



# To Sway a Swindler

## (Tempting Thieves #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The Pied Piper is a con artist, not a hero. But when a spirited young woman upends his latest scheme, he finds himself on a quest he never agreed to.

As'ad makes his living the dishonest way—unleashing swarms of rats into unsuspecting towns and then saving them for a price. He's pulled it off so many times, he could run the con in his sleep. But when Rahma, an infuriatingly determined girl with more self-confidence than sense, insists he escort her across the kingdom to find her missing best friend, his well-crafted schemes begin to unravel.

Rahma is relentless. She talks too much, trusts too easily, and has no idea how to survive beyond her own doorstep. Yet, as they stumble upon a dangerous conspiracy—one that involves missing orphans and a sinister underground network—As'ad realizes he might actually care. Not just about the fate of those children... but about Rahma.

Too bad she has no business falling for a scoundrel. And he has no business falling for her.

For fans of fairy tale retellings, reluctant heroes, and adventure with a touch of humor. This clean fantasy romance novella features a charming rogue, an independent heroine, forced proximity, witty banter, and more than a few adorable rats.

**Total Pages (Source):** 14

# Page 1

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## In Which Rats Play a Key Role

As'ad watched as the sleek gray rat snuffled closer and closer to the bag of seeds. He waited until the stealthy creature began working at the drawstring around the top.

"Alzali," he chided. "You've had plenty of treats today."

The cunning rat switched her attention from the burlap to her owner. Her adorable little squeaks and snuffles, in addition to the way she raced up his arm and began rubbing against his chin, resulted in the desired effect.

As'ad laughed. "Fine, you win." As he reached into the bag, he added, "Sometimes I think you're a better con artist than I am."

The treat bag was considerably lighter after he gave one to Alzali, Sarir, Yasrukh, Qamar, Khudha, and Fat Carl. This prompted him to take stock of the rest of his stores in the handcart that went everywhere with him. As expected, he was running a bit low on both food and coin. Unfortunately, that meant it was time to pull another con.

With a sigh, he unearthed the set of maps he had procured early in his wanderings. So far, his travels had covered a significant portion of Sharamil, if one ignored the vast stretches of empty desert. Leaving the more populated cities close to Mafur, the capital, had been good for his health. He no longer woke up each morning wondering where the next threat to his life would come from. True, his next meal was never guaranteed, but that had been the case in the cities, too. He preferred the long stretches of peace between villages, even if his belly rumbled from time to time.

Ignoring the towns and oases that occupied the northern two-thirds of the country, As'ad scanned the coastline and the southern border. The trouble with running a long-time con was that one eventually ran out of places to deceive. The coastal cities tended not to worry about losing their crops since their economies focused more on trade and fishing, so a better bet for him would be to travel the southern border, which included mostly agricultural towns.

Currently as far east as he could be without standing on the beach, As'ad decided he would travel west until he hit the mountains. He tapped his finger on the mountain range that formed Sharamil's western border. A generous gap in the mountains created a pass that was frequented by many merchants and travelers. He could follow that route to the countries in the west. The kingdoms that occupied the enormous valley hosted the majority of the continent's farmland. His con might work even better there.

With that decision made, As'ad interacted with his rats for a little while before bed. The girls were always interested in learning new tricks, and even Fat Carl liked to cuddle now and again. Essentially nocturnal, his pets would entertain themselves throughout the night, then sleep during his daytime travels. It worked out nicely for him.

Referencing his map one more time the next morning, As'ad thought the best place to set up camp would be about three hours' travel from his current location. He checked the rats, who were beginning to curl up in the nests each had made in the cages that were situated under a canvas in the cart. Made with thin metal wires twisted into a grid to form each side, the cages weren't to keep his pets locked up, but rather to give them a safe place away from predators. His furry little friends were fully capable of squeezing in and out without much effort.

Once everyone was settled in for the day, he loaded the remains of his camp and set off down the road. Hot and dry as usual, the day was made more pleasant by the

occasional breeze coming from the out-of-sight ocean. As'ad had never been as far as the southern border before. He knew the region became greener as it transitioned from desert to jungle, and he looked forward to seeing that. Other travelers he had met over the years told him that Jocestria was just as hot, if not hotter than, Sharamil. Though many complained that it was the humidity that made it worse.

About the time he began thinking of stopping for lunch, the landscape began shifting away from the ubiquitous sand and rocks. Hints of green appeared here and there, not unlike the terrain around an oasis. When the sound of running water reached his ears, he looked around for a spot to set up. A convenient rock ledge provided a bit of shade and was within reach of the stream that had caught his attention. He quickly unloaded, arranging a camp that would look like he had stepped aside for only a moment.

He left four of the rats at camp, preferring to take only Alzali and Khudha with him. The gray rat barely stirred from her slumber and easily fell back asleep once placed in his pocket. Khudha woke more thoroughly and climbed to perch on his shoulder. She raised her nose to the air and sniffed vigorously at the greenery that began appearing in thicker clumps. Her whiskers frequently tickled his neck. After an hour of walking, though, the little white rat that looked like her head and neck had been dipped in gray paint chattered sleepy noises in his ear until he tucked her away, as well.

His calculations had been correct, and he saw a farming community a few minutes later, after rounding a hill. Even better, the collection of homes and businesses was close to a waterway with a strong current. Too substantial to be considered merely a creek, As'ad thought it might not be quite big enough to meet the qualifications of a river, and thus had been left off his simple map. He scanned the landscape, then climbed the hill. The road navigated around the feature, but As'ad thought he could cut a good half-hour off his commute by going overland on the way back.

Not bothering to rouse his sleeping pets, he clambered down the hill, then used the

more abundant foliage to hide his approach. The sun was beginning its downward path to the western horizon, and the lengthening shadows helped As'ad creep closer. The little town was clearly agricultural. Silos and storehouses on the edges made it a good target for him. Until dusk, he waited on the very outskirts. Slowly, in no rush and not eager to get caught, As'ad worked his way around the town, eventually returning to his starting point on the eastern edge. The north and west sides of the town held most of the farmland, while the south was hemmed in by the river and the east held too many rocks and sandy patches to be useful.

As the darkness grew and the lanterns were lit, he risked venturing further in. Just big enough to host two taverns, the town bustled on this fine autumn evening. From the conversations he overheard, there had been a good harvest this year. Another good sign, he clinically noted. Most of the farmworkers were in high spirits, and the party atmosphere spilled out of the taverns and into the streets.

Walking purposely, as though he had every right to be there, As'ad moved through the marketplace and into the town square. He was hoping to discover the local attitude about the town's leadership. The mayor's house was easy to identify but not nearly as ostentatious as it could have been. That likely meant he would be dealing with a somewhat reasonable person. Unless, of course, the mayor was responsible for the extravagance of the fountain in the middle of the brick plaza. With the river/stream so close, the effort that much pipework must have demanded seemed a little ridiculous.

As'ad was very careful with the fees he charged. He didn't like to ask for more than a village could afford, and when he had time, he checked out what kind of leadership a town had in order to determine how much to ask for. If he believed it was probable that an extra tax would be levied on the populace, he worked out a method to target the richer folks so he could request a donation from each of them while leaving the poorer residents out of it. This town gave the impression that everyone would be expected to chip in a bit to supply the fee according to their means. After doing this

for so long, his guesses tended to be accurate over 90% of the time.

One of his early (and memorable) misjudgments occurred with a tiny village in the northeast. There, the beloved leader had stepped up and paid his entire fee out of her own pocket. The villagers had assured him that they would repay her with meals and service for the rest of her days. He often thought about that group and wondered how they got on.

Shaking those thoughts from his mind, As'ad wound his way back toward one of the bigger silos. In his earlier observations, he had noticed that the residents of the nearest farmhouse were setting up tables by the silo. The harvest celebration was in full swing by the time he made his way back there. It looked like the perfect place to begin his con.

Alzali and Khudha were wide awake by this time. He kept a hand in each pocket to placate them until he was ready for them to perform.

Gently tugging the soft gray rat from his left pocket, he held her up to his face.

“Find food,” he whispered. Alzali practically vibrated in his hand until he set her down in the shadows closest to the barn.

Freed to begin her investigation, the rat started by sniffing the air. Her whiskers were perked as her nose tried to take in every scent at once. Something soon caught her interest, and she zoomed off.

As'ad, who had been holding his right pocket closed, snuck to the other side of the gathering and retrieved Khudha. He repeated the instruction to his hooded rat. Slightly more cautious than her littermate, she crept toward the appetizing scents at a sedate pace.

As hoped, and as had worked many times before this, his fun-sized companions behaved perfectly. Highly motivated by food, yet wily, the pair scurried in and out of the lantern light to find the choicest morsels. He needed them to be seen eating and leaving physical reminders. As'ad knew they had been sighted when the squealing began. At first, the only people who seemed truly bothered were a few young ladies and one middle-aged man. The oldest members of the group laughed off their worries. When they sent someone to go find the cat, As'ad carefully called back his pets from the shadows. As he was leaving, he heard one farmer mutter to his neighbor something about how the infestation that had plagued a village not far from here started with just one or two. The other man merely scoffed.

As'ad returned to camp, unaccountably cranky but satisfied that the initial groundwork would help him succeed. Feeding the rest of his rats and checking that they had enough wood chunks for gnawing on distracted him from his mood. Receiving their affection after dinner dissolved the rest of his irritation, and he dismissed the silly feeling.

After shaving off the beard he grew out of laziness, he dug to the bottom of his handcart, then found and unwrapped the pipe that kept him fed. A decent musician since childhood, As'ad had learned how to control the magic of the pipe with a significant degree of finesse. Through trial and error, he discovered how to overlay the melodies he played with specific intentions. With the correct focus, he could create and maintain the illusion of many rats. His familiarity with real rats allowed him to imbue the illusory rodents with lifelike movements.

Unlike their flesh-and-blood counterparts, the fake rats were unable to physically interact with anything, but he had developed the level of control that allowed the apparitions to react to their surroundings. For instance, if someone swatted at them with a broom, the illusions scurried out of reach. Within the music, he embedded the commands for them to swarm food sources and avoid fire, people, and larger animals.

It took him hours to properly perform the lengthy tune that was required to create the sort of long-lasting, flexible illusion his con required. Ending the composition before the final note meant that he could play the concluding bit at a time of his choosing to begin the effect. Even with so much practice, the effort wore him out. He collapsed onto his bedroll that night and fell asleep at once.

As'ad's constant wandering often caused him to lose track of the days. Upon arriving at the town, he discovered it was a rest day. Not displeased, as it worked in his favor, he checked the head covering he had thrown on that morning, then walked boldly toward the town square. Pretending to stop for a drink at the fountain, he gave Sarir and Yasruhk the "find food" command.

As he walked closer to the mayor's house, he noticed a very pretty girl talking with an older couple who strongly resembled her. Perhaps a couple of years younger than himself, she appeared to be upset about something as she spoke with her parents in the square. Since it didn't seem to be the rats, he ignored her and worked his way to the back of the mayor's home. A conveniently open window invited him to send Khudha inside. So he did. Letting her out of his sight like that was a risk, but she was the most intelligent of his current batch of rats.

His efforts were soon rewarded as the villagers began catching sight of his friends. Before any of them could work themselves past cries of dismay, he discreetly retrieved the three rodents he had released and moved on to a different portion of the city. He sent out everyone but Fat Carl in strategic locations for a short time. They hit both taverns, the church, and as many barns or silos as he could reach in the two-hour time frame he had given himself.

Then As'ad pulled back to a smallish boulder by the water. Ducking behind the rock and trusting the sound of the current and the increasingly agitated townsfolk to hide his actions, he pulled the pipe out of his hip bag and carefully concluded the melody. After tucking the magical artifact away, he moved within earshot. Screams from



multiple parts of the town confirmed that his illusion had taken effect.

Gambling that the town leadership would gather at the biggest and most important-looking storehouse, As'ad worked his way toward the northern edge of town. His luck held. From the shadow of an outbuilding, he watched as the farmers reacted to the flood of rats. The mayor himself had been called in and stared in horror at the mess.

Thanks to all his practice, the pretend rats were very realistically looking for a way into the building. They hustled out of reach whenever someone approached. The panic-fueled chaos had ceased to amuse As'ad long ago. Now he waited impatiently for them to come to certain realizations.

"C'mon, c'mon. Notice that they avoid the flames," he muttered under his breath. "Finally!"

One enterprising youth had been brandishing a torch for a full five minutes before his elders realized he had stumbled upon a good idea. They scrambled to set up torches and lanterns around the perimeter of the storehouse. As'ad's illusions reacted accordingly and milled about beyond the reach of the fire, still trying to get in.

The immediate crisis averted, the people turned to the mayor. They demanded that he do something; they couldn't stand guard over their food stores day and night, they had other things to do. Someone mentioned that the Pied Piper had last been seen in a nearby village. The mayor seized on that knowledge and announced that he would send messengers out to search for the man. The pronouncement settled the crowd somewhat, and As'ad took his cue.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

### Which Contains Even More Rats

Unable to hurry too quickly with sleeping rats in his pockets, he traveled up and over the small hill that stood between this town and his camp farther out. He was banking on the fact that the messengers didn't know exactly where to find him and hoping they would stick to the roads that most travelers used. He arrived in time to rearrange his camp as though he was simply stopping for lunch. Taking care, he tucked the rats and their cages at the bottom of his cart and wrapped a piece of canvas around them tightly. It wouldn't prevent a determined rat from escaping, but his pets usually snoozed through this part and, being well fed, were inclined to stay put.

After putting away the headwrap he had worn in town and changing into a clean set of robes in a different color, he rewarded himself with the last of his food. As'ad was dousing his fire when a tall, gangly young man burst into sight. The youth pulled up short when he saw the camp, then leaned forward to rest his hands on his knees as he gulped air.

"Are you, by chance," he gasped, "the Pied Piper?"

Asad nodded and walked closer. "Yes, I am he."

"Oh, good!" The lad stood upright. "Nahr has been overrun with rats. Please, you must come save us," he implored.

"By all means," As'ad assured the young man. "I trust you've been sent to lead me there?"

“Yes. Can I help you pack your things?” he asked, eager to be of service.

“I don’t have much, as you can see. It will only take me a moment.”

The runner insisted on pulling the handcart. As’ad agreed easily. Following the road, their journey took the full hour, as the cart resisted moving faster than a quick walk. As they neared the town, the messenger’s posture grew taller and cockier. He may not be the one to actually fix the rat problem, but he would garner plenty of praise as the one who had brought the solution back.

Almost as soon as they were within sight of the town, As’ad’s escort began shouting. It took some time for him to be heard over the noise of the panic that still gripped the residents. When the pair was finally noticed, volunteers took over the cart-pulling duties and directed them to the town square. Something of a procession soon formed behind As’ad and his escorts.

Brought out by the hullabaloo in his courtyard, the mayor walked down to greet them by the fountain. His eyes scanned their hope of salvation, becoming more confident as he took in the piper’s traditional robes and smooth chin. As’ad slipped into the role he had played a hundred times before, confident that his appearance projected the right air of competence despite his relative youth. The older man with a slight paunch gave him a deep nod.

Nodding back, As’ad put on his I-am-taking-this-seriously-but-I’m-still-friendly smile. “Your messenger informs me that Nahr is having a rat problem.” He gestured back the way they had come. “I have seen the evidence with my own eyes. Could you, please, update me on what has happened since the messengers were sent out?”

The mayor responded to the professional tone, unconsciously relaxing his rigid posture. “We are keeping them at bay for now with fire. Every torch that can be spared. We have rings around the storehouses and a few other places, but we’re

running out of supplies to protect everything.”

“Nor can your people be on watch all the time,” As’ad empathized.

“Exactly!” the mayor agreed.

“Will you show me one of the storehouses?”

“Yes, yes. This way, please.”

As’ad didn’t check on his cart as they walked toward the edge of town. He trusted their respect for his position to keep it safe. Indeed, as his host began speaking again, he heard the familiar creak of the wheels keep pace with them as someone brought it along.

“We’ve heard of your skills and experience. Does this look like what you’ve encountered before?”

“Did the rats appear en masse suddenly or trickle in a few at a time?”

“The Marzaries saw just a couple last night!” someone interjected from the crowd that ringed them.

This inspired some of the others to add their personal accounts. As’ad let the overlapping statements continue until it became too loud to distinguish the individual words. He raised his hands, and appreciated the immediate silence that followed.

“It does sound like the pattern I’ve been tracking across Sharamil.”

“How did you get here so quickly?” a suspicious female voice demanded.

As'ad turned to discover the pretty girl he had noticed yesterday walking by his elbow. She was even more attractive up close, with her flashing black eyes and straight nose.

He nodded politely and explained that he had already been heading this way.

“Why?”

As'ad sent a quick glance toward the mayor, but the town's leader didn't object to the girl's questioning.

“Someone or something is pushing this epidemic,” he explained, neglecting to mention that it was him. “My investigation led me to believe that this unnatural phenomenon would soon work its way west. Maybe I can get in front of it soon.”

The young woman held her tongue, but As'ad could feel her dark eyes boring a hole in the back of his head as he followed the mayor the rest of the way to the storehouse.

His hours of piping the night before were paying off. The artificial rodents oozed around the circles of fire and people, constantly seeking a way in while avoiding everything that could discredit their reality.

He took a long moment to observe the situation, rubbing his chin, narrowing his eyes in thought, and occasionally nodding to himself. He finally addressed the mayor. “I take it nothing you've tried has been able to hurt them?”

The man shook his head. “The vermin are unnaturally fast.”

“Agreed. That and their unwavering determination to get into the food supplies despite all the opposition has me convinced that these are more of the magically compelled rats I've been hunting.” As'ad clasped his hands together. “Which leads

me to good news and bad news.”

The mayor braced himself. “What’s the good news?”

“My pipe can take care of this problem. But it’s going to cost a pretty penny,” As’ad finished before the mayor was too relieved. “My expertise isn’t cheap, and it’s expensive to track this malicious magic across the country.”

The other man set his jaw. “What’s the damage?”

As’ad named a price that caused the mayor’s eye to twitch. The counteroffer was half that. A few more townsfolk who held positions of authority joined the discussion, and the real haggling began.

They argued that the town couldn’t afford the full price. The “expert” asked if they could afford that many torches and constant guard rotations. One of the men insisted that paying that much money for less than a full day’s work was criminal. As’ad suggested one of them rent his pipe and try it for themselves, reminding them that they were paying for his years of expertise and a specific job, not a set amount of manual labor.

After several more of these back-and-forth arguments and rebuttals, a price was settled upon. It was more than the town’s first offer while being considerably less than his initial quote. As’ad was content with the amount.

Now the trickiest part of the con would begin.

“Why aren’t they leaving any excrement?” the girl from earlier asked, interrupting his train of thought.

