a guild to protect her, which is why she always made sure to try to help as much as possible.

She and her mother gave food away every day to those that didn't have any, and afterward, Asfia would help out the new recruits.

As she handed out food, she listened as Desma and Sefu talked about rich nobles and big palaces, and she waved when she saw one of her friends next in the line.

Haniyya ran up to her, food forgotten in excitement.

"Fia! The dye shop ladies said yes!"

Haniyya had been wandering the streets for a while after her mother put her out, but she started hanging around the guild. She wouldn't stay with Asfia and Yusra, because she said her own mother would come back for her soon, but she had been accepting the food.

"I told you Aunt Ziri would say yes!" Asfia said, jumping with shared joy.

Uncle Amatus tried to find places for her friends, and now Haniyya would be somewhere warm with more meals than just this one.

Haniyya's dark curls bounced with excitement as she spoke, and Asfia could tell that Aunt Ziri had cleaned her up, her brown skin now free of dust and dirt.

"You're right! And she said that if I'm good, they'll teach me how to weave, and I can still come out and play with you when I don't have errands!"

Their celebration was cut off by the clearing of a throat.

"Some of us need to eat," said Ejiro, one of the sons of one of the guild members.

He stepped in front of Haniyya and reached for the basket of food, but Asfia pulled it away.

"This isn't for you," she said, crossing her arms.

He stepped closer, trying to glare down at her, despite them being the same height.

"You have to feed me. That's your job," he said, and she snorted.

"You have food at home. If you're hungry, then ask your dad,"

He looked angry for a moment, but then crossed his arms with a smug smile.

"You're just jealous because I have a dad,"

Asfia ignored the ting of his comment. She saw her dad from time to time. Her mother had pointed him out to her one time in the stream of men headed to the mines, along with a warning to keep her distance from him. She knew his face and that was enough.

"I have one. You're just stupid and mad because I'm faster than you,"

"You are not!" He shouted, fists balled up.

"Am too!"

"She is too!" Haniyya added.

"Shit yeah!" Desma chimed in only to shushed by Sefu.

"You don't take sides in a kid's fight, Desma, damn!" he whispered.

"What do you mean? Of course we're on Asfia's side! Ejiro's dad owes us both money!" she said back, not bothering to lower her voice.

"Okay, that's it! Asfia, blow the whistle if someone starts hitting," he said as he ushered Desma away.

Ejiro ignored the adults' side comments, instead focusing all of his energy on a comeback to Asfia.

"You only won that time because I tripped and there was sand in my eye," he finally said, looking proud of himself, but Asfia rolled her eyes.

"You still lost," she said and Haniyya nodded.

"Rematch then! Okay? I call rematch!" He shouted, his declaration drawing the attention of some of the locusts and new recruits that were milling around.

"Didn't you already lose?" Ajith, a son of one of the Talons, said, stopping his game of marbles to come closer.

"I saw that! He fell on his face and cried!" Sinta, one of the locusts, added.

"Everyone shut up, or when I'm in charge you'll be sorry!" Ejiro said, but Ajith laughed.

"Isn't Asfia in charge?"

"No! It'll be me!"

"I don't know," Sinta said as she walked closer. "Asfia is the one with all the food..."

"Fine, we race tomorrow and if I win, I'm in charge!"

"Deal," Asfia said to a chorus of Ooh's from the other children.

Ejiro stomped off in a huff and with the excitement gone, she went back to handing out the food.

\*\*\*\*\*

She was at the bottom of her basket with the line finally finished when she heard a noise coming from the nearby ally.

With her hand around her whistle, she watched as a scrawny, tanned figure, with large eyes and dark matted hair, emerged.

She could tell he was a child, like her, but his eyes were wild and in his hand was a large rock.

"Hello? Are you here to eat?" she asked, but he didn't respond.

He stepped toward her, and then took another one towards her, almost staggering.

Asfia knew she could outrun him, but at the same time she felt stuck in place. He was so thin, like a skeleton, and she had never seen him before.

"I still have some left if you're hungry," she tried again, but again, the boy still didn't answer.

The area was quiet and his eyes never left hers as he raised the hand that held the rock, but before he could do anything, the air between them grew cold.

Something clear appear around his feet, jagged and sharp. It shot out of the ground, clinging to him and holding him in place, completely encasing the arm that held the rock, until he dropped it, the stone hitting the ground with a harmless thud.

Suddenly, what Asfia could only describe as a flurry of cold white sand, appeared near her and out of it stepped Galen, his cold eyes fixated on the starving child near her.

"Gally?" Asfia asked. "Did you do that?"

Galen nodded, still looking at the other boy.

"He came here to hurt," he said, his voice as chilly as the air. "Shall I end him?" He asked, raising his hands that emitted that same blue glow.

"Wait one second!" Asfia said before hurrying over to the other boy.

"You didn't answer me! Are you here to eat?"



The boy, tears now streaming down his face, turned away.

"They said that you wouldn't give me any and that if I took it they'd let me join," he muttered.

Asfia cocked her head to the side in confusion. She was supposed to give the food to those that needed it, and he clearly needed it.

"Who said that?" she asked.

"The Jackals. If I hit you and take the food, I'll get to join," he said, brow furrowed and eyes sad. The clear thing holding him in place expanded, creeping up his neck.

Galen approached.

"Are you going to hit me?" the boy asked, and Asfia shook her head.

"No, Gally is going to let you go so you can eat," she looked at Galen expectantly.

His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to protest but shut it.

With a wave of his hand, the mysterious material holding the boy vanished, and he dropped to the ground.

"What was that, Gally?" she asked as she nudged the collapsed boy.

"Ice," he said.

"Eyessh," she repeated, trying to sound out the strange word.

"Ice," he repeated.

"Eyeshsss," she said again, this time with more confidence.

"What is it?"

He paused, trying to find the right words.

"Cold sand," he finally settled on.

Galen watched as she circled the boy who had collapsed, not moving to help her as she attempted to shake him awake.

"I'll blow the whistle and they can help us wake him up,"

With some effort she rolled the boy over and blew her whistle, the shrill sharp sound piercing the air and alerting any Talons that she needed some help.

She offered the last of the food to Galen chatting away as the two of them sat next to the passed out form of the other boy.

"Oh Gally, I'm having a race tomorrow," she said around a mouthful of food. "You should come!"

### [Advanced Demo](#)

[Jul 1, 2024](#)

Here is an update that follows up on the conversation with Heka!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

I have a bit more to say, but I'll save it for the update!

### [Line of Sight \(Heka ft. Zibiyah, Kunzang, and Rishi\)](#)

[Jul 1, 2024](#)

The path to his mother's pavilion was bright and smooth, the bridge over the pond adorned with sculptures of the same flowers that floated in the pond.

He squatted and tried to reach one of the taller ones, his fingers barely brushing a petal. With a grunt, brow furrowed and tongue sticking out in frustration, he was about to give up when the flower was suddenly within his grasp, as if it had grown an extra inch just to help him reach it.

Pulling at it, he stood triumphantly, prize in hand before continuing to run down the path to his mother's pavilion.

He smiled at the maids as he passed through the doorway, not listening as they warned him about his muddy clothing or that his mother had a guest. He didn't hesitate to fling himself into her arms and she caught him, the soft swirl of the pink fabric of her gown as welcoming as her arms and laugh.

With little effort, she lifted him, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Our Heka is such a fast runner! And what is this?" She asked, looking at the hand that held the flower.

With pride swelling in his chest, he held out the flower to her.

She smiled, her deep brown eyes turning into crescents as she did so. Gently taking it from him, she smelled it before tucking it into the dark waves of her hair.

"There, is your mother pretty?" She asked, and Heka nodded deeply.

She turned, bringing Heka with her, to face her forgotten guest.

A man, with long dark hair and fairer skin than Heka's mother, was watching them quietly from where he was seated. He wore the same robes as the monks that sometimes visited, crimson and orange, draped and tied.

He was quiet, but smiled as Heka's mother spoke.

"Well Kunzang? Am I pretty?" She asked playfully, and color rose in the man's cheeks.

"Zibiyah, nothing in creation is more beautiful than you,"

Heka's mother, Zibiyah, smiled again, this time one that held something different and set Heka down.

"Your father is such a sweet talker, Heka," she said, and Heka's brow furrowed in confusion as he looked between his mother and the stranger.

Heka knew what a father was. Everyone had one. His cousins all had one, his mother had one. Everyone had a father except for Heka.

"This is my father," he asked, looking at the man once again, but the man refused to meet his gaze.

Another man appeared in the doorway, older and also appeared to be a monk as he was wearing robes as well. Kunzang, the man who was being called Heka's father, quickly stood and bowed deeply.

"I knew you would be here," the new man said, his eyes cold and his mouth twisted into a scornful frown.

"Watch how you speak. Monks are guests in any home they enter. He was invited, however you were not," Zibiyah said firmly, placing herself between the man and Kunzang.

The new man took a step back and bowed stiffly.

"I mean you no disrespect, although it is the man you entertain that has disrespected you. Your people call a monk's child good fortune. Where I am from, we say no such thing, because no such thing exists,"

The man fixed his gaze on Heka and Heka found himself shrinking back.

"The brothers here behave disgracefully," he finishes with a sneer.

Heka's mother took his hand and smiled at him, her grip tight and her smile reassuring, despite the fury burning in her eyes.

"Get out," she growled, but the man made no move to leave.

"I have come for Kunzang and the boy," he said matter-of-factly.

"Over my dead body," Zibiyah responded with just as much finality.

Heka looked between his mother and the man, an unfamiliar coil of fear squeezing his throat.

"I will not stop seeing Zibiyah. I would sooner stop breathing," Kunzang said and the other man scoffed.

"Brother Kunzang, don't flatter yourself. We sent you to another temple, and you still crawled back like a dog in search of its master. You're a lost cause, but there has been whispers about the birth of this child. We will take him, and you will come to explain the circumstances of his birth as you are a witness,"

"You will not separate us," Kunzang said, this time louder and far fiercer than seemed possible considering his mild demeanor.

"If my rank in the temple was higher, none of you would dare to open your mouths," he seethes but the other monk just laughs.

"This is not up to you," he says and looks at the maids who send a contrite look toward Heka and his mother before hurrying off, returning with some men that Heka had never seen before, along with his grandfather.

The man who often snuck him sweets before dinner and played with him in the gardens would not look at him, instead his eyes were fixated on the ground.

"Zibiyah, if the temple requests it, how are we to fight against the will of heaven?" he said pleadingly and Zibiyah shook her head in disbelief.

"Who said that this is the will of heaven? All I see before me now are mere men. Men telling me that they are here to take my child," her voice broke as she said it and Heka watched in horror as tears streamed down his mother's face.

"You know that he is no ordinary child. I love him as I love you, but we cannot war with destiny. I have given my permission," he had the decency to look ashamed, but his voice leaves no room for argument. Still, Zibiyah tries to.

"The temple requests, and you have agreed? You have given your permission? Everyone has been asked except for me, the mother of the child? You don't have my permission! Do you hear me?!" Her voice echoed through the room and Heka clung to her.

"I don't want to go," he cried, looking to his grandfather for help, but the older man turned away, leaving the room.

"Hold her," the older monk said and the new men grabbed Zibiyah's arm, prying her grip from Heka's.

Heka felt his arm wrenched upward in the older monk's firm grasp.

No! Let him go! Kunzang, go with them! Protect our son!"

Zibiyah's voice grew fainter as Heka was dragged away, his mother's pavilion disappear from view.

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"Pretty boy still thinks he's too good to eat?"

Heka ignored the jeers of some of the other boys, not even bothering to turn and face them from where he was lying in his bunk.

"They thought he was going to be a special one, but look at him! How could he see anything when he keeps his eyes closed?"

The taunting of the boys felt like it was miles away. Everything did. For months, the monks had tried to teach Heka and test what they called, his 'divine gifts', but all they were met with was either disinterest and rage. All Heka wanted to do was close his eyes and open them to find that this was all a bad dream and that he was still safe in his mother's arms.

"Leave him alone. He's been abandoned just like you," another boy said, and anger flared up within Heka.

Before he could even think, he was out of bed. He swung recklessly, and when his fist connected with the boy closest to him, he thought he might be satisfied.

A full-fledged fight broke out, only ending when one of the older boys pulled Heka off one of the others.

They were scolded by the older monks, but Heka couldn't hear a word. He was miles away from the moment.

Days continued like that.

Silence, then petty jabs, or harsh words, followed by fists.

Heka stood before one of the older monks, cheek bruised and eyes vacant.

"You and Irek are beyond me," he said with an exasperated sigh.

"Then let me go home," Heka said quickly, but the older monk just shook his head.

"I'm sending both of you to the temple near where you came from. After that, my hands are washed of you. Stay in the brotherhood, run off to your mother, I won't be troubled with you any longer," the monk said with a sigh.

For the first time in months, Heka smiled.

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He didn't know where the previous temple was located, but he recognized the jungle covered mountains of his home, even from a distance. The humid air and the rains were like a balm to his soul, soothing the rage that had been building within him. Even the complaints and jeers from Irek, weren't enough to provoke him as he neared closer to home.

