

The Way It Fell Apart

Prequel to *The Lord of Freedom*

Amena Jamali

Dedication

This story of the mothers and the fathers of the Quest of Freedom
is lovingly dedicated
to Mary and Emily, who have chosen to walk with me on life's winding path,
and
to the United States of America on their 250th Birthday, through whom the Almighty has made my found family
possible.

For all those who have found that blood itself was not very much after all—
May the Divine help you find a family who loves and chooses you above all things.

Author's Note

Dear Readers:

This book is born of three very different desires of my heart, and only the harsh experience of writing this book has refined them into gratitude.

The first is the curious longing that I felt after a conversation with a dear former teacher of mine, the retired United States Army colonel who taught me the meaning of leadership and the power of public speaking. During that conversation, in May 2022, I told him the story of the Blood-soaked Sorcerer and his brother, Khonatir—the tale of two brothers as I called it—as it is described in *The Bell Tolling*. His reaction to what I thought was mere background was full of such eager enthusiasm that I realized there was a story to tell. Even before I finished *The Way It Would Become*, I began to draft *The Way It Fell Apart*.

The second is the bleakness I have felt all my life whenever someone tries to impress upon me the importance of blood-relations.

Blood-connections are certainly important. It feels only natural to love those to whom blood binds us.

But, as many of you might have found in your own lives, somehow blood never happens to be as important as it is claimed to be. Too many times has it happened that when it was *my* turn to call upon the sanctity of blood—to ask my family to hear my voice, to respect my wishes, to show up for me when it mattered—I was told, ‘not now’ or ‘you are too much.’ As though when it was *my* turn, my claim to blood meant nothing, yet when it was theirs, they had every claim to my support, my respect, and my obedience. As though there were a natural obligation for me to love them, but not for *them* to love *me*.

The heartbreak of that double-standard and the resultant yearning for a found family that so many of us feel are key parts of this book. How bleak is the desperation to be chosen back!

The third is at once both curiosity and desperation. For some years now, I have wondered about why it is that people lose faith. What drives a faithful person away from the faith that once sustained them and pushes them toward cynicism and indifference? Through the bitterness of lived experience and the anguish of watching others struggle has come my answer to this question—betrayal.

In this book, there are two types of betrayal that occur: the first is societal, a pivot among people in positions of power to target the weaker and the vulnerable in order to bolster their own reputation. The second is personal, a

pointed and unrelenting criticism of individual choices that ultimately makes a person's heart feel too heavy to continue. The particular example I have chosen for this second betrayal is marriage.

For clarity's sake, please understand that I believe in marriage. It is an institution that, in my view, is critically relevant and important in our lives, across faiths, cultures, nations, and individual temperaments. My personal interpretation of feminism is that it reveals what marriage is meant to be, a critique intended toward improvement and implementation.

What I am speaking to in this book, however, is the wielding of marriage as a weapon in order to control a person's choices and contravene their free will. Though the wielder may believe that they are doing the right thing, they are in fact breeding unhappiness and resentment and pushing *away* from faith the person they thought they were bringing closer to it. It is that consequence that is explored, at least in part, in *The Way It Fell Apart*.

Please remember that several of the terrible episodes of gaslighting in this book are based directly on lived experience, my own and those of others around me.

More specifically, I consider this scenario: what if such coercive force was directed toward the mother of a future savior? What would that mean? And what would be the consequences?

As you ponder those questions, please understand—this book is radical, feminist, and very much a story of enduring conviction in the power of faith.

For it is the story of the mother and the father of Elian, the Honored Exemplar of Esteem, and, like the other two books that revolve around him, it is a story about free choice. The awe-inspiring wonder of when it is upheld and the shattering cruelty of when it is not.

I have not managed to explore all the strands of this idea in one book. Elima and Khonatir, Elian's parents, have certain paths that they chose to walk, and there are many facets and interpretations I discarded in my journey to grasp what story they desired to tell.

The story that they desired is a dark one. This book has few action scenes and few demonstrations of great magic. But it is well and truly dark fantasy, with a world that is falling inexorably into shadow and heroes who cannot seem to slow evil's progress.

It is a tragedy.

There is romance, sweet and gentle, but it is a tragedy. It does not end well.

Many evil things occur in this story: non-explicit scenes of rape, matricide and patricide, war, violence, gore, harm done to children, suicidal ideation, flagrant misogyny, an entire society's bloodlust, attempts to force marriage, and betrayal and gaslighting by one's parents, siblings, family, and friends (to the level of domestic violence in some places). This book, in particular Prologue 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 10, Chapter 19, and Epilogue 3, may be triggering to some readers, and I urge to prioritize your own heart and health at all times. Choose wisely and freely on your own behalves, dear readers.