No one had ever questioned that part before, so As’ad pretended he hadn’t been

listening right away while his mind tripped over possible excuses. “Hmm? Oh, that.” He gestured vaguely toward the ever-shifting mass of rodent bodies swirling around the ring of fire. “I haven’t worked out yet why the original curse-maker—or whoever is responsible—left that part out. But we can be grateful that they did. Can you imagine the diseases that could be spread?” He looked to the older members of the crowd, shaking his head. “Losing an entire harvest is bad enough.”

The assembly agreed with him, murmuring to each other about the injustice of having the town’s food stores decimated, even though nothing of the sort had actually happened here.

“Before I begin, I would like to collect a few specimens from different areas, if you don’t mind.” As’ad walked over to the handcart and carefully snagged an empty cage without revealing the ones containing rats.

A few of the town elders looked confused, and possibly alarmed, by the request. One woman, holding herself with calm competence and carrying a doctor’s bag, nodded and came to As’ad’s defense. “Yes, of course. Samples are important for the scientific process.”

As’ad nodded his thanks. He was then escorted to several locations within town where the rat infestation was most noticeable. Using some sleight of hand and misdirection, he was able to “capture” enough apparitions to explain his pets should anyone dig through his things. That oversight had once threatened the entire operation early on, and he now took pains to add that caveat to the enchantment.

When he had secured the “specimen” rats, he walked to the point in town farthest from the river. He left his cart in the care of the original messenger and began playing a complicated tune on the pipe. The townsfolk within range quieted to listen.

Piping the music that was necessary to take over an active illusion and change its

directive was far more difficult than setting it up. In the beginning, As'ad's attempts had been utter failures. Had he made the mistake of trying it in front of an audience first, this con would never have been successful. It took him weeks to ensure he could blend the two enchantments seamlessly every single time.

After establishing the initial parameters, As'ad began walking in the general direction of the river. He moved slowly in order to collect each of the fake rats. The notes that he played while gathering the rodents didn't matter very much. He tended to repeat the same refrain while moving because it took less concentration and wasn't needed to add to or change the enchantment in any way. Once he had the full parade of rats following him, he led them to the riverbank.

Standing to the side, he amended the tune to send every one into the water. As the illusions were unable to interact with their environment, he also had to create and manipulate the appearance of agitated water. As'ad had deliberately chosen a place downstream from town. This ensured that the people believed the drowned rats were washed away from their drinking water.

Some of the townsfolk, including the suspicious young lady and a substantial number of the children, followed him to the river. That wasn't a problem. Nor would it normally bother him to have the complete attention of a beautiful girl, if she hadn't been glaring at him the whole time.

As he continued playing and watching the stream of rats fling themselves heedlessly into the river, he spared a moment to be grateful that this town wasn't situated on an oasis. A confined water source surrounded by desert made it difficult to use as a disposal method. The residents were always rightly concerned about contamination, and As'ad sometimes had to convince them to create a bonfire of sufficient size. In one fortunate instance, the oasis town had contained two bodies of water. Some quick thinking had enabled him to send the rats into the smaller one, where he then had the inhabitants pour an oil slick and set it on fire. It was an impressive display that went a



long way toward persuading everyone that the remains had been burnt beyond the chance of rot.

Today's extermination was a simple affair, by all accounts. He played until no more rats appeared from the town, then continued for a few minutes longer, slowly diminishing the splashes. He checked with the young adults who had been tasked with scouring the area to confirm no rats remained behind. When the all-clear was given, he finally left the riverbank.

As expected, the grateful town wanted to fete their savior. While the preparations were taking place, the Pied Piper performed his duties and interrogated people from every quadrant of town. Asking the same questions over and over again was dull but quite possibly the most important part of his con. During this portion, he scribbled incomprehensible notes in his little book and made sure to drop useless hints about what he had learned from his investigations so far. The process had become rather mechanical for him. The observant girl who wasn't afraid to ask questions always seemed to be lurking in the background, though, and it was beginning to put him off his game.

When pressed, he revealed his intention to continue working his way west. With few anomalies, the rat phenomenon seemed to be heading that way after scouring the north. Naturally, he neglected to mention that he occasionally skipped a town in that logical progression so as not to make his involvement quite so obvious. He did assure the mayor, when asked, that he would definitely stop in Jabal, the town right before the mountain pass leading to Bavenpier. Since they were on friendly terms, it was only right that the neighboring country be warned.

That night, As'ad endured the feast. He danced with whomever asked, though his heart wasn't in it. Several of the ladies were uncommonly pretty and eager to make his acquaintance, but none of them held his interest. The question of whether or not he would accept a dance with the skeptical young woman never came up, and As'ad

had to tell himself that it was exhaustion, not disappointment, that nipped at his heels. Fortunately, he was able to plead fatigue early on. While the magic he performed had exacted a physical toll, as usual, today's weariness seemed to have settled into his soul rather than his limbs.

The innkeeper who had claimed the privilege of hosting the Pied Piper assured As'ad that the handcart and all his belongings would be perfectly safe in the stableyard. He was quite willing to assign a stablehand to guard it and the "specimens" overnight when As'ad asked.

Confident that Khudha and the rest would be safe until morning, the exhausted con artist collapsed onto the soft bed in the inn's finest room, barely remembering to kick his boots off first.

In the morning, As'ad fed his pets in a clinical manner, aware of the audience that watched his every move. After breakfast, the mayor and town treasurer appeared at the inn with his fee. The pair may have been attempting a private audience, but a crowd had been forming for hours. Several folks suggested writing to the sultan about recent events. As'ad assured them that he sent in regular reports to that royal. In doing so, he also managed to insinuate that their distant sovereign was not overly concerned because the plague of rats had not affected enough people yet, or him personally. And since As'ad had been able to take care of it on his own thus far, why send out more resources when he didn't have to? Everyone accepted this, certain in the knowledge that the sultan would not exert himself until the problem inconvenienced his royal person. They thanked the piper again for being so personally invested in the lives of the oft-neglected farmers and finally sent him on his way.

Escaping the town fully took thrice as long as it should have because multiple people stopped him to bestow gifts of gratitude in the form of food and supplies. He accepted them graciously and hid his growing discomfort as they repeated their appreciation

for his willingness to help the rural communities. Eventually, he was finally on the road for real and could no longer see the town.

As he walked, he reviewed the last couple days. Overall, the con had run as smoothly as he expected. The questions, comments, and concerns hadn't noticeably deviated from the script that had been developing over the past several months. No deviations if he ignored that pretty girl's question about rat poop, anyway.

Realizing that he hadn't seen her at all that morning, he checked over his shoulder. He should be pleased that he had been able to leave without suffering through more of her questions or glares. Instead, he found himself, inexplicably, ill at ease. He walked for another hour before the feeling faded and he felt safe checking on his sleeping pets.

That night, As'ad made camp in a pleasant little hollow. The rocks and sand still outnumbered the green bits, but there were signs that he was nearing the transition to full jungle. A few of the more generous souls had bestowed fresh meat and other perishable goods on him. He really had no choice but to cook and eat them now.

"The things I suffer," he said to his rats as he prepared the meal.

Sometime later, he flipped back the canvas covering the cages. "Who's a pretty rat?"

He had just taken Khudha out of her cage, ready to coo over her performance, when a distinctly feminine voice shouted, "Ah-ha!"

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

Which Features a Fiery Female

A s'ad looked up to see the owner of the voice stalking into his firelight. It was the girl from Nahr. Of course it was.

“May I help you?” he asked quite calmly, despite knowing how bad it looked. His heart responded to the perceived threat by pumping more blood to his limbs. His fingers twitched, and Khudha squeaked in response.

In spite of her anger, or perhaps because of it, As'ad was struck by the thought that he had never perceived such a wild and beautiful young woman. His wits were not addled to the point that he thought saying so would help him escape the situation. Alive.

“I knew there was something off about you.” The girl stood with both hands on her hips and leaned forward. “Those were your rats all along!”

As'ad's brain threatened to panic, but years of practicing deceit as a means of survival kicked in. “Why do you say that?”

His refusal to react in a flustered manner frustrated his challenger.

“You were just baby-talking that rat!”

“So?”

“That proves you didn't just catch them yesterday!”

If they had been any closer to town, As'ad would have been concerned that the girl's increasing volume would attract attention. Determined to play it out, he continued to act as though nothing was amiss.

"I don't see how." He smiled at the rat in his hand and rubbed between her little ears. "It is true that I have become fond of rats"—he held up his hand when she tried to protest—"when they are not demolishing a village's storehouses," he appeased.

She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at him. "Nobody is fond of rats."

As'ad shrugged lightly. "Their loss. I have found them to be quite intelligent and affectionate."

"Ha!" She brandished her finger at him again. "Intelligent, huh? Meaning you can train them."

He scratched his cheek as though contemplating the idea. "Yes," he mused. "I suppose that is very likely possible. I have never kept any quite long enough to determine that."

The girl's frown became more contemplative and ever-so-slightly less hostile.

Taking that as a hopeful sign, As'ad went on the attack in his mildest, most reasonable tone. "It sounds like you have a theory. Some story that you've created in your mind about me. Would you care to share the thoughts that led you there?"

"Well, first off, you showed up awfully quick when the messengers were sent for you."

As'ad purposefully turned his back to her, to demonstrate how little he was concerned by her presence and to put Khudha away. "I believe that came up the other day, didn't

it? I was able to arrive in a timely fashion because I was already heading this direction. I'm following a pattern, you may recall."

He couldn't be sure, but it sounded like the girl was grinding her teeth. He faced her again and leaned against the handcart before crossing his arms casually across his chest.

She sighed heavily through her nose. "Would you care to explain the odd behavior of the rats? They didn't react normally. To anything!"

"How exactly are rats that have been formed by a curse or some other magic supposed to react? All our standards for normal are thrown out the window." He scratched his ear, then very deliberately stifled a yawn.

"But what about the excrement?" What was this girl's obsession with droppings? "None of the big crowd of rats left any—"

As'ad interrupted, "Again, magically produced or prompted creatures tend to follow different rules than the rest of us."

"—but the Marzaries noticed rat leavings on their table at the party," she finished as though he hadn't spoken. "Which lends credence to my 'theory' that you are using trained rats in some capacity to pull a con."

Fear stabbed at As'ad's chest like a spear. Only the years and years of hiding his thoughts kept him from revealing the accuracy of her statement, even as a bead of sweat trickled down his spine. He hated to do it, but the threat pushed him to poke at what was likely a sore spot for her.

"I wonder that you're here confronting me on your own. Did no one else think your questions were valid?" He pushed off the handcart and walked closer, still leaving

plenty of space between them. “So far, I haven’t seen you produce any proof of your words. You may, of course, run back to Nahr with your little tale. But your presence here, alone, makes me think they don’t tend to listen to you, do they? Are you, perhaps, known for wild stories?”

The hurt that flickered across her face pinched at his heart. He had scored a direct hit and he knew it.

“Go home, miss,” he said quietly. “Your family will be missing you.”

Something else appeared in her expression for a split second. “Are you still heading to Jabal?”

“Yes. I’m working that direction.”

He was confused by the abrupt change in her line of questioning. Even more so when she nodded, sharply turned on her heel, and stalked off into the darkness back toward Nahr. Somewhat absently, he noted the large pack she wore on her back. He hadn’t initially noticed it in the dark and now wondered what her unstated goal was. Who brought that much luggage to confront a con man? A weapon would make sense, but he doubted she was carrying an entire rucksack of knives and slingshots.

Still unsettled from the confrontation, As’ad’s interactions with his beloved pets were stilted. They didn’t seem to notice, content with the treats and belly rubs. For some reason, the encounter lingered in his mind, and the little one-man tent felt rather crowded. Sleep eventually took him, but not before the guilt about his parting shot had been stuffed down more than once.

No longer in a hurry to put distance between himself and the site of his last con, As’ad took his time the next morning getting ready for the day. When he did begin walking down the road, he was plagued by an itchiness between his shoulder blades.

Several times throughout the day, he looked behind to search for the source of his unease. Nothing was ever there.

The terrain was an interesting mash-up of desert and jungle. More substantial green plants began filling the view, while dry sand collected at their roots. When the wind came in from the north, it was hot and dry. If the breeze shifted to swirl in from the south, As'ad felt sticky. The contrast would normally keep him entertained as he experienced and observed these new sensations.

Instead, he remained jumpy throughout his midday rest and while passing a much smaller village that afternoon. On any other day, he might have gone in to purchase perishable food items, but the wariness he just couldn't shake convinced him to skirt around the community instead.

Nothing unusual—or even interesting, really—happened that evening or the following day. The third afternoon after being mean to the girl, he did venture into a small community that lay not far from the road to purchase some fresh fruit. It broke up the monotony a wee bit, but he still hadn't regained his equilibrium.

The fourth day finally felt like winter was approaching. The night's coolness lingered longer than before. Sometime after lunch, a light rain began. More mist than anything, the fine droplets seem to hover in the air and cling to everything. As'ad stopped early that evening. His rats remained dry and warm under their oiled canvas, but he fared less comfortably. His fire that night was larger than usual. Although still some weeks away from the true mountains, the low foothills provided more, and different, plant life than he was used to. One side effect/benefit was the ease with which he could now collect firewood. He stashed as much as he could in the cart against the day that his path took him away from the abundance.

As'ad was putting out the remains of his fire when a shriek met his ear. Looking east in the direction he had come, he noticed flickers of light on the branches of a tall tree



he had chosen not to camp beside. The shriek did not repeat but was replaced by worried and frantic vocalizations. He checked that his fire was no longer harmful and took off running.

The tree in question lay just beyond a rise. Unfamiliar with its type, As'ad believed it was something known as an evergreen. Instead of broad leaves, it possessed a myriad of skinny, dark-green needles. Unlike anything nearby, it stood out. As did the fire at its base and the female figure dancing around it.

As As'ad drew near, he recognized the girl who had given him so much grief this trip. In an instant, he absorbed the details of the scene and figured out what had happened. Her open pack was flung to the side, and a fire had been started in the dry space under the tree. Obviously the girl didn't know any better. The dry debris had caught and sent flames racing up the trunk. As he hurried closer, the lowest branches also caught fire.

The girl exclaimed with surprise when he came into sight, then rushed to copy him as he began scooping some of the dryer sand and dirt mixture onto the out-of-control campfire. Unfortunately, they were too late. A loud popping crack sounded above their heads on the trunk. As'ad grabbed the girl and hustled her backwards, not taking his eyes off the fire. A section of the trunk ignited almost explosively, and he knew the whole tree was lost.

The girl stood where he left her as he hustled over to scoop up her things. He brought them back to where she stood hugging herself in the misty rain, staring with wide eyes at the catastrophe she had caused.

The tree now looked like a giant candle, and As'ad expected to be joined by others as they noticed. At this point, all he could do was watch to be sure that the flames didn't spread beyond the solitary tree and be grateful for the cold rain that had been soaking the area for most of the day.

“You’ve never camped before, have you?” he asked, not unkindly.

A harsh half-laugh escaped her lips. “How can you tell?” she asked bitterly.

As’ad noticed her rubbing her arms and passed her the pack. “Here. Find something extra to put on.”

She finally looked at him with a grim smile. “I’m already wearing all my extra layers,” she confessed. “I didn’t realize it could get this cold so soon.”

He grunted. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

When she didn’t answer immediately, he took his eyes off the inferno to look at her. She was biting her lip.

“I need to get to Jabal.”

He waited, sensing there was more.

“I don’t know the way, but you are going there, so I thought I could just follow you.”

A long, heavy sigh poured out of As’ad. “And how long did you think that plan through?”

“Clearly not long enough,” she responded with true contrition.

“Well, you can’t travel with me, and this evening proves you can’t travel on your own. When someone comes to investigate this fire, you can head back with them. I’m sure they can get you home safely.”

Her wordless noise of protest was audible over the crackling flames. “I can so travel

on my own! I have been just fine for days.”

He let one incredulous arched eyebrow answer for him.

She huffed. “Fine. I could use a few lessons on how and where to make fire. Until now, I hadn’t been cold enough to try. But you can teach me.”

He turned away from her winning smile and started walking around the tree. She scrambled to catch up to him.

“I know you can teach me,” she insisted. “And then I won’t have to bother you anymore.”

“Supposing I do teach you how to operate fire, then what? Do you have a map?”

He continued his circuit around the tree, checking that none of the flames had spread beyond the dry patch under its limbs.

“I . . . could get a map, I’m sure, at the next village.”

“And can you read it?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Your silence is very reassuring.”

By then, they had completed the circle and returned to her pack. As’ad was confident that as long as they watched the fire, it wouldn’t cause any more damage to the surrounding countryside.

“Even if we ignore the fact that you have no sense of direction and don’t know where

you're going—”

“Hey!”

“There are other factors to consider. What if you encounter bandits? Wild animals? Ghouls? How are you going to handle them?”

She flapped her hand in the air. “Ghouls only haunt cemeteries,” she contended.

As’ad crossed his arms and stared her down, a thing that was harder to do as she was nearly his height.

After a moment, she relented. “Fine. You are correct. I need a more experienced companion. May I join you?”

Her wide grin invited him to say yes. He resisted the urge and resolutely turned toward the fire.

“These flames must be visible in the next village over. It won’t be long now.”

Help did not arrive that evening. As’ad and the girl watched the tree until it was nothing more than glowing coals. They stomped out the occasional burning patch of weeds or clump of grass but otherwise had little to do beyond watch. The girl was surprisingly silent during this time.

As the night progressed, As’ad became more and more concerned about being responsible for this gal. While the ghouls may not be the most realistic concern, bandits and wild animals were. She was also likely to die of exposure or getting lost and tripping into a canyon or something ridiculous. He simply could not in good conscience leave her to her own devices.

With that decision made, he reluctantly led her back to his own camp when it became clear that the fire was no longer a danger to the surrounding countryside. There he set her up in his tent after sharing some of his food. She tried to protest, but at that point, he had turned off his ears. His determination to ignore her finally made a dent, and she quietly crawled into the tent.

As she was scooting out of the rain, he couldn't resist a final sally. "Don't forget to guard your feet; this is palis country."

The girl yipped and pulled her feet into the tent faster. Then she poked her head through the flap to scowl at him. "Those aren't real!"

"How do you know?" he challenged mildly.

Her answering sigh was rather aggressive. "Creatures with barbed tongues that lick your feet until they can drain your blood? That no one has ever seen before?"

"If no one has ever seen them, then how can you be sure?"

"The absence of evidence should be enough."

He shrugged with all the insouciance he could muster. "All I know is that I wear my shoes every night and I haven't died in my sleep yet."

Her nostrils flared as she refrained from saying anything more. Her face and rebuttal said that she didn't believe him, but the way she very carefully tucked the tent flap in suggested she wasn't as immune as she pretended.