The cart carrying them was driven by an old monk named Vibol, who, outside of feeding them, might as well have not known they were there. Heka watched as he regularly stopped the cart to pray, relieve himself, or chat with passersby, and once Heka saw a road marker that looked familiar enough, he slipped out the back of the cart, determined to find his way home.

The dirt road was surrounded on both sides by farmland and rice paddies, the road wet and soft from the rain.

Each step he took, sank him further into the mud, but he kept going, knowing the road would lead him home.

He could hear wet, muddy footsteps and turned in time to see Irek, barreling towards him.

"I knew it! Where are you going?" Irek said as he struggled to maintain his footing on the narrow path.

"I'm going home," Heka said without breaking his stride.

A rumble of thunder and a new round of rain made it hard for him to hear what Irek said next, but he felt the impact of the boy crashing into him.

The two of them tumbled into the mud.

"Why do you get to just go home?!" Irek screamed as the two of them struggled in the mud, each fighting to get to their feet, only to be dragged down by the other.

Heavy rain and heavier mud coated and slowed them, but didn't stop them.

"Vibol said hee lost you two and yet here you are, barely down the road," A low voice said.

The two of them startled, each looking up to see a monk with dark brown skin, long shiny black hair that was graying at the temple, and a softly lined face looking at them in amusement.

"The road is wide enough for both of you to walk, yet you compete for space. The road is small, but it can go both ways. Yet the two of you stay stuck in the middle of it," the monk said, leaning on a wooden staff, the top of it peirced with bell laden rings.

He poked at them with it, forcing the two of them to seperate.

"Are you here to bring us back?" Heka asked.

"For now? Yes. If I leave you out here, you'll get caught in a mudslide or die exposed to the elements, but as for whether you stay in the temple? We are not like the other one that wishes to force you onto a path. Coming and going is something you must decide,"

Heka was tired of monks, but he was also cold, wet, and covered in mud. He reasoned with himself that his escape could wait.

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It was a longer wait than he expected.

When the monk took them to the temple, he was confronted by the distant face of his father. Kunzang didn't look at him and barely spoke to him, but Heka became fascinated.

Who was this man that his mother loved so much?

He followed him around the temple. He prayed when he prayed and ate when he ate, always just out of his father's line of sight.

That was how he ended up going to the mountain shrine with him.

When they had asked which monks wished to climb the mountain to observe the silence, Heka had stood as soon as he saw his father stand. It was like his legs moved before his mind did. In the temple, everyone was a brother in the faith, but Heka knew that this was his father. Maybe away from the others, he would call him his son, acknowledge him in a way that was more true.

But that was not to be the case.

The walk up the mountain was silent, the preparations for the ceremony were too, outside a couple of quiet requests for Heka to bring some of the supplies over.

Heka stared at the man, his father, until finally, his father opened his eyes, looking directly at him, for the first time, his expression unrecognizable.

"The point of this is to focus your gaze inward," he said, his voice low and smooth.

Heka opened his mouth, unsure what to say, but finally settled on the question that had been burning within him.

"If you're my father, why don't you look at me?"

The quiet in the room was deafening and Kunzang sighed.

"Because I am ashamed. Not of you, but of myself. I didn't do what your mother asked and I have put both of you in an impossible position. I cannot face her and I cannot face you because you have her eyes,"

Heka sat in silence, too stunned to figure out what else to say.

"You don't hate me?" Heka finally asked, no longer as afraid of the answer.

His father looked apalled.

"Heka you are my son. Besides your mother and the Architect of Heaven, who else can I love this much?"

Tears pour down his cheeks and without thinking, Heka takes his hand.

The two of them hear a commotion at the entrance to the shrine. Taking a torch his father clammers to his feet and goes to investigate, Heka not far behind them.

"Help me bring this in," a woman says and Heka is running before he can stop himself.

It's his mother, beautiful and rainsoaked, and right in front of him.

He jumps into her arms and he heard her make a noise between a laugh and a sob.

"Kunzang, have you been taking good care of our boy?"

Kunzang sinks to his knees and Zibiyah embraced them.

Heka may not see his mother's pavillion again, but he has a mother and father, and that was more than enough.

[Writer News](#)

[Jul 29, 2024](#)

Hey y'all!

It may be quiet over here, but I'm working on some fun stuff that should be up later this week.



So you'll be getting a HAT update and since there are new free members, I've decided to do a little something special for y'all muhahaha!

What you can expect is the continuation of the previous update, plus more actual missions and lore connections. HAT requires you to manage your double life, that means both royal court and the guild. You might have noticed that the presence of magic is starting to become stronger as we progress, so that will be another thing to look out for. Finally, all of the potential love interests have been introduced, so now we can finally start the pursuit! (A large part of my time has been spent mapping out potential connections and intersections of the various relationships and their impact on the story.)

So stay tuned!

### [Demo Update 8/9/2024](#)

[Aug 9, 2024](#)

We made it!

I'm sorry that I'm a week late, but I swear every time I set a deadline, life rejects it!

Anyway, this demo hopefully has a good amount going on! We finally leave the city for the first time, there is more scheming, and perhaps some alliances are strengthening while others are weakening.

So tell me what y'all think, let me know if anything breaks, and I'll also have another surprise for y'all tonight (hopefully)!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves/mygame/>

### [Chapter 1: To Follow](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

From the beginning, a maid and her lady are linked in a one-sided sort of destiny. Her lady's pain is her pain. Her lady's joy is her joy. A lady's maid is more than just the one who draws her lady's bath. Whether it is being her lady's eyes and ears, her voice in places she dare not go, or a lockbox for her deepest and darkest secrets, a maid must be able to be whatever she needs to be.

It seemed that Princess Mithra needed Danai to be her friend. And to be wherever she was. Even on Danai's days off.

She could hear the approach of the princess long before she came into view, the hoof beats and whinny of her horse carrying across the field.

Danai stopped working at her loom, getting up to bow as the princess stopped before her.

"Good evening Princess," Danai said and Princess Mithra grinned at her brightly.

"Good evening? That depends on whether or not your mother has already served dinner," she said with a mischievous grin and Danai returned her smile.

"Considering you always find your way back here looking for a bowl, she was expecting you,"

"Between you and Mama Tena, I'll never starve,"

"You might not starve, but you will have to wait. The bird isn't ready," Danai said as she sat back down at her loom, watching as the lines of thread came together to form a blend of reds, oranges, and pinks that resembled a sunrise.

Princess Mithra leaned on her, looking over her shoulder at her work.

"That is lovely Danai," she said, her voice soft with awe. "Is it for me?"

It wasn't an uncommon question.

Most of what Danai did, ended up being for the princess. That's what a maid was supposed to do.

But not this.

Danai stopped and shook her head.

"Not this time. It's going to be my sister's wedding dress,"

"Don't hurt my feelings! What are we if not sisters?" Princess Mithra said with a pout.

*A princess and her servant*, Danai thought, but instead bit her tongue and smiled as she took Mithra's hand.

"It's my honor that you call me sister, but Aziza will kill me if I give away this dress,"

Danai tried to keep her voice light, but she truly hoped that the princess wouldn't demand the dress.

Mithra's eyes roved over the forming fabric before sighing.

"Fine. But you must make me a wedding dress just like it for my wedding,"

"I would be honored,"

"And," Mithra added with a raised hand, "Tomorrow you will come with me to a feast at the palace,"

Danai did her best to hide her frown. She had requested leave to help her family plant their crops for the season.

"I would love to accompany you, but I promised my family that I—"

"Please, I practically gifted you this land. Surely Mama Tena won't begrudge me your time," she said with a wave of her hand.

The sound of Danai's mother calling them in for dinner interrupted them and Danai put on a smile, gesturing for Mithra to enter first.

As the sun went down, she took one last relieved look at the fabric before heading inside.

\*\*\*\*

Danai hefted her basket on her hip as she walked into the town square, hoping to run what few errands she could before preparing the princess for tonight's feast.

"There's Bronze, but I don't see Gold," one of the stall vendors called out to her, his voice teasing, but without malice.

Danai rolled her eyes but still let out a light laugh and in return he tossed her a pear.

Because she and the princess had been attached since childhood, people in town had watched both of them grow up, with some giving them the nicknames of Gold and Bronze. Similar enough but worlds apart, with Danai being the less expensive of the two, of course. When they were really young, they were even mistaken for each other, although that never happened now.

Danai was on the shorter side and heavy in the bottom and chest, with strong arms and legs from her duties as a maid and chores around her family's homestead. She had large lips, a wide nose, deep dark brown eyes, and warm brown skin. Princess Mithra had become well-known over the years for her beauty. Many a poem had been written about her long dark curly brown hair, tanned skin, light lavender-looking eyes, and tall stature. She and Danai supposed they complimented each other but the days that she could be mistaken as a beauty that inspired poets, or as someone equal to the princess were long behind her.

"Danai! I was hoping you'd come by! How's your mother?" One of the sailors called out and she walked over to his stall.

"She's doing well, but she'll be better if you have a bargain for me," she said and the sailor laughed, the ends of his mustache curling up as he smiled.

"I have some fresh fish from Kylosia," he began when Danai's father approached.

"Selling fish from Kylosia when our own boats are more than seaworthy? Doesn't sit right with me," her father grumbled as he glared at the fish, taking Danai's basket from her and resting it on his own hip.

"It's not the boats that are the problem, it's the raiders, Fadhili, the raiders!" The sailor responded with a grave shake of his head. "I heard they've gotten so bad in Bluet, that they have to give them their harvest, just to get some peace,"

Danai frowned, hoping that some of her cousins in Bluet were okay, and reminded herself to ask her mother about it.

"I hope the king can figure something out before the next harvest. If the raiders are already dipping into their reserves, then a bad harvest could ruin them," she said and one of the old sailors shook his head and laughed.

"Don't you worry about that. The king will send them running back to their boats!"

"That's right!" Her father added with a laugh. "The next time we return to the market, those fisherman from Kylosia won't believe their eyes. Our nets will be so full of fish, we'll have to borrow a ship from the king to haul it in! Mark my words!" Her father and the rest of the sailors looked so serious and optimistic, their laughter reverberating through the market. Danai couldn't help but catch a bit of their positivity, although she knew better.

To say their words were wishful thinking was an understatement, but it was a hope that everyone in the kingdom shared. At least everyone who didn't hear the discussions going on within the palace walls.

"From your lips to God's ears," the Danai said.

She and her father departed from the stall and Danai was careful to not lose track of the sun in the sky, trying to be mindful of the time.

"Weren't you helping with the aqueduct today? What brought you to the market?" she asked as they walked home.

"Your mother told me that you're heading to the palace tonight,"

"Mithra was summoned so she turned around and summoned me," Danai said with a shrug.

"Well keep your wits about you and make sure you come back in time to finish that dress. Your sister hasn't stopped chirping about it since you started it,"

Danai grinned at the thought and her father looked at her, his eyes soft. He always said that he was thankful that his daughters looked like their mother, but Danai knew that of all of his daughters, she resembled him the most. Both of their hair was tightly coiled, their skin the same shade of brown, and Danai idly wondered if her true smile resembled his, nose wrinkling, and eyes squinting.

"You know, she may be a princess, but you'll always be my little princess," he said, taking the basket from her. "I just wish these old bones of mine would have let you live like one,"

She knew her father carried a guilt with him over her. She had a younger sister and two younger brothers and when their father fell ill, her mother and siblings relied on her to help tend the land. When Danai was handpicked by Queen Abella to serve as maid and playmate to the then-sickly Princess Mithra, the money she made became crucial for her family's survival.

It had worked out. She bought medicine that had helped her father recover and the princess had paid her enough to be able to help her parents purchase the parcel of land they worked, something rare for the people in the village.

"I'm fine, truly," she said looping one arm in his as they walked home.

\*\*\*\*

The small palace that Mithra lived in was located in the territory of Lord Alazar, one of the most powerful men in Rukar after the king himself. His son, Lord Kinar had become a recurring visitor to Danai's village, and as she watched the way he looked at Mithra as the three of them rode in the carriage, it wasn't a mystery as to why.

"Why does it get harder to part from you each day," Lord Kinar whispered as he took Mithra's hand in his, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand.

Danai turned to look out the window, choosing to focus on the moving landscape of the countryside instead of whatever sweet nothings they were going to whisper to each other for the entire ride to the palace.

"Soon, when we are married, we will never have to part again," Mithra said softly and Danai's eyes widened.

Neither one of them was in a position to arrange their own marriage and their match was certainly not one the king would consent to. Danai had overheard in one of the princess's classes that kings were very careful to prevent lords of the land from gaining too much power. The princess's brother, the crown prince was still very young, and her marrying Lord Kinar could put her brother's throne in jeopardy.

Still, Danai kept her mouth shut. A maid was in no place to comment on her lady's business outside.

"Danai, this is what I meant to tell you! Kinar and I are to be wed,"

Danai highly doubted that, but bit her tongue, choosing to smile instead.