If you do choose to read *The Way It Fell Apart*, then please remember it is a prequel, and the third prequel at that (the second has not yet been written but will be forthcoming). It may be read before *The Way It Would Become*, *The Bell Tolling*, or at any point thereafter without receiving any untoward revelations. It does not require the context of the main series to understand, and you may choose not to read it and still find your enjoyment of the main series unimpeded. However, if you desire to understand every nuance and every piece of context, then I recommend reading *The Way It Would Become*, the first prequel to *The Lord of Freedom*, before this book. *The Way It Fell Apart* transitions directly into the fourth chapter of *The Bell Tolling*, so I also recommend reading that book immediately thereafter, starting with Chapters 4-6, then 1-3, and then continuing with Chapter 7 onwards. In addition, if you decide to read in accordance with my publishing order and come to this book after *The Reverence Chosen*, you may find your heart wrung dry of tears.

If you are determined still to read *The Way It Fell Apart*, then remember that eventually the Quest will come, with blessing and freedom spreading in their wake...

What follows hereafter is translated from *a'Makalle é a'Ambele é Ajaan Elian a-Maréalaah*, a preliminary to the volumes of the annals compiled by the Archivist under the wishes of the Lady of Icilia and the guidance of the Guardian of Names.

With Gratitude,

Amena Jamali

June 2026

Postscript:

If you desire to learn more about the warnings and triggers described in this note, please visit <https://amenajamali.com/trigger-warnings/> for a detailed and updated list. Thank you.

The Beginning

This story is a prequel to the series, *The Lord of Freedom*. Thus, it begins with the same lore:

In the beginning, nothing stirred. The divine cleansing of the land had left none who dared to move, for the memory of the purge haunted each breath. But with time, those who survived the purge believed themselves to be spared and then immune to any form of accounting. So, before many years had passed, the land devolved into chaos. Iniquity abounded, and no conscience whispered the truth. There was only darkness.

But then, amid the disorder, came Light. The Light entered the morass in the figure of a man, one who shone. Folding his sleeves up, he gathered a people, a few who were just a little less unruly than their neighbors. He brought them together, he healed them, he nurtured them. Dazzled by his light, they knelt at his feet and pledged to follow him and through him his Master the Almighty always.

The Shining Guide, as they revered him, pleased with this pledge, gave them civilization. He taught them the arts of government and writing, the sciences of farming and metalworking, and the sanctities of family and community. Eagerly they learned, and he smiled and called them Muthaarim, those who shone. He then showed them the treasure that blossomed in their country, the trees which bore athar, the most blessed substance ever known. He taught them new disciplines, the ways of benefiting from athar and forming their natural magic. Thus, the people flourished.

Yet then came the day on which the Shining Guide bid them farewell. He had completed his task, so his Master called him to another land, and he would answer. The Muthaarim, his heart's children, cried and begged for him to not leave them amid the chaos. The Shining Guide, seeing their misery, smiled and promised them that they would not be abandoned. For one day, the land would unite with them, and, whenever troubles overwhelmed them, saviors would come. And with that assurance, he departed.

Much time passed, and the Mutharrim lost the fervency of their devotion. Thus was the first trouble that broke upon them.

But the Shining Guide's promise was not hollow. Four generations after he had first chosen the Muthaarim to be his people, the Quest of Light arose and fulfilled his promise and prophecy. With the dedication and effort of their lifetimes, three of the Muthaarim, Aalia, Manara, and Naret, spread the blessings of civilization to all the land, which they named Icilia.

So connected, the Mutharrim found companionship with the Areteen, the Ezulal, the Nasimih, and the Sholanar. Seven mighty nations formed, and peace reigned. And the land revered the names of Lady Queen Aalia the Ideal of Light, Graced Queen Manara the Exemplar of Truth, and Honored King Naret the Exemplar of Love only beneath the name of the Shining Guide.

But, as is the way of things, prosperity did not last...

Two Prophecies

Before the start of this story:

Though prophecies were usually given only for royals, the Guardian of Names arrived unexpectedly and delivered these prophecies at the birth of two nobles:

In Asfiya, the year 446 of the Civilization of the Quests, C.Q.—

“Oh Mother of Esteem, may your will preserve

The light of your own soul through life’s every swerve.”

In Koroma, the year 451 of the Civilization of the Quests, C.Q.—

“Oh Father of Reverence, may your heart prize

The bleak truth and the light born of sacrifice.”

Though the Guardian of Names was almost a divine figure, these prophecies seemed so odd and obscure amid that age of prosperity that they were soon disregarded, save for brief, rare reminders to the children raised under their weight.

Prologue 1: The Way It Would Always Be

Prologue 2: The Way It Would Change

Perspective: General Elima benna-Nezana Izzetis, noble of Kholaler of Asfiya

Date: Eyyélab, the twenty-sixth day of the fourth moon of the year 468, C.Q.

The second group to approach the royal dais, my family and I dipped showy reverences before the grand steps, though without the customary smiles, before taking our place on the left side of the circular hall in a fluid motion of supple armored silver robes and matching silver caps.