As'ad chuckled quietly as he made a nest for himself under the handcart while listening to the industrious movements of his nocturnal pets above. His amusement distracted him briefly from the cold, invasive drips. If the rain didn't stop soon, it was

going to be a very long night.

In the morning, As'ad woke to clear blue skies and an annoyingly happy, and therefore loud, bevy of birds. While he waited for the girl to make an appearance, he retrieved his maps and stretched them out on the driest rock he could find. Everything steamed as the morning sun touched it; apparently yesterday's foray into winter weather had been an aberration.

Still a little disappointed that the nearest community was filled with heavy sleepers, As'ad turned his attention to the next occupied space on the map. It looked like there was nothing substantial for days, unless they veered north. There was a village or town about a day and a half in that direction. Lamentably, the girl had already proven incapable of getting there herself without mishap. Which meant his plans now included a detour.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

### In Which Introductions are Finally Made

As'ad expected the girl to sleep for hours still after their long night guarding the fire. But as soon as he began cooking breakfast, he could hear rustling from the tent behind him.

He turned to look. She was stumbling through the flap and groggily attempting to pat her hair down. As'ad had never seen hair so . . . big? The dark curls that he had previously noted as being a bit wild were completely untamed outside of the braid she had confined it in the day before.

“Turn around.”

As'ad blinked stupidly at her.

“I can feel the absolute beast that my hair has become. I'm pretty sure it's feral, and you don't look a wild animal in the eye, as it is liable to attack.” The girl delivered her speech with half-closed eyes and a monotone voice. Then she stumbled toward the low hill and scraggly bushes they had designated for privy use.

As'ad did as she asked and returned his focus to the fire. He kept his back to her when she made her return a few minutes later, and resolutely ignored everything happening behind him until she appeared at his side. He then wordlessly offered her the stale bread he had toasted, plus a portion of porridge.

Her “thank you” was quite prim and sounded much more awake. A glance showed that her hair had been wrangled into a long braid down her back. Here and there, a

loose curl defied her efforts.

“Do you have a name?” he asked.

“Of course I have a name, who doesn’t have a name?” She frowned over her meal at him, then blinked. “Oh. Right. My name is Rahma.”

“As’ad.”

“It’s nice to meet you, As’ad.” Rahma nodded deeply from her position next to the dying fire.

“Finish quickly,” he directed, turning his attention to scattering the coals. “We’re heading to Balda.”

Rahma frowned, her mouth too full of food to respond. When she swallowed, she asked, “Balda? That’s not the last village we passed.”

“Correct.” As’ad stood and brushed off the seat of his robes.

“I thought you would try to take me back to that last community.”

“I don’t backtrack, ever.”

Rahma shoved the last of her breakfast into her mouth and stood. She followed him over to the handcart, where he had begun repacking the few items he had removed the night before.

“Why don’t you backtrack?”

As’ad wasn’t about to tell her that returning to the scene of a crime was a good way



to get caught, so he held his tongue. The girl seemed to understand he wouldn't budge on this subject and went to pack her own things. He fed the rats and made sure they were settled. Qamar, the luminescent white beauty, resisted her usual cage but calmed when he nestled her in his pocket.

"If you're going all the way to Jabal, why can't I just go with you?"

As'ad turned to stare her down. "Are you seriously asking why you, a young"—he paused to pointedly look at her unadorned wrists—"unmarried female, shouldn't be traveling with me, an unknown, strange man who is in no way related, for weeks on end?"

She had the decency to flush.

"Now, I know that I am not a creep who preys on young women, but you don't know that." He moved to the tent she had vacated and began tearing it down. "Your parents must be worried about you."

"It's fine. I left a note."

As'ad wasn't sure if she was acting or truly that naive. He hefted the tent bundle into his cart and made a space for her things.

"Set your pack in the cart."

"Why?"

He looked at her in confusion. "So you don't have to carry it?"

She blinked, and the curling black lashes brushing against her brown cheek distracted him for a moment. Then she smirked, and As'ad wondered what she would say next.

To his surprise, and mild disappointment, Rahma simply did as she was bid.

They hadn't been on the road for more than five minutes, at most, when the girl started talking.

"I bet you're wondering why I want to go to Jabal, aren't you?"

As'ad wasn't going to get sucked into that game. He grunted.

"I'm on my way to rescue my friend Suha," she declared.

This time, he didn't even grunt. He kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead, scanning for potholes and wild animals.

"Suha has been my best friend since she was born. I'm an only child, you know."

As'ad didn't know, and reminded himself that he didn't care. His continued silence didn't seem to affect Rahma in the slightest.

"Suha's parents both died a couple weeks ago."

"That's very sad," he offered when she didn't immediately keep speaking.

"It is," Rahma agreed quietly. "I was over at their house so often, it was sort of like having extra parents."

As'ad had never known his parents, but he theoretically understood that they were precious to many people.

The girl rolled back her shoulders and straightened her spine. "Suha was supposed to come live with us." Her words were a bit fiercer than As'ad would have expected the

situation to call for. But, as he was determined not to play into whatever her game was, he didn't question any of it.

“Somehow,” Rahma all but snarled, “that woman produced a letter from Suha's ‘relatives.’ My too-trusting parents bought it. And let her take Suha!”

As'ad half-expected her to spit or kick something. Clearly, she didn't believe the provenance of the letter and was upset by the actions her parents had taken. Or rather, not taken?

“Anyway.” She took a cleansing breath. “Suha is stuck in Jabal and I'm going to bring her back.”

Not all of her narrative made sense to him, but he caught the last part.

“What do you think you are ‘rescuing’ her from? And how would you get back?”

Rather than take offense, as he half-expected, Rahma nodded. “I missed a few details, didn't I?”

As'ad kept his eyes on the path. He moved more carefully for a few steps when he felt Qamar climbing up to his shoulder.

“We have a . . . woman in Nahr”—her pause insinuated unsavory things about the female—“who houses orphans until they can be rehomed or employed somewhere. Suha was staying with us before her parents died. They were concerned that she was going to get sick, as well.”

In hindsight, it appeared their prudence had been warranted.

“My parents were intending to let Suha stay with us forever.” She interrupted herself

with a rueful laugh. “Well, not forever -forever. I’m sure she would have gotten married and left eventually. But she’s only sixteen, we have time.”

The way she stated her friend’s age made it sound like Rahma was older, but As’ad wasn’t going to invite more personal details from the young lady.

“Hadia never should have gotten her claws on Suha.” Rahma reached down to pluck a wad of some type of long grass and ruthlessly started pulling off the blades and seed bits as she continued. “That woman stopped caring for orphans years ago. There isn’t much need for her in Nahr, fortunately, but the few children she did have all ‘miraculously’ learned about relatives who amazingly and coincidentally —VERY coincidentally,” she muttered vehemently, “all live in Jabal.”

Compared to the rural villages As’ad usually frequented, Jabal was a thriving metropolis. So it was possible that multiple orphans from Nahr could have relatives living there. He wondered why Rahma didn’t believe that to be the case for her friend. He was also mildly impressed by the vitriol in her sarcasm.

Almost as if she could read his mind, she supplied the answer. “I know that it’s technically possible, but Suha didn’t recognize the names of her so-called relatives. Hadia claimed that they were estranged and looking to reconcile. BUT. How would Hadia know who to look for when Suha didn’t?”

The grass stem had been mutilated to nothing. She dropped it and grabbed a fresh one.

After a beat of silence, As’ad asked, “How do you know she wants to be rescued?”

“Of course she does!

He pressed, “Maybe she wants to make a fresh start. Not be stuck in a town filled

with memories of her parents, but no parents.”

“Uh—” The thought had obviously not occurred to Rahma before. A deep wrinkle formed in her brow as she processed the idea.

As’ad let that settle, content to continue plodding along without words. Surely this would be what convinced her to seek a way home.

All too soon, the dark-haired girl clapped once and nodded to herself. “I will ask her first and respect her answer. Then I will rescue her!”

He didn’t bother hiding his snort. “Which, again, brings us back to: How are you going to get her back home?”

When she didn’t answer right away, he glanced over. An odd expression sat on her face.

“You know, it’s really hard to take you seriously with a rat on your shoulder.”

Since Qamar had been there for a good bit, he concluded that the girl hadn’t looked at him for a while. “How is that my fault, exactly?”

“It’s not,” she assured him. “What is that one’s name?”

“Who says I name the specimens I collect for studying?”

“Your baby talk.”

Hard to refute that. “This is Qamar.”

Recognizing her name, the white rat pushed her body against his jaw. He smiled

automatically, then rearranged his mouth when he remembered that Rahma was watching him.

She didn't remark on it, and he wondered if she had missed the exchange or had a reason for ignoring it.

"What do you feed them?"

"A little bit of everything."

"Like . . .?"

As'ad wanted to scratch the back of his neck, but he knew that was his discomfort talking and didn't want to communicate that to her. "Um, grain, seeds. Some fruits and veggies. They like a little bit of meat now and then."

Rahma nodded along as he spoke. "What about yogurt? Or cheese?"

"No." He shook his head, careful not to dislodge Qamar. "The others are smart enough to avoid those, but Fat Carl can't seem to resist no matter how grisly the aftereffects." He grimaced at the memory.

"Do I want to kn—No. Your face says I should leave it at that." Her laugh was playful.

A moist breeze slid in from the south, reminding As'ad that he needed to check everyone's water soon.

"How do you keep them from reproducing?"

Startled, he looked over at her.

She shrugged. "I saw the cages. They don't look as secure as they could be."

That was true. He nudged a wheel-stopping stone out of his path. "The rats I currently have are all girls."

"You named a girl Fat Carl?" Disbelief colored her tone.

"Excuse me, there are five girls and Fat Carl. But since the girls avoid him and he doesn't seem to think of anything but food, it hasn't been a problem."

"Are they all as affectionate as Qamar?"

"Khudha likes to ride on my shoulder, too," he admitted.

"What does she look like?"

As'ad was walked through a tour of his rats, including their appearances and behaviors, without realizing how much he was talking until it was time to stop for lunch. After watering his pets and checking his main supply, he realized how dry his throat was and chugged a good bit more than usual.

During the stop, Rahma asked to see the rest of the rats. She learned how to tell Sarir and Yasrukh apart. Both were dappled brown and white, but Sarir had a brown patch over one eye, whereas her sister had a brown mask over both eyes. Alzali's sleek gray form was admired, and Fat Carl's round one was the source of a couple of stifled giggles. Rahma kept her distance from Khudha, who hissed a warning. As'ad blamed it on the rat being woken up from her normal daytime sleep.

The afternoon passed more quickly than As'ad was used to. His days of travel tended to blend together with nothing to distract him from his thoughts. Rahma tried to lure him into more personal conversations from time to time, but he was on guard again.

His lack of engagement didn't seem to bother her that much. She cheerfully chatted about anything and everything under the sun until they stopped for the night. He learned that she liked needlework but not weaving, couldn't whistle, and thought that Sharamil would benefit from a rural library system like the one Bavenpier had.

After a simple dinner, Rahma failed to engage positively with any of the rats. She moved slowly and spoke in a soothing tone, but the standoffish rodents wanted nothing to do with her. They stuck close to As'ad while watching the stranger. Sarir, Yasruhk, and Qamar turned his lap into a communal bathing spot and soon forgot to eye the girl with misgiving. Khudha and Alzali took up that slack from their perches on his shoulders. Only Fat Carl ignored Rahma's presence completely. He chose a spot on a fire-warmed rock to doze, content to lay there until the fire was doused for the night.

It wasn't until they were settled into their separate sleeping spaces that As'ad realized the girl had neatly redirected the conversation away from her plans. Her willingness to discuss his pets had completely derailed him. The steady stream of information about herself had kept him off-balance. A begrudging ember of admiration glowed in his chest. That had been neatly done.

Since their path headed due north, the landscape had reverted back to sand. As'ad didn't realize he was making a face until his uninvited travel companion asked him about it.

"I don't like sand," he admitted.

"Because it's coarse and rough and irritating?" Rahma offered.

"And it gets everywhere," he added with a smirk. Living in a country dominated by desert meant that most people just accepted the sand as a part of life and didn't bother complaining. It was nice to hear an opinion that agreed with his.



“Have you ever been to the coast?”

Wary but deeming that morsel of information to be relatively safe, As’ad admitted that he had.

“Is that sand different from this stuff?” Rahma scooped up a handful of the tan and gray granules, then made a fist and slowly poured them out.

He had to think about that. “I suppose it’s mostly the same. It feels different because the ocean is right there.”

From the corner of his eye, As’ad saw her turn to study him. He pinned his gaze to the top of the small rise in the road.

“Tell me about the ocean, please. I’ve never been.”

Since he couldn’t reveal anything dangerous about his past with such an impersonal request, As’ad happily fulfilled it. He told her about the various ships and smaller boats that plied the waters, and the vast quantities of fish that were brought in daily. His time on the coast had been short-lived, but he remembered the feeling of the salty wind against his skin and the sense of freedom that called to him from beyond the shore. Halfway through a description of the racing vessels some of the wealthy Sharamilans owned, he looked over at Rahma and realized that he was practically gushing.

“Oh, don’t let me stop you,” she rushed to say when he broke off sheepishly. “I love hearing you speak so passionately.”

The tightening of his chest made it hard to speak, and his next words were gruff. “There’s Balda.”

Rahma turned to see the oasis town within view. As'ad thought he read disappointment on her face but turned away determined to focus on getting to civilization and passing her off to a responsible party.

She unsuccessfully tried to engage him in conversation for the last hour of walking. Seeing Balda so close reminded As'ad that he would soon be free of her presence, and there was no need to give her more opportunities to trick information out of him.

Balda was new to the both of them, but it was set up in a familiar manner. A sturdy wall protected the oasis town from the desert raiders that sprang up from time to time. As'ad had seen bandit crews occasionally on his travels, but they usually ignored him. A lone wanderer wasn't worth the effort. The one time a scraggly looking crew had ventured near, As'ad had whipped out his pipe and played a horde of rampaging rats into existence before the villains got close enough to realize he had been the one to conjure them.

Wide gates allowed entrance to the town, and As'ad quickly found a general merchant's shop on the main road. Rahma guarded the handcart while he went in to make several purchases. He came back and dumped the parcels in her arms.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

In Which As'ad Does Not Escape

“What’s all this?”

As'ad privately enjoyed the bewilderment on her face. It was about time the shoe was on the other foot. “Warm clothes and other necessary supplies. You won’t survive the trip home without them.”

He didn’t acknowledge her gratitude but did help her repack her bag.

“We need to find the administrative center,” he announced when they were done.

“Why?”

“Because I asked if anyone is traveling toward Nahr or beyond. The proprietor said that the Adil family is preparing to do so soon, and they have five daughters.”

Rahma set a hand on her pack in the cart. “I’m properly outfitted now. Why can’t I go with you?”

“You may not care about your reputation, but I need to guard mine.” As'ad got into position between the poles and tugged the handcart back onto the road.

“But—”

“And you can’t follow me safely. Think about the bandits. And the ghouls.”

“Ghouls only frequent cemeteries, remember?” she said with a shiver that undermined her words.

“Things outside of towns die, too, you know.”

At the administrative center, he made her write a letter to her parents. The scribes were willing to write on her behalf, but Rahma assured them that she was capable. She didn't tell As'ad what she wrote, and he didn't ask. After paying for its delivery, he got the address they needed to locate the Adil family.

Following the directions to a beautiful home with a proper view of the water, they met the lovely family who had five daughters, ranging in age from toddler to young adult. Yusef impressed As'ad with his calm competence, and his wife, Amna, immediately took Rahma under her wing. The pair were quite willing to believe As'ad's story. His careful words and manner suggested they had only been in company together for a few hours at most. And since he was traveling in the opposite direction, he would be ever so grateful to know that she was in good hands.

Yusef promised to get her there safely. He and his family were heading to the coast for an extended vacation, and it was no trouble to stop in Nahr on the way. The one downside was that they weren't planning to leave for a few more days, at least. That gave Rahma too much time, in As'ad's mind, to seek him out and continue trailing behind. She hadn't corrected any of the assumptions, which he appreciated, but her suspiciously submissive silence was beginning to unnerve him. He asked Yusef about the lodging options in town. The jovial man gave him directions to the nearest reputable inn. After thanking the man and his family, As'ad took his leave.

His question about inns had been a show for Rahma. He had already made inquiries during his first stop at the shop. He now knew that there were two large inns that catered to the traveling merchant crowd, and both were set close to the city gates, though on opposite ends of town. As'ad left in the direction Yusef had indicated for

the closest, and ostensibly cozier, lodgings. When he was sure that Rahma couldn't see him anymore, he deviated from that path and took a winding course toward the north end of town.

The next morning, in an abundance of caution, he left town by way of the north gate. From there, he followed the road until the oasis was out of sight, then circled back to rejoin the road heading west. Traffic, and his odd path, elongated his journey and exacerbated the growing anxiety that Rahma would somehow catch up to him.

The drifting sands in this part of the country made keeping a road clear rather difficult. Instead of paving stones or something more permanent, the road builders had chosen to erect stone markers at regular intervals. Squat and sturdy, these hip-high guides included carved symbols that corresponded with matching symbols on state-sanctioned maps. As'ad paused to check his most official map and get his bearings, then set off aiming for the next small village. His funds had depleted more rapidly than he'd planned, and he needed to pull another con. According to the map, Qarya should fit his needs.

The first day of travel was uneventful. Feeling nervous about being followed again, As'ad pushed faster than he normally would. Yesterday's detour had added a couple of hours, and he didn't get quite as far as he had intended. Although he looked back several times, he didn't catch a glimpse of anyone who could be Rahma. His fellow travelers were eyed with great suspicion, and one poor lady dressed head to toe in shockingly pink robes stopped to give him a piece of her mind when he stared a little too long. Luckily, she accepted the apologies of the scruffy looking rambler, alone but for his travel-worn handcart. She had apparently decided that her attire was just too beautiful not to look at, and As'ad encouraged the notion. He was also excessively grateful that the well-muscled mountain of a man at her side was content to merely stand there menacingly.

His second day saw less people and began to look more like his usual travels. Now

that he was heading toward a small farm village that didn't happen to be between two important places, it was just him and the rats as far as the eye could see. As'ad was loath to admit it even to himself, but as the journey stretched on, he found himself missing Rahma's chatter. When she wasn't asking invasive questions, she was quite pleasant to be around. And more than slightly pleasant to look at.

On several occasions, he had to remind himself that this was the life he had chosen for himself. No one else could dictate where he needed to go, or what he needed to do. As they did from time to time, his thoughts wandered back to the life he had escaped. For a brief period, As'ad had kept himself fed by playing the pipes on street corners in Mafur. His instruments were often fashioned by his own hand and nothing to write home about. Thanks to a kind soul who frequented the orphanage, he had learned the basics of playing before he left. The rest he learned through experimentation.