"Congratulations, to you both. Now I know why you were so interested in Aziza's dress,"

Mithra giggled and Lord Kinar wrapped an arm around her.

"Oh, so she's as eager as I am? But don't worry Danai, we haven't forgotten about you," he said, his eyes suddenly locking on her with a grin.

Please forget about me, she thought.

"You remember Zereck, right? One of Kinar's knights. Well, I'd hate for you to get lonely once we move to Kinar's land, so after our wedding I'll arrange yours,"

Danai blinked in disbelief, dread pooling in the pit of her stomach.

"What?"

Surely she was joking.

"Oh look, we're here,"

The beige stone towers of the palace came into view.

Danai couldn't appreciate the high and intricately carved walls, instead her mind was still caught on Mithra's words.

"Mithra, thank you, but you don't have to take me with you or arrange—"

"Of course I do! Danai," Mithra laughed dotingly, looking at Danai like she was adorably foolish.

"Everywhere *I* go, *you* go,"

Before Danai could protest further the carriage came to a halt.

## [Chapter 2: Repay Your Debts](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

The balls of her feet ached, and she rocked back and forth from heel to toe, trying to keep her feet from cramping.

It was fortunate that Mithra didn't choose to spend most of her time in the palace, meaning that Danai didn't have to make the journey away from home too often. Unfortunately, when she did, it was to accompany the princess to events like feasts. On these occasions, she not only served as the princess' attendant but she was also expected to help the palace maids with their duties.

She had been on her feet for hours, first in helping set up the feast, and now in assisting the palace maids in presenting clothes and jewelry for Mithra to choose from for the night's festivities.

"He's going to ask tonight," Princess Mithra said after dismissing the other maids. She pointed at one necklace and Danai walked to the table and brought it over to where Mithra was seated.

"Ask what?" Danai said, her mind foggy with fatigue.

Mithra giggled.

"Kinar, silly! He's going to ask Father for my hand,"

Danai didn't know what to say. She had a nagging feeling that the outcome Princess Mithra and Lord Kinar wanted was unlikely to happen. If the king wanted her married to one of his lord's sons, he would have arranged it years ago.

"That's exciting," Danai settled on saying hoping she sounded convincingly enthusiastic.

Princess Mithra either didn't notice the flatness in her voice or didn't care, and pressed on.

"I could barely sleep last night for thinking about it," she said, holding up a hairpin before dropping it.

"Heavens do I look like it? Do I look tired? I need to rest! Danai, tell them I've selected the silver and amethyst, and then tell them I do not wish to be disturbed until time to prepare for the feast,"

Ushered out the front, Danai was suddenly presented with a few precious hours of free time. While Danai couldn't nap in the middle of the day, she did take the opportunity to sit under one of the fruit trees in the sprawling palace gardens. Looking around to see that the coast was clear, she gingerly removed her shoes from her sore feet.

With a pained sigh, she leaned her head back against the smooth bark of the tree, trying to focus on the light shining through the leaves instead of the princess's plans to marry them both off. She shut her eyes for a moment, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face, but she soon felt a shadow fall over her.

"So much work to be done and yet here you are. Lounging. One would think that you're a princess instead of the servant of one,"

Danai opened an eye, already recognizing the voice of the shadow's owner. She grimaced when her suspicions were confirmed.

Thana was a lady in waiting for the queen. Yes, she may have done some of the same tasks as Danai, but her family was noble, sent by her family with the sole purpose of establishing a foothold in the court, something she never wanted anyone to forget. Anytime Danai accompanied the princess to the royal palace, Thana always did her best to season the visit with her distinct flavor of unpleasantness.

"I've completed everything that was assigned to me and the princess has no further orders," Danai said, fighting to keep her face neutral.

"And you looked for nothing else to do?" Thana scoffed, crossing her arms and looking at Danai like she didn't know what to make of her. "I don't know why I'm surprised. What could someone like *you* know about humility? How could someone like you understand what it means to serve with your *whole* heart? I heard you today. Calling her highness *Mithra*, like she's some common milkmaid like you," she twisted her face in disgust and squatted down until she was at eye level with Danai, her voice low and cold. "I ought to beat you for your insolence,"

Danai couldn't help but roll her eyes at the threat. Not only did Thana not have the authority, nor the bravery to lay her hands on her, but she doubted Thana knew how to make a fist, let alone take a hit from one. If they came to blows the only one getting beaten would be Thana.

She balled her fist up, but a thought made her release it.

It wouldn't be a fight. Two maids could fight, but a noblewoman and a common servant? It would be a noblewoman exerting authority over a commoner. If Thana struck Danai, then she would be reprimanded, but if Danai hit her back, then she would probably be cast out or worse. The thought was sobering and made the idea of giving Thana the beating she so clearly needed, far easier to resist.

Danai stood up, her tired knees creaking as she did and with a weary sigh she looked at Thana.

"The way I address her highness is to her liking and the way I serve her is to her liking. If you don't like it and want to change it, you're more than welcome to try,"

Danai walked past her, allowing her shoulder to clip hers as she passed, taking small satisfaction in the way it made the other woman stagger.

"Oh, and about beating me," Danai narrowed her eyes. "Again, you are more than welcome to try,"

Walking away from Thana, hopping a bit as she tried to slip on her shoes without breaking stride, she went in search of friendlier faces. She thought of the kitchen and of kind-faced, gruff-voiced Fathia, who always had a special treat waiting for the maids.

She had barely stepped foot in the kitchen when she was enveloped in a warm tight hug.

"There you are! I was worried I wouldn't see you until the end of the feast,"

Danai returned the hug, leaning into the familiar embrace.



"I was beginning to think the same. The queen usually summons Mithra to her personal quarters as soon as she steps a foot out of the carriage," Danai remarks and Aydana wraps an arm around her, leaning their heads together to whisper.

"I'm telling you, there is something going on. The king and queen barely said anything to each other this morning and then the king had me deliver an entire box of jewelry to her this afternoon," Aydana said, her voice hushed and urgent, as she led them to sit near one of the kitchen cauldrons, out of the way from the stream of maids coming and going.

Danai nodded thoughtfully, although she was more so just happy to see her oldest friend than to hear the royal gossip.

She understood why Aydana was so invested, however.

Aydana came from the same village as Danai. They had already been friends, growing even closer when illness took Aydana's parents and forced her to live with Danai and her family. On one of the Queen's visits to see the princess, she became taken with Aydana's cute face and smart mouth and requested that she return to the palace with her. She said that she was seeking to 'ease Danai's family's burden', but really it seemed she wanted a healthy daughter to soothe her while her own recovered miles away. Parting had been hard, but Aydana and Danai saw each other as often as the princess and queen met, which was frequent and yet still not often enough.

"Does the queen still treat you well?" Danai asked and Aydana puffed up with pride, taking a moment to smooth back an errant curl that had escaped from her braided bun.

"Of course she does. Don't I look well?"

Her light brown skin had a healthy glow and she looked well-fed, with her cheeks looking plump and round. She stepped back and gave a mock curtsy, showing off the expensive fabric she was wearing.

Aydana had quickly become the queen's favorite maid, something that, to Danai's relief and servants like Thana's chagrin, hadn't changed over the years.

"Yes, you do. I don't know why I even worried," Danai chuckled, her chest already feeling lighter.

Aydana's grin faded slightly as she looked at her.

"And you? Is the princess treating you well," she asked carefully.

Danai's smile was tight.

"I have no reason to complain," she said quickly, almost as if her tongue acted on reflex.

Aydana didn't give up so easily.

"But if you were in a complaining mood, you would complain about..." she looked at her expectantly, prodding her to continue talking.

Danai bit her lip, wondering if she should tell her friend about what she had learned in the carriage ride.

"I think the princess might be getting married soon, and she wants to arrange my marriage as well,"

"What?" Aydana gasped, jaw going slack.

"Danai, I've heard nothing about a marriage for the princess. Are you saying that she's trying to elope?"

Danai was overcome with a sense of dread. She wasn't sure if she had just revealed a secret or if she was complicit in some plot but each thought made her head ache.

"I think you should come with me and speak to the queen. This could be—"

Before Aydana could finish someone struck the bell in the kitchen.

"Five hours until the feast! To your stations!" One of her servants called out and Danai tucked her concerns into her back pocket, taking Aydana's hand.

"We'll talk more after the feast, but I should go tend to the princess,"

With a last squeeze of the hand, she hurried off to the princess's room.

### [Chapter 3: Love and Duty](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

It took two hours to dress Princess Mithra, with makeup taking even longer. Danai didn't doubt that Lord Kinar being in attendance was the reason for this increased interest in appearing, as Mithra put it, 'as enchanting as possible.'

When they reached the great hall which held the feast, the festivities were already in full swing. Plants and flowers adorned tables and pillars alike, giving the illusion that they were outdoors. The low tables were piled high with delicacies, and dancing and gossiping abounded.

"I need you to keep watch," Mithra whispered to Danai, nodding her head over to the private balconies.

Danai furrowed her brow, at first not understanding until she saw Lord Kinar enter one of them.

"Fresh air, Your Highness?" she said just loud enough that any eavesdropping guest would infer that the princess had requested a breather.

"Yes, that's just what I need," Mithra said with a blinding smile and allowed Danai to lead her to an 'unoccupied' balcony.

Danai rested her back against the door, hoping that she looked like she was simply taking a breather and enjoying the music instead of worrying about what the ramifications of Mithra's potential indiscretions could be.

She stood there for so long that her feet almost went numb, and her stomach rumbled as the tantalizing tables of food taunted her, just out of reach.

Just when she thought she would become a statue to decorate the palace, the king raised his hand and one of his attendants hit a small drum, signaling that he wished to speak.

When she saw this, Danai discreetly tapped the door with the back of her hand, hoping that the princess could hear her.

The door opened and Mithra exited with her head high and a wide smile on her face. With one last wry and mischievous glance back toward whoever it was she was speaking to on the balcony, she let Danai escort her back to her seat, just in time for the king to begin speaking.

King Nay of Rukar was no stranger to Danai. Well, he was in that he knew nothing about her except her name, but she had grown up seeing him. When Princess Mithra was sent to the countryside to gain her strength, he and Queen Abella visited weekly. As Mithra got older and healthier, their visits became more picnics and lavish dinners, than healers and tears. Both the king and queen always had smiles on their faces in recent years and tonight was no different, however, Danai thought about what Aydana had mentioned and noticed a twinge of discomfort in the king's eyes and the way he squeezed the queen's hand before he spoke.

"Thank all of you for joining me on this beautiful Sower's Eve. At this moment, many farmers are still at work, sowing and preparing the land that has already been so blessed us with ample crops. We can thank God's favor, our people's skilled hands, and of course your guidance," he said, his voice carrying across the feast.

The noble's in attendance cheered, and Danai fought the urge to roll her eyes. She had yet to see a noble guide anyone in regard to sowing, only in where to put the harvest once it was grown.

The king chuckled at his guest's enthusiasm, but his eyes darted to Queen Abella. Her smile tightened, and she gave him a sharp nod, her hand coming out to hold his.

"We gather to celebrate even greater news," he continued, clearing his throat. "I am pleased to share with the kingdom that my youngest daughter, Princess Mithra will be the future queen of Odock,"

Hushed murmurs filled the halls, before applause and cheers settled in, but they turned into shouts of shock.

Without warning, Mithra flung the low table she was sitting at forward. Wine and food spilled everywhere and Danai, still shocked by the news of the princess' betrothal, was unable to avoid the cold sticky wine as it splashed across her feet, soaking into her shoes.

"I won't do it," Mithra hissed, rising to her feet, her chest heaving in fury.

Her father winced.

"Now Mithra, word has spread of your beauty and talents, and King Diederick and I agree that you would make a splendid match for his son Crown Prince Thilo,"

"You and he are in agreement? Well, I most certainly am not. Call. It. Off." she said with gritted teeth.

"Mithy don't be unreasonable—"

"Call it off,"

"If you give this a chance, then you'll see that this is truly—"

"I don't care. Call. It. Off."

"Now I understand your worries, but I am your father and I will not allow you to disrespect me in front of my court," he said evenly, his voice taking on a dangerous edge.

Princess Mithra either couldn't tell or didn't care because she pressed on.

"I don't care who is listening! They can all mark my words: I will *not*." She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes.

"This is not just about you," the king said, rubbing his eyes, and Danai wished that he would end the feast so that this discussion could be held privately.

The musicians were currently pretending to inspect their instruments, Danai could have sworn she saw Erlaya's curly hair making a beeline back to the kitchens, and the rest of the distinguished guests were watching with rapt attention, no doubt holding onto every word of the royal spat to repeat back in their own circles.

"How is this not just about me? It's my marriage!" Princess Mithra shouted and the king's eye twitched. He looked at his limit.

"Your marriage could secure a much-needed alliance. Security for both of our kingdoms—" Mithra laughed, cutting him off.

"Again, this has nothing to do with me. The two of you can sign whatever, but I will not be part of your bartering,"

"You will do what I tell you to do," he snarled, and for the first time in the argument Princess Mithra balked.