The throne hall, a circular chamber built to mimic the Throne Hall of the Quests that lay several rooms beyond, was usually a source of endless joy and fascination to me. The curved walls were draped with breathtaking tapestries of athar and silk that depicted the history of the first Quest and their immediate descendants, and each of those panels was accented with the sacred weapon or object used within it—rendering the chamber an almost living display of the legends of our world. One echoed in the stirring, sacred swells of Asfiya’s living music, the grand beauty of our nation, that always filled this chamber.

The royals and the nobles present, from the royal family of Asfiya on the northern arc, opposite the doors, to the noble families arranged on their right and left, seemed like a child’s dolls before that grandeur.

A blade on the far side, above the heads of the Zakaler delegation directly opposite me, gleamed white-gold, drawing my gaze and calling my heart.

The sword of the Prince of Virtue, King Barhaq aj-Shehasfiyi of the third century.

As I had decided last autumn, this would be the year that I would finally get to hold it in my own hands and both study it and write reams of poetry about it. Somehow, some way, with all of my influence as a second cousin of the monarch and as that Prince’s own descendant, I would obtain the necessary permission and finally delve into its beauty and its mysteries.

Deep though my passion for my craft, my art, and my magic went, today it was but a distraction from my greatest worry.

Are we at war with Khuduren?

That question swirled around my mind, prowling around every other thought like a soldier inspecting an enemy's defenses before an invasion...

"Take this opportunity," hissed a voice in my ear, "to evaluate the sons of the other governors."

I suppressed a desire to roll my eyes. *Is this truly my mother's highest priority when war might be about to fall upon us? Upon us, without question, first and foremost—we are the nobles of Kholaler, city of war, and in war we live and die upon the front line. What is marriage in comparison to that?*

"*Elima*," my mother stated, emphasizing each syllable of my name, "this is important. *Look*."

I glanced to my left at my father, who raised an eyebrow as if to prompt me to listen to her, and then at my grandfather, who seemed to be ignoring us, his gaze riveted to the dais. My aunt, my father's sister, standing with my mother behind the three of us, was bouncing slightly on her feet, a bright gleam in her eyes.

No one in my family seemed to share either my frustration or my worry.

I pressed my lips together and, as the remaining nobles reached their places, looked to the king.

Seated on his jeweled throne, King Alafen aj-Shehasfiyi was smiling as always. Pale lips spread wide over white teeth, gray eyes creased in gentle wrinkles that indicated years of easy joy, cream cheeks alit with white luster—but the brightness of his expression could not entirely mask the rage and the misery beneath. His almost-silver eyes were bloodshot, dull despite his smile, and shadows lingered beneath them. The gray-streaked wheat-brown curls of his beard were not as neat as usual, a few locks spilled from beneath his cap and crown, and strands of his mustache hung onto his lips, as though he had not cared to properly trim them. His robes were black, the color of lamentation. For all his regal pride, he looked exhausted.

Why would he not? He had lost his wife and lieutenant so suddenly three weeks ago... Queen Qistana had been such a kind, virtuous soul, the very paragon of what a ruler should be, far eclipsing her husband, and it was like the nation had lost her light. Her empty throne at the king's side ached like an open wound, and I still reeled from knowing my aunt, my hero, the one who had taught me everything I knew, was gone.

But it did not excuse war.

Khuduren had no trouble with us—not like Zahacim had with Bhalasa—and Koroma's refusal to invite us to their summit this week with those two nations meant we should cultivate relations with our neighbors, not wreck

them. And regardless it was not right by the laws of engagement to fight without just cause. Queen Qistana would have vehemently disapproved.

Such reasoning was nowhere to be found on the royal family's faces. A bleak anger hardened Crown Princess Rajana's beautiful features and glittered in Princess Jalana's ice-gray eyes. Their husbands, as close to the queen as I, seemed equally upset, their jaws clenched tight beneath their beards. They seemed to *want* war.

Yet, as I watched them, the crown-bearing couple seated to their father's right and the second couple seated to his left, their thrones elevated several feet above the ground by the dais' proud height, I could not miss the signs of grief. Tears caught in the light of the enchanted crystals on the crown princess' cheeks, her consort's hand held in her own, and the second princess was slumped back in a way she would never would have allowed me to sit. Her own consort was shaking, as though suppressing sobs. Such was their sorrow that it tinged the strains of music around them.

How could I truly censure them?

That same comprehension glistened on the face of my friend, Beres, who sat on his own throne by the empty one of his new wife, the third princess, also on the king's left and near the back of the dais. Though he alone seemed to share my horror, his lavender eyes wide and his lips pinched together, his expression brimmed with a gentle compassion, a shattered softness that gleamed whenever he glanced the way of his new family by marriage.

Though my mother's expression was hard, her mouth tight and her jaw set, that same pain flashed in her eyes, grief for her sister the queen whom she had loved as I had.