But the paltry coins earned from busking on corners in the less reputable areas of town weren't enough to fill a growing boy's nutritional needs. When Aladdin and his crew invited him to join their gang, it sounded like an answer to prayer. If so, Fortuna hated him.

Life with Aladdin hadn't been too bad, at first. The instant camaraderie soothed As'ad's soul. He had a place to belong. The crew had set him up in their headquarters in the basement of an abandoned building and asked him to guard their food stash in exchange for steady meals and a safe place to sleep. They also enjoyed the nightly music he offered. Little by little, they taught him the skills he would need to participate in their group as a full member.

As'ad had always been slender, and as a child, he was barely more than a slip of a thing. This natural advantage made moving through crowds like a wraith simple. His fingers, nimble from playing the pipes, swiftly learned to dip in and out of pockets to retrieve items without alerting their owners. Relieving rich persons of tiny portions of

their wealth didn't bother him at all. He figured they could afford it, and he would put it to better use than they would.

The crew also taught him how to use his expressive brown eyes to their best advantage. Many a well-meaning, generous soul donated to his various causes by falling for his false sincerity. His earnest face brought in more funds than several of the others combined. Until puberty, that is. For a few short but uncomfortable years, his gangly limbs and unpredictable voice, which could crack at any moment and swooped between high and sweet and discordantly low, made working those cons difficult. Aladdin pulled him off the front lines and had him working with the research team.

Quite a few years older than the rest of them, Aladdin was the mastermind behind the gang. He always had a hundred plans up his sleeves. And he was ambitious. Somewhere or other, he had gained knowledge that solidified his belief in the cave filled by the Forty Thieves. His source, which he refused to share with anyone, affirmed that Ali Baba had left most of the treasure intact. Aladdin was determined to collect the riches and magical artifacts for himself. To that end, he constantly had at least one or two gang members searching for references to the cave.

Qadir, a member of the crew who had been with Aladdin almost since the beginning but had broken his leg in a manner that didn't heal correctly, was tasked with teaching As'ad and the others how to read. Less personally invested than Aladdin, As'ad still found the historic texts fascinating. Reading opened up a new world for him, and he sometimes snuck into the city library to peruse different topics.

Around the time As'ad was twenty or so, Qadir had a breakthrough. The most trusted members of the gang left the city to seek out the cave. As'ad fell into that category and experienced his first taste of country living. The journey took several weeks, and he found himself the preferred playmate for Aladdin's younger sister most of the time. As'ad had not been entrusted with the story of Aladdin's family, but there could

be no doubt that he and Shula were related despite the fifteen or so years between them. Her exotic green eyes aside, just slap a long, curly wig on Aladdin and he would be an adult version of Shula. The leader of their gang often used his more delicate features to his advantage.

Still a child, Shula never questioned Aladdin's directives. She willingly played the part of a sick youngling or whatever they needed. Outside of the city, she embraced the freedom of the open desert and ran the rest of them ragged until Aladdin asked As'ad to entertain her. Unsurprisingly, he was soon wrapped around her little finger and accepted whatever role she assigned him in her games of make-believe.

The cave they eventually uncovered in the mountains that separated Sharamil from Fanostrin held enough relics to make the trip a worthwhile endeavor. As'ad got the impression that Aladdin didn't find what he was seeking, though. The crumbling texts were examined, then carefully packed for the return trip when it became evident that they couldn't be deciphered at a glance. Something must have given Aladdin hope that he would find the real cave soon, though. He seemed almost cheerful on the way home—an unusual state that As'ad found perturbing.

One of the artifacts uncovered by the group was an amulet that could curse people with illness. Unlike most of the other items, this one had come with instructions. They learned how to reverse the sickness, as well. Aladdin quickly worked out a scam to inflict people with the unheard-of disease, then provide the sufferers with a miracle cure that solved it. Naturally, the miracle was exorbitantly expensive. As'ad hadn't been fond of the scam in the first place. He became exceedingly uncomfortable when some of the more stubborn victims died before paying for the cure.

The amulet fizzled out after a month or so of abuse. But it was the catalyst that opened As'ad's eyes to the real effect Aladdin's schemes had on his targets. As'ad had already refrained from any cons that involved violence; he couldn't stomach it.



The others razzed him but left him alone because he brought in plenty with his gentle methods. Being alert to the less obvious harm, As'ad became aware that many of the tricks and scams were perpetrated against the desperate and not just the wealthy, like he had previously believed.

It didn't take long for him to decide that he wanted out. He plotted everything down to the last detail. A year before he thought he could make a clean break, he began reminiscing about the trip to the countryside. He kept his comments wistful at first; then, when the crew got used to his sighs, he ramped it up. The remarks became a little more concrete or asked questions, like, "Wouldn't it be nice to live in the open air with elbow room?" Everyone grew accustomed to his "someday" plans, and a few started to offer suggestions on how he could make that happen.

His chance came a full four months before he thought he would be able to leave. Aladdin and Qadir had translated enough of the ancient writings found in the first cave to point them in the likely direction of the ultimate treasure cave. As'ad knew he couldn't risk possessing that knowledge. Aladdin might be fine with one of his crew members leaving to wander about the desert. But he wouldn't countenance such a person who knew the exact location of a cave filled with wonders.

He offered to keep an eye on Shula at their base. Aladdin trusted him with the task, and As'ad hoped it would work out in his favor. When the men returned, flush with victory, Aladdin readily granted As'ad's request to branch out on his own. He even gifted the young man with a pipe they had found. No one else could play, and they hadn't figured out if it served any magical purpose or not. As'ad recognized that it cost Aladdin very little while still making him appear generous, so he thanked the man and made his escape.

Twice that evening, while As'ad was playing with the rats and getting ready for bed, he felt the itchy sensation of being watched. His rats gave no sign of scenting a predator, and he couldn't see anything past his fire. He even slunk away from the

harsh light for a time to scan the darkness but couldn't find anything definite. He slept uneasily that night, forgoing the tent in case he needed to react quickly.

Only partially surprised to wake up intact the next morning, As'ad took his time gathering his things and caring for his long-tailed companions. The feeling of being observed surreptitiously had dissipated sometime in the night. He remained vigilant, though, as he hiked along the rocky path. The loose shale interfered with the cart's wheels and slowed his progress considerably.

Sometime after the noon hour, familiar shrieks grabbed his attention. A put-upon sigh poured from his lips even as his heart gave a glad leap. He rushed to grab his pipe, then left the hardcart where it was and ran toward the commotion.

As he approached a breach in the landscape that indicated a small ravine, he heard Rahma scolding something. Whatever, or whomever, it was didn't verbally respond to her dire warnings to leave before getting hurt, so As'ad was expecting to find her cornered by an animal of some sort.

He was not expecting her to be trapped by a large, bright-yellow, one-horned carnivorous rabbit.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

### Which Might Not Be a Scam

“How did you manage to let a miraj sneak up on you? They’re kind of hard to miss,” he couldn’t resist teasing. As hoped, the fanged, knee-high beast swiveled to watch the newcomer.

“I didn’t know this channel was a dead end,” Rahma protested. “He must have followed me in here.”

As’ad eased farther away from the girl, trying to lure the miraj away. The creature was hesitant to turn his back on her to watch this new threat.

“Can you climb over the rim?”

“Can you keep him away from me while I do?” Her sassy answer reassured him. She wasn’t going to lose her head and do something silly.

Unfortunately, when she moved to scramble over the edge of the shallow ravine, the miraj took offense and leapt toward her in two aggressive hops, brandishing his sharp horn. She stopped and whirled to face him, causing him to hesitate.

As’ad scanned the area for a stout stick or anything useful. He spied a fist-sized rock and hurled it toward the creature. This had the unhappy effect of angering the miraj, who took a gigantic leap toward As’ad but still wouldn’t leave.

The con artist realized there was only one option left to him. He was reluctant to blow his cover so thoroughly, but he couldn’t leave Rahma there to be eaten by a bunny.

Pulling out his pipe, he hastily threw together a melody that made a swarm of rats appear at her feet. At the final note, they rushed toward the miraj. Though considerably larger (and corporeal), the creature panicked at the sight. It tore through the ravine, kicking up sand and squealing in high-pitched terror.

As'ad walked toward Rahma. He carefully set his pipe on the ground, then reached in a hand to help her up.

"And you tried to convince me that you weren't a con man," she observed as he hauled her over the edge.

"Can you blame me?" He dropped her hand. "This is my livelihood and the only way I know how to keep food in my belly."

She squinted at him. "You don't like to lie, do you?"

"How's that?" As'ad scratched the scruff on his chin, pretending he didn't understand.

"Your deceptions are very careful. You tell the truth in a way that leads people to the wrong conclusion. I saw it in Nahr and with the Adils." Her head tilted to one side. "Does that help with the guilt?"

"How guilty do you feel about ditching that nice family?" he asked. "I bet they're worried sick."

"I don't feel any guilt." Before he could wonder what sort of person that made her, she said, "I told them the truth."

As'ad's lungs pinched. "The truth?" he asked, aiming for indifference but probably landing closer to morbid curiosity.

“Mmhmm.” She flipped her braid over her shoulder. “I told them that I was heading for Jabal and I was following you because you knew how to get there.”

“And they were fine with that?”

Her nose wrinkled. “I wouldn’t say fine , exactly. They definitely tried to talk me out of it. But since I am legally an adult, there’s not much they can do about it.”

He looked her over. “ You’re nineteen?”

“Only for another three months.” She put her hands on her hips and very obviously scanned him. “Oh, come on.” She crossed her arms. “You can’t be more than twenty yourself.”

As’ad pulled himself taller. “I am twenty-three years of age, thank you very much.”

“Huh.” She looked mildly surprised but not upset by his admission.

“Probably,” he added under his breath, ducking his head. As soon as the word left his lips, he knew it was a mistake. He turned to walk back to his handcart and pets.

Rahma jogged to keep up with his long, hurried strides. “What does that mean?”

“What does what mean?”

“Ha. You know what I mean.”

Since the girl was following him—and would be following him until Jabal, at this point—he knew there was no escaping the question. She would circle back to it later if he didn’t answer now. “Twenty-three is my best guess. I left the orphanage fifteen years ago. As far as the headmistress knew, I was about eight years old then.”

What he didn't mention was that the headmistress had been overly fond of the paddle and every one of those eight years had been emblazoned on his backside. Leaving her "tender" care hadn't been a difficult decision. Nor had he ever regretted it, regardless of what came later.

Rather than pressing, Rahma returned to an earlier comment as they reached the cart. "I'm looking forward to being twenty," she said. "People seem to take you more seriously with a two in front of your age."

The loquacious girl then launched into a one-sided discussion about the merits of salting or drying meat for long-term storage, of all things. As she didn't seem to require his participation, he focused on pulling the cart.

After the calming effects of a warm meal that night, As'ad asked a question that had been pricking at him for the last couple hours. "How did you follow me? I was very careful not to go to the inn Yusef recommended. And I never saw a glimpse of you."

"Oh, I didn't follow you," she said lightly. "I just knew where you were going. More or less. I got a late start but, luckily, your camp was pretty easy to find the first night."

He watched her try to offer a seed to Yasrukh. The brown-and-white rat eyed the offering with misgiving. No matter how much they loved food, they wouldn't take it from just anyone.

"Thank you, by the way. For the tent and extra clothes," she added when he stared at her blankly. "I would have frozen without them."

"Uh, you're welcome?" He poked at the coals with a stick and wouldn't meet her eye.

Rahma seemed content to sit quietly while slowly attempting to gain the trust of his

pets. The rats were not fond of the growing cold and had been sticking close to his person when they weren't huddled in their nests. Tonight, the wind had died down and the rats were taking advantage of the day's residual heat. Khudha hadn't hissed again, but she kept her distance from the stranger. As'ad hadn't seen any scratching or growling from the others, either. It was likely only a matter of time before Rahma achieved enough familiarity not to be avoided. He didn't know whether she would ever earn the affection of his pets, though. They could be somewhat particular.

Waiting for Rahma to fall asleep was an exercise in patience that As'ad didn't think he had. He still needed more supplies, but her return complicated things. When she finally entered her tent and remained still for twenty minutes, he pulled out his maps. The dying fire barely illuminated the parchment. The moon was waxing, but the clouds that scuttled across its face far too frequently made it hard to read.

Eventually, As'ad gave up and returned the maps to their case. Yasruhk and Sarir were far too excited to see him. He worried that their excited chitters would wake Rahma, so he put them in his pockets before setting out. While the moon's illumination was too feeble for map-reading, it was plenty sufficient for guiding his steps. By his estimation, the next village was within a two- or three-hour walk. Their unexpected guest made the need for food and funds more immediate. And more inconvenient.

Too far north of the border for much jungle foliage, As'ad wasn't sure what kind of village Qarya was. It didn't look like it was set on an oasis, according to the map, but everyone needed water. Perhaps they had some very deep wells. To his relief, the trip was accomplished in the time frame he expected.

Qarya lay dark and silent as he approached the small village. The few dogs seemed to be of a lazy sort, and As'ad's investigation was only interrupted by a bark or two. The rats in his pocket responded by hunkering deeper into the fabric.

As predicted, the village's water appeared to be sourced from multiple wells. A small quarry at the edge of town looked, at first, like a possible place to dispose of his fake rats, until he realized it was now serving as an aquifer. He couldn't risk even pretending to contaminate their water sources. Which meant he needed to convince them to create a bonfire or something equally inconvenient.

On the trek back to camp, As'ad contemplated his options. The most thorough form of evidence disposal was a large fire that was hot enough to reduce any "rat skeletons" to ash. The difficulty in this region came from procuring enough burnable material without asking the inhabitants of the town to sacrifice things like furniture. He had once dashed all the rats into a bottomless crack in an abandoned quarry some months ago. But no one had been using it to hold drinking water, and getting the villagers to push a heavy rock over the top hadn't been problematic. Qarya was a thorny problem that thwarted his best thinking. Though, at this time of night, he could hardly be accused of being at his best. If he wasn't running so low, he would consider skipping it for the next town.

Feeling dull-witted and slow, As'ad climbed into his tent a few hours before dawn, intending to figure something out then. His pocket companions made an appearance and danced around his head in some game he couldn't follow. But even their enthusiastic scampering couldn't keep him awake, and he soon drifted off into dreamless sleep.

Rahma woke before him and had already begun preparing breakfast when he crawled out of his tent the next morning. He thanked her and ate. He was so focused on finding a solution, he couldn't have identified the food items two minutes after. Uncharacteristically, the interloper maintained her silence.

When As'ad broke from his musings and went to care for his rats, he saw that she had already seen to their water and arranged the canvas covering. With nothing else demanding his attention, As'ad took out his shaving things and removed the scruff.



He still didn't have a plan of action but wanted to be prepared.

Apparently, this change of events was too much for Rahma, and she opened her mouth. "Why are you shaving?"

"I feel the need to look presentable today."

"Is that why you favor the more traditional robes?"

Asad wasn't sure how she made that connection. It was a pleasant side effect, but mostly they were easy. "I don't like all the buttons on the more modern styles." He spared a look for her. "Your clothes are more traditional."

Rahma nodded as she ran a hand down her knee-length tunic that covered her pants. "I find them both comfortable and flattering."

As'ad tried to concentrate on the task at hand. Admiring her figure wouldn't help anybody. The exasperating girl grinned at him.

Scraping a sharp blade across the delicate skin of his face had never been a dangerous endeavor before. Having a rapt audience made him aware of just how badly this could go.

"Haven't you ever watched your father shave before?" he asked his observer in an attempt to get her to look elsewhere.

"Sure."

He paused the process to give her a look. She shrugged.

"You're more fun to look at."

His face grew hot, and he couldn't think of a single safe response. Eventually, As'ad completed the activity—without drawing blood, somehow—and they set out. He had more or less decided to try something that had worked for him once in the past. A few months ago, he had been a little sloppy scoping out the next town. He hadn't been desperate for supplies yet, so he had taken less care than he should. The townsfolk had guessed his identity before he'd had time to set things up.

In that one instance, being recognized without having first “rescued” anyone from rats had worked out in his favor. They believed the rumors they had heard from other travelers that he was researching the rat problem. His appearance in town was assumed to be an attempt at discreet investigation. He did nothing to disabuse them of this notion, and filled the role they were expecting. He asked all the questions and checked out all the buildings, escorted by willing residents who were hoping he knew how to keep the plague from getting to them. An added bonus of that encounter was the abundance of supplies they had bestowed on him just for telling them what to watch out for. Or maybe they were simply grateful for his alleged humanitarian efforts?

Qarya didn't have an ideal setting for his con, but they were quite likely to have heard of him by now. He rather hoped they would find it in their hearts to outfit him for the next leg of the journey. He wouldn't come right out and ask, of course. But while he “investigated,” he could easily let it slip that his supplies were running low. Maybe they would gift him enough to make it to the next con-worthy town.

That left the problem, however, of Rahma. Waltzing into the village with her was out of the question. He had absolutely no good reason to be traveling with an unattached, unrelated female. Part of being able to maintain the illusion of expertise came from the Sharamilans' faith in his character. He had spent a great deal of time constructing the reputation of a studious, upright champion of farmers. Introducing anything to refute that claim could endanger his ability to maintain the scam. As close as he was getting to leaving the country, he still had too far to go.

When their path rounded a large, rocky outcropping, the village became visible in the distance. As'ad stopped walking and set down the cart handles. Rahma's monologue about tunic patterns, which he hadn't been listening to, paused.

He had been planning what to say to her for the last twenty minutes, but now that it was time, his words felt flat and unbelievable. "I would greatly appreciate it if you did not join me in town. I'm hoping it will be a quick stop to refresh supplies."

"Oh?" she inquired, with a bland innocence that made his palms sweat.

"It's that whole . . . reputation thing. You understand."

She ignored the fumbling in his explanation and nodded with all seriousness. "Oh, yes. We wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea."

Her smile did little for As'ad's nerves, but she didn't question it when he removed her pack and set it at her feet. He left for town both relieved and vaguely unsettled.

About fifteen minutes after leaving the girl behind, he paused to dig out the pipe and arrange it more visibly in the handcart. He would rather the village inhabitants begin forming their own ideas as soon as possible. The less he had to prompt them, the simpler it would be. When he glanced back, Rahma was nowhere in sight. He rather unconvincingly told himself that she was merely helping his cause by staying hidden.

As'ad rolled into the village shortly after midday. Many families and workers were finishing lunch, and a good number of them looked to be considering naps. A gray-haired woman who may have been in her fifties or early sixties approached him first.

"Hail, traveler. Welcome to Qarya."