The queen tried to rest her hand over his, but he snatched it away to point at Mithra.

"The Raiders of Gritaar grow bolder every day. We are about to enter a war, one we cannot win alone. Is that what you want? You want the raiders to invade, ransack the palace, and cut off my head? Have I failed you so greatly that you now wish me dead? Answer me! Do you want your father to die?!" he ended in a bellow, his hands slamming down on the table as he rose to his feet and stormed over to her in a swirl of silk.

"They have asked for the crown and if I do not give it to them, then they will take it and my head. This is what is at stake you insolent, spoiled child! So hear me now. You will be married to Crown Prince Thilo of the Kingdom of Odock. You will set out for there immediately, and you will be grateful that I am paving the way for you to be a queen instead of some raider's war prize!"

The hall was silent. Danai didn't even dare draw breath, her shock was so great. When the king visited the palace in the countryside, he was always in good spirits, amiable, and doted on the princess, fulfilling Mithra's and his wife's every whim.

The man she saw now was not the same as the one she had served food to as he sat with his wife and daughter taking in the scenery. Or maybe he was. Maybe the situation was so dire that he was now a king before he was a father.

Princess Mithra's eyes welled up with tears, the makeup Danai had so carefully applied streaking down her cheeks.

"Mother, you're going to let him—"

Before she could finish the king grabbed her, drawing gasps from some of those in attendance, but none dared to intervene.

"Your mother is in agreement with me. This is your duty! After the years you have spent in luxury, the privileges you have enjoyed, it is now time to pay your kingdom back,"

She sobbed, and he released her, returning to his throne.

"Take her and clean her up. Everyone, resume," he said coldly and Danai hurried to Mithra's side along with the other maids as the musicians began to play once again. Uneasy conversation sweeping through the halls.

As she walked the princess out of the hall, supporting her sobbing form, she spotted Lord Kinar. She didn't know how she expected him to look, but she knew that she was surprised by his silence during the king's announcement and the ensuing argument.

She saw that his grip on his glass was white-knuckled, and his lips were pressed into a thin severe line. He looked in her direction, or rather in Mithra's and instead of sorrow, there was a rage in his eyes. Rage and a sense of finality, as he turned his gaze back to the king.

## [Chapter 6: The People's Princess](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

The sound of silence came with both relief and fear.

A soldier called out that the enemy had retreated, leaving the clearing and vanishing into the woods, and both Danai and Aydana breathed twin sighs of relief.

Their happiness was short lived as Lord Nabu came to look into the carriage.

Danai and Aydana climbed out, and Lord Nabu frantically looked behind them.

"And? Where is she?" he asked, panic creeping into his voice.

Unable to say anything, both Danai and Aydana just hung their heads.

"They're going to kill me," Lord Nabu said, disheveled and wide-eyed as he stared past Danai at the empty carriage.

"We lost the princess. No. I didn't," he turned stiffly back to Aydana and Danai, rage taking over his face.

"It was you! You incompetent lot lost the princess and now we're all going to die!" He tried to walk forward but lost his footing, staggering to the side.

Danai noticed that his entire side was a dark red and his tanned skin had taken an ash like pallor.

"Lord Nabu, be still, you're injured," she said, getting up to approach him, but he waved her off, his large sleeves flapping like a drunken goose.

"Don't touch me! It's not my blood, you dumb wench," he shouted as he staggered closer to the carriage, sinking to his knees.

"My first foray into diplomacy, and here we are. I was supposed to be a dignitary, and now we're going to go to war. We're going to die," he whined plaintively into the dusky sky.

He screamed and then slumped over before sitting up abruptly.

"Unless they don't find out," he whispered under his breath, his eyes manic and oddly hopeful.

"You—" he snapped his fingers in Danai's direction. "You served the princess the closest, yes?"

Danai hesitantly nodded and took several steps back when he approached her.

"Do you speak Docian," he asked.

Once again, she nodded. She picked up several languages while serving the princess, mainly because she had to be present during her lessons.

He circled her like a vulture, before smiling to himself.

"How would they know?" He muttered to himself and snapped his fingers at Aydana.

"You there, dress her in the princess's clothes. Add a veil and from this moment on you will address her as 'her highness', he said in a harsh whisper before speaking loud enough for any of the other servants nearby to hear.

"I'm so glad you're alright, your highness. Yes, by all means go freshen up," he said, his cheery voice not matching the warning glare he was sending both of them.

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The gown felt uncomfortable. Not because of the material or the fit, while it was a little snug around her bust, it was probably the softest dress she'd ever touched, let alone worn. Still, she fidgeted with the sleeves, tugging on it, unable to make it feel *right*.

She knew it would never feel right because it wasn't truly hers.

"How are you feeling?" Aydanna asked as she placed a veil over her. "You know, about the lying? Are you a good liar? I don't remember you lying," Aydana said, her nervousness causing her to ramble.

Danai, felt like she was going to be sick, and covered her eyes with her hands. Feigning interest and politeness was one thing but pretending to be someone else completely was another.

"I think," Aydana continued, "that you'll be fine. Because you don't need to pretend to be Princess Mithra, because they don't know her. You can just be you, but a princess. You'll be you, but a princess named Mithra,"

Although she was on the verge of blanking out what Aydana's anxiety ridden mind was going on about in favor of what her own anxiety riddled mind was focusing on, some of her friend's words connected.

It was true that no one in Odock knew Princess Mithra personally, so it was unlikely that she'd be immediately discovered.

Danai swallowed thickly before squaring her shoulders. "I think I can manage,"

Aydana nodded.

"Good. That's good. Good, good," she said, laughing nervously before sharply turning to Danai.

"I'm not," she blurted.

"You're not what?"

"A good liar! I don't lie!"

Danai grabbed onto her shoulders, shaking her slightly.

"Then don't! Either stay silent or say whatever part that is true, that doesn't reveal us,"

"Princess, come out and greet his highness," Lord Nabu's false cheery voice called out, and both of them went still.

"Is he talking to you or did she come back?" Aydana whispered.

She looked to the sky and felt like weeping.

"I think he's talking to me, but what does he mean by his highness? Who is his highness? I thought I was *her* highness now?" Danai could hear her voice getting higher with each word and stopped her self, trying to gain her composure.

With Aydana following behind her, she walked back to the clearing, walking past the other members of the procession to where Lord Nabu was standing with a large man clad in dark grey armor.

On the man's back was a large bladed weapon, the hilt too long to be fully a sword, but the blade too wide and broad to be a spear. His helmet obscured his face, and the fur of some great beast lined the cloak he wore.

She willed her legs not to give out as she bowed before him.

"Greetings, your highness," she said, imagining she was greeting Queen Arabella instead of a mountain of armor.



She flinches as she sees his armor covered hand approach her, but he doesn't strike her and call her a fraud. Instead, he just holds it out and patiently waits for her to take it.

She does, the metal of the armor, not unpleasant to touch as she had assumed it would be.

She risked looking up at him, but instead of a helmet, she was met by the darkest eyes she had ever seen. Everything on him seemed strong, from the broadness of him to the prominence of his crooked nose and the set of his square jaw.

He stared at her for a moment, his gaze unreadable, but then turned to look at the rest of the bridal procession.

"We will bury your dead and take you and your wounded to Redmount Fortress. Once you've had time to heal and are fit to travel, I will deliver you to my brother," he said, his voice reminding Danai of the low rumble of thunder.

"Thank you, your highness," she went to bow again, but realized that he was still holding onto her hand.

With an awkward smile, she went to pull her hand away, but before she could, he began to gently guide her over to the carriage.

He started to help her into the carriage, but she stopped him.

"Uhm, thank you, but wouldn't the carriage would be better served carrying the wounded," she said, hoping that her Docian was good and that he didn't take offense to her suggestion.

He stared at her for what felt like an eternity before nodding, leading her over to a large black horse instead. He took off his fur lined cloak and placed it over her shoulders, securing it tightly around her. The sudden warmth of the garment making her realize just how cold she had been.

Taking a knee, he placed his hand out, and she balked at the sight of royalty kneeling before her.

She wasn't sure what he wanted, and he didn't seem interested in telling her, he just looked at her and then at the monster of a horse in front of her.

He wanted her to get on the horse, and he's on the ground because...

*Oh.*

Her cheeks grew warm, embarrassed at her own slowness, and she carefully stepped into his waiting hand, using the boost to reach the stirrups and climb in the saddle.

For a moment she feared he would climb up behind her, but instead he wordlessly took the reins and began to walk by the horse, leading her out of the clearing and up the snowy path.

"Thank you, but I can ride on my own if it's necessary," she said, uncomfortable that he was stuck guiding the horse.

"It's not necessary," he said gruffly and Danai, thought about sitting there in silence, but she really didn't want him to inconvenience himself more than he already had.

"I do have some experience riding—"

"In snow?" he asked, looking at her pointedly with raised brows.

Already knowing the answer, he turned his attention back to the path and Danai slouched in her seat, feeling embarrassed.

"I could have traveled with the others," she said, and the prince grunted noncommittally, as if to say, *but you're not*.

The fur of his cloak tickled her nose and she let out a loud sneeze.

Cringing, she looked down to see him looking up at her, his eyebrows knit together, and his mouth set in a deep frown.

Danai looked off.

"Pardon me," she said quietly.

He didn't respond with words, instead picking up the pace until the horse was moving at a trot, and the red speck on the mountain that had seemed so far when Commander Barrow first pointed it out to her, grew closer and closer.

## [Chapter 4: The Part](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

"Your Highness, please I beg of you," a lady in waiting cried, her voice muffled by the thick wood of the door.

The sound of another expensive ceramic being thrown into the wall, sent her cowering, running back into the hall.

Danai watched the painful scene, and with a sigh, she went back into the princess's room for the fifth time that hour, carefully stepping on the glass and pottery-shard-covered floor.

"Get out, you traitors," cried Mithra, her voice hoarse and ragged from crying.

The preparations for the princess's marriage had been going on for weeks and for weeks, various tutors and diplomats had been trying to educate her on the etiquette she would need in her new position as the crown prince's wife.

And for weeks, Danai's days had been filled with the sounds of crying, sobbing, cursing, and shattering.

"It's me Mithra. It's Danai," she called out.

Immediately Mithra emerged, her usually vibrant violet eyes bloodshot and wild.

"Danai?" she said, dropping a vase she was about to hurl at whoever the poor intruder was.

With a sob, Mithra shuffled over to her and fell into her arms, squeezing tightly.

"They keep trying to tell me about—about that man. About that place," she spat. "Mother won't even open her door to see me and Father has deserted me,"

She leaned back, staring at Danai with so much intensity that Danai worried for a moment that she might attack her in their stead.

"You won't desert me, will you? You'll be by my side?" she asked, her eyes searching Danai's frantically for reassurance.

The princess's nails bit into Danai's shoulders from how tightly she was holding onto them, but Danai smiled through her wince.

"Of course. I will stay by your side until the carriage departs," Danai tried to say reassuringly, but her voice wavered when the princess looked at her, tear-filled eyes narrowed and mouth agape, caught between a snarl and a sob.

"Danai," she blinked away her tears and looked at her sternly. "There is no, 'until the carriage departs.' Of course, you're coming with me. You can't leave my side. Not through this,"

Her voice is startlingly cold, her face hard, but the expression is gone before Danai can fully register it, replaced by anguish once again.

With a hiccuped sob, she clung onto Danai, resting her entire weight on her, causing her to stagger slightly.

She tried to focus on the sorrow she felt for the princess, which wasn't too difficult. After all, the princess was grieving the loss of the only life she had ever known and as Danai thought about the fact that she

might never see her family again, the princess's sorrow felt too much like her own.

\*\*\*\*

The departure of the wedding party was not a joyous occasion. Music was played and songs were sung, but none of the maids that had been selected to follow her to this new household looked happy.

Danai had been shocked when Aydana came to stand next to her in the procession, looking nonchalant next to the sorrowful faces of the other maids.

"There is a downside to being the most trusted of the queen's maids," she said, as they made their way down the road. "Sometimes she trusts you with stuff like following her dearest daughter to another country,"

"I didn't think she could bear to part with you," Danai said, and Aydana smiled sadly.

"And I knew the princess couldn't part with you,"

The two of them looked ahead, the road looking longer with each step they took. The oranges and reds reminded Danai of her sister's unfinished wedding dress, and she blinked back tears.

"Hey," Aydana said, her voice laced with concern, but Danai wiped her eyes, waving her friend off.

"I'm fine. Just thinking about how my sister is going to kill me. My whole family probably won't forgive me for running off," she said with a humorless chuckle and Ayadana nudged her.

"We'll write them as soon as we get there. Let them know that all is well,"

"I guess all is well isn't it?"

"Of course. And you know what? I'm feeling optimistic,"

Laughing Danai looked at her, straightening the pack that held her belongings on her shoulder.

"Are you now?"

"Yes!" Aydana insisted. "You and I are united and facing the unknown together. Who's to say this isn't a blessing?"