Trumpets blasted a series of long, sharp notes, a demand for respect and homage.

Through the open doors on the far side of the hall came the shuffle of boots being removed.

Then into the hall strode Princess Diyana, third princess of Asfiya. Dressed in the thick armored silver robes of a warrior in Asfiya's military, her every movement was sure, confident, the prowl of a lioness more than the pace of a mortal woman. Silver gleams on her belt marked the sword and the daggers she openly carried, each of which was already blooded and the merest expression of her strength. With her proud stride and her weapons, she was the warrior of Asfiya, our champion and our hope, honored by the chimes of hallowed music rising in her wake.

But she, too, had lost her mother.

I narrowed my eyes as I examined my cousin's face.

Her lips were curled up into a perfect regal smile, but shadows deeper than her father's lined her silver eyes. Those eyes were themselves dull, and her shoulders were ever just so slightly bowed forward, burdened as I had never seen them.

As I watched, her smile spread in a more genuine curve as her gaze alit upon her family—and then flicked to me, to my mint green eyes, to the white flecks on my pale cheeks that so matched her own.

Even without her mindlinking, her silver eyes conveyed a message, a promise to come and find me later.

Returning her smile, I dipped my head in both acceptance and reverence.

Much more than a cousin, Princess Diyana was my dearest friend, and the moment I had begun to show mastery of my city's craft at the age of fifteen, her mother had brought her to me as both partner and student. Though I was only two years her elder, I had essentially trained her in the art of war and the science of strategy, in the rightful use of force, the wonder of war-magic, and the greater grandeur of peace. Yet, though I was her teacher, by her eighteenth birthday she had far surpassed me.

As a royal, she had attained magical maturity as I never would.

But her glory was so much greater than that. With her skill, her magic, and her discipline, she was one of Icilia's two most powerful warriors—her only rival was Princess Riqeta sej-Shehenzahak, the Sword of Prudence, the ever-sharp blade of Zahacim, a most stern and terrifying woman. Though Diyana was gentle and often spirited and even effervescent, she was still experienced, having acquitted herself well in Asfiya's war with Nademan last year and in innumerable competitions since her childhood.

Despite possessing equal skill, though, she had often stated that she had no desire to supersede Princess Riqeta—the two princesses were dear friends.

To my regret, I had never had the chance to join them. I had never been present for Zahacim's royal visits, some or another matter preventing me from journeying to the royal palace, and, with the diplomatic snub of Asfiya's lack of invitation to the southeastern nations' trade summit, it did not seem likely that the fierce princess would return to Asfiya anytime soon.

I fervently hoped that the snub would not devolve into war. I doubted that even I could survive the Sword of Prudence's wrath. But I knew that Diyana's heart would break if she had to fight the woman who was another sister to her. If war came, I would bear the weight of that battle for her.

For, as I watched her walk to the dais, my heart was glowing at the sight of my sister...

Behind me, my mother hissed, "Elima, you need to follow her example in more than just war. She is only twenty and already married! What are you *doing* unattached at the age of twenty-two?"

The words stung deeply. And was this really what was preoccupying her thoughts so soon after Auntie's death?

But I ignored it, a much greater question clamoring in my thoughts: what had happened with Khuduren? What had happened in Diyana's meeting with the Khudurel queen? *Were we at war?* When would the first attack be—?

Diyana approached her father and swept a bow, one hand raised to press against her heart as she bent forward.

King Alafen inclined his head, his smile briefly reaching his eyes. "May the Almighty bless you, my Daughter," he greeted in his booming baritone.

"May the Almighty bless you, my Father," Diyana replied, slipping into a kneel at the foot of the dais.

He leaned forward just slightly. "How went your mission, my Daughter?"

I did not fidget, well-accustomed to my noble's composure, but my stomach tightened, my pulse drumming in my ears as sweat dripped down my back. *If we are at war...*

Even as my nerves thrummed with anxiety, the other nobles wore smiles, shifting half a step toward the dais as their eyes gleamed with some odd emotion.

My breath caught. *Anticipation. They actually look excited! How can they be excited about anything when our queen has died? No matter how she died?*

Diyana's shoulders rose and fell. Then she reported, her voice even and calm, "Father, as you ordered, I met the queen of Khuduren on the northern portion of our border, west of Sabaler—the place where Mother..." Diyana bowed her head for a moment before continuing, "The queen came armed, with two companies to my platoon, but I raised a white flag and explained that I only wanted to know what happened to my mother. The queen softened at that and agreed to my request of testing her soldiers with athar. The athar light affirmed that they spoke the truth, which matched the healers' finding. I then investigated the residue in the area where it... where

it happened, and the athar light again confirmed that there was no sign of evil there. It was..." A deep breath. "It was Ammi's time to leave us, to enter the Almighty's reward.

"I spoke thus to the queen of Khuduren, and she softened further and sent away her troops. We sat together and supped, and she promised to send a trader with the fine incense that Ammi loved so much, as a funeral-gift. I accepted and, receiving her condolences, bid her farewell and began my journey back to your side.

