

Fuel to the fire

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C H A P T E R

1

Davran bit her lip and stared at the dark imposing doors, the howling shriek still ringing in her ears. Resisting the push and shove of the men all around them, Samaq closed his hand around hers and squeezed a measure of comfort. More than almost anything she wanted to hold on to her father but the dread of discovery forced her to draw her hand away.

Never drop the pretence, she thought, the words coming to her mind in Samaq's voice.

Never.

Ever.

She had heard the sound before: razor hounds in the wilderness, far beyond the cut. Distance had apparently softened its menacing edge. In her fifteen years she had yet to see one of the creatures and now wondered if it would look as fearful as it sounded. Knowing the creature was not directly behind the door but deep in the heart of the building she pushed her fear aside and ran through her memory all Samaq had told her. Speaking inside the arena being forbidden this was the last chance for any askings. She had none to ask. Ready as I'm ever gonna be, she determined, as mute guards heaved the doors open and she looked with resignation into the cavernous entrance.

The interior throbbed with a distant drumbeat. It was almost inaudible, felt more than heard, and yet it captured and controlled her heart's rhythm. The mass of men moved forward. Captured in the flow, Davran glanced over her shoulder, absorbing what might possibly be her last view of the perpetually red sky to see a guard looking directly down on her from his lofty platform. Her heart kicked. He was one of Saurian's elite: special guards

assigned to the palace grounds. Leather armour highlighted like a second skin his heavily muscled bulk. He leaned forward and a band of thick leather around his forearm glinted with menacing blades.

Taking a moment to scan the crowd the guard then looked back at her, reading – so it seemed – her deepest thoughts and fears. Did he know? *Did he see father hold my hand and think it strange*: an action more befitting a daughter than the son she pretended to be. Looking like a boy was easy; behaving like a boy was getting increasingly difficult.

As if the guard's scrutiny was not enough another howl ripped through the gloom, louder and more blood chilling now the doors were open. As a distraction she again reminded herself of all Samaq had told her. Horrid things. Things told in her best interest, told so she would be better prepared. She glanced at her father's face. His eyes were locked on the entrance, expressionless.

As they squeezed beyond the opening – narrowed by the guards lining it, arms folded and forearm blades glinting – a minor tussle erupted. A spray of blood misted the air in front. Men began pushing men as they tried to avoid the blades. One of them stumbled backwards. Davran turned aside leaving space for the man to correct his balance. The action took her away from Samaq, only two paces apart, but at that very moment the guard nearest to Samaq unfolded his arms and stepped back. The flow nearest Samaq quickened, dragging him away from her.

Beyond the entrance the men spread into the gloom, all of them silent, all heading for corridors that throbbed with the beating drum. Davran could have rushed on. She could have caught up with Samaq but she stopped dead, snagged by a terrible unexpected sight.

She saw Samaq turn to look back, his eyes frantically searching. She knew she should head towards him but couldn't help staring up at the interior wall, at the hooks and the bodies that Samaq had neglected to mention, seven of them hanging by the wrists, rusty shackles cutting deep into their flesh.

Samaq had seen her and was struggling back, trying to make it look casual. She should move on, she knew that, save him the struggle, the risk of being spotted, but she continued to gaze at the bodies on the wall. She felt a strong compulsion to do something, but what could she do, a mere girl in a place where females were not even allowed. She glanced at Samaq as he edged closer and appeared to be silently cursing with every step.

He didn't look up at the bodies. He looked at her. He looked her in the eye. She saw a scream in that look, a scream that told her to move. She saw something else too: a look of what...? Regret...? Sorrow...? Fear?

These bodies could not have escaped his memory.

He was meant to have told me everything.

When yer of age: he'd promised.

Everythin, he'd said.

Every pain-filled detail.

Why then aint he told this?

Even with Samaq by her side, even though she knew she should take the sight in her stride, she continued to gaze up at them, at their heads tipped onto their shoulders, their expressions partially hid by a gauzy material that showed a mere trace of the horror. The mouth of one drew the muslin against his teeth on the flight of a shallow breath. It was stained around the mouth and nostrils and hinted at the measure of life still present.

Samaq didn't look at them. He stood by Davran, looking down the passage. In a sudden rush he tugged Davran's sleeve. She allowed him to shepherd her into the shroud of men. Her father had to have known. *They must always be here*, she told herself as they passed more bodies, scores of them hanging from the walls in various states of decay.