\*\*\*\*

After a ship took them across the channel they walked and walked, feeling the dip in temperature. By the fifteenth day of their journey, Aydana was no longer calling their journey a blessing. Instead, everything was a curse.

The soldiers that wouldn't let the maids ride with them on their horses?

Cursed.

Lord Nabu, the diplomat who wouldn't stop asking them to jog alongside his carriage to bring him refreshments?

Cursed to hell and back.

Most worrying of all was Princess Mithra, who seemed determined to die before they reached Odock.

She threw a tantrum anytime one of the maids tried to get her to eat, with Danai being the only one who could get her to imbibe anything at all.

As Danai gathered another spoonful of porridge and lifted it to Mithra's lips, the princess suddenly grabbed her wrist in a surprising display of strength.

"I truly have enjoyed all of the time we've spent together, Danai. Do you know what I've enjoyed the most?" the princess asked suddenly.

Danai gently placed down the bowl, giving her full attention to Mithra.

"You truly care about my happiness. You're the only one who I can trust completely. You feel what I feel and the fact that you're with me has been my only consolation."

Danai wasn't sure how to feel about that. It was impossible for a maid to be happy when her lady wasn't. That was what being a servant entailed. Happiness, and survival, all were dependent on whether or not the one you served was pleased. In a way, Danai almost felt guilty, because while in the past she felt close to the princess, these days she felt more and more like she was simply doing her duty.

Mithra paid no heed to Danai's silence. She released her wrist just as quickly as she grabbed it, and leaned back in her seat, her eyes fixed on the trees.

"Go ask Barrow how long it will be before we reach the border, I can finish eating on my own," Mithra said and Danai agreed, as she climbed out of the carriage, her feet sinking into the crisp white snow. She winced as she felt the snow make its way into shoes completely unfit for the climate, but still she pressed on.

Their procession had stopped to make camp, and she moved through the different clusters of soldiers and servants, inquiring about Commander Barrow, the leader of the soldiers and guide for their journey.

She was told that she'd find him off the road and in the woods, near the stream they had passed earlier.

His armor was the first thing she saw, the light reflecting off of the stream and bouncing off the gold metal made her have to blink to avoid being blinded. He had his helmet off, showing his braided dark hair and beard, both streaked with gray.

Barrow wasn't overly friendly, but he also wasn't as conscious of the gap in their stations as Lord Nabu was. When he heard her approach he turned to face her, his hand leaving the hilt of his sword once he saw it was her.

"Lady Danai," he said with a tilt of his head, a slight smile highlighting the fine lines in his light brown skin.

"Commander Barrow," she said, bowing deeply. "It's just Danai, my lord. I'll be punished if someone overhears you elevating my rank," she cautioned and Barrow gave a gruff laugh.

"All ladies, are ladies. Noble or not," he chuckled and scratched his beard. "What does that one want now,"

Danai was shocked at how flippantly he treated rank and how he addressed the princess, but she was in no place to chastise him.

"Princess Mithra would like to know when we'll reach the border,"

He hummed disinterestedly and beckoned her over, pointing past the tree line.

"You can tell her that we're already here. That's one of their fortresses, just over that ridge," Barrow said as he squinted against the sun, pointing to one of the rocky peaks in the distance.

Danai squinted, even getting on her tip-toes, craning her neck to see what he was pointing to.

"Is it in the mountain or behind the mountain, because I'm not seeing it," she said and he laughed.

"It's that red speck on the mountain. It's called Redmount and we'll be stopping there,"

She was about to lament having to potentially climb a mountain when a shriek made both her and Commander Barrow turn in the direction of where the procession had stopped.

The commander ran to the commotion and Danai found herself on his heels, concern for Aydana and Princess Mithra overriding any hesitation.

As they got closer to the clearing, several maids ran past them, fleeing as arrows whizzed by.

Commander Barrow raised his shield, just in time to stop Danai from being hit by one.

She felt herself begin to sweat as she looked around. The soldiers were clashing with assailants whose armor had no markings to signify who they were.

They were clearly trained and had caught their soldiers off guard. Some of Commander Barrow's men were scrambling for their weapons, while others resorted to fighting it out with their bare hands.

Danai shook as she looked looked for Aydana or the carriage, but couldn't see her. An elbow from Commander Barrow interrupted her search.

"I can see the princess's carriage just over there. Go to her. Keep her covered and from panicking until this is over," he instructed and Danai swallowed her fear, steeling herself as she looked through the fighting she would have to pass through to reach the carriage.

She took off, jumping as an arrow buried itself in a tree right by her. One of the enemy soldiers tried to grab her, standing directly in her path, but instead of turning around, she dropped her shoulder and ran straight at him, taking them both to the ground.

He must have fallen wrong because she could hear him groaning beneath her, but she didn't dare stop to look at him, instead scrambling to her feet and closing the distance between her and the carriage.

She climbed inside expecting to see the princess cowering, but instead, Mithra was sitting completely upright, watching the fighting with a detached interest.

Figuring that it was shock, she tugged on Mithra's arm trying to pull her away from the carriage window where she could be hit by a stray arrow.

"Don't be afraid, Danai," Mithra said calmly removing her arm from Danai's grip.

"It's just my husband coming to collect me,"

Now Danai was convinced that the princess had lost her mind.

That is until Lord Kinar ripped the door off the carriage.

Danai tried to hold onto the princess's hand, but Mithra wrenched her hand off of her, eagerly taking Lord Kinar's.

She climbed out of the carriage without so much as a single glance back at the carnage her so-called husband had caused.

A familiar voice tore Danai's attention away from the sight of Mithra climbing onto that traitor's horse. She turned in time to see Aydana, crawling away from the melee, her arm bent at an awkward angle.

Danai hurried out of the carriage, carefully making her way over to her and dragging her to the carriage helping her inside. They huddled closely on the floor of the carriage, waiting for the sounds of mayhem to end.

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

Redmount sat on the border between two kingdoms, Rukar to the south, and Odock to the north. Its position in the mountains and access to the surrounding villages made it integral to Odock's security.

It was also a good place to be the second son of a king.

Prince Ansgar, the second son watched as his older brother, Crown Prince Thilo approached. The gates to Redmount opened to the future king and his retinue and Prince Thilo dismounted quickly, running over to him.

"Ansgar! I have news!"

Instead of giving his older brother his full attention he just grunted, continuing to practice with the training dummy in front of him.

"Ansgar, can you be more excited to see me?" Thilo said, his shoulders drooping and his mouth forming a pout that made Ansgar roll his eyes once he looked at him.

"I am excited," Ansgar said and Thilo shook his head.

"No, no. You were the first person I wanted to share this news with and you're more interested in that training dummy,"

With a sigh, Ansgar rested the wooden staff on his shoulder and turned to face his brother fully.

"I'm listening. What?"

Thilo perked up, smiling so widely his dimples were showing.

"I'm getting married!" he crowed, his excitement punctuated with a clap.

Ansgar blinked, trying to digest the information.

"You're married? Since when?"

"This is a future event Ansgar, keep up. I am promised to the princess of Rukar. Her name is Mithra. Doesn't that sound lovely? Let's say it together! Mithra..."

Ansgar stared at his brother in disbelief before looking at his brother's servants behind him.

They shrugged, shaking their heads like they shared his confusion.

Still, Ansgar indulged his brother.



“...Mithra,” he said begrudgingly and his brother clapped in excitement.

“There you go! Lord Eskil was telling me all about her. She paints, she rides, she is well versed in matters of the state and she’s even said to be quite kind,” Tilo said, his voice wistful and while Ansgar wanted to share his brother’s enthusiasm, the idea of marrying someone without so much as speaking to them made him uneasy.

“That sounds...good, but you’ve never met her? Was this your idea or Father’s? Because—”

“—Father is ill,” Thilo interjected quietly and levied a solemn stare at Ansgar.

He continued. “It is father’s idea and I agree with him and the advisors. Surely you see the benefit as well?”

Ansgar nodded. “Their land is fertile and they repeatedly have a surplus in their harvest, but their army is weak. We have good raw resources and a strong army, but our winters have been harsh. Food for protection doesn’t seem like a bad deal,”

“So you understand—”

“—What I don’t understand is why you need to get married. Can’t the two kings just—I don’t know—sign something?”

Thilo sighed and crossed his arms, looking mildly irritated.

“This ensures that I have an heir and increases our obligation to protect them. It makes the people of Rukar and Odock family. It is a good thing,” he insists.

Ansgar doesn’t like it and isn’t entirely convinced that his brother does either, but as always, Prince Thilo’s enthusiasm seems more durable than one of their knight’s strongest shields.

“If you’re sure that you’re happy with this arrangement, then I will support it,” he finally said and Thilo gave a small smile.

“Sometimes happiness is a choice and I’m happy to do my duty. For years it seems only one of us has, so I’m happy to pick up the slack,”

Ansgar knew his brother felt guilty about the dangers he faced for the kingdom. He had even asked him when they were younger if Ansgar hated him for not being the one they sent to quell unrest and fight enemies of the crown, but Ansgar never did. As Thilo said, it was a matter of duty. The second son of a king had very few choices, but far more freedom than the firstborn. He could either be a threat, float through life like a piece of driftwood, adding nothing and disappearing from view, or he could be useful.

He chose to be useful and his father was happy to use him. He was swinging a sword by his seventh year and by his fifteenth, he was joining knights on their expeditions. He saw blood too early, but life in

the border fortress showed him how his father's decisions impacted the people of Odock.

If there was one thing he and Thilo shared other than blood, then it was a love for their people.

He rested a heavy hand on Thilo's shoulder.

"Oh, you're going to do your duty now? I admire your courage in marrying a beautiful princess. I'm sure our kingdom will sing tales of your sacrifice," he smirked and Thilo rolled his eyes, shoving off his hand.

"Shove it, Ansgar. Anyway, it is time for the second reason for my visit. I need you to escort her here,"

Ansgar snorted at this but realized quickly that his brother was serious.

"I'm not going to act as a governess for your future wife. Shouldn't you be the one to pick up your own wife?"

"I will be in the palace, greeting guests and dignitaries that will be coming to celebrate our union. She will have a bridal party coming with her, but they will be strangers to this land! I'd feel much better if you brought her to me. Also..." Thilo trailed off, looking sheepish.

"Also?" Ansgar encouraged.

"Also, during the journey, you could get to know her and then tell me once you arrive at the festivities. That way I wouldn't be going in blind,"

Ansgar laughed, this time loudly.

"No. I'm not going to get to know your wife for you. You have your whole life to do that. I'll escort her when she gets to this area, but that's it,"

"That makes me sound like an indolent oaf who can't be bothered to speak to his wife!"

"Those are your words. Not mine," Ansgar smirked and Thilo shoved him before looking around.

"Aunt and Uncle haven't come to greet me yet,"

"They're on their daily ride around the fortress and village together. They'll be back by supper,"

As Ansgar said that, several of his trusted knights, returned. They were led by Elyor, one of the best knights at the fortress and also one of Ansgar's closest friends. At the sight of Prince Thilo, they dismounted and bowed, with Elyor's eyes already taking on a mischievous glint.

"We greet Your Royal Highness the crown prince, they said and he smiled, waving a hand to signal for them to rise.

"Good to see all of you again. Oh, Elyor, I'm getting married!" he said brightly.

Elyor raised an eyebrow at Ansgar before returning the crown prince's smile.

"Congratulations my prince. Let's pray that she's pretty," he said, earning several chuckles from the knights.

"Do you want to see the fortress before our aunt and uncle return," Ansgar asked him after some of the laughing had disappeared.

"No, no, let's practice our marksmanship," he said, gesturing at the bows and arrows.

Ansgar smiled slightly.

"You wouldn't prefer to brush up on your swordsmanship?"

Thilo snorted and looked at him like he had lost his mind.

"Do you really think it's fitting for my future subjects to watch the next monarch get beaten within an inch of his life with a wooden sword?"

Ansgar tried to keep a straight face and cleared his throat.

"Every one of your knights here is loyal. No one would breathe a word of your defeat."

A chorus of agreement rang out from the surrounding knights, although most sounded disingenuous.

"I would never, Your Royal Highness," said one.

"Wouldn't tell a soul," shouted another.

"I'd only tell my mother. Maybe my brothers. A couple of my friends..." Elyor said thoughtfully.

A glare from Thilo, made him straighten up.

"But they all have jaws like a locked door, my prince. No one would ever know," he hurried and punctuated it with a bow.

At this Ansgar completely lost his composure, giving into the urge to laugh and Thilo joined him, despite his attempt to maintain a withering look of disapproval.

"One of you traitors, bring me my bow. I'll give you all something to tell your mothers about,"

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It wasn't long after his brother left that Ansgar spotted something from one of his favorite spots on the battlements. Amongst the green of foliage and the white sprinkling of snow, he spotted several colorful banners, bright and billowing in the wind.

He squinted, unable to see if the banners were attached to a military convoy, or if they were merchants.

Assembling a small group of soldiers, he informed his uncle and led his men to investigate.