"I pray you accept my efforts."

Exhaling deeply, I let the tension drain from my limbs. *Diyana turned war to peace. How wondrous.*

That same relief shone in Beres' eyes.

That same relief crescendoed in Asfiya's music.

But no one else seemed so pleased.

A brief, forbidding frown twisted the king's lips before they spread into a warm smile, sweet and loving, seeming genuine—but for how it did not reach his eyes.

The nobles sagged where they stood, their composes dropping as the glimmer left their gazes.

Even my parents and the royal couples masked disappointment, their mouths flattening into thin lines.

Diyana's composure did not break, but confusion and hurt flashed in her eyes.

Those same emotions swirled through my own heart. *Why do they want war so much? They have never wanted it so much before!*

There was, if I was not mistaken, a hint of wariness even in Asfiya's ever-present melody...

Widening his smile, King Alafen declared, "Well done, my Daughter! Rise, please, and approach your dear father." Beckoning her forward as she stood, he bent down and kissed her forehead. Then, grasping her hand, he drew her up the steps to the side of his throne. "Hail the Princess-Champion of Asfiya!"

In response, the nobles cheered, their voices just slightly too thin for sincerity.

I pressed my lips together. At least he did not humiliate her.

Despite the hint of wariness now to her expression, Diyana was beaming, and how I loved to see her smile.

Still, I could not help but wonder: why did they *want* war?

Why had they been willing to turn our noble queen's peaceful death into a cause for violence?

A deep part of my heart whispered that I should be cautious, for prosperity did not last, and this— this— *this* was the way it would change.

Chapter 1: Shouldering the Weight of Condescension

Perspective: General Elima benna-Nezana Izzetis, noble of Kholaler of Asfiya

Date: Eyyéala, the thirtieth day of the seventh moon, Narsaffe, of the year 473, C.Q.

A wide smile creased my lips as I stepped onto the dais, the folds of my silver warrior's robes flaring with the motion, and faced my new recruits. "May the Almighty bless you," I began. "In the name of his Majesty King Alafen aj-Shehasfiyi and the favor of the Quest bestowed unto him, I welcome you to the ranks of Asfiya's defenders and pray in gratitude for your choice to aid in the protection of our beloved nation."

The recruits, youths newly committed to the military and dressed in their first silver-and-white uniforms and conical caps, grinned back at me, their jewel-bright eyes shining with excitement. Some were of the Sholanar, with wings and glinting scales, others were of the Areteen and short with vibrating plates, still more were of the Ezulal with their sensitive skin flushed in excitement, and one was even of the Nasimih, with glossy cheeks and a slim form. Those of the Mutharrim glowed silver in their pleasure. All *so* different, yet united in their love of Asfiya and of their city, Sabaler.

Asfiya trilled her appreciation in such sweet harmonies that many were blinking back tears.

Letting my voice ring out over the ranks, I continued, "Each of you is unique. An individual who breathes, thinks, and dreams—in accordance with our Rulers the Quest's teachings, each of you has free choice. And the fact that you have gifted that choice to the military is an honor for us. An honor for me, for her Highness Princess Diyana sej-Shehasfiyi, for my father the High General of Asfiya, and for our Monarch the king himself. So, thank you."

More grins and excited quivers, the enthusiasm of embarking on a path of which they had only previously dreamed.

"With our thanks, allow me to offer this counsel now that you have sworn your oaths," I said, sweeping my gaze over them and letting my smile fade. "The path of the warrior, the true soldier, is a difficult one. It is to refine one's heart and soul, cleansing it of impurity, in the pursuit of virtue. It is to fill oneself with love—so that we may never act unjustly and out of a desire to harm. We protect; we defend; we serve. We are," I carefully emphasized, "here to die for Asfiya should our lives be the sacrifice she needs. We come not to fight for the pleasure of war but for the sanctity of peace. We are here not to spill the blood of others but to gift our own."

“I place these convictions before you now, as I do before every soldier, because they must become as your own breath. The path before you, in accordance with Asfiya’s traditions, will require you to sharpen your minds and your bodies with study and discipline. At the core of it, the essence without which your work is futile, are these convictions.

“Only once you have fully absorbed them into your blood will you arise to the unique glory of Asfiya’s soldiers, protectors resplendent with knowledge, with virtue, and with the arts of both peace and war.

“Thus is the path before you.”

Under the weight of my heavy words, some of the recruits’ enthusiasm had faded, like a candle blown out by a gust of wind.

Only a few were nodding, their lips curving as they found within themselves a desire kindled—the hallowed longing for virtue that was the melody most fundamental to the songs of our nation.

There are fewer every time. I suppressed a sigh. Every year I make this speech, fewer seem to desire that virtue. Fewer share that passion with Diyana and me. And I cannot seem to understand why. Oh Dalaanem... What mistake are we making in our recruitment process?