He nodded deeply and thanked her. Her shrewd eyes drank in his appearance and the

visible contents of his cart, including the conspicuous pipe.

“This may seem rather forward of me, young man, but are you, perhaps, the one known as the Pied Piper?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The woman gave a cry of delight and clapped her hands. Others began moving closer to him, as well.

“Let me introduce myself. My name is Ruha, and I’m the mayor of this humble village. How can we help you?”

While the leader of their village was smiling, some of the others looked agitated when his identity was revealed. A man, who was maybe a decade younger than the mayor and wore a fierce black beard, stepped forward.

“Is Qarya about to be overrun?”

As’ad shook his head. “Apart from the specimens I keep caged in my handcart, I have not seen any signs of rats in the vicinity. Nor does your village fit the pattern I’ve established so far.”

The large man lowered thick, black eyebrows that balanced out his beard. “Then why are you here?”

“Oh, hush, Rais.” The mayor set a hand on his arm, and As’ad was able to see a family resemblance between the two. “True diligence requires being thorough.” She looked to As’ad again. “I imagine anomalies are always a possibility.”

As’ad silently thanked her for providing a reasonable answer without him needing to

say a word. He ducked his head. “Assumptions are dangerous in my line of work.”

The gruff man, who was likely the mayor’s son or nephew, relaxed his stance. “How can we be of service?”

“A survey of why certain areas aren’t being hit with this unnatural plague could be just as valuable as discovering why others are. Do you mind if I ask more questions than you probably want to answer?” As’ad grinned at the crowd.

A few answering chuckles let him know he was hitting the right tone. The mayor promised that he could go anywhere and talk to anyone; all the village residents would be more than happy to assist him in his investigation.

While he still had their full attention, he said something about grabbing his notebook and flipped back the main cover of his handcart. The action “accidentally” revealed how little food he had. He coughed, then quickly pulled the cover back into place. His second attempt to retrieve the writing supplies was less unrestrained. As’ad kept his head down as though embarrassed, but when he risked a peek at the mayor, she was already exchanging knowing glances with some of the folks in the crowd.

After that, it was simply a matter of wandering over every square inch of the place, asking the same standard questions over, and over, and over—and over—again. The sun had nearly set by the time As’ad felt he had sold the act. Several kind villagers had provided water and snacks throughout the afternoon.

Ruha collected him about then and brought him to an open area that had been filled with tables. It seemed he would be well-fed tonight. A twisting sensation in his middle accompanied the memory of Rahma waiting somewhere outside of town. Maybe he could sneak her something after everyone had gone to bed. Rais had already offered him a place to sleep for the night.

“Hello!”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

### Which Features Honesty in a New Light

A chill ran down his spine at the familiar voice. Had he conjured her with his thoughts? He turned around to discover his ears had not deceived him. Seeing Rahma, not only in town but drawing attention to herself, froze his brain. He blinked stupidly at her.

She waved merrily at the group. “How are things going?”

Rais stood closest to her. He turned to face her but didn’t apply the intimidating posture he had first used with As’ad.

“Hello, miss,” he returned the greeting politely. “May I ask who you are?”

“My name is Rahma.” She beamed at the crowd. As’ad had a moment to think that maybe it would be alright. Then her next words froze his heart. “I’ve been following the Pied Piper.”

The village elders turned to look at him with varying degrees of curiosity and/or hostility. The younger set hadn’t yet caught on that a drama was about to be acted out, right here in the streets. Sweat gathered at his hairline. He had never imagined this scenario and his usual quick wits had utterly abandoned him.

“He keeps trying to persuade me to stop,” Rahma informed them, her smile never wavering. “He even found a lovely family with five daughters—can you imagine that, five daughters?—who were headed to the coast and could drop me off at home on the way. Obviously,” she continued, “I didn’t go with them.”

She said that last almost as if it was a joke that they could all share. As'ad could see no way out of this mess, but to his surprise, the crowd seemed to be softening. Two or three of the older ladies exchanged glances, and he heard a couple murmurs about "young love." His obvious discomfiture about the whole situation seemed to endear him to them. All too soon, and without quite knowing how it came to be, As'ad found himself seated at the head table with the mayor and several of her cronies.

Rahma was there, as well, naturally. She had wrapped the village elders around her little finger simply by telling the truth. As'ad chose to stick to the truth as much as possible in order to avoid inventing details that might trip him up later. Rahma wielded the truth as a weapon. Her absolute unconcern for the judgment of others had them all eating out of the palm of her hand.

She told them about Suha, and then flat-out asked if anyone knew anything about misplaced orphans. One of them mentioned that the married couple who cared for the occasional orphan had been relieved of their most recent dependents. The twelve-year-old twins had long-lost relatives somewhere out west. A sour-faced woman had collected them not long ago. This interested Rahma greatly. Her gentle but direct questions established that the woman was most likely Hadia, and that she had been accompanied by a girl matching Suha's description, along with two young men. As'ad worried that Rahma was getting her hopes up for nothing. Dark hair and brown eyes described pretty much the entire population of Sharamil.

That night, Rahma and As'ad were welcomed into two different homes to sleep. In the morning, they were gifted a goodly amount of supplies on top of the fee he didn't ask for yet received anyway. More than one person asked Rahma if she wanted an escort back home. She stubbornly stuck to her plan, though she did unbend enough to send another letter to her parents, and the general feeling seemed to be one of goodwill.

When one of the matrons asked Rahma if she felt safe traveling on with As'ad, he



relaxed at this evidence that they weren't going to blithely allow her to continue her outrageous behavior. She reassured them that he had been the perfect picture of a valiant knight.

"I don't think I could persuade him to behave dishonorably toward me even if I tried."

"And have you been trying yet?" a middle-aged woman asked in a confiding undertone that As'ad pretended he didn't hear. He also pretended not to notice the way Rahma twinkled back at the lady.

Before he knew it, they were back on the road heading west, alone but for a handful of rats and a much heavier handcart. How did this come about?

"Where did the name 'Pied Piper' come from, anyway?" Rahma asked, right around the time As'ad lost hope that she would change her mind and return to Qarya. "I mean, obviously the 'piper' part makes sense. But what's the deal with the 'pied' part?"

He shrugged helplessly. "I can't answer that. I'm really not sure where it came from, either." He kicked aside a pebble in his path. "One day, the town I was visiting just called me that. Apparently, word spread. Now everyone does."

The moniker was a mystery, but he benefited from the anonymity. No one viewed him as a separate person with a real name, and that buffer provided another layer of safety from the authorities.

"It's better than the Snide Piper, I suppose," she mused.

He looked at her askance.

“Or the Tried Piper, which suggests a criminal background.” Before As’ad could object, she threw out a few more. “The Dyed Piper? Fried Piper? Guide Piper almost works.”

“Must it rhyme?”

She looked at him. “At this point? Yup!” Her fingers began twisting her braid around. “Hide Piper? No, Hide the Pi—No. Lied . . . to Piper?” she sounded out with a forming grimace. “Nah.”

Her hand got too tangled in the braid and she accidentally tugged her head to the side. This didn’t stop her rambling.

“Dried? Tied? Chide? Eyed? Well, I should hope so,” she muttered the last to herself, then continued at her regular volume, “Bride, cowhide, seaside?”

“How about the Wide Piper?” As’ad offered, unable to resist any longer.

Rahma burst out laughing. “Can you imagine? Everyone would expect you to come waddling into town!”

He felt a surge of pride for making her laugh.

She wiped at her eyes a moment later. “Well. I suppose it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

She smiled at him, and he smiled back without thinking.

“Awww, you do like me.”

He dropped the expression. “I’m tolerating you until I can safely make you someone

else's problem."

"Oh, naturally," Rahma agreed easily. "One of these days, you might actually succeed."

They walked in silence for all of seven steps before she changed the subject.

"Have you really been doing this for years?"

He frowned a question at her.

"Back in Nahr. During negotiations, you said that we were paying for your years of expertise."

"Oh." He slowly started nodding. "Right. Uh . . . I'd guess it's been"—his hand moved side-to-side in the air—"maybe a year?"

"A year of this con, or a year of living on your own like this?"

As'ad wasn't too keen on the shrewd look in her eye. "I mastered this use of the pipes about a year ago," he stated, hoping she would catch his tone and leave it alone.

"This use? How else can you use the pipe?"

His next words were slow and enunciated clearly as he turned comically wide eyes on her. "To. Play. Music."

"Bah." Rahma threw her hand toward his shoulder and rolled her eyes. When he left it at that, she shook her head. "You really haven't experimented with anything else?"

As'ad blinked.

“What if you can do more with it? Maybe even something useful!”

Her emphatic hand motions were back. He moved over to stay out of her flailing range.

Rahma stopped to put both of her hands on her hips, and he automatically paused, as well. She leaned forward to stare into his eyes. The sunlight caught in their depths and brought out a mahogany hue As’ad had never seen before. It distracted him from her next words.

“I know you don’t like pulling cons. This could be your ticket to something else.”

“I don’t know how to do anything else,” he answered without thinking. “Hey, wait! What do you mean, I don’t like pulling cons? I’m very good at it.”

A satisfied smirk settled on her lovely face. “There. You see? You couldn’t flat-out refute my statement, so you tried to distract me by pointing out your skill.” Her eyebrows rose. “Being good at something doesn’t mean you like it.”

As’ad stared stupidly as she spun on her heel and continued walking down the road. She called over her shoulder, “I, for one, am very good at finding grubs in the crops. That doesn’t mean I want to do it. I learned out of necessity.”

After a beat, he began moving again. He rolled her words around in his mind for the next leg of the trip. Rahma mercifully stayed quiet for longer than he had previously thought possible, and he was able to work through his thoughts in peace.

That night, as they sat around the campfire and played—or tried to play, in Rahma’s case—with the rats, As’ad worked up the nerve to ask her a question.

“How do you know I don’t like pulling cons?” He wanted to add a stick to the fire to

avoid looking at her, but they were running low, so he examined his fingernails instead.

“You don’t take as much money as you could, for one thing,” she stated.

“So?” He risked a glance in her direction, but Rahma kept teasing Fat Carl, who had sidled near, with her braid.

“That tells me you aren’t greedy.”

Fat Carl rolled over on his back, revealing the V-shaped patch of white under his neck that looked like a collar against the brown of the rest of his fur. She gave him a piece of fruit, and he chirped happily before delving right in with his round belly still exposed.

As’ad shook his head. That rat behaved nothing like any of his other pets. Then he remembered what they were discussing.

“Maybe it’s because I don’t want to get caught.” He leaned back on his hands. “A little less money more often works out mathematically to be much more profitable than prison.”

Rahma met his practical expression with an unimpressed one. She shifted to face him fully. “Your attitude about the whole thing is what first made me pay attention.”

“What attitude?”

“Oh, you know. Little things. The dread that creeps into your voice when you realize it’s time to do it again. The way you were eating less so I could have enough but our food stores didn’t shrink as fast as they should.”

A growing heat burned at As'ad's cheeks. She had noticed that?

“The fact that you don't keep a full army of trained rats—which would be pretty easy for you—to cause real damage to the villages—”

He held up a hand. “If I left a trail of destruction like that, the sultan's men would find me in a heartbeat.”

She pointed a finger at him, then shook it. “It's in the way you can justify all of your actions and make them sound selfish.”

As'ad pulled his arms around his legs to ward off a chill that didn't come from the evening air. “I don't think I need to hear any more reasons.”

Rahma studied him for a quiet moment, then pushed herself to her feet and brushed her hands off. “Goodnight, Fireside Piper.”

He watched her walk to the tent, then turned back to the dwindling fire.

“Oh,” she called. “If you're looking for Alzali, she's in here.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” It seemed her steady campaign to win his rats' hearts was beginning to see results.

As'ad foolishly started thinking he was off the hook when they made it through breakfast and almost a full hour of walking the next morning before Rahma reintroduced the topic.

“So,” she announced. “I was working on it all last night.”

“You're awfully chipper for someone who didn't sleep,” he teased dryly.

“Of course I slept.” She shot him a look of confusion, then moved on. “Currently, you use the illusion for deception. But ”—she emphasized the word with both hands—“couldn’t you use it for entertainment?”

As’ad hated to wipe the growing smile off her face, but he had to ask, “Who in their right mind would be entertained by a plague of rats?”

Rahma threw her hands in the air with a huff. “It doesn’t have to be rats ! What else can you create?”

His mind blanked. “Uhh . . .”

“You mean you’ve never tried anything else? Ever?!”

“Well, you know,” he scrambled to defend himself against her incredulity. “The first time I made the illusion, I was looking at a real rat. I kinda wished for another one, and there it was!”

“Hmm,” Rahma tapped her chin as she walked. “Can it only duplicate things that you’re looking at? No,” she declared with an outflung hand before he could get a word in. “Your swarm has rats with colors and markings that aren’t part of your six.”

He drummed his thumbs against the cart poles as he considered that.

“And I’ve seen you give them pretty sophisticated instructions through that pipe. So I’m sure the magic isn’t limited to what rats can do in nature.” She patted the air by his face. “I don’t mean to say you make them fly or anything, but that single-minded focus they exhibit just doesn’t track with real rats.”

As’ad ran over his usual process in his head and came to the conclusion that he could get the illusions to do other things, if he wanted. “I bet I could make ’em dance or

something.”

“So then the question reverts back to whether or not you can do more than rats,” she mused, seeming not to have heard him. She halted abruptly and grabbed one of the poles. “Here. Trade places with me.”

He acquiesced to her command without thinking. “Wait,” he said after she was in position, “why?”

She grunted with the effort of starting the cart, then took a couple of less toilsome steps as it gained momentum. “Oh.” She stopped. “It would be easier to grab the pipe if the cart isn’t moving.”

“Why am I getting it?”

Rahma wrinkled her nose at him. “C’mon, Misguided Piper. How else are you going to experiment?”

“Oh, right.” Feeling ridiculous for not figuring out the obvious, he quickly unearthed the instrument. A thought poked at him. “You know, I have created the illusion of splashing water, too.”

“When you send the little beasts into the river?”

“Yeah . . .”

“You can definitely do more with that pipe.” Her emphatic nod loosed a curl from her braid, and he was momentarily distracted by the way it grazed her temple.

When he didn’t do anything with the pipe for another minute, she looked at him and motioned with her hands impatiently. “No time like the present. Try something!”



Using the larger, rounded end of the pipe to rub his ear, As'ad looked at her helplessly. "Like what?"

"Well, how good is your imagination?" When he didn't know how to answer her, she clarified, "Do you need to see the thing that you want to create an illusion of? Or can you pull it out of thin air?"

He hesitated.

Rahma looked around. "Ooh, why don't you try to make some more trees?" She pointed to a scraggly grove up ahead.

Calling the skeletal, half-dead shrubs "trees" was rather generous. but they provided a starting point for As'ad. He took his time examining the dying plants, then toodled out a couple of measures. The small stand immediately became a grove. Instead of replicating exactly what he was looking at, he had created an image that was similar but distinct. The extra plant life looked as though it had grown at the same time as the originals.

Rahma dropped the cart to clap her hands. "Ooh, very good."

As'ad frowned as something nudged at the back of his mind. When he figured out what it was, he immediately piped a few notes to end the illusion.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:52 pm*

Which Contains Rat Nostalgia and a Debate

“Why did you stop?” she asked, picking up the poles again.

He coughed. “I realized that I don’t know who all can see that. It’s far enough away that we could have observers we don’t know about yet.”

“That’s a good point.”

They walked for a few more steps before Rahma had more questions.

“Can you set a time limit for the illusion? Or do you always have to play something? Next”—she paused to sneeze, then continued as if nothing had interrupted her words—“I think you should try something simpler and easier to hide. Like making some rats dance.”

As’ad ran his fingers along the pipe, feeling the familiar dips and holes. “No, I don’t have to play anything to end the enchantment,” he said, already distracted by the idea of dancing rodents. “Usually I plan ahead.”

This time, he pictured a small portion of his usual horde. As he played, he wondered if it would be more aesthetically pleasing for the fake rats to perform individual dances or if they should move in patterns. He quickly settled on the idea of directing the critters along decorative paths. After he blew the last note, he pulled the pipe away from his mouth and rested a hand on the cart to stop Rahma.

As the pair watched, a steady stream of rats in many hues poured out from under the

cart and began to weave a design with intricate figures. The effect was rather mesmerizing. As he watched, As'ad had another idea. He raised the pipe to his lips and added a trill while focusing on his new intent. A section of the rodents peeled away from the main group to stand on their hind legs and sway from side to side.

Rahma's delighted giggle inspired him to create more complex and elaborate diagrams for the rats to follow. The illusion had to be dissolved whenever another traveler was within sight, but the exercise kept As'ad's mind and creativity occupied for the rest of the day. When they made camp that night, he played with the fire. The melody he chose was fast and bright, and the fake flames grew and twisted in time with the music. He changed the color, he changed the height, he even sent little balls of fire whirling around their campsite. The fire illusion had the added bonus of increasing illumination.

Curious, he piped a little ditty to create a mini orb of flames that would last until morning. The pretend fire followed him into the tent and stayed lit all night. Since it wasn't real, it couldn't hurt anything, and he spent far too long swiping his hand through it to prove that point when he was supposed to be sleeping.

The next morning, after the rats were abed and the cart was on the road, Rahma jumped straight to a personal question.

"How did you come to own a magical pipe, anyway?"

The subject of Aladdin and his gang was not one As'ad cared to probe. He also understood that Rahma was as persistent as a leaky roof. She would drip, drip, drip her way in until all his secrets were laid bare. His only hope of holding anything back was to carefully reveal just enough that she was satisfied.

"After the orphanage, I ran with a gang that hunted treasure, among other things. They found this in a cave."

“You weren’t with them?”

As’ad somehow managed to boil the entire explanation about trying to leave Aladdin’s gang while maintaining his trustworthiness so they wouldn’t hunt him down into one word: “No.”

“Why did they give you a pipe? Did they know it was magic?”

If Aladdin had known what it was capable of, he never would have given it—or As’ad—up.

“None of us knew it was magic. I think I got it because I was the only musician in the group.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

They walked in silence for a little bit while she chewed on what he had given her. He tried to appreciate the slow cloud that drifted over the sun and provided some relief, even as his not-quite-buried anxiety that the gang would seek him out someday nibbled at his tranquility.

“Then what?”

With difficulty, As’ad escaped the memories that had been tugging him into a bleak place. “What do you mean?”

Rahma narrowed her eyes at him for a second, then clarified in a deliberately light tone, “What happened after you got the pipe?”

“Oh. Right.” He shook his head as though the physical action could loosen the pesky thoughts. Then he had to shake his curls back out of his eyes. Annoyingly, it was

nearly time for a haircut.

“Um . . . I left that gang and found my own way.”