"Do you smell that?" Dastan, one of his knights asked and Elyor grinned.

"Of course I do. That's the smell of adventure lads," he said taking a loud sniff of the air before grimacing. "Maybe not the good kind,"

Ansgar knew the smell all too well. It was the smell of blood.

"Dismount, we'll approach on foot in case it is an ambush," he said and his knights followed the order, leaving their horses and treading carefully on the freshly fallen snow.

They could hear groans and hushed voices as they approached. The clearing they reached was full of the wounded and weeping, but as soon as they stepped into view, the few that were able drew their weapons.

Ansgar's men followed suit but he raised a hand, stopping them from advancing.

The people were already wounded and not dressed warmly enough for the weather. An uneasy suspicion crept over him.

"I am Prince Ansgar of Odock. What has happened to you?" he spoke and the people didn't lower their weapons until a loudly dressed man approached, shouting at them in what sounded like...Rukari maybe?

Ansgar knew a few words here and there but didn't have the knack for languages that his brother had.

Thankfully the slim man began to speak in Docian, clearly fluent and lightly accented.

"Greetings your Highness," he said and bowed with a flourish.

"I am Lord Nabu. Entrusted with the honor of delivering our princess to your brother the crown prince, but as you can see, we have run into great misfortune,"

Ansgar grimaced. His suspicions had been correct. This was the bridal party for the princess of Rukar and yet there was no bride in sight.

"Is she among the dead?" he asked somberly and Lord Nabu rushed to shake his head.

"No, she's here! And alive! Oh, princess," he called out sweetly, and when he received no response he called out again, this time more forcefully. "Princess, come out and greet His Highness," he said with an edge that had Ansgar raise an eyebrow.

A veiled woman stepped forward from the group, her stride hesitant yet graceful. The bright orange hue of her dress along with the way her gold jewelry brought out the warm glow of her brown skin looked so out of place in the coldness of the wood that Ansgar had to take off his helmet, just to make sure he was seeing clearly.

The almost transparent material of her veil shifted slightly revealing dark lashes and soft plush lips.

"Greetings Your Highness," she said, her voice even and smooth, with a lowness to her tone that he wasn't expecting.

He swallowed thickly, reaching out a hand to help his brother's wife to her feet.

## [Chapter 7: Any Other Name](#)

[Aug 10, 2024](#)

When Danai had first seen Redmount Fortress from a distance, she assumed that it was almost a part of the mountain, surrounded by craggy peaks.

While it was in the mountains the area surrounding it was quite vast, with a dense forest facing its rear entrance and a clearing surrounding the front.

There were several villages nearby, and there was much more traffic going in and out of the castle than Danai had expected.

Another thing she hadn't expected was how friendly the people were. Everyone, from Lady Imelda, who had greeted her at the gate and commissioned new and warmer clothes for her, to the maids that had been assigned to tend to her were more than kind.

Her first few weeks at the fortress were mostly spent in the clinic. Aydana was there with a broken arm and several others were in much more dire shape. Danai thought that she was just doing what was right by not leaving the Docian people of the fortress to take care of their Rukari people.

She had no way of knowing how much her presence in the clinic was influencing the rumor mill.

"I swear! I saw the princess on our way here walking alongside her own carriage. I thought she was just a pretty maid! I'm glad I didn't embarrass myself," she heard one of the soldiers say one morning as she went for a stroll with a healthier Aydana.

She and Aydana share a relieved glance at each other, happy that he hadn't realized the truth in his statement.

"I'm just surprised no one has said anything more on the nose," she said in a hushed whisper.

Aydana opened her mouth to say something but shut it promptly when she saw someone approaching.

"G—good morning your highness!" a young soldier said enthusiastically. He attempted to bow, but his movement was hampered by his arm still being in a sling.

"Good morning," she said, returning the greeting with a smile, and he bowed once more, completely red in the face. He ran back to another group of soldiers who all cheered and smacked him on the back.

"What's that all about?" she asked Aydana once they were out of earshot.

"They think you're the real princess so he gets bragging rights just for having the courage to talk to you.

Danai rolled her eyes.

"More like laughing at my expense. They know I'm a fraud,"

"Actually I think very few of them do," Aydana said and Danai's eyebrows shot up.

"How is that possible?"

"Think about it. Commander Barrow, Lord Nabu, and you and I were the closest to the princess's carriage. We're the only ones who saw what happened and several people died that would have seen Lord Kinar and Princess Mithra leave together," she whispered and Danai frowned at the memory.

They walked to stand in a secluded alcove near the clinic. Aydana continued.

"Everyone else that knows knows because they know you. Some of these soldiers have only heard us referring to you as Her Highness,"

Realization settled over Danai. That's why some of the people from the procession seemed so genuine in the way they treated her and were surprised by her behavior.

"Come to think of it, the princess spent so much time in the countryside that most people in the palace haven't had the chance to serve her directly. And during the procession, she was so mopey that she rarely stepped out of her carriage,"

Aydana's eyes widened. "You might be the only princess they've ever known,"

Danai couldn't take comfort in it. It made her feel like a bigger liar, like a child who had gotten into her older sister's clothes. It was all too fragile. They had placed a crown atop her head. It was too big for her and it felt like it had settled around her neck, growing tighter each day.

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It happened just after breakfast. She and Aydanna were walking back from helping at the clinic when a soldier rode through the gates.

On the horse with him was a woman wearing Rukari clothing. They watched as he dismounted and helped her off the horse. Danai started to approach to help, but Aydanna snatched her back.

"What? She looks like one of ours," Danai said and Aydanna shook her head.

"Look closer. She's one of ours all right,"

Danai furrowed her brow, looking back at the woman before her eyes widened in recognition.

Thana.

When they had come to the fortress Thana was nowhere to be found, not among the healthy, the injured, or even the dead.

"Let's go," she said in a hushed voice to Aydanna and the two of them began to quickly walk away, but a loud voice made them both flinch.

"DANAI!"

Both she and Aydanna froze, not daring to look in the direction of the shout.

It had only been a few weeks and already she had been exposed.

Finally taking a look behind them, Danai felt like swinging on her.

Thana, whose head was bandaged, was running after them, yelling all the while.

"Danai?! What are you wearing?!" she said reaching out in an attempt to grab her.

A large armor-clad arm stopped her short, knocking her onto her tail. Both of them looked to see Prince Ansgar.

He looked down at Thana, his eyebrows knitting together as he frowned.

The glare he sent the soldier who had brought Thana was bone-chilling.

"Why have you brought a madwoman before the princess," he asked and the soldier quickly dismounted, bowing deeply.

"She was found in a nearby village. She told them she served the princess," he said and Prince Ansgar turned his attention to Danai.

His large frame and dark eyes made Danai pray that he wouldn't ask anything that required her to lie. She felt like he would be able to see right through her. Like he already could.

"Do you know this woman?" he asked bluntly, not bothering to look at Thana from where she was in the snow, blessedly silent.

Danai swallowed and nodded quickly before remembering her etiquette.

"Yes, Your Highness. She serves as a lady in waiting for Queen Arabella,"

"Your mother?" he asked and she blinked.

If she's the princess then that would make Queen Arabella her mother.

She doesn't want to say that though.

She won't claim another person as her mother, even if she herself must go by another name.

"She was selected to join the bridal procession and household," Danai said instead.

Thankfully, Prince Ansgar nodded and started to walk away, but stopped once he was in front of Thana.

She looked pale and was very still as he addressed her.

"What was that you just called your princess?"

Danai looked toward heaven and then at the large blade he had secured on his back. She still couldn't decide whether or not it counted as a sword or a spear, but she knew she didn't want him to skewer her on it for lying to him.

She looked at Thana beseechingly, but Thana's disoriented and fear-filled gaze was solely focused on Prince Ansgar.

"Answer me. What did you just call the princess," he said, this time more forcefully and Thana rushed to speak.

"I—I called her Danai—milord or your highness," she stuttered and Prince Ansgar turned around to look at Danai with a raised brow.

She felt like she had turned to stone. Her hands shook and she couldn't see Aydana anywhere.

"Is your name not Mithra?" he asked and she tried to think of what to say.

"Danai is what the people who know me, call me," she said. Her voice was calmer than she felt and she even summoned a smile to go along with it.



He said a word she didn't quite understand in Docian, meaning that it must have been something more informal.

"Pardon me, your highness, I didn't understand,"

He opened his mouth, perhaps to explain, but was interrupted by the arrival of Lord Nabu. Aydana was behind him, having slipped away to fetch the diplomat once trouble started.

Danai shot her a look of gratitude.

"Yes, we've told her not to be so informal with her servants, but she *just won't listen*,"

His tone was cheerful, but she heard the hidden barb directed at her.

He had told her earlier that he would do the talking and that she was to give the royal members of Redmount Fortress, especially Prince Ansgar a wide berth.

She couldn't have predicted that the prince would show his face right as her real name was being shouted from the rooftops.

"Pardon me your Highness, but I'm sure Princess...*Danai* wants to make sure her dear lady's maid is seen to," he said and helped Thana up, shooting a stern look Danai's way.

With a quick bow to Prince Ansgar, she hurried to follow, but she could still feel his eyes on her, even after she was long out of sight.

\*\*\*

"—And you chose common-born Danai to do it?!"

They had taken Thana to Lord Nabu's room to be able to fill her in on the details without anyone else overhearing.

"It was a desperate maneuver for a desperate time," he said as if Danai wasn't standing right there.

"I cannot fault you milord, I understand how difficult this must be for you," she said, placing her hand on his and Danai rolled her eyes, not even bothering to hide it.

"There! You see how she acts," Thana exclaimed pointing at Danai and Lord Nabu frowned at her.

"Try to act with some decorum. You would think that serving the princess for this long would have rubbed off on you,"

"I would have been a better pick," Thana sniffs and Lord Nabu pats her hand reassuringly.

"Yes my lady, but at least the maid speaks Docian,"

Unable to just stand there anymore while they talk about her like she's the last cross-eyed fish at the bottom of a barrel in the market that they've had to bring home, she quietly slips out the door.

[Writer Update 9/8/2024](#)

[Sep 8, 2024](#)

Whew!

So I'm finally moved into my new place and settling into my new schedule!

Now, I can get things going again on here!

So here is the schedule for this week:

Monday: Part Two of Sarai's Short Story

Wednesday: Certain events from Menandros Labaton's point of view

Friday: Nari's first encounter with war

This upcoming weekend: Maid, A Princess update

Hope y'all are doing well and, as always, feel free to comment if you want to read anything specific!

[Character Conversations: A Queen's Destiny\\_\(Sarai and Avith\) Pt. 2](#)

[Sep 30, 2024](#)

"You like someone," Lalia said bluntly.

Sarai, almost choked on her drink, avoiding her cousin's sharp eyes.

Lalia was by far Sarai's favorite cousin, both of them shared a love for riding and Lalia's dry sense of humor complemented Sarai's nicely, but these days they didn't get to see each other as often. Lalia was

several years older, and had taken on more responsibilities in her branch of the tribe.

After Sarai visited Lalia at her coming of age ceremony, her cousin had returned with her, exercising her new freedom.

"Who is there to like?" Sarai evaded and Lalia narrowed her eyes.

"That's what I want to know. You weren't interested in any of the men who accompany your brothers, you don't look at the men in our tribe, and you haven't been able to travel anywhere since the prince has visited your land," Lalia said, counting out her logic on her fingers and Sarai's face grew warm.

Ever since her trip to visit her cousin, the Prince's presence had become more noticeable, especially to Sarai.

"Is it...someone who came with the prince?" Lalia asks and Sarai decides to test the waters.

"Something like that," she admits, wondering if she can tell her cousin the truth.

Lalia sighs, leaning back.

"I wouldn't advise it, cousin. Uncle does not want us tangled with the fight for the Hashindian throne. I wouldn't be surprised if a clever prince tried to form an alliance through one of his men-"

Before she could finish, Sarai abruptly stood up, not wanting to hear the rest.

"The hour is late, and I'm tired," she hurried out, avoiding her cousin's concerned eyes.

Instead of going to her room, she went outside, the night air doing its best to calm her nerves.

Why was it that even Lalia seemed to think she needed counsel. They weren't that far apart in age, yet now she thought herself in the position to advise her.

Frustration bubbled at the surface, and Sarai looked toward the stable.

Maybe a late night ride would ease the tension in her chest.

Saddling up her horse, she quietly guided it towards a back, less heavily guarded way and snuck off into the night, planning to be back long before daylight.

The abyss like blackness of the nights was only illuminated by the moon and the lanterns put up along the desolate road that led to her cousin's tribe's outpost.

She enjoyed the night breeze, and the freedom of solitude, until she realized there was another set of hoofbeats echoing through the night.

Coming toward her was a man she had seen but never spoken to.

Astrid a horse of pale gold the same shade as his hair, was the man who she always saw just a few paces behind Prince Avith, if not directly by his side. She had felt the cold blue of his eyes on her, although not in the same way Prince Avith's eyes lingered.