But none of that disappointment reached my expression. “That was my counsel. I pray you consider it and absorb what good I have managed to speak. In the meanwhile...” I grinned. “Take a sword and show me what you know!”

Their enthusiasm returning in a flash, the youths cheered, throwing their fists into the air. At my nod, they ran for the racks of wooden swords placed on either side of the large courtyard. My aides and the Sabaler commanders and senior officers, who were stationed beside those racks, stepped forward to help the youths, and, under the efficient oversight of my lieutenant, they were quickly split into pairs and instructed to spar.

The hard thwack of sword against sword filled the warm summer air.

It was a sort of music to my ears, a complement to the harmonies of Asfiya that I so loved.

I watched them for a moment, simply savoring the sight.

In the lowest of Sabaler’s eastern tiers, built snug against the mountainside was a grand compound centered on a courtyard of white stone—edged in colonnades and domes and adorned with curls of silver gilt and elaborate

paintings—the seat of Asfiya’s northwestern defenses. Like the military compounds in the other cities, it exuded a sort of warm discipline, an encouragement to excel while remaining forgiving of follies and mistakes.

Diyana and I had fought so hard to maintain that air...

Blowing out a breath, I descended from the dais and began my rounds. Pausing to observe each sparring pair, I noted posture, grip, movement, and a dozen other indicators that conveyed the skill of the fighters.

About half would need more training in the basics, a few could progress to the next level, and two showed enough promise that I felt they could skip even the advanced classes. Perhaps they would even be able to earn a warrior’s athar cloth robe in the next five years (armored silver athar cloth robes, such as what Princess Diyana and I wore, were only granted by the king to the most skilled of soldiers and nobles, whatever their rank).

Perhaps after my conference tomorrow with Sabaler’s commanders, I would grant them the permission to do so.

Sensing my assessing gaze, the recruits fought harder, slamming sword against sword and sliding feet in smooth arcs as the joy of movement filled their faces. Each aimed to impress.

I raised a brow. *Rihaa must have spread rumors of her suspicion that I will choose the next members of the elite Azsefer guard from this group. Much as she said she would, to advantage her home city.* I cast a fond look toward my lieutenant, who was gently coaching a recruit through blocking an overhead chop. *She is correct, though... Hmmm...*

Clasping my hands behind my back, I considered my list of available trainers and started to match their names with those of the recruits. Individual counseling was one of my best programs, with most soldiers saying that, regardless of skill level, they had benefited from conversations with their superiors, and I had such hopes that it would be to this group’s benefit as well.

Reaching the end of the final row, I strode back toward the front.

Between one step and another, the breezes, enchanted by my wind wizardry, encircling the courtyard brought to me voices:

“Does all of the general’s talk of peace mean we will never get to actually use these skills?”

“I hear that spilling blood has such a unique thrill to it that nothing else can compare.”

“I really wish the laws were not so tight on *when* we can go to war.”

“I would really like to use this sword on those Khudurels across the border!”

Behind my back, thinking I could not hear and forgetting the strength of my magic, the recruits were whispering in defiance of my speech. A clashing, staccato rhythm, a strain of Asfiya’s music that always worried me whenever it appeared, underlaid their words.

My boots froze mid-step before I remembered to continue walking.

I did not care that they disagreed with me. I was Lieutenant High General, the future Duchess of Kholaler the City of War, the leader in actuality of Asfiya’s military, and I had learned to not regard my own dignity so highly.

Beyond even the travails of war and of politics, Diyana saw to crushing any natural arrogance from my heart when she wiped the arena with me, her teacher, every year in the royal tournaments. And, truly, it suited a protector such as me to learn humility through my prayers, my studies, and my art.

So what I *did* care for was that these grumbles carried a lust for death—in fresh recruits, no less, not even blooded yet—that could make them dangerous to their own people.

And that I was desperate to prevent.

The best way to persuade someone, as my aunt the late queen had taught, was to be kind.

Pivoting on my heel, I sought out each of the complainers and personally praised their efforts. “Excellent block,” I said to the boy thinking spilling blood was thrilling, and “A well-executed parry,” to the girl with enmity toward Khuduren. Then, to avoid an appearance of favoritism or prejudice, I spread my encouragement to all of the recruits, finding something to extol about each and every one’s form and skill.

Until all of them were beaming at me. And Asfiya’s music was fully pleasant once more.

I smiled. *Gratitude, oh Almighty, oh Dalaanem. A pleasant impression of me should help them absorb my lessons.* Satisfied, I returned to the dais, ready to announce the end of the day’s program. Only after the discussion with Sabaler’s commanders would I allocate students to classes and choose the most promising for elite training. Then, too, the selections would be conveyed via individual letter—I had despised the previous practice of publicly announcing assignments, as it seemed to promote only ill-intentioned competition, and I had finally managed to replace it in every city two years ago.