Fifteen years old and it hit her – an unexpected punch of realisation – she knew so little. She had been shielded all of her life.

Intending to get seats far away from the master's box they had arrived early. Davran guessed these areas were already full, as a closed gate and a menacing guard barred every

tunnel Samaq went for. Samaq walked on, pausing every few steps. Davran followed, head dipped, knowing she was responsible. Eventually they reached an interior tunnel that was still open.

Darkness swallowed them as the tunnel gate clanged shut behind. A faint orange glow marked the opposite end. Samaq placed a hand on Davran's shoulder and firmly pushed forward. There might be room at the back, she thought, picturing Samaq's description of the arena's interior.

From the tunnel they spilled out onto a wide ledge. The upper seats were full and Samaq looked concerned as they descended to the lower benches, those closest to Saurian's platform.

The place was enormous, much larger than Davran had expected. She scanned the domed ceiling, wondering how such an expanse did not collapse. Up high she saw the drummers, eight of them, even more hugely muscled than the guards outside. Leather masks covered their faces making them look slightly inhuman. Each stood on a separate elevated stage, equally spaced around the arena and arching over the heads of the seated crowd. Every thumping blow bounced to the spiralling roof and fell in a deluge of crushing sound that penetrated her like a blunt spike. Each forceful thump swelled her blood, pounded her temples and rattled her ribs.

Samaq indicated a bench with space for them to sit together. Davran sidestepped along the narrow gap between the benches. The drummers momentarily forgotten, her gaze switched to the two razor hounds snarling at each other. The closest of the creatures was almost within touching distance, each black-wire hair clearly visible. It was all fearsomely unnerving and amplified by the worrisome expression on Samaq's face. But she was fine. She was coping. She wanted to tell him but knew she couldn't. She wanted to tell him not to worry about her but knew he would anyway. So she sat in silence, watching, emulating his action as he swept his dark glistening eyes over the crowd.

She saw no women in the crowd at all.

That was expected. Females were not allowed. All the same, Davran wondered if there were others like her. Had other girls spent their entire lives disguised as boys to avoid being chosen as handmaids, or was she the only one? A surprising number of the crowd, young like her, fidgeted in their seats. Samaq's words entered her mind: *look as if yer've seen it all before, like it aint nothin new*. The way her insides churned she didn't know if she would manage it. She understood why other young people fidgeted. She understood why she needed to be invisible. Those who got noticed were likely made an example of.

She had no intention of being an example.

Examples, she now realised, *find themsens hangin from walls*.

Davran looked at Samaq and followed his eye-line along the row to their right.

Thirty yards around the arc, two rows back, she met the gaze of Farfell, their neighbour. Farfell's twins nudged each other and smiled in her direction. Davran ignored them as Samaq had instructed. Farfell side-mouthed something to the man in the next seat: Tarpink? Tarrik? Yes, Tarrik: a trusted friend of Farfell's. Tarrik nodded at Samaq and held his gaze. With some hesitation Samaq returned the gesture before looking away.

Davran's knee wavered against Samaq's and she wondered, as she looked at the hounds, if Samaq remembered his first visit to the arena. Had he been afraid? Despite the worry on his face she couldn't imagine Samaq being afraid of anything. To prepare her he had described the razor hounds in detail. Even so Davran was shocked by their size, the hump of their shoulders as tall as the handlers' heads. She sniffed a long draw of air into her nostrils. It was dank and smelled exactly as Samaq had said it would: the stench of the beasts; the sweat of the crowd; a hint of stale vomit. *Sommat else*, she thought, *sommat he's missed from his tellin*. Dung: a sweet and sickly undertone laced with acrid smoke that Davran now watched as it coiled from the torches of burning pitch. Their flames fluttered like flags forcing shapes to dance across dark walls and throw giant drumming shadows to the high ceiling.

Beneath the shadows the beasts strained against their chains, claws shredding the soil. Handlers held them back, four to each hound, their thighs and biceps bulging like coiled rope.