This man, the Kylosian, as her father had called him, was like an undisturbed lake. Calm, without a ripple to show any emotion.

"Princess Sarai," he said as his horse reached her, his voice flat.

"That is not my title," she said as she pulled at the reins, bringing her horse to a halt.

"Princess Sarai, I am here to bring you to Prince Avith," he said as if she hadn't spoken.

Sarai didn't care to correct him again, her heart beating louder than the drum used to alert the tribe of danger.

"He's here? To see me?" she asked, sounding eager, even to her own ears.

The man gave a curt nod and turned his horse, wordlessly asking her to follow.

They rode their horses forward for a while and then off the beaten path before Sarai attempted conversation.

"What is your name?" she called to him.

"Menandros," he said curtly, his tone putting up a wall that barred all future conversation. Still, Sarai tried.

"Menandros? Is that Kylosian? I'm Sarai-"

"Sarai. Young daughter of the Zilmulk. I know who you are," he says, turning to her slightly, the moonlight reflecting off of his cold blue eyes, startling her.

"It feels unfair that you know me when I do not know you," she replied with an uneasy laugh, beginning to rethink blithely following this stranger into the dark.

"There is no fairness. I know all wants and wishes of my king. We've arrived," He said, nudging his horse forward towards a grove of oranges, where she could see a lone white horse tied.

She followed Menandros' lead, riding to it before dismounting.

There, amongst the trees and moonlight, was Prince Avith.

"The moon is so beautiful tonight that I could almost mistake its glow for your company," he said as he approached, taking her hand as he did so.

Face warm and heart pounding, she did not remove her hand from his, instead enjoying the warmth on a cool night.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and his grip on her hand tightened.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. I missed the silhouette you cast at dinner. The glimpses I catch of your shadow. How could I stay away when you're out of my grasp," he said lowly, his thumb rubbing the soft back of her hand.

Sarai blinked, shocked at his words, but not displeased, in fact a smile tugged at her lips as she carefully removed her hand from his.

"We are not familiar enough to miss one another," she said, reaching up to pick an orange off a low-hanging branch. She began to peel it, eyes avoiding his, hoping to hold onto her wits in the face of his sweet words.

He grinned as he leaned down, his hand moving some of her braids to the side, making her shiver.

"Those who are fated, do not need to be familiar,"

His breath was warm against her neck and she shuddered in what she thought was excitement.

Still, she knew that she shouldn't be alone with him for too long.

"I should get back," she said reluctantly, and took a step back.

He chuckled as he lightly caressed her cheek before he took her hand and led her back to her horse.

"Menandros will bring you to me again tomorrow night," he said.

To Sarai, it sounded like a request, and she found herself nodding.

"Tomorrow night," she agreed.

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Tomorrow night turned into every night.

Each night at the orange grove, Prince Avith amazed her with stories of battles and the beauty of his home. She fed him fruit as he solemnly spoke of his fears for the kingdom now that his brother was in power. And she bashfully let him take her hand and bring it to his lips in farewell every night, the pounding in her chest growing harder to ignore.

"It is hard to find someone who truly understands you," he said one night, his head in her lap as they sat under one of the orange trees.

She nodded idly as she caressed his wispy curls.

"I'm a second son of a second wife. They don't think I can lead Hashind to greatness. Few others can understand the frustration in me. The yearning to show them what a king I can be,"

"Order of birth means nothing. One's skill and heart should decide who wears the crown," Sarai reassured, and Prince Avith abruptly turned to her.

"I knew you would understand, because you are the same," he said, his eyes burning with an intensity she had seen traces of but never fully glimpsed.

"I-I understand, but I am not the same. My father does not favor some children over others and we can all prove ourselves," she began, but Avith's chuckle interrupted her.

"You are a good daughter, Sarai. Good daughter's make good wives, but you have created an illusion for yourself. They see you as young. They ignore your wisdom. Your freedom is a farce, one that even they believe,"

Stunned by his words, piercing and callously delivered, Sarai struggled to find a response, to defend her family, and to not let his words ring true.

"I do not-"

"Would they even let you pick your own husband?" He interjects again, this time pulling her towards him, trapping her against his chest.

"Would they let you pick me?" He finishes, his eyes inescapable in the moonlight.

Sarai's heart rises and falls at the same time.

She knew her father didn't approve of the prince, and yet Avith's words promised so much. He wanted to be her husband.

"I'll ask," she said softly and Avith's chest reverberated with his deep chuckle and she felt him reach up and grab the pin that gathered up her braids.

"Why ask? You do not need them to tell you what to think or how to live,"

Her braids fell down her back and she felt his heavy hand slide across her back, stopping at one of the ties that held her dress up.

Snapping out of her stupor she pulled her gaze from his eyes, scooting back until she felt the bark of the tree.

"We are not married. This is not right," she warned but once again, Avith laughed.

"We are not in Zilmuk and we are not in Hashind. We are in an orange grove all our own. Who has authority higher than us in this moment?"

His voice was soft and low, and his eyes didn't leave her as he crept closer to her.

"Sarai," he practically purred. "You love me. Let us take the moon as our witness and I'll give you the stars as your dowry. We are married this night and not even the heavens can separate us,"

Sarai gasped as he leaned forward, trapping her in a kiss. Her first ever.

He was warm, and it felt like he filled up the entire world, like he was her entire world.

He pulled at the tie of her dress and she looked up towards the moon as it bore witness to their union.

\*\*\*

She awoke to soft grass beneath her, the smell of citrus on the wind, and the sun caressing her face.

The warmth startled her and dazed, she shot up, looking around for Avith, but instead was met with the cold appraising eyes of Menandros.

He peeled an orange as he watched her, eyes lazily drifting across her bare body.

With a shriek she gathered her discarded dress and covered herself.

"What are you doing?!"

She couldn't stop herself from shaking. Avith was nowhere to be seen and the sun was high in the sky. Surely her family knew she was missing by now.

And Menandros was staring at her as she was bare and fragile as the day she was born.

"Waiting for you to wake up," he said bluntly, unphased by her terror and fury.

His expression was blank, but his knuckles were white as he gripped the orange, his fingers tearing into the delicate fruit. Callously he threw it to the ground.

"Where is Avith?" she said shakily.

"He has left, but I was told to ensue you returned home safely and to deliver you this message. The next time the two of you meet, he will be king and you will be his queen. Give this to your father," he said, standing and walking over to his horse and removing a scroll from the saddle bag and tossing it at Sarai's feet.

She scowled at Menandros but carefully stooped down to pick it up.

"Is this his request for my hand?" She asked and Menandros did something she had never seen before.

He smiled.

It was mocking and his eyes looked wild. It was closer to a snarl and she hoped to never see it again.

"He already informed your father of his intent to wed you. Your father said no. Not that it matters now. Put on your clothes Princess Sarai. Go and face your father,"

\*\*\*

Menandros accompanied her to the outskirts of her family's encampment before promptly riding off.

She heard the drum sounding and knew her family was already looking for her.

Avoiding the concern looks of guards and servants, on shakey legs, Sarai dismounted and entered her family home.

She could hear the commotion inside and was immediately engulfed by her mother's embrace as soon as she stepped inside.

"Sarai, my love, where have you been?!" Her mother wept, before pulling back to look at her, the worry in her eyes only intensifying as she took in her disheveled appearance.

Wordlessly, Chieftess Lulit removed the scarf covering her hair and wrapped it around her daughter.

"Come inside, it's fine now. You're home," she said to Sarai before turning to a guardsmen.

"Send word to the Chief that his daughter has been found."

Sarai could say nothing, the weight of last night and this morning crashing down on her. Suddenly she did not feel wise. She did not feel like anyone's wife. She felt like the daughter who was afraid to see the look in her parent's eyes.

Dusk settled by the time her father returned, many of her siblings in tow.

They gathered around her, fretting and fussing, until her father approached.

He gathered her in a bone crushing hug that lifted her off her feet, before setting her down and looking at her sternly.

"Where did a rambunctious foal like you run off too?"

Every eye in the room was on her, even Lalia, who had returned from looking for her, watched her, waiting for an explanation.



"I-I am married," Sarai finally said, her voice sounding weak and small, even to her.

There was quiet and then a roar.

"What do you mean?!"

"To who?!"

"Sarai, tell me this is a joke, some kind of game!"

The furvor of her siblings was nothing compared to the silence of her parents. They stared at her, her mother's gaze caught between rage, anguish, and disbelief. Her father's was unreadable.

"Sarai. What do you mean?" Her mother finally asked, and the room grew quiet once more.

"Prince Avith-we are in love, and so with the moon as witness-"

The words that had sounded so true the night before sounded clumsy and foolish in her mouth, so she gave up and with trembling hands held up the scroll she had been given.

Her mother took it and approached Chieftain Thulani.

Sarai hazarded a glance at her father only to see his eyes wide, tears streaming down his cheeks. The cords in his neck were bulging and his jaw was clenched.

He took the scroll, eyes darting across the words before he crushed it in his hands.

Walking up to Sarai he struck her across the face, knocking her off her feet.

Her mother and sisters surrounded her, attempting to block any other blows.

"Thulani!" Chieftess Lulit cried, but he shook his head.

"Read what your *husband* sent," he sneered.

Sarai picked up the crumpled scroll, cheek stinging and blinking back tears.

*Thulani, I have taken possession of your daughter, just as I will soon take possession of my kingdom.*

*You are unwilling to contribute men to my cause, but perhaps you will contribute them as a wedding gift.*

*Do not despair. Now you house a future queen under your roof.*

The paper fell from Sarai's hands and she tried to force the words from her sight and memory.

He must have just said it like that to pressure her father into accepting the marriage. He must have.

"You have offered yourself up. You have not only thrown yourself to the wastes, but now positioned us on one side in a battle of princes,"

"You misunderstand him-" Sarai began but her father held up his hand, silencing her.

"No I misunderstood you. My clever daughter is a fool, and I can't bring myself to look at you,"

It would have been better if he had screamed at her, but instead he just turned his back to her as he left the room.

\*\*\*

She wept with her siblings, each looking at her in pity as she tried to explain, tried to make them see that Avith wasn't who they thought he was, that the two of them were in love, but she saw the frailty of all of it in their eyes.

She spent most days in her room. The smell of oranges made her nauseous but still she kept them in her room. A reminder of a promise that seemed further and further away.

She began to feel ill as months passed.

Mornings had her rushing to empty her stomach and she grew too dizzy to ride.

Her mother looked at her and wept.

Sarai had learned how little she knew, but even she knew she was with child.

She hadn't seen her father in months, but news from Hashind gave her hope.

Avith was winning. Hashind would have a new king and then surely, he would come to get her and her child.

\*\*\*

She fell ill, more ill than in the early days of her pregnancy and it felt like an omen.

Sweat soaked and delirious, she layed in her mother's arms, the drum beat signalling visitors feeling like it was a world away. Still she heard commotion and a familiar voice.

"I have come to retrieve Queen Sarai," Menandros's cold voice reached her and she felt her mother's grip on her tighten.

"Can't you see she's in no condition to travel? The child of your king is killing her," her mother snapped and Sarai's eyes came more into focus.

Menandros was no longer dressed humbly, but in robes of white, blue, and gold. His pale golden hair now long and bound, his face shaved clean.

"Whether she lives or dies, she will do so as a queen of Hashind," Menandros said matter of factly, and though Sarai loathed to see him, she was overjoyed by what his presence meant.

"Mother, I told you," she rasped, and delirious smile on her face.

"I am married. My husband has sent for me," she laughed, vindication causing her heart to soar. "I must go with him. You must tell father that I must go," she rambled.

"My daughter is ill and close to labor. She would not make the journey," Chieftess Lulit insisted and Menandros sighed.

"I have come with an escort for Queen Sarai that is five hundred men strong. Thousands will respond if I do not send word of my success. You cannot turn us away without bloodshed," he said and narrowed his eyes at Sarai.

"Three days. You have three days to prepare her and her dowry for travel,"

Sarai didn't hear him leave, nor does she remember the ensuing three days.

All she can recall is her mother's tearful face as she looked down at her, rocking her as if she was still a babe.

"It will be fine, mother. I told you, my husband is here and we are in love," she heard herself say.

\*\*\*

Lalia left her tribe to join her in Hashind.

Chieftain Thulani didn't see her off.

Her siblings and mother wept as her caravan left and Sarai, heavy with child and still ill, clung to Lalia as they set off.

She had been dressed as a bride should, with gold and silver adorning her ears, hands and hair. Her dress was exquisitely embroidered, but not made for her, instead borrowed from a neighboring chieftain whose wife had passed.

She was clothed in beauty and bad omens.

Tears at a wedding, dressed for her own funeral.

The journey took days, with her labor starting shortly after they began their journey, her screams harolding a new queen and heir for Hashind.

"I'll pay you back Lalia," she said one night, in between pains.

"There is nothing to repay," Lalia said softly, but Sarai shook her head.

"No, when we reach Hashind, you will all see. Everything we've lost will come back to us,"

Hand on her stomach she smiled through the pain, dreaming of the love of her husband and child. At the thought of being a wise queen her family could be proud of.