“You said something earlier about stumbling onto the magic of the pipe,” Rahma said slowly, as though working it out. “Which means you didn’t start working the rat con immediately. How did you feed yourself?”

His throat felt clogged, so he swallowed, then swallowed again when it didn’t work the first time. “Oh, you know. I, uh, ran some other—scams. That I learned. In my time with . . . them.” His halting explanation was a jumbled mess of half-connected phrases.

Rahma had pity on him and let it slide. They walked quietly for a good ten minutes. Since they were moving almost due south, the jungle of the border region was easier to see on the horizon. As’ad focused on the distant greenery.

In keeping with Rahma’s character, the peace didn’t last. She still had questions about his past, but she approached it from an angle that As’ad didn’t mind exploring.

“So you must have had rats before this set, correct?” She glanced toward the back of the handcart, even though she couldn’t see any of his pets. “Rats don’t live that long, do they?”

She asked gently, and As’ad knew that she wasn’t prying to be mean.

“That’s true,” he said. “I’ve heard they live to be about two-to-four years old, though none of mine have hit that mark yet.”

Her next question was almost tentative. “How long have you had this batch?”

“Fat Carl is the oldest. He is . . .” As’ad paused as he thought. “Eighteen months old? I think that’s right.”

“Oh.”

“Khudha, Alzali, and Qamar came from the same litter. They are right around one year old.”

“What about your brown-and-white speckled beauties?”

He smiled, thinking of his affectionate cuddlers. “Sarir and Yasruhk came to me about seven months ago. They were the only survivors of a flooded wadi.”

“From what you said earlier, it sounds like you aren’t trying to breed more—”

“You mean like an army?” he teased.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “That’s not what I was getting at. I was just wondering— Um . . .”

As’ad had pity on her. “You want to know how I find replacements when they die?”

“Well, I was trying to ask more compassionately.” She sounded frustrated with herself.

“It’s fine.” And, to his surprise, it really was fine. “My particular pets are pretty good at discovering wild rats. They stick close to me in general, but their behavior changes when others are nearby. At this time, I’m not looking for any new friends, so I ignore them. When . . . our numbers dwindle, I pay more attention and see if any of the wild rats are young enough to be trained.”

Rahma nodded thoughtfully. “Will you tell me about the ones you used to have, the ones that came before? Your past rats? I mean,” she rushed to add, “I’m not trying to bring up painful memories. I can tell you really love your furry friends, so I was trying to give you an opportunity to talk about them.”

As’ad didn’t bother to stop the growing smile on his face. Warmth blossomed behind his breastbone at her kindness. “I would love to talk about my rats, actually. Thank you.”

The next few hours were completed with laughter and the occasional tear. As’ad told her all about Bruno, his asocial rat who preferred to hide in his cage and not interact with the others; Ghuldi, who had golden-tan fur and a penchant for hoarding; Easal, his sweetest-tempered rat; and the worst rat he ever had who had earned the moniker Aladdin. As’ad didn’t mention that the cranky rodent was named after his former leader, but she didn’t push for more.

Rahma asked questions at the appropriate moments and laughed in all the right places. She was especially curious to hear tales of Barie, who was so obsessed with nest-building that As’ad often found everything from clumps of hair to torn embroidery in the cage. And about Fantum, who ghosted in and out of places with more stealth than any of the others.

Per her request, they stopped for the midday meal near a crossroads. As’ad aimed to continue heading south before turning west. The major thoroughway that intersected their path was a more direct route out of the country. As’ad had yet to change his original plan of working through the smaller border towns, and Rahma hadn’t voiced an opinion either way. Perhaps she hadn’t realized they were taking the long way to Jabal. Her sense of direction, or lack thereof, was what had lumped them together in the first place. As’ad resolutely ignored the voice at the back of his mind pointing out that he could be rid of her much faster if they turned west now. He also quashed the other part that wanted to explore exactly why he was prolonging their time together.

Rahma may not have had an informed opinion about their progress, but she did take advantage of the many travelers available. She asked anyone who would slow down for a moment if they had encountered or misplaced any orphans lately.

A surprising number of people reported knowing orphans or other outcasts heading to Jabal. Rahma was unable to collect any more accounts about Hadia, though she still believed her friend was traveling with the woman. As'ad agreed that the amount of orphans heading west was unusual, but he didn't find it as suspicious as Rahma was determined to believe.

That afternoon, the desert dipped farther south, pushing the growing greenery aside once more. As'ad was a little grumpy about that fact; Rahma didn't seem bothered at all. Then again, not much seemed to bother the eternally cheerful young lady.

“Ooh, what's that?”

As'ad looked up from his irritable examination of the sand collecting in mini dunes that obstructed the path. When he saw the shiny half-buried object that she was reaching for, a wordless shout erupted from his lips.

She hastily pulled her hand back, then looked at him in question. When he didn't say anything immediately, she reached down and pulled out a jagged tube of glass. His heartbeat returned to normal when he saw what it was.

“It's just a broken bottle. Were you expecting a djinn?” she teased.

His laugh was forced. “Please don't joke about the djinn.”

Her expression was thoughtful; then she discarded the item over her shoulder. As she often did once As'ad was paying attention, she moved the conversation to something that distracted him from the things he wouldn't discuss.



“That pipe of yours is kind of an unusual shape, isn’t it?” She meandered over to join him on the main path. “Think it could possibly be the horn of a shadhaver?”

As’ad could truthfully say he hadn’t given the matter much thought. Unlike the human-crafted instruments that were usually made of wood, his pipe had an unusual texture and shape. It was long and thin with little holes that could be covered with his fingers to change the sound, but now that he thought about it, it wasn’t a normal color, either.

“I know that type of faery has been extinct for centuries,” she mused, “but you said it was found in some sort of cave. Who’s to say it hasn’t been sitting there for that long?”

“Is that the one that wandered around enchanting people and animals?”

“Looked kind of like a gazelle with one horn and ate whatever it dazed? Yeah, I think so.”

“Huh.” He shrugged. “Sounds reasonable enough to me. I wonder if there are any depictions of a shadhaver somewhere.”

“Good question. It seems likely; we’ve got art and books dedicated to every other topic under the sun.”

A high-pitched, loud, but clearly distant bird shriek pulled both of their gazes to the sky. Far, far to the north of them, just visible against the pale blue of the heavens, something white circled.

“Is that a rukh?” Rahma asked, using the Sharamilan name.

As’ad knew they were called rocs in other countries. “You ever seen one before?”

“No,” she breathed out in wonder.

The fantastically enormous birds were native to Fanostrin. As’ad had seen them from afar during his journeys through the northern part of Sharamil.

“I wonder what it’s doing so far south?” He stopped pulling the cart.

Rahma had already paused. “It’s crazy to think that we wouldn’t even be able to see him if he wasn’t so huge.”

The pair watched for another moment or two before the winged creature tilted north and flapped out of sight.

A little later, Rahma posed an academic question that As’ad had never considered before.

“What distinction—or distinctions, I suppose—do we use to categorize some creatures as faeries and others as just animals?”

As’ad rubbed his jaw against his shoulder so he could scratch it without dropping the cart poles. “I’m really not sure.”

“For that matter, do we all consider the same ones faeries or animals?”

“Great question.” As’ad’s curls kept trying to get in his eyes, and he was ready for a lengthy (and safe!) distraction. “Let’s work through the ones we are familiar with, shall we?”

Rahma happily engaged. They quickly determined that rats, cows, cats, dogs, and most birds were simply animals. Phoenixes, rukhs, and gaganas seemed to fit into the faery category. Though they happily debated for several minutes whether or not a

ruk'h's massive size indicated faery status or not. As'ad felt that magic had to be a part of its makeup and, therefore, it could be included in the same division as a bird made of fire and one possessing an iron beak and copper claws.

His companion found those points valid, while also pointing out that they hadn't established whether or not the inclusion of magic, in either a creature's physical composition or its abilities, was what earned it the faery moniker.

"Everyone agrees that goblins are faeries, yes?"

"Of course," Rahma agreed.

"Why? I don't think 'animal' when goblins are being discussed, but what makes them a faery?" As'ad wondered.

"Does intelligence have something to do with it? Intelligence and magic." Her eyes sparkled as she made her next point, and As'ad lost the thread of their conversation for a moment.

"Think about dryads, right?" she continued. "I know we don't have any here, but everyone else on the continent seems to. And everyone else on the continent views them as faeries." Her hands danced around, underlining, emphasizing, and organizing her thoughts. As'ad wondered if she would be able to speak if her hands were glued to her sides or holding something heavy. "So dryads are faeries who must have magic in their physical composition, somehow. The way they can melt in and out of trees has to be magical, yes?"

"No doubt," As'ad agreed amiably.

"And they can converse with humans and live completely independent of anyone else."

“You mean, not like cows or chickens per se, who could probably survive in the wild but would be eaten within a day?”

A gurgle of laughter bubbled out of her chest. “I suppose.” She went on. “I wasn’t thinking about whether or not dryads would be eaten, but yes. They are smart enough to fend for themselves and create their own society.”

“I have heard that there are places that are just dryad communities.”

“And dwarves!” Rahma was already moving on. “Dwarves are the same. Everybody calls them faeries. For the most part, they just look like smaller versions of humans, though.”

“Very hairy, little humans,” he felt the need to point out.

She snorted. “Yeah, yeah. The point I’m trying to make is that dwarves are considered faeries without being obviously magical. Do they have magic? Or are they magic in some way?”

As’ad made a noise in the back of his throat that communicated he had no idea. “What made you think of dwarves, anyway?” he asked.

“Oh”—she flipped her hand back toward the crossroads—“I think I saw one or two while I was interviewing those nice grandparents from Wahatan. They were part of a large caravan.”

After a few minutes of contemplation, As’ad had another thought to share. “What about pixies? They can fly and grant blessings to newborns, according to the tales, but don’t have a reputation for intelligence.”

Rahma made a face and tilted her hand from side to side. “They’re supposed to be

flighty—”

“Ha!”

“Yeah, I get it. Anyway , they aren’t smart, but they can communicate with human speech, right?”

“So they say.”

“Hold up.” Rahma plopped to the ground. “I’ve got a stone in my shoe.”

While she took care of that, As’ad used the pause to check whether his pets needed water. Qamar chittered a few sleepy squeaks, and Fat Carl twitched his little paws and brought them to his mouth as if dreaming of food. The rest of the rats snoozed on peacefully.

“I’ve kind of lost where I was going with that.” Rahma stood and brushed herself off. “But I think it was something about ratios of magic to sentience, or something like that. Bleh. I don’t know what I’m saying anymore.”

“No, wait. Give me a second,” As’ad requested.

Her vague words had sparked a nebulous idea that slowly coalesced into something more solid.

“Rabbits are sentient, whereas chairs are not,” he said as he got into position and lifted the cart poles. “But we classify a rabbit as an animal and a miraj as a faerie . . .” His words drifted off.

“Are you saying that, while both are sentient, the miraj also has, or is, magic, so it earns the faery title?”

“Yes?” As’ad smiled at her helplessly. “I thought I knew where I was going with that.”

They continued their lighthearted debate on and off until they found a pleasant spot to camp shortly before sunset.

As they were finishing their supper, Rahma brought it up once more. “You know, there are probably scholars and books devoted to the faery field of study.” She ran a finger down Alzali’s back. The gray rat had decided Rahma was acceptable. “We can’t be the only ones to stumble on this question.”

“I bet you are correct.” As’ad pulled Khudha out of his hair from where her attempts to bathe him had become a little too aggressive.

“Maybe one day, we’ll find some of them.”

“The books or the scholars?”

“Either!” She grinned at him from across the fire, and his stomach did that lurching thing that was becoming more common.

Only later, when As’ad had curled up in his blankets, did he realize Rahma had spoken with the assumption that their futures would continue to include each other. And he had automatically gone along with it. It would be better for everyone if he remembered that their paths would diverge soon enough. Which they would.

### In Which Speculation Occurs

The next farming community had been bypassed by midmorning the next day. The supplies from Qarya were holding out and would likely keep them fed for another week or so.

“Or!” Rahma gasped out of the blue. “Does a creature gain the faery classification by being at least slightly humanoid in shape?” She counted on her fingers as she spoke. “Goblins, pixies, trolls, dryads, dwarves, and djinn all have humanish physical characteristics—generally four limbs and a head or face, yeah? Is that what makes them faeries?”

As’ad mused over her words. “But what about the miraj and shadhaver and phoenixes? Didn’t we say they fall under the faery heading?”

“I know we said so, but what if we’re wrong?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” he said carelessly. After all, he had no stake in the argument. It was mostly an entertaining way to pass the time.

Rahma rubbed at her bottom lip and stared into the distance for a long moment. Then she threw up her hands. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t really matter.”

She turned their conversation to childhood memories. Since As’ad’s resolution to keep his distance was still fresh, Rahma carried most of the discussion. He eventually admitted to a few of the universal childhood experiences, like believing he could fly with the right set of wings and a sufficiently high launching point. The headmistress

never let him test that theory, but Rahma had disregarded Suha's advice in that area and broken her arm in the process.

These recollections continued through their lunch stop and into the early afternoon. The desert had all but disappeared as their steps headed west again. Jungle foliage popped up here and there, but the majority of the green in this area came in the form of grassland. The gently rolling prairie was the perfect place for livestock to graze. The first hour or so, they saw mostly cattle. Then they came upon a unique herd.

"Are those karkadann?" Rahma asked.

As'ad had heard of the creatures but never seen one.

Karkadann were an odd combination of useful and useless. Similar to cows in shape and general size, they were not great for eating. Nor were their other products good for a quick buck. They had scaly skin that made strong, lightweight armor, but only if it was harvested after they died naturally. They grew and aged so slowly that many of the creatures who finally gave up their leather had been born in the time of the ranchers' grandparents or great-grandparents. At least the karkadann were quite large when they finally passed. This allowed for multiple sets of armor to be made from a single skin.

Their lone horn was even more profitable than the leather. In a powdered form, it served as an antidote to nearly every poison on the continent. But again, removing the horn early was impossible. Anyone who tried was left with a toxic substance that nothing could cure. These limitations were well known and protected the herds. Their size, tough exterior, and poisonous horn also helped, of course. Ruhks were the only known predators.

Seeing the at least partially magical beasts brought a new theory to As'ad's mind. "What if we are approaching the whole faery/not-faery debate from the wrong angle?"



Could there be different classes of faery creatures like there are different classes of non-magic creatures?”

“Like humans and cows are both non-magical but we separate them into people and animals?” Rahma’s next few steps bounced. “So there could be people faeries and animal faeries. Makes sense to me!”

Apparently satisfied with that conclusion, she let the subject drop and hummed to herself. “I know we passed a couple homes already, but is there a bigger town soon?”

As’ad looked away from a truly massive karkadann that he half-expected to drop dead as they walked past. “Why?”

“Because I want to ask more questions.”

This reminded him that the girl accompanying him was not here for him. His heart seemed to curl in on itself for a moment with the reminder. Distracting himself from his foolishness, he made an observation that he had been ignoring.

“You haven’t mentioned Suha in a while,” he said, keeping his tone light, as though her answer didn’t affect him.

Rahma coughed once. “Yes. Well, I was trying not to remind you that your goal is to get rid of me.”

“I’m not—” As’ad stopped. That had been his exact goal since the beginning. He amended his statement. “I am concerned for your safety and reputation.”

She gave him a look that he couldn’t interpret. He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably, then shifted the topic.

“Will you tell me exactly why you don’t trust this Hadia?”

“Gladly.” Rahma rubbed her hands together. “First off, she’s mean to little kids.”

“A grave failing,” he remarked dryly.

“It is when she’s been put in charge of the orphaned ones.”

As’ad couldn’t disagree with that.

“And it’s worse because she pretends not to be. None of the adults would believe us when we reported the things she would say. We were told off for badmouthing an adult when we probably misunderstood what she said in the first place.”

How well could he remember similar incidents of his own. “Childhood is rough,” he empathized.

“Yeah.” Rahma rubbed her hands down the sides of her tunic. “I’m sure mine wasn’t that bad, though.” She didn’t use the words, but he caught her reference to his time in the orphanage.

“You may be . . . passionate about justice,” As’ad started, “but that can’t be your only reason for suspecting the woman of nefarious doings.”

She had smirked while he scrambled to find the right descriptor, but now her face took on a serious expression.

“Of course not. My suspicions have been simmering in the background for years.” Her sigh sounded disgruntled. “But I didn’t do anything until it affected me personally.”

“What specific things did she do?” he asked to shake her from her self-condemnation.

The woman at his side played with one of the curls that defied the containment of her braid. “It wasn’t only things she did. Some of it was things that happened.”

“For example?” he prodded.

“A few years ago, she went on a trip with the two little ones she was caring for, then came back without them.”

“Where did they go?”

She shrugged. “West. Hadia was close-lipped about the whole thing. Only said that their relatives wanted ’em.”

“Are you thinking that trip was to Jabal?”

“I am now.” Her lips turned down. “Not too long after that trip, she started traveling more. A lot more.”

As’ad ran over various scenarios that could include traveling. Most of his ideas were criminal in nature.

“She said she was visiting her own family. But she started wearing fancy clothes, and her house is full of really nice things now.”

“Is her family wealthy?”

“That’s the thing!” Her arms flew out to the sides. “Until a few years ago, she always talked about how being from an orphanage had prepared her for taking care of orphans.”

“She could have extended family that she hadn’t met yet,” As’ad said doubtfully.

Rahma gave him a look he completely agreed with.

“But why would they give her money and make her travel all the time?” he questioned. “If they liked her that much, wouldn’t they want her to live closer?”

“Now that we know she was traveling with more than just Suha this time”—she ignored the eyebrow he raised when she used the word “know”—“I think she’s collecting orphans and outcasts from all over and trading them in for money.”

A frown creased As’ad’s face. “That brings up two questions. First, outcasts?”

“One of the couples that I talked to at the crossroads mentioned that their nephew had run off. They said he wasn’t a bad kid but had trouble fitting in. Well, the aunt said that. Her husband seemed to think the kid just needed a couple more months of ‘physical’ discipline. And she agreed.”

“Ugh.”

“Yeah. Anyway, he disappeared shortly after Hadia came through town.”

“Or the woman you think is Hadia.”

“Close enough.”

“Second question: How could she be trading them in? Indentured servitude isn’t really a thing anymore. Plus, any money earned that way was strictly for paying off debts.”

A deeply uncomfortable expression sat on her face.

“You don’t think—slavery has been outlawed since the sultan’s grandfather reigned!”  
The very idea curdled his stomach.

“Well, I initially considered more of a black market adoption sort of thing because the first children she made disappear were pretty young. But people desperate for children probably don’t want the older ones who are about to move out and get married or start apprenticeships.”