The chill in the air nipped Davran's cheeks, captured her breath in fragile clouds, and yet the handlers glistened with sweat. One handler's chain slipped a few links. Davran stiffened and formed a fist. She noticed the slight tilt of her father's head from the corner of her eye and knew he'd glanced at her. She turned her attention back to the handler as he wound his hand through the chain and gripping tighter, locked his own gaze on the master, Saurian, standing at the head of the arena.

Avoid eye contact with Saurian, Samaq had said, repeatedly. Don't look at him at all. Feeling tempted she locked her gaze on the handler. His gaze was fixed on Saurian, and more than once she found herself straying onto his line of sight. Saurian's presence tugged as if attached to her. She resisted the urge, concentrated on watching the handler, his hand wrapped in chain.

Like the other handlers and the silent crowd he was waiting for Saurian's command.

She imagined what the handler was feeling, imagined what he was thinking. Lost in these thoughts, she followed the handler's gaze and unexpectedly found herself staring at Saurian. Thankfully, he was looking the other way.

Saurian did not yet seem to be ready and stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his silver robe shimmering in the torchlight. To each side of him stood a guard. They were elite, like those outside: tall, solid, clad in leather, the spikes on their forearms catching amber glints from the flickering torches. For their stillness they could have been statues and standing beside them Saurian could have been taken for a boy: not insignificant, just smaller, perhaps only half a head taller than she. He began to turn his gaze in her direction. She continued to look, poised to avert her eyes quickly should he turn all the way. He didn't. He leaned onto the balustrade surveying the crowd, his silver-blue eyes piercing the darkness.

Faces at the far side of the arena looked no bigger than Davran's thumbnail and to her eye were just as blank, their detail smudged by gloom. Saurian though seemed to see every expression and while scanning them, appeared to read their thoughts. Drawing a breath

through flared nostrils he flicked his white hair from his shoulders and cast a glance to the nearest drummer. A slight nod of his head followed.

The pounding beat grew to a faster, more forceful slamming. Davran's heart, trapped in the relentless rhythm, whirled like a feather in a vortex. She wrenched her eyes from Saurian as he turned fully in her direction. One of the beasts suddenly reared up, its chains clanking as it rose to twice the height of the men struggling to hold it. Davran gasped and received a firm jerk from Samaq's knee.

Hammering crashed along the walls like a caged animal. Louder. Faster. Heavier. Saurian flexed his jaw, looked around the crowd, and casually raised his arm. Handlers watched with committed obedience. Drums pounded ever faster and chest-crushingly louder. The entire building sang with vibration. Writhing against the chains, the beasts snarled, twisted and tugged.

Drumbeats fell even faster, even heavier.

Boom. Bang. Boom. Bang. Faster and faster. Crushingly loud. Heavy in her ears. Throbbing through her chest.

Saurian's hand fell.

The drumming crashed to a halt.

Its echo rolled like departing thunder and Samaq jumped to his feet, dragging Davran to hers. Whipping chains slashed the air. An explosion of noise swelled the roof, the mob cheering, hollering and stamping.

The handlers ran from the floor, all but the one with his hand wrapped in chain. The charging beast to which he was tethered jerked the handler from his feet. He twisted onto his back, looked into the face of the beast, and clawed at the tightening chain. He kicked up dry dust as the creatures snapped wildly. Each time the handler rolled to the side he managed to get to his feet only to tumble again as the chain pulled tight.

Suddenly, both of the razor-hounds pounced at the same time. The handler cried out as the claws of one ripped into the muscle of his leg and dragged him close. His scream rose

above the roar of the mob. Despite being snared he desperately tried to free himself from the chain. A mighty swipe from the second beast cut into his stomach. Spluttering, the man's lips frothed with blood. While looking at Saurian his eyes appeared to beg for mercy. None was given. The handler then slumped, his pitiful cries drowned in gurgles of rising fluid.

Davran winced at the sound of cracking bone and glanced at Saurian in disbelief. When she looked back to the floor the hounds were tugging the body like rope. Their tugging split him at the stomach-wound, spilling his guts around the severed spine in a cloud of steam. Sickened by the sight, Davran still could not make herself look away. The hounds whipped away a half each, spraying the crowd close by with gore. Davran felt a compulsion to vomit but swallowed against the need as she looked back at Saurian. He leaned over the balcony, a grin spreading his face, his eyes wide with delight as he held out his hands to catch a spray of blood. In seeming ecstasy he held his head back, his mouth wide, his tongue outstretched and licking frantically at droplets in the air.