\*\*\*

Pain.

Searing pain that burned hotter than the desert she had just crossed.

She thought she might die as Menandros pried her from Lalia's arms and carried her into the palace.

There was a strong scent of metal and sweat and she knew it was coming from her.

Her baby would be born in the palace and she was certain she was dying.

Menandros looked down at her as he carried her through the majestic halls, her blood retracing their steps.

"I see it now," he remarks casually and through the searing pain she looks at him in confusion.

"What?" she said as she struggled to breath.

"What he sees in you," Menandros said before stopping in front of a pair of large grand doors.

Servants stood on each side. A man in a pale blue robe looked directly at her as he encribed something on a tablet.

Several ornately dress women already knelt in front of them, each clothed in rich fabrics and jewels.

"Your majesties," Menandros said and Sarai's brow furrowed from confusion as well as pain.

The grand doors opened and there was Prince-no *King* Avith.

His beard was thicker, his curly hair longer, but she still knew him.

Even underneath the new crown and heavy robe and jewels, she still knew his scent and smile.

Menandros set her down on the cool stone floor and she reached out to Avith.

He grinned, and stooped down to her eye level, not taking her hand.

"Look at you. You've grown. And such a good wife to bring my son to me," he said, patting her on the cheek.

"Take her inside," he said to Menandros before he stood and turned to face the kneeling women.

"Wait, Avith-" she couldn't finish her sentence, another wave of pain stifling her words with a scream.

The heavy doors began to close and several midwives were at her side.

Before the doors fully shut, Sarai heard Avith's booming voice full of laughter.

"See how Sarai has come bearing the gifts that I desire. See how she has already outpaced you? Seniority is nothing compared to my favor, and this is why Sarai shall be a higher queen than all of you."

*Than all of you.*

*All of you.*

She was not his only queen.

Menandros watched, arms fisted neatly as she cried out for her mother, Lalia, and Avith. Finally it sunk in, it was just her. A baby's wail joined hers and she was met with a new set of eyes and her first burst of clarity in what felt like months.

She was miles from home, wedded to a liar, and she was a mother.

"Ah, Sarai," Avith purred as he came in, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"You have done so well."

[Demo Update 11/10/2024](#)

[Nov 10, 2024](#)

We made it! Shout out to Dashingdon for fixing my access to my account to upload the new game sections!

So this update picks up after the first encounter with Merikh's brother. This chapter is where the fantasy genre really comes into play hehe...

A couple of flirts that definitely won't have any repercussions at all! (Yet...)

I hope y'all enjoy and thank you again for your patience. I had to write several different iterations of these fight scenes, which really pushed my coding skill. There is a bit of character and plot development, both for the characters and the MC. Let me know what y'all think!

<https://dashingdon.com/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced/mygame/>

[Demo Update 11/10/2024 Bug Report](#)

[Nov 11, 2024](#)

Some of y'all were running into an infinite loading issue, and I think I might have fixed the issue by hanging the location of some variables. It passed my bug check, but let me know if the problem is still persisting.

Edit: Shout out to AilurosCorvus for identifying the problem! Missing scenes appear to be the issue. It can't load what isn't there. Thanks for troubleshooting with me!

[Chapter 8: Trust Is A Weak Sapling](#)

[January 22](#)

A few nights later, she found herself laying wide awake. A silver beam of light shined through the narrow window of her room, illuminating it in a pale blue hue.

Her stomach rumbled, but she looked at the cord that was attached to the kitchen bell with disdain. She remembered all too well what it was like to be awoken from your sleep just because the princess wanted some pickles.

Getting up, she picked out the least ostentatious of all the princess's dresses and shuffled off to the castle kitchens.

Located on the lower level, she felt the warmth of the smoldering hearths and smelled the remnants of the spices used to season the day's meals.

Lighting the candles, she began to rummage around, locating which ingredients were where. She had a craving for a taste of home, so she set about making a batch of the small glazed loaf cakes she used to make with her mother and sisters.

She grabbed some nuts from one of the lower shelves, and stood up. Only to find herself to be nose to nose with someone.

Both of them jumped back with a shout and Danai grabbed a broom to defend herself with, raising it above her head, but she stopped abruptly.

In front of her was a terrified kitchen maid. The girl looked to be a much younger than Danai. She was pale haired but dark skinned and despite the roundness of her face, you could still see the height of her cheekbones. She looked like she could have been from Rukar, but her hair and clothes seemed to mark her as Docian.

"I'm sorry, Princess! I just heard a noise and was startled, please don't beat me," the girl said, her eyes welling up with tears.

Danai immediately dropped the broom and rushed over to the girl.

"Don't cry, don't cry," Danai said, using the same tone she used when her sister was younger. "I was startled, too. See? No broom,"

She showed her hands and the girl laughed.

Danai dried the girl's tears with her sleeve and sighed.

"I just got hungry and wanted a snack," she said, straightening up and walking back over to the shelves.

"Can I help?" the girl asked, and Danai looked at her. Still in her nightdress with bare feet, the girl didn't look like she should be doing anything but getting a good night's rest.

"You don't have to. I miss cooking," Danai said, before biting her lip. She hoped the girl wouldn't ask why a supposed princess was accustomed to cooking.

If the girl thought it was strange, she didn't say anything, instead she set down her lantern and rolled up her sleeves.

"I want to! I also get hungry at night," the girl said sheepishly, and Danai laughed, beckoning her over.

Danai realized that the girl had been speaking to her in Rukari this whole time instead of Docian.

"You speak Rukari very well," She said to the girl as they began making the dough.

"Thank you, your highness," she said, puffing up with pride. "My mother is from there,"

"What's your name," Danai asked.

"I'm Erlea! I started working on the same day Prince Ansgar brought you here, so we're both new,"

Erlea looked unsure about blurting out that last part, but Danai laughed in agreement as she started preparing the filling for the cakes.

"So we are! And please, call me Danai,"

Erlea grinned, her earlier weariness dissolving like the butter used to grease the pans. They worked side by side, with Danai happily answering all of Erlea's questions about Rukari food and Rukar in general. For the first time, the weight on her chest seemed to lessen.

Their leisurely conversation began to drift away from Rukar once the cakes were put in the oven, and Danai took the opportunity to learn more about Odock and Redmount Fortress.

"There is High Prince Silvan, he's the king's brother and is lord of the lands in this area. This is his house," Erlea said, gesturing to their surroundings. "His wife is Lady Imelda. She's nice, but she likes things done a certain way," Erlea pouts, muttering under her breath something about how Lady Imelda always changed the food. "They're almost always together except for when they have to do castle stuff," Erlea finished as she picked up one of the nuts they had used for the cake and popped it into her mouth.

"And what about Prince Ansgar," Danai asked, unsure if she wanted to know, his stern gaze and imposing figure still etched into her mind.

"He's the best," Erlea said matter-of-factly while looking into the oven impatiently to see if the cakes were done.

Danai had expected to hear about how he prowled around at night or impaled his enemies on the walls of the fortress, but Erlea said he was 'the best' like she didn't even have to think about it.

"The best? How?" Danai asked in disbelief, and Erlea shrugged.

"He doesn't ask us to do much, he protects our villages, and he and the tall knights help us pick fruit in the spring time,"

"And none of you are scared of him," Danai pressed and Erlea stared at her blankly before her mouth formed a perfect 'o' shape.

"Do not worry your highness, he doesn't wear his sword all the time and when he does he keeps it strapped to him. It won't fall on you when you pass him," Erlea said reassuringly, as if it was something she had verified herself.

Danai let out a puff of air, laughing through her disbelief as she removed the cakes from the oven.

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Erlea and Danai hadn't counted on the fragrant scents from the cakes to wake up and attract the other kitchen maids. After the initial wave of shock and panic at Danai's presence, an ease and familiarity settled in. What had started out as a lonely and restless night for Danai had turned into a late night to early morning cooking celebration.

Speaking to the girls reminded her of her friends back in Rukar. She covered one of the many trays of cakes and wrapped up two more helpings, one for her and one for Aydana.

The sun was barely peeking over the horizon when she left the kitchens, but her heart was full of so much warmth that she didn't even mind the early morning chill.

Wanting to enjoy the sunrise and a few more precious moments of just being without having to watch her words or be scrutinized, she walked up one of the staircases to the battlements.

The high stone walls of Redmount overlooked forest, mountains, and grassland and she shivered, both from the temperature and the sheer expansiveness of the view. It made her feel small, but in a good way. The scenery made her feel like no matter how insignificant she was, she still had a place in the world, like a single brush stroke in a grand painting.

Something heavy was placed on her shoulders and she stiffened before recognizing the familiar warmth and tickle of fur.

Looking up, she saw the cloaks owner looking out at the same scenery she was, his arms crossed and seemingly unbothered by the cold.

"Thank you, your highness," she said and he nodded in acknowledgment.

Feeling guilty for just accepting his coat she remembered the cakes in her hand.

"Please accept my thanks your highness," she said, holding out one of the wrapped helpings to him.

She almost expected him to turn her down but reached out and accepted them, his fingertips brushing against hers as he did so.

The warmth of his hands startled her and if he hadn't already taken the cakes, she might have dropped them.

She looked at him again, seeing now that it wasn't just the armor that made him look large, he was genuinely just a tall and broad man. Standing there in his pants and tunic he looked a tad less menacing and the scars she could see on his forearms made him look human instead of death made flesh.

"I hope you like them," she said, deciding conversation would be better than just staring at the man.

Instead of answering he uncovered one and picked it up, sniffing it slightly before taking a bite. His eyes widened slightly as he chewed and soon he was on his his third of the little morsels.

She smiled as she watched him eat and began to understand why Erlea and the other servants at the fortress weren't afraid of him.

"I made them," she said, a little bit of pride creeping into her words. Why did she want him to know that she was the one to made them instead of one of the other maids from Rukar? She brushed the thought away, instead watching the way his jaw tensed as he chewed.

His chewing slowed down after she said that and she began to worry that he'd spit them out just because she made them.

Swallowing he gave an awkward half bow, half nod.

"They are very good. You...are a good cook," he said, and she felt her face heat up at his blunt praise.

"Thank you," she said softly before clearing her throat. "Do you come up here often," she asked, looking back out at the view.

He gave a stiff nod.

"Yes,"

"It looks like it goes on forever," she continued.

"Yes,"

"It is a lovely view,"

"Yes," he said and she almost snorted at his short answers before he continued, "Very beautiful,"

His voice was soft and she glanced at him, only to find his dark eyes boring into her instead of the view before them. She tried to ignore the way his words made her heart climb to her throat and the heaviness of his gaze.

Tugging his cloak tighter around her, she tore her eyes away from his and looked back at the view.

"I would come up here all the time for this view," she finally said and she felt like kicking herself. He had just moved on from one word answers and yet she was still stuck on the scenery.

"I come up here because it is one of the best vantage points to see the enemy coming," he suddenly blurted out.

"What?" she asked blinking. Not only was she not prepared for the sudden increase in the volume of words, she also was not prepared for the subject matter.

"The woods, the mountains, and the plains. The plains make enemies easy to spot and prepare for, the mountains are almost impassable and only small amounts could get through at a time." he said, taking a

step closer to her and leaning over to point out the different terrain, the difference in their heights making it so that his chin was almost resting atop of her head and sshe could feel the warmth of his body behind her. "The area with the least visibility would be woods, but equipment and banners stands out against the trees. You have nothing to fear here,"

Danai nodded slowly, standing as still as possible, lest she bump into him.

"...Thank you. That adds to the view."

He looked down and realized how close they were to each other and took several steps back.

"You should go," he said, "It gets colder the higher up you go,"

Danai took his advice and looked one last time at the view. One last time at him.

She spoke without thinking.

"You'll have to tell me about what is visible from the other wall on another day," she said and hurried down the steps before either one of them could say anymore odd things to the other.

### [Advanced Demo Update 3/2/2025](#)

#### [March 2](#)

It's super late and I don't know how long it is, but in this update, the MC will probably never want to go hunting again.

- The stat page has some new additions, but is still not perfect.
- More variables have been created to keep track of events and relationships.

Hopefully there are no game breaking bugs, but if there are, please let me know!

Here you go: <https://cogdemos.ink/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced-demo>

### [Advanced Demo Update 3/2/2025 \(Fix\)](#)

#### [March 2](#)

The advanced demo was producing an error that made it unplayable, however, I believe I fixed the problem. Please give it a try and let me know if it persists.

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/leone/honor-amongst-thieves-advanced-demo>

[Writing Update 4/13/2025](#)

[An hour ago](#)

Wanted to hop on and give a brief to-do list on what y'all can expect in the coming days!

- Interactive side story from Sutek's perspective that takes place while the MC was away on the hunt. Short, but hopefully interesting, and will be out by April 18th.
- I'm also working on the next demo update which will have more Laverna, Heka, and Sarai, as you figure out what happened while you were away.
- Side story featuring Laverna and Nari's friendship.

Anyway, that's what I'm working on!