As’ad opened his mouth, but she jumped in first.

“I also thought of some weird ‘buy a bride’ service when Suha left. But that falls apart with the nephew.”

“It also seems unlikely that one woman would have a hand in that many different ways to get rid of people,” he pondered aloud.

“All I know is that something is very wrong with the whole situation.”

With the approach of evening, the lights of Marj twinkled brightly. As it was a rest day, the community was still fairly lively. Rahma wanted a chance to interview more people, and As’ad couldn’t stifle his curiosity, either, so they decided they could make camp a little later than usual. He preemptively appeased the rats by slipping a couple of treats into their cages before any of them woke.

To Rahma’s delight and As’ad’s dismay, they arrived to discover that a dance was being held in the square. Rahma asked where they should stash the cart, but he didn’t want to leave it, so she slipped into the dance without him.

As’ad set up the cart at the edge of the lantern light and leaned against it to glare into the crowd. When a hunched crone hobbled past him, her return glare was so unimpressed, he made an effort to be more pleasant. None of these strangers deserved

his baseless wrath.

As he watched Rahma swirl across the dance floor with partner after partner, As'ad finally recognized the pinch in his gut as jealousy. He had become accustomed to being the only recipient of her smiles and attention. But he didn't have any claim on her. In fact, he had less than no claim, and she would be leaving as soon as Suha was recovered.

Almost before he recognized that he had decided to move, his feet led him to where the dark-eyed beauty was catching her breath next to the refreshment table. He didn't say anything, simply held out his hand in invitation. His own breath caught in his chest as he watched her eye his offering with a playful smirk.

One hundred years (or seconds) later, she slid her small brown hand into his. He folded his fingers over hers, then laughed when she impatiently tugged him onto the dance floor as a new song began. The notes were quick and light. Their feet fairly flew, and As'ad saw no one but her. More of Rahma's curls had pulled free to frame her face charmingly. Her eyes glowed and he felt like the only man in the world.

All too soon, the song ended and the pair reluctantly stopped. Like the dancers around them, their breaths came fast. When the musicians began a new tune, Rahma quirked an eyebrow. She didn't wait for his response, though, and had him twirling around the square before he could say yes.

This song was a touch slower, and As'ad's breathing returned to normal. His heart rate, on the other hand, refused to settle down.

"What's going on, my Tongue-tied Piper?" Rahma teased in a low voice that wasn't likely to be overheard.

Suddenly, As'ad realized he would do anything to be hers. But what did a criminal

lowlife have to offer this virtuous, exciting young woman?

He tried to fob her off with a shrug. “I don’t know. I’m not much of a dancer?”

“You’re doing just fine.” She beamed at him.

Several times, other men attempted to steal Rahma away from him. She turned them all down kindly, somehow managing the feat without creating hard feelings. Eventually, their travel-weary feet demanded a break. Rahma took advantage of the opportunity to chat with the older folks sitting on the side. Naturally, she mentioned that they were in the company of the renowned Pied Piper.

As’ad reluctantly settled into the role (after pausing to collect his notebook), disappointed to lose her exclusive company but knowing that he would have her all to himself again tomorrow. As he made the rounds, he occasionally overheard his beautiful companion asking her questions about orphans and outcasts. He missed most of the answers, as the residents were all-too-eager to discuss their theories about why the rats weren’t plaguing Marj.

Though he hadn’t planned on revealing his identity, again, it worked in their favor. He was invited to make camp in the square with the other visitors, who he learned were traveling merchants. In the morning, while stalls were set up for the monthly market, some of the regular residents added to As’ad’s food stock. If this kept up, he might not need to pull another con until he left the country.

But leaving the country meant leaving Rahma, and his mood soured.

He had barely finished checking that all his pets were tucked in when a hand grabbed his shoulder and yanked him away from the cart. He was ready to defend himself when he recognized Rahma’s voice in his ear.

“She’s here!” Her harsh whisper felt damp on the side of his face.

“Suha?”

“I wish,” she sighed. “No, Hadia is here. Look. By the man selling leather necklaces.”

As’ad peered around the corner of the building she had dragged him behind. Two women stood by the leatherworker’s stall. One was plump and jolly-looking. She laughed and bargained with the merchant. The other woman wore fine clothes that set her apart from the others. The supercilious expression might have had a hand in the bubble of space around her, as well.

“The one who looks like everyone is beneath her?”

“Yes! We need to follow her!” Rahma stepped forward, but As’ad held her back. The feeling of her in his arms distracted him for a moment, and she frowned at him before he remembered to speak.

“We don’t need to do anything,” he spoke over the protest that he could see forming on her lips. “She would recognize you. I can follow her.”

Rahma begrudgingly nodded.

He moved his hands to her shoulders. “Can you move the cart out of town? I don’t want her seeing you, and we can leave after my reconnaissance.”

“That’s a good idea.”

He was slightly surprised that she didn’t argue about needing to do it herself. Surprised but grateful.



Peering around the corner showed that Hadia had moved away from the leather goods and was now shunning a stall dedicated to cookware. As'ad helped Rahma get the cart moving on the cobblestones by shoving the back. Once she got it started, she would be fine, and the hard-packed dirt road outside of town would make it easier.

Everything As'ad had learned about working a crowd came back to him. He took his time seeming to browse the wares, never quite making eye contact with any of the sellers. Hadia frowned at everything and everyone until the man who served as Marj's version of a mayor came into view. She followed him to the side of the market. As'ad trailed them, taking a position near a busy stall lined with spices and dried herbs.

He missed the beginning of the exchange, but Hadia was asking about useless people looking to relocate. She didn't use those words, of course, but As'ad could tell that's what she meant by "young people who don't fit in or have a home."

The community's leader took exception with her tone and very politely, if coldly, told her they didn't have anyone like that here. Hadia announced her intent to ask some of the others, and the man dismissed her with a deep nod. After she traipsed off, As'ad saw the man approach some of the locals. From their expressions, he guessed they were being warned about Hadia.

As'ad didn't have time to speculate on their actions; he needed to follow the suspicious woman. As he turned to do so, his eyes caught on another member of the bustling throng.

### Which Begins and Ends with a Mystery Woman

The stately woman held his gaze for a moment, then melted into the crowd. As'ad felt sure that he had seen her somewhere before. He doubted she was a resident of one of the towns he had scammed. Her dark hair and eyes were similar to many of the Sharamilans, but her lighter skin tone and regal features set her apart. He could have met her in one of the bigger cities, but it seemed more likely that he had seen her more recently on one of the busier roads. Several caravans passed through on their way to the coast, after all.

Shaking off the odd encounter, he eased away from the spice merchant and wandered behind Hadia. The woman was speaking with—or at—a grandmother who didn't seem inclined to respond. A glance at the way the currents of people were moving told As'ad that a perfect opportunity was about to strike. He slid into the heaviest part of the traffic and allowed it to push him close to Hadia. The waspish woman didn't even notice when he reached into the bag over her shoulder and pulled out a folded parchment. He carefully tucked it into his robes as he continued moving with the ebb and flow.

Picking her pocket had been a risk, as he was both out of practice and didn't know if she carried anything useful to them. The thickness of the paper gave him hope. Nobody wasted paper like that to doodle nonsense.

As'ad found Rahma waiting for him just off the road on the western end of the community. Marj was longer than it was wide, and they were a considerable distance away from the square. That didn't prevent As'ad from wanting to put more space between Rahma and that woman. He asked her to wait a little longer for answers.

Rahma obliged him and even remained quiet until he felt there were a sufficient number of low hills behind them.

The jungle still sent tendrils into this part of the country, but the mountains were looming ever closer and some of the plant life reflected that. As'ad pulled off the road by a stand of trees whose leaves lacked the waxy texture he was used to.

“That was faster than I expected,” Rahma remarked.

It didn't sound like an accusation, but he hurried to explain. “She was asking about young people who wouldn't be missed.”

His companion huffed and crossed her arms tightly.

“Then I stole something from her bag and decided to make my escape before she noticed.”

Rahma grabbed his arm. “And you are positive she didn't see you?”

He smiled at her concern and reached up to poke the worried lines between her eyebrows. “I am positive.”

Her worry melted into a matching smile that soon grew with excitement. “What did you snag?”

As'ad held up both hands. “Don't get too excited. I don't know yet.”

“How don't you know?” she asked, curling her hands in the front of his robes and shaking them in her impatience.

“I couldn't look at it in the square”—she released him with a nod—“and I wanted to

examine it with you.”

Rahma beamed at him. “That is an excellent reason. Where is it? What is it?”

“I think it might be a letter,” he said as he liberated it before she could take it upon herself to search him.

Despite her eagerness, she didn’t snatch it from his hand but waited until he passed it to her. Then she unfolded it and leaned into his space so they could both see it as she read aloud.

“Well done.

The latest shipment was more than satisfactory. You will be compensated accordingly.

We have had requests for specific stock. Fill these orders before the next shipment leaves J at the end of the month for a bonus payment.

—P

Wanted:

(1) 13–15 m woodworking

(2–3) 12–16 f sewing

(1) 13–15 m/f cattle”

The P used in place of a signature had a very distinct embellishment that turned his stomach to lead. That symbol was used by Pozik, a dwarf with more underworld

connections than Aladdin.

He leaned away as Rahma reread the letter to herself. Pozik's involvement was bad. Potentially life-threateningly bad.

"But what does it mean?" Rahma sounded frustrated, and the paper crumpled a bit where she clutched it. "Clearly, Hadia is getting paid by this 'P' person, but the rest is mud."

As'ad looked her in the eye. He could tell she understood more than she wanted to. Because if the letter said what she thought, Suha was in far more trouble than she originally knew.

He pushed her braid off her shoulder to rest his hand there. "I recognize the signature." His thumb traced up and down her neck. "Pozik the dwarf has his fingers in just about every criminal pie in Mafur. I haven't heard anything about him since I left the capital, but Hadia is mixed up in something far more dangerous than I think she realizes."

Rahma let the letter fall to her side. She reached up to hold his hand against her neck and shoulder.

"The specific stock he wants is . . . people, isn't it?" Her voice wavered, and tears filled her eyes.

He gathered her into his arms. "I'm afraid so," he whispered into her hair.

After a few moments, Rahma took a shuddering breath and straightened her spine. As'ad reluctantly let her pull away.

"C'mon." She snagged his hand and led him to a tree with decent shade. "Let's sit

while we figure this out.”

She shook out the sheet as he settled in next to her. As he sat closer than he needed to, he spared a thought to be grateful that his rats were still snoozing.

“Should we suppose that the bracketed numbers indicate an amount?” she asked.

“I think that’s a safe assumption.”

“Then on the first line, Pozik wants one something to do with woodworking.”

“Given what we know about who Hadia has been escorting, I think we can also read the next numbers as an age range.”

Rahma took a deeper breath that pressed her shoulder more firmly into his. “And the ‘m’ likely stands for ‘male,’ which means he wants a thirteen-to-fifteen-year-old boy with woodworking skills.”

“Or at least a woodworking background,” As’ad pointed out. “At that age, apprenticeships have only just started.”

She moved her finger to the last line. “That would make sense for this one, too, since he is open to a boy or a girl with a cattle background.” Her voice grew bitter. “I imagine it’s easier to get people used to slavery when they’re young.”

“Now, we don’t actually know that these are potential slaves,” he began. “But it doesn’t look good,” he added hastily when she shot him a look.

“Dare we hope that Suha wasn’t in the last shipment?”

As’ad wrapped one arm around her shoulders. “Is she a seamstress?”

“Wha—? Oh!” She scanned the sheet again. “She was more of a weaver, like her mother, but yes. She could sew well enough.”

“Maybe she’s one of the sewing set that Hadia is collecting?” As’ad could hear the false hope in his voice.

Apparently, so could Rahma. “That would be nice, but I don’t think we can count on it.” She slumped against him. “I’m still determined to save her; I just need a moment to feel my feelings. Then I can move past them.”

“Feel your feelings?”

She rolled her head back on his shoulder so she could see him a little better. “You know, taking the time to acknowledge and experience your emotions so they don’t sneak up later and control your actions.”

That was a completely foreign concept to As’ad. He generally tried not to have too many emotions in the first place, as they seemed to complicate things. Peace and contentment were the ultimate goals, and neither of those expected much feeling from him.

“Oh. What are you feeling now?”

A tired laugh huffed over her lips. “A wee bit of despair, lots of dread, more hopelessness than I’d like to admit.”

“Oh,” he repeated, not sure what to do with all that.

But she continued, her tone gradually warming from listless to fiery. “Sorrow for everyone whose life has been stolen from them, anger at Pozik and Hadia for thinking that any of this is okay, and”—she sat up fully—“the determination I need to fix it.”

As'ad opened his mouth, ready to remind her of some salient details.

She held up her hand to forestall him. "I know. I know that we don't know how big this is. And we don't know where Suha or the others are. And we don't know how to stop it, either." Rahma grabbed his free hand and clasped it with both of hers as she looked imploring up at him. "Will you help me figure out what we can do, and do it?"

Drowning in her dark eyes melted the last icy piece of indifference in his heart. He would do anything this woman asked.

As he came to that realization, an idea sparked.

"What was the date of the next shipment?" As'ad asked as he detached himself from her and walked to the cart.

"Uh . . . Here! The next shipment is set to go out in . . . seven days."

"Perfect. That gives us a timeframe to work with."

Rahma watched him dig through the back of the cart for a while before asking, "What are you doing?"

"Looking for—Ah-ha! These." He held up the maps that had somehow migrated to the very bottom of everything. Fat Carl protested the daylight interrupting his slumber, then promptly rolled over. As'ad smiled as he tucked the canvas cover back into place.

"With these, we can try to work out a timeline with the letter. Do you remember how long ago Hadia was in Qarya?" He looked at Rahma with a grimace. "Did you ask that part?"



Her movements were slow as she joined him at the flattest rock he could find. “I did ask that.”

He glanced up from unrolling the correct map to see an odd expression on her face. “What?”

She hesitated, then knelt and helped him hold the map open. “You never said whether or not you would work with me.”

A sheepish smile tugged at his lips as heat climbed his neck. “I’m an idiot.” He rested his hand on hers and held her gaze. “Yes. I will help you.”

She beamed at him.

“I had an idea and jumped straight into it without answering. My apologies.”

Her free hand dismissed his apology with an elegant wave. “All is forgiven. What was your idea?”

He pointed to Jabal at the map’s edge. “I think we can assume ‘J’ stands for Jabal. None of the other towns or villages within a reasonable distance start with ‘J,’ and you heard her mention Jabal specifically.”

“I agree.”

His fingers walked the distance between Qarya and Jabal, then from Jabal to Marj. “When about did they leave Qarya?”

Rahma sat back on her heels and peered at the scattered clouds as she made the calculations. “We were there, what? Four days ago?”

A second later, As'ad counted the same. "Yes."

"Then Hadia and the others were there fifteen days ago. About."

"That's probably close enough," he assured her. "It's about three days to Jabal from Qarya using the main route."

Rahma narrowed her eyes at him, but he pretended not to see. "If they went straight there, that would give Hadia time to drop off her first load and leave to get more. I'm guessing she's here looking for someone used to cattle. Would you agree?" He turned innocent eyes on her. She pursed her lips but nodded. "I thought I could figure out the timeline better, but too much information is missing and I don't see how we can know for sure that Suha is still in Jabal. But we have to act like she is."

"Yes." Rahma slapped the ground with her hand.

Some more finger-walking gave As'ad another estimate. "I believe we can make it to Jabal in four days. That gives us just under three—better say two days, to be safe."

That decided, the black-haired beauty pushed to her feet. "Let's go, then!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

As'ad hurried to repack the maps and catch up with her.

The next days blurred together. Rahma wanted to move as fast as possible, and As'ad felt a similar urgency. Not quite as sprawling as the capital or some of the larger coastal cities, Jabal was still a full city. Finding a single girl presented a thorny problem.

It was highly unlikely that simply asking around would direct them to her. Hadia had

been getting away with this scheme for a few years at least. She couldn't have done so without getting caught if she wasn't wily. From what As'ad remembered of Pozik's criminal enterprises, the dwarf likely had one or more storehouses in the city. Depending on how he moved the "stock," they could make some educated guesses about the location.

On the third night after deciding to push for Jabal as fast as they could, Rahma and As'ad discussed the most likely places to begin their search. Rahma wanted to ask at a magistrate's office, but As'ad pointed out that Suha and the others were unlikely to be meandering the streets. Nor were they required to present themselves. Hadia would have snuck them in or hidden their identities.

"What do you remember about the large group traveling with those two dwarves?" Rahma asked as she tried to get Alzali to jump over a twig. As'ad watched the rat lunge for the treat the girl held just out of reach. The gray rat hadn't quite grasped that she was being asked to jump.

"I don't actually remember that group," he admitted.

"Darn. I was hoping to pick your brain so I could compare your memory with mine. Because I think I'm misremembering to make the facts fit the story."

"What do you mean?"

Khudha chose that moment to nip one of her sisters. As'ad pulled her out of the pile that had been happily bathing each other and placed her on his shoulder.

"Well, it seems to me that all of the people in that group were younger than we are, for one." She nudged the treat closer so Alzali could snag it. "They didn't look thrilled to be there, but I just assumed it was because they were walking through lunch."

Fat Carl found a rock by the fire upon which to sing the song of his people. His squeals and chitters were as emphatic as they were aimless. After a few seconds of impassioned speech, he turned his tail to the fire and jumped down, waddling off in search of who knew what.

Rahma looked to As'ad for clarification. All he could do was shrug and shake his head. That oddball continued to defy all his expectations.

“Anyway, now I’m questioning whether or not my memory is accurate. Just because Pozik is a dwarf doesn’t mean every other dwarf on the continent works for him.”

“That’s true,” As'ad said slowly. “But there’s also no reason to rule it out. It doesn’t change our plans, so we’ll keep it in mind.”

The nights and the days had grown steadily cooler as they moved into the foothills. Their path angled northwest away from the southern border. The foliage became more evergreen forest and far less jungle. Their fire that evening was quite large, and as they went along, they collected any bits of wood that fit in the handcart. Rahma had thanked him twice more for the warm clothes. As'ad was grateful that he had thought to purchase another layer for himself.

They reached Jabal midway through the fourth day. The sight of the city sitting at the base of the mountain range between Sharamil and Bavenpier caused Rahma to stop in the middle of the road. Her jaw dropped as she took in the mass of buildings and people that had to be ten times the size of Nahr.

Built on the Sharamil side of the pass that connected both countries, Jabal had grown from a small outpost into a thriving metropolis. Merchant caravans from all over the world passed through here on their way to Mafur and Fanostrin. As such, inns, warehouses, and all manner of businesses had sprung up to cater to the merchants’ needs. A long wall ringed the city in a semicircle. There was no need for such

protection where the city met the sheer wall of the mountain.