An overwhelming sense of hatred brushed aside Davran's need to vomit.

The handler devoured, beast turned once again on beast. They circled one another, slowly, the battle now more controlled as each creature waited for advantage.

Saurian looked on, raking his fingers through his hair. He appeared agitated and turned as if to walk away. He then darted back, his face flush with anger. Abruptly he shouted, "SILENCE!" his voice ringing with power.

An immediate silence smothered the crowd. Saurian placed a foot on the balcony and leapt into the arena. Turning on the spot, glancing over each shoulder, he glared at the razor-hounds, his eyes switching from one to the other. In barely more than a whisper, his teeth gritted, Saurian growled, "*I demanded silence!*" The volume of his imperative was constrained, but the presence of power within it sliced with a judder into Davran's bones.

The razor-hounds shrank into their haunches and circled Saurian. They rolled their shoulders, held their heads lowered so their eyes were level with Saurian's, strings of red-

drool stretching from their snarling jowls. Saurian wet his lips before firming his jaw. The creatures howled in unison and then launched forward.

Davran drew a sharp breath, for at that moment Saurian closed his eyes. He tipped his head back and flung out his arms, capturing their throats and gripping tight. He squeezed, his arms trembling. The razor-hounds bared ferocious looking teeth in mouths large enough to easily close around Saurian's head. They snarled and twisted while Saurian looked straight ahead, his face a picture of fearless concentration. He laughed maniacally as gasping for air the creatures began to writhe. Saurian held on, his hands lost in their greasy hair, squeezing. Davran found herself emulating the grimace on Saurian's face, clenching her jaw so forcefully her teeth began to hurt.

Perhaps fearing death, the creatures tried to retreat. Saurian held on, the sinew in his arms tight with tension. Finally the razor hounds slumped to the ground, lifeless.

Saurian twisted his stern expression into a sneer as he eyed the crowd and raised his arms. Turning on the spot, he repeated the words, "*I demanded silence.*"

The crowd took the signal and a roar waved around the arena. Prompted by Samaq, Davran cheered. Some of the crowd howled like animals. Some stamped their feet while others whistled loudly, fingers stretching their mouths. Davran tried to copy but finding only a dry-rasp howled instead. Saurian dropped his arms, allowed his blood-stained robe to fall to the ground and paraded naked around the fallen creatures, crossing his wrists before his stomach, leaning forward, expanding his chest.

Davran felt drawn to the pendent swinging from a chain around Saurian's neck. It was so black it looked to be a hole in his chest. *A hole where yer heart should a been*, she thought. Through its cast of blackness, as if formed of captured light, was conjured the image of a golden fist.

Davran felt a stinging sensation in her eyes, so painful that they began to water. Saurian became a blur to her squinting sight as he turned to face the crowd on the opposite side. The burning sensation eased and her vision cleared. The image of the golden fist remained.

Davran tried to shake it away but it remained visible, like the seared impression of a bright flame.

Saurian circled the arena once more, the strutting victor welcoming applause, before entering a corridor of polished black stone. Unlike the amulet, the corridor gleamed and reflected Saurian's image. Davran stared after Saurian, and as he disappeared the golden fist faded from her vision.

Gradually the applause died.

Samaq urged Davran to move as others began to leave.

* * *

Away from the arena, Samaq paused and drew Davran into the shadows. "You did well," he said, his voice soft with compassion as he gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him. Brushing his thumb across the glinting tracks of her tears, he quickly scanned the shadows before cupping her face in his calloused hands and planted a kiss on her nose. She looked back at him, puzzled, then gave a slightly skewed half-smile of appreciation. Samaq smiled back, his dark eyes casting a glint that indicated they also brimmed with moisture.

"There are stories, Davran, tellin of a sky as clear and blue as your eyes. They say a wheel of fire once rolled through it. And when the sky cried, magical colours called rainbows appeared. Wharra sight that must have been, Davran, eh? Wharra sight."

"I'd like to a seen it," she said, reaching up, grasping her father's hands and drawing them away from her face. "But yer've told me this story afore."

Shaking his head, Samaq's smile faded as he glared at the palace tower.