As I climbed the steps of the dais and spun to look at my recruits, there was such a well of joy in my heart that I realized—I was unequivocally happy. Despite the looming clouds of war and my mother’s incessant criticisms, I was happy, fulfilled by the service that was my prime reason for each and every breath. I was twenty-seven years old, and, though I had not fulfilled every dream I had for myself, I was *happy*.

Inhaling, I parted my lips to speak.

The experienced guards on the opposite side of the courtyard, visible from the dais, snapped to attention. Then, through the colonnades, appeared Nuseran Fallatís, heir to Sabaler.

I could not help a thinning of my lips.

Nuseran was an arrogant sort, steeped in distasteful rumors and particularly indolent when it came to his duties—but, until his mother or the king revoked it, he was the heir-apparent to Sabaler. Though the compounds were a long established part of Asfiyan law and tradition, they still operated in actuality upon his pleasure.

Rihaa, I said in the mindlink between us. *Please cover for me*. Then, descending from the dais, I strode around the recruits, managing to catch the noble in the columns, before he could interfere with my recruits.

“Blessings, Safiri Fallatís,” I said, ensuring I halted directly in front of him, blocking his view. “What brings us the honor of your visit?” The question was as close as I would go to a full lie.

The man wore a lazy grin, his amber eyes sweeping up and down over my form in a way that I never liked. Despite my spelled armored robes and helm, I felt exposed under that gaze.

But, knowing he would countermand my aides and confuse my recruits if he could, I gritted my teeth and held my position. “Is there a matter your mother the duchess would have me address?”

Nuseran’s smile spread wider as he met and held my gaze. “I would like a report on the new recruits. Whatever you have so far.”

That was a fair request from the future duke.

Curtailing my distaste and whispering a prayer for patience, I clasped my hands behind my back and took a few steps left, intending to lead him away from the entrance and the recruits.

Instead of following me, he went right.

Though my hands tightened into fists, I followed him, quickly matching his step, and said, “The Almighty has blessed us greatly this year with one hundred and ten new recruits—”

“Is that just in Sabaler?” he interrupted, examining a fingernail. “Or in all of Asfiya? If it is the second, I must say your recruitment standards are falling.” A flash of a winsome smile as he looked up at me—ruined by the scent of something sharp on his breath. “Perhaps no one wants to join an army led by a woman.”

For a moment, I could only stare at him.

Asfiya’s army had, as anyone with even a cursory knowledge of our history would know, almost always been led by a woman. No matter who the High General was, the actual administrator and leader of the army was almost always a princess or a duchess. Such was the tradition established by the first Quest, and, in this way, we were much like Zahacim.

I could not think how to answer such a gross denial of our nation’s sacred history, so I settled for, “Safiri, the count for Sabaler is the subject of this report. The count for all of Asfiya is, as you well know, a matter beyond your purview.”

Anger struck across his face, his lips thinning as the copper cast to his pale cheeks was lost in a surge of silver. Then abruptly he regained his composure, the color receding and smile reforming, and said, “Is that really your decision to make, Elima?”

I stiffened. It indeed was my decision to make—and it was wildly inappropriate for him to use my name directly, especially because I was his superior in rank. After my grandfather’s death three years ago, I had been formally named the future Duchess of Kholaler and the future High General by the king himself. In contrast, Nuseran’s city was lower ranked than my own. He knew this.

But arguing with this speck of a man was not wise. He was a vengeful sort, and, if his complaints did reach his mother’s ears, the supplies and meals that the city provided the compound would come screeching to a halt. For the sake of my soldiers, I could not risk the goodwill of Sabaler’s duchy.

So I responded, “Based on the details I am allowed to share, I can convey the count, skills, and qualities of this year’s Sabaler recruits. Would you like me to continue?”

Asfiya’s music trilled an alarm that I could not heed.

“Yes, yes.” He flapped a hand at me, his mouth twisting into a smirk. “Tell me your little numbers.”

My fists tightened further, but I delivered the report, listing the official analysis and omitting the army's internal evaluations. In accordance with the policy I had established, the official analysis was careful to avoid deeming even the most troublesome recruits as problems.

Even the most vicious person could be redeemed.

Even Nuseran could be redeemed.

Though I prayed that helping him reach it would not become my responsibility.

There was not a single sentence of my report he did not interrupt. I was only stating the basics, but he made me repeat myself and clarify what I had just said. And then, when I did clarify, he questioned the validity of my information.

"Forty of the recruits will be assigned to the border—" I began a sentence.

"How many did you say again?" Nuseran asked, unconcerned, glancing away to his left, his gaze lazy as it lingered on a pair of sparring recruits.

"Forty," I said, clinging to my composure, as he turned the corner onto the fourth round of the courtyard.

"Are you sure forty is enough?" Nuseran said, now looking at the colonnade's honeycomb ceiling. "You must not have heard it: my mother thinks the border with Khuduren needs additional guarding. I suppose the report was lost in your study—or perhaps you forgot?"