Silhouetted against the sky it loomed high above the sprawl of ramshackle dwellings. Light streamed from the windows. She could see small figures moving around. Maybe one of them was Farfell's daughter, Maia. Davran shuddered as she imagined the horrors behind the palace walls. They were horrors that could potentially befall her now she had turned fifteen.

For all of these years Samaq and her mother, Varna, had successfully protected her by passing her off as a boy.

To keep up the pretence, she now had to learn to be a man.

C H A P T E R

2

Samaq had smeared a mix of dung, rotten vegetable matter, and congealed blood over her clothes. Even dry it made Davran's stomach churn. Becoming a man was not all she had expected and as they headed past the last few dwellings on their way to the wilderness, already feeling anxious, she saw an image of Saurian's amulet floating before her.

The black sphere's surface rippled and came to resemble a black fist; from within shimmered a golden light. The golden light became white and pierced like a hot needle into the core of her mind. It then faded, rippling, once more becoming a black sphere that disappeared leaving behind the golden fist.

Davran was about to mention it to Samaq when he abruptly stopped and she crashed into him. He grunted, shrank into the shadow of a low wall, and pulled her down by his side.

"Focus," he snarled, pointing in the direction they had been walking.

Some distance away a silhouetted figure darted from one shadow to another. She knew better than to let her mind wander. Out here, to be less than focused was dangerous: one of Samaq's many tellings.

Squatting against the wall, determined to be more careful from now on, she observed Samaq watching the patch of darkness before them knowing that they were also being watched.

"Knowin who yer can and can't trust is important," Samaq whispered. "Remember that. We don't trust, not till we know who they are. Even then we're careful. It aint easy to make friends, an' yer gorra be certain. But it's still worth the effort. Share food with friends when

yerv spare; when he's spare he might share too. People with true friends have a better chance of surviving. Remember that."

"Like Farfell?"

"Yes, Farfell's a good friend. Yer can trust him."

"Like mother?"

"Of course."

If Samaq had caught the cutting edge Davran gave to the word mother he didn't show it. Last night, when Samaq had told Varna how Davran had stopped and stared at the bodies on the wall, Varna had looked worried. *What if she'd been discovered?* Varna's words had rung with reasonable concern, but to follow it with: *Better she die now than that.*

Varna's comments had escalated to an argument with Samaq, an argument that had ended in Samaq slamming his knife on the table and saying, *kill her then.* Varna glanced at the knife and said *I couldn't,* which was a relief. She then turned to ladle stew from the pot and in words not much more than breath said, *not now.*

Unable to sleep that night, Davran played the words in her mind and tried to convince herself she'd heard wrong, but she hadn't. Much as she tried to mould the words they would take no other shape. *Not now* could only mean: *once could have.*

Once could have, she thought, watching Samaq, dagger in hand, edging toward the gloom where the other man lurked. Davran saw a narrow but bright glint of red and recognised it as the edge of a blade reflecting the sky. On the verge of warning Samaq she stopped herself. Everyone had a knife. Of course the stranger had a knife. She herself had a knife and was well practiced in its use. She ran through her mind the act of throwing it into the stranger's gut.

"Keep back Davran. Keep hidden," Samaq whispered through a cupped hand. He paused a moment as if thinking of something else to say. "If I get killed, run straight back to yer mother."

"But—"

“Don’t even think of revenge.”

Samaq had grumbled when setting out, after the wind ripped the door from his hand dislodging a bone from the tangled mass from which the door was constructed. *A bad omen*, he explained while threading the bone back in place. He’d groaned as he bent to pick up the bone, complaining that he was getting old. Mother was much younger, but she was Samaq’s second wife.

Samaq paused and for a brief moment she thought he was going to come back. He would never do that though: safer to face an engaged threat head-on than turn and retreat. He stopped a moment and stretching his legs, he rubbed his thighs. “Definitely gerrin too old for this.”

No you’re not, Davran said to her self. *When people get too old they die*. She refused to contemplate the idea of Samaq’s passing. *He’s not too old. Not yet. Please, not yet*.

The stranger scraped his blade against a rock, sending a metallic rasp into the air. He then clicked his tongue three times and ran his blade along the rock again. Samaq replied, running his blade along a rock twice in quick succession, clicking his tongue once and running his blade along the rock again.

“It’s alright Davran,” Samaq called, relief flooding his voice. “It’s a friend.”

Davran crawled to Samaq’s side. He leaned toward her and whispered, “You’ll have to learn them codes.”

Still cautious, the two men approached each other, poised for possible attack or counter. Davran followed a few paces behind Samaq, her thumb tracing the length of her belt toward her knife’s handle.

“Oh! Yusmuth... it’s you.”

The change of tone in her father’s voice prompted Davran to unclasp her knife. Gripping the handle she slid it up and down the sheath to make certain it would easily come free.

“Ah,” Yusmuth exclaimed, stepping closer, “Davran’s become a man I see.”

“Learning to become a man,” Samaq corrected, his eyes downcast as he sheathed his knife. “Big gap from boy to man. Needs a father to bridge it.”

Yusmuth gazed at Davran and licked his lips. Davran edged closer to Samaq and Yusmuth chuckled.

“Well... Good thing he’s not a girl, Samaq. He’s grown pretty enough as a boy.”

“Clamp yer tongue,” Samaq snapped, looking up, tugging at the handle to make certain his knife was secure. “Loose talk like that—”

“I know.”

“Yes, well—”

“Sorry, Samaq. Sorry. Tell me...” Yusmuth reached forward and patted Davran’s arm. “What’ve yer learned so far?”

Davran twisted away from Yusmuth’s touch and elevated her shoulders. “Loads. My father’s a good teacher.”

“I’m certain he is. What things, though, hmmn?”

“Keep to shadows; how ter search the palace dump. I’ve also learnt that Saurian’s even more cruel than—”

“Davran!” Samaq clamped a hand over her mouth. He scowled in warning and held her gaze while slowly taking his hand away.

Yusmuth gasped in shock then playfully tutted, widening his eyes with seeming delight. He shook his head ever so slightly and, holding Davran’s gaze, bit away a smirk that hid behind his lips.

Davran’s expression hardened and in a tone rolled with grit she said. “But he throws good food to rot while people starve.”

“Hush your tongue, my—”

Raising a finger for emphasis Samaq halted on the brink of saying more. Davran guessed *girl*. He’d actually almost said girl. Almost. *Girl*. My girl. He’d almost said the one thing that should never be said out loud. He’d nearly said it in front of this man.

“We don’t talk about it,” Samaq growled, covering his near slip with only a minor pause. “Loose talk’ll get yer killed. Words is dangerous. He’s ears every place.” Samaq tipped his eyes in Yusmuth’s direction and tapped her forehead as if forcing the implication to stay put.

“A feisty lad, indeed, hmmn?” Yusmuth chuckled and ruffled Davran’s hair. As he withdrew his hand he allowed the back of his fingers to trail the soft downy skin of Davran’s cheek. “Anything else?”

“How havin’ good friends is important.” Davran paused a moment and pierced Yusmuth’s gaze. She looked at how fleshed out his face was, particularly for an outlander like them. Compared to her father he was fat. “You got any food to share?”

“I note you’re teaching him well, Samaq.” Yusmuth nudged Davran’s shoulder and winked. “You’ll do well,” he said with a wry smile, spreading his hands apologetically. “Unfortunately, no. I’ve no food to share. I’ve precious little for my own family.”

“How’s pickings ’mongst the rocks?” Samaq enquired, looking at the distant mountains.

“Some lichen and fungus, but I had to... I ad ter go in deep to... ter get the little I have here.” Yusmuth glanced around before opening his hand, revealing a compressed ball of grey-mush.

Samaq blew a silent whistle. “How far?”

Her father seemed surprised, Davran thought, at the risk Yusmuth had taken for such little gain. If Samaq knew what she’d spotted he wouldn’t be so surprised. If he knew he might think a slitting Yusmuth’s throat instead of asking him questions.

“Razor hounds breathing down my neck, that’s how far. Had to skirt the far mountain. Close to it’s been well picked over. Times are hard, Samaq, hmmn? People are desperate. Hatred of *him* is at an all-time high you know.”

“No wonder! Holdin’ food back. Starvin’ folk. I know he’s cruel, but does he want us all dead?” Samaq’s brow wrinkled in deep furrows as he waited for Yusmuth’s reply. When none came Samaq continued. “So, yer risked the mountains then? Better to wait and search

the palace walls for his spoils, I'd a thought, or even the next event at the arena. Only scraps, granted, but less dangerous."