My fists were so tight the nails were almost breaking the skin of my palms. "The duchess herself approved the assignment of forty."

He waved his hand, a motion of callous dismissal. "She changes her mind as much as you do. It is why she needs me to hold the city steady."

I stared at him, trying to prevent my mouth from falling open. His mother, Duchess Nuhala Fallatís, was the strongest of Asfiya's governors! A powerful, stern, yet generous woman who was the pride of her citizens. And he thought her capricious and unstable?

He thought *me* capricious and unstable?

Oh Dalaanem, I beg of you patience...

“You should,” he said, “pair each recruit with someone more experienced. The border guards are becoming increasingly more incompetent.”

I had just explained to him that we had implemented exactly that—personal counseling, with curriculum, objectives, and a schedule. It was actually why the guards were becoming increasingly *more* competent.

But before I could attempt to explain this again, Nuseran said, “Well, continue, Elima! Why are you dawdling?”

Though I knew he was not skilled with a blade, I felt as though he had cornered me with all the adeptness of a master warrior. I could not retaliate, could not argue back, could not defend myself, for the sake of my soldiers who depended on his goodwill—all I could do was continue.

So I did.

It hardly seemed to matter. Though he was the one who asked for the report, Nuseran seemed to hardly give attention—his gaze was usually elsewhere—and when he did give it, he repeatedly interrupted me, required clarifications for items only just discussed, or suggested actions that I had clearly stated I had already taken.

His dismissals, his rudeness, his condescension—it made me feel small. Despite my anger. There was a terrible swoop in my belly, as though the acid of my stomach had drenched all of my organs, consuming them in a flood of pain. And, though I knew I was accomplished, worthy of respect, and simply worthy in my own right—none of it seemed to matter. He crushed me with merely his words.

I wanted this walk, this conversation, this day,—all of it to simply *end* so I could escape his presence and return to the privacy of my own chambers. The courtyard’s white stone and silver gilt, which usually brought me such cheer, seemed to be losing its luster.

Despite all of the interruptions, I still finished my report. The noble’s composure I had learned as a child remained, as always, my best defense, and Asfiya’s music, a warm undertone of sympathetic melody, helped me remain strong.

My staff, though attentive, casting glances in my direction during the walk, did not come to help me—and I did not signal for them to do so. The recruits’ first day of training was too important.

So I kept walking and shouldering the weight of condescension.

As the eighth circle around the courtyard came to a close and the sun dipped toward the west overhead, Nuseran halted and faced me.

Ready for him to leave, I halted as well and asked coolly, “With all of these clarifications, was the report satisfactory enough for you, Safiri Fallatis?”

The man had the audacity to smirk and shrug. “I will need to check it again later, Elima, and I will send word of my adjustments.”

“Safiri, it really is not—” I started, anger pouring cool silver into my cheeks.

“But Elima,” he interrupted, “a little report is really not the point of this meeting. I had to see for myself what everyone is saying.”

“So you spent hours of my—” I began, my usually even temperament on the verge of shattering.

“Elima,” he said, his amber eyes filling with a gentleness that seemed ill suited to his face, “you are really not doing well. You keep missing the standard for your position, and your little changes are not making the impact you believe they are. A number of other nobles are wondering whether it really was wise to entrust you with your command. After all, you still have not done your most fundamental duty by providing an heir to your duchy.”

The soft chords of the land’s music turned to ferocious cacophony... but he did not react...

I opened my mouth to interrupt—to demand *where* he was hearing these rumors—to defend myself against his insinuations about my duty—but he trampled over my attempts to speak.

“Many of the nobles,” he said, “think it would be best if you limited your failures and married. Your consort could handle these military duties while you focus on an heir. But, Elima,” he twisted his lips in a disgusted sneer, “you are *old* now. Not a maiden in her first bloom. Even my ridiculous little sister is married already, and she’s almost six years younger. What nobleman, who can choose any woman he pleases, would want such an *old* woman?”

I... had never considered myself to be *old* in that way before... but to hear someone other than my mother say it... *oh Dalaanem*...

“You really do need to marry, Elima,” Nuseran said, blowing out a dramatic sigh, “and you know I do like you. I would be willing to accept you and solve this mess for you, since no one else clearly is.”

I stared at him, words strangling in my mouth and prayers suffocating in my mind.

Whimpers filled Asfiya’s voice of music.

“Consider it, Elimia dear,” Nuseran said with a wide, sweet smile. “Do not lose the opportunity I am offering you.” Then, casually tucking his hands in his pockets, he sauntered out of the courtyard.

All I could do was stare after him as my organs turned to ash in my middle.

Despite the six feet of my height and the breadth of my achievements, I felt as though I had been crammed into the form of a tiny ant.

It was worse than lacerations delivered by the slap of a whip.

Chapter 2: Nowhere Else to Go