Yusmuth shook his head. "Apparently the arena's on hold, and he's having food buried instead of handing it to the people. I know someone who watched it happen."

"Who?"

"You don't know him."

"I might."

"No. You don't know him."

"Where are they burying it?"

"The west wing of the palace. But they're guarding it."

"I was just by the west wing and there wasn't a guard in sight."

Yusmuth scowled. "It *is* expansive. Maybe you were at the opposite end. Anyway, don't even think of lookin' for it, or diggin' it up if you find the spot, or you'll find yourself hangin' from a wall. There's not going to be any easy pickings at the palace. Not any time soon. I've heard some outlanders are braving the swamp in search of food. Some even talk of venturing over the mountains!"

"No! Really? That's suicidal. They'll be— We'd best try the wasteland then." Samaq loosely draped an arm around Davran's shoulder and made as if to move away.

"It's risky out there." Yusmuth looked at the mountains and turned to back Samaq with a look of concern. "I could take Davran back with me... if you like?"

Yusmuth reached out to take hold of Davran's hand. She flinched at his touch and snapped her arms behind her back, clasping her right wrist with her left hand. Her right hand held her dagger at the ready.

"You know how dangerous it is, Samaq, hmmn?"

To Davran's surprise, taking his arm from her shoulder, Samaq seemed to consider the offer. Then, to her relief he said, "No. Thanks, but no. He's got to learn some time. Now's as good a time as any."

Yusmuth placed a hand on Samaq's shoulder and leaned into his ear. "Stay alert, my friend. Changing times ahead. Can almost feel the hatred in people these days. There are those we shouldn't trust, I think! Hmmn? If I hear of any I'll let you know. You'll reciprocate... do the same, yes?"

"Yeh. Knowledge is power."

"Knowledge is indeed power," Yusmuth echoed, nodding. "I've heard magistrates are going to be scouring our sector soon."

"Really? Well... I'll... be careful."

"Anything for a friend. And if you need a hand training Davran, hmmn?"

"...I'll let you know."

* * *

When they had found and crossed a pole at the cut, confident that Yusmuth was well behind them, Davran finally spoke. "He talks funny."

"Mmm," Samaq answered.

"Uses strange words."

"Mmm."

"He had green plants in his pockets, p'rhaps other stuff. They were bulging."

"I know. He must've found a good patch."

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"But you dint let on?"

"No."

"He aint a good friend."

"No."

"We don't let him know that we know though, do we?"

Samaq clapped her back and chuckled. “Never let others know exactly what you know, nor what you’re thinking. And let them think you’re as dumb as they would like to believe you are. Do that, and when they think they’re foolin’ you, yer really fooling them. Reciprocate indeed.”

“You know strange words too?”

“Yer mother taught me. Woulda taught you too, but it’s easier to hide stuff yer didn’t never know in the first place.”

“Res-hip-row-kate,” Davran voiced, forcing the sounds. “Do the same. I’ll remember that”

“Forget fancy words,” Samaq cautioned. “They’ll do yer little good. Keep yer knowings and yer thinkings to yersen.”

“I can tell you though? My thinkings?”

“What’s on yer mind, Davran?”

“Last night,” she said, hesitantly, wishing she’d thought about it some more first, “before dinner, when we got back from the arena, when yer slammed yer knife on the table, mother said she couldn’t kill me then added, *not now*. Does that mean there was a time when she would a done?”

Samaq paused too long in answering for Davran’s liking and then hurriedly said, “No, course not.”

Even as the words left her mother’s mouth Davran had dismissed them. Now though, in light of Samaq’s delayed response... Davran recalled times when she had looked up and caught her mother glaring at her as if she despised her or mistrusted her. She had hoped it a making of her imagination, but in light of this she wasn’t so certain.

“I think she hates me.”

“Yer mother doesn’t hate yer... it’s just... there are things about yer mother that even I don’t know. Things she’d never talk about. Terrible things, I should think, as happened afore I met her. But one thing I do know is she loves yer more’n life itself.”

There was something he wasn't telling her.

She could tell.

It was the slight pause when he finished speaking, as if he was drawing breath to say more. Now was not the time to press the matter. Out of character, she placed her hand in his as they neared the incline of harsh looking rocks.