Rahma looked at the collection of buildings with delight. As'ad saw a million places for Suha to be hiding.

As they trundled through the city gates, a woman caught As'ad's eye. It was the lady who had seemed out of place in Marj. She held his gaze and dipped her chin.

### During Which Rahma's Patience is Tried

When the mysterious woman turned on her heel and began walking away, As'ad moved to follow her, disregarding the angry grumbles his abrupt change of direction caused.

The tug on his sleeve didn't stop him, but he did answer Rahma when she asked what he was doing.

"I've seen that woman a few times now. She knows something about all of this. I'm sure of it."

"What woman?"

He gestured with his chin. "The one wearing the dark-blue wrap."

"With her hair pulled up?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if I could get my hair to stay in that arrangement," Rahma wondered aloud as they crossed an intersection heedlessly. The shouts of the rider who had nearly overrun them didn't seem to make an impression. "It would require a thousand hairpins. Or more."

The woman led them past the merchant district, through a residential neighborhood, and into an area filled with warehouses in various states of disrepair. As they walked,

the steady flow of people tapered off into a trickle that eventually evaporated. They continued to wind through buildings that looked more and more abandoned until they came to a portion of the mountain wall that formed the back of the city's defenses. No more man-made structures stood in their way, but it became difficult to navigate the handcart over what looked like a goat path in places.

Although they made plenty of noise, between the cart wheels and Rahma's observations, their guide never looked back. She had to know they were following her. As'ad was ready to believe it was intentional on her part. After quite some time, the track had circled back toward the more populated areas. Ahead, he could see a large house of some sort. Set apart from the others, its bottom level seemed to be built up against the cliff face. The next two stories up were slightly smaller than the base, creating a pyramid look.

Finally, the woman turned to face them. She was still too far for words that weren't yelled, so As'ad didn't bother. A very brief head-tilt indicated the house. Before the pair could get closer, she turned and walked away. As'ad exchanged glances with Rahma, but when he looked back, the woman had vanished.

"That was weird, right?" his companion asked.

"Very weird."

"She motioned to the house. So we need to investigate it." Rahma sounded less sure of herself than normal.

"Her head-tilt was so fast, I was beginning to doubt I saw it at all," As'ad confessed.

He looked around and found a rocky outcropping to stash the cart behind while they discussed their next move. Rahma was all for walking up to the front door and knocking. As'ad felt they could be a little more circumspect in their investigation. He

convinced her to hide with him behind some of the rocks, at least until they decided what to do.

From their position, they watched for any comings or goings. Rahma chafed at the delay but accepted that knowledge was their friend in this case. For over an hour, no one entered or exited the building. No one even walked past, though there were a few other homes—if that's what the ramshackle structures were—nearby. The whole area had a feeling of deep neglect.

Rahma returned to her previous argument. “Even if Hadia left right after us, I bet she didn't push as hard as we did. You practiced changing my nose enough; I can go knock on the door. No one will recognize me.”

During their most recent travels, Rahma had taken many turns with the handcart in order for As'ad to practice creating illusions that would be more beneficial for whatever circumstances they encountered. He had learned how to create the illusion of a different nose that sat over her real one and moved however she moved. As long as she didn't touch it, the effect was perfect. He had tested different eyebrows and a new chin shape but had trouble imagining the details, and she ended up looking like a caricature of herself.

As'ad thought he heard her grinding her teeth when he asked her to wait a bit longer.

“Then will you at least practice the environmental disguise while we wait?” Rahma pleaded. “I'll keep watch. You can move over there.”

Another successful experiment had been a full-body camouflage that utilized their surroundings. Made more difficult by their need to keep moving and by the open space of the road, As'ad had finally figured out how to make the illusion of whatever was behind them sit right in front of them. It had been easier to accomplish when he walked behind Rahma and focused on disguising her alone. Or when he had traveled



in front of her and walked backward. He was less confident in his ability to recreate that specific illusion, as his opportunities to practice had been few. Traveling to Jabal in the most straightforward manner meant they encountered a great deal of traffic going both ways.

He made her promise to stay where she was, then headed off farther into the rocky emptiness that had led them here. Rahma was still within sight, but because of the way the path moved uphill, he would be completely invisible from the house. Only Rahma's head poked over her rocky hiding place, and she had tied a gray scarf over her dark hair to avoid sticking out against the stone backdrop.

From his new location, As'ad practiced playing the pipe as quietly as he could. The texture of this new environment provided a unique challenge until his eyes got used to seeing the color variations of what he was looking at. He created a rock shelter over Rahma's location, focusing on the intent of making it transparent from the inside. When he finished the tune, she disappeared from his sight. Since he didn't hear squawks of protest, he figured she was still able to see. Next, he played a tune to do the same for himself, remembering this time to anchor it to his person and not his location. Then he crept forward and quietly called Rahma's name.

"Where are you?" she hissed.

"My disguise is working," he replied quietly. "One moment, I want to check something. I'll be right back."

Confident that he wouldn't be seen from the house, he walked as silently as he could down the gravel-strewn path, past Rahma's hiding place. When he turned around to check on her, he couldn't see anything but the rock he had created. As he returned to her side, he patted himself on the back. It blended in seamlessly.

"I made an illusion of more rocks where you are," he said when he rejoined her. "I

tried to make it opaque from the outside and transparent from the inside. It looks like it worked.”

“Of course it did! You thought of it and you are incredibly smart.”

Before he could do more than invisibly preen at her praise, she continued.

“Now get back there and work on the hard one.”

A sigh that sounded too much like defeat to his ears oozed out. “Right,” he agreed, stumbling back to his earlier position.

The “hard one” referred to the process of creating and maintaining people. As’ad could focus and recreate an image of Rahma without issue. He could even make it move and speak like the real thing. But when he tried to emulate someone else, the apparitions never looked quite right. Either he messed up on the details he couldn’t remember or the illusions moved awkwardly, like mechanical puppets.

The problem frustrated him, as he couldn’t understand why the rats and Rahma were so simple to replicate, yet everyone else looked like a parody of humanity. As he stewed, a thought occurred. He hadn’t tried to conjure multiple rats until after he had spent months with his beloved pets. Everything about the way they moved and looked was very familiar to him. And as he had recently admitted to himself, everything about Rahma fascinated him. Her appearance, the way she moved, the words she used, and her every hand motion were etched permanently into his brain. That likely had a lot to do with his ability to recreate an accurate image of her.

But when he tried to mimic someone like Hadia—who he was less familiar with but who could be a useful illusion in this scenario—his lack of detailed knowledge tripped him up. He wondered if an illusion of a random human would work better. When he imagined the river of rats that made up his con, he let his intention fill in the

gaps and didn't worry so much about the specifics.

To test this theory, As'ad piped a melody while focusing on the idea of a little girl kicking a ball in the open space behind one of the empty buildings. He paid more attention to the intent behind the illusion and worried less about things like the color of her dress or what her shoes looked like. As he finished the last note, he felt a surge of confidence.

His faith was not misplaced. A little girl in a light blue-green dress pranced around the flat area, kicking her brown ball whenever she got close. As he watched his illusion, he examined it for flaws or unnatural movements. He found none. By trusting his innate knowledge of how a small child would interact with the space and a toy, his subconscious had supplied the necessary details. The fake girl looked like any one of the hundreds of little girls he had met or seen over the years. Her hair, he noticed, did bear a striking resemblance to Rahma's unruly locks, and he recalled that her tunic this morning had been the same color. But all in all, neither of those things were deal-breakers. The illusion was sound.

As'ad returned to Rahma, still wearing his camouflage. He opened his mouth to explain his breakthrough, then saw the undisguised handcart and hurried back out of range to play a tune to fix that.

When he returned a second time, he excitedly told Rahma what he had learned. She was appropriately thrilled for him, and the pair spent some time figuring out how such an illusion could be useful today. Rahma asked if he had included speech, and he had to admit he had forgotten that aspect. The difficulties of planning for every possible answer to any question that might be asked of an illusion were soon deemed impractical for the moment, if not impossible altogether. With enough time and effort, As'ad felt sure he could create a false person that could interact on the most basic level. But it would only work in scenarios that more or less followed a script. So while there was potential for a dramatic act or a singing group, he dropped the

idea for now.

Rahma sent him away to practice having his illusion say something simple. They might have need of a child or young person running away and yelling for help. No official or solid plan had been established, since they still didn't know exactly what they were up against, but both agreed that a distraction would likely be necessary at some point. By the time As'ad felt safe producing a human that could repeat a short phrase as often as necessary, the sun was nearly behind the mountains.

Still impatient to be up and doing something, Rahma did agree that waiting to see if anyone was even in the house made sense. They had followed the enigmatic woman on a hunch. Her motives were a complete mystery. Fortunately for everyone's peace of mind, a light appeared on the second floor soon after. As they watched the window, a willowy figure moved past it.

"That was Suha! I know it," Rahma whispered fiercely.

As'ad didn't want to dampen her spirits, but he had to point out the obvious. "That was only a silhouette; we can't be sure it was her."

When she inhaled to argue, he set a hand on her arm.

"It is certainly something to confirm. But we need to keep our heads."

She took a long, slow breath, and then another. "You are correct. Rushing about won't help anybody."

"If it is Suha, we need a way to signal her."

"Without alerting the wrong people," Rahma added. She tugged on her braid as she thought, then looked at the house again. "This place is too old to have a modern sort

of privy inside, so where do they relieve themselves?”

That question was answered almost as soon as they carefully rounded the derelict dwelling. Somehow, Rahma’s preoccupation with base bodily functions had led her to the answer. Again.

After the briefest wait, a side door of the house opened to let out a slim figure. As’ad could feel Rahma quivering beside him and didn’t need her hand suddenly cutting off the circulation in his arm to understand that it was Suha. His companion showed admirable restraint and didn’t alert the girl until she had opened the wooden door of the privy shack, which blocked their sightline to the house door.

“Suha!” she hissed. “It’s me!”

Suha’s posture didn’t change, but her eyes scanned the rocks and general emptiness behind the shack. As’ad remembered that their camouflage was still in place and quickly remedied that with a single, low note. Suha stiffened when she saw the pair, then threw the door open harder so she could slip around the shack while the door was closing.

As’ad played as quietly as he could while still being considered playing to set up a large rock segment to block the three of them from the house. The girls’ reunion was as joyous as it was silent. Rahma attacked the smaller girl with a smothering hug and rocked her back and forth. Suha sent a worried glance toward the house, then settled into the hug when As’ad assured her that they were essentially invisible.

“What are you doing here?” Suha asked when Rahma finally let go to wipe her eyes.

“Rescuing you, silly!”

Hope flickered in Suha’s mud-brown eyes. She flashed a look at As’ad, then grabbed

Rahma's hands.

"I'll fake a stomachache so I can spend more time out here. Give me thirty minutes." She squinted at Rahma's face in the half-light. "Eat something while you wait."

As'ad's estimation of the girl went up. Even in her desperation to leave, she kept her head and looked out for her friend. "We will. See you soon."

Suha slipped into the outhouse, careful to catch the door so it didn't slam. When she emerged a moment later, she did let the door bang shut behind her. As'ad and Rahma watched her walk into the house. A single light glowed through the open door.

Circling the house to return to the cart was more perilous than the first trip. The fading light transformed the smallest obstacles into major hazards. Somehow, they made it without alerting anyone or twisting an ankle.

The waking rats were overjoyed to see them. As'ad placated their need for affection with copious caresses while Rahma refilled their water and portioned out food. He could tell she needed an outlet for her nervous energy. Being this close to Suha and unable to speak must be torture.

Once the furriest members of their party were sated, As'ad made sure that Rahma also ate. Not being able to light a fire reduced them to cold rations, but he doubted she even noticed what she was eating.

His earlier experiments with one-way disguises gave him the idea of a light illusion that only they could see. He practiced creating a ball of light similar to the expensive faery lights humans could purchase from certain faeries. Setting parameters to keep the light invisible to anyone but him proved difficult until he thought of using it in conjunction with the one-way rock. After testing it out with Rahma, he was satisfied that it would function as he desired.

The trial and error productively occupied Rahma's attention but almost made them late for their appointment. The hidden light helped them navigate the loop soundlessly and with greater speed, so they were ready behind the privy shack when Suha stumbled out of the house with a small lantern and staggered quickly toward it. She flung the door open so it would slam after she tucked the lantern inside.

Suha then scooted cautiously around the wooden cubicle. Rahma reached forward and pulled her inside their fake rock wall. The sudden illumination surprised her, but she launched into speech at once.

“How did you find out about the slavers?”

### In Which Perceived Elimination Aids Plotting

A s'ad and Rahma exchanged dread-filled glances.

“So we were right?” Rahma grasped her friend's hand. “Hadia's behavior was suspicious, but I was kind of hoping you weren't about to be sold as a slave.”

Suha was shaking her head. “Hadia deceived us all. She's been collecting orphans and other people who won't be missed and bringing us all here. It's lucky you got here when you did. They're shipping us out the day after tomorrow.”

“How does that work?” As'ad couldn't resist asking.

“The dwarves wait until they have a full house, basically. They have tunnels through the mountain to get us into Bavenpier. From what I overheard, I think they're sending us to Diomland to be sold there.”

Rahma frowned and squeezed Suha's hand tighter. “We won't let them.”

“What else can you tell us?” As'ad refocused the conversation.

“I arrived the day after a shipment,” Suha said. “I've been doing my best to pick up information from the dwarves who guard us. There are only three in the house right now.”

“That's good!” Rahma dropped Suha's hand to clap once.



As'ad was more suspicious. "How many of you are in the house? And how are they keeping you here?"

Suha's answering look was dark. "There are twenty-two of us in total. I'm the oldest, and a few of the boys are fifteen or so, but the rest of them are between twelve and six." She ignored Rahma's outraged gasp. "The guards have knives and whips. The little ones are too scared to step out of line, and the older ones who tried now have scars on their backs."

The injustice galled As'ad. He burned to rush in and fix everything, armed with nothing but his righteous fury. Suha's cool manner helped him focus on more productive steps.

"Usually, the guard who sits by the stairs watches from the side door when one of us needs the privy. I have been very, very careful not to test them in any way. They now trust me to use the privy alone or take the youngest ones." She turned to look toward the house. "Speaking of which, I can only be gone for so long. My 'tummy troubles' are keeping everyone away from me and I can be back again soon, but I need to leave now."

Rahma wanted to keep her friend in sight, As'ad could tell, but she let the younger woman slip away to retrieve her lantern and enter the house. During her absence, they discussed the new information. As'ad hadn't truly entertained the idea of sneaking Suha out and leaving any others behind, but the knowledge that several of the captives were so young only solidified his resolve to free everyone and take permanent steps to prevent this from happening again.

By the time Suha reappeared, he had a number of questions to ask her. The slender actress crashed through the side door at a run and hurtled into the privy shack to deposit her light. As far as As'ad could tell from the lights on the second and third floor, no one was peeking out to witness her dramatic exit, but he mentally applauded

her dedication to the act even as he prepared his first question.

“Where did all the children come from? Hadia couldn’t have collected that many by herself.”

Suha shook her head. “I gathered this is the last stop before leaving the country. We have kids from all over Sharamil. A couple are even from the northern border.”

“Tell us more about the tunnels.”

“I get the impression that moving young slave candidates is too hard using the regular mountain pass. They tend to cry and draw attention.” Her unimpressed expression said it all. “The dwarves take them and other contraband through the tunnel system that follows the pass, as far as I understand.”

“Do you know who is heading the operation?” As’ad felt certain that he had interpreted the stylized P correctly but wanted confirmation.

Suha raised her hands helplessly. “One time, one of the guards said something that sounded like Pozik? But I can’t be sure.”

As’ad grunted. It didn’t matter too much; they needed to get everyone out regardless. Regrettably, that particular dwarf was known to hold grudges.

“Are there guards in the tunnels? Or anywhere else?” Rahma asked while As’ad was distracted.

“Yes, actually. At least three.” Suha looked over her shoulder. No figures walked past the windows on this side. “There is a door not far from this side door on the bottom level that leads straight into the tunnels. I know because I overheard the guards and saw some of their latest shipment coming in.”

“Do you know what it was?” As’ad asked, not really concerned with the answer. His thoughts were working in a different direction.

“They called it ‘spark pepper’? I only heard one guard say it before the other told him to shut up.”

That caught As’ad’s attention. “I don’t suppose the shipment is still in the tunnels, is it?” he asked with a desperate enthusiasm.

“Yes, it is.” Suha gave him an odd look. “They moved it away from the door but said they needed to wait for the tunnel wagons to return from Bavenpier. Why?”

A wide grin spread across As’ad’s face. “Because they just solved all our problems.”

Both girls protested his cryptic statement, and he quickly explained. “Spark pepper” was the black market term for black powder. Highly explosive and easy to light, it could, if there were enough barrels in the tunnels, be used to destroy this end, rendering the route useless. A slave trade extensive enough to collect people from all over the country was too much for three people to take down. They could, however, interrupt regular operations for a long, long time.

Suha had to head back then. She told them she would leave the side door unlatched so they could investigate the tunnel. Precise plans would have to wait until certain details were verified. They made arrangements to meet up with her in the early morning before dawn.

Before following her, Rahma and As’ad discussed their next steps. As’ad thought that the current illusion that moved with them and looked like a generic bit of rock wall was probably sufficient for sneaking into the tunnel, since all the local rocks were composed of the same material. Rather than risk playing a new tune after entering the tunnel, they would simply keep the enchantment up for the brief time they were in the

house. Anyone coming down the stairs would find it odd to encounter a part of the mountain indoors, so they would need to move as quickly as possible.

As promised, the side door opened without trouble. The route to the tunnel door was obvious in the light of the lantern left on a hook. Two broad tracks had been worn in the dust that coated the bottom level. One led from the outside door to a staircase close by, while the other headed into the darkness behind the stairs. Following it was a breeze. A breeze that made the hair at the back of As'ad's neck stand on end.

Suha had said she thought there were at least three dwarves camped out in the tunnels. But how close to the entrance were they? The pair slipped through the tunnel door as silently as they could. A few creaks from upstairs indicated the presence of people, but no one moved toward the stairs. Finally, As'ad closed the door and released a silent sigh of relief. Rahma slipped her hand into his and tugged him along.

The tunnel they found themselves in had been chiseled out of the mountain. As'ad idly wondered if the entire thing had been manufactured here because its location was convenient, or if the original builders had taken advantage of a naturally occurring fissure. No lights shone ahead until they rounded a bend. Then they could see a flickering light quite a ways down. Rahma squeezed his hand, and they slowed their steps as they approached the campsite set in the middle of the tunnel.

At first, it seemed like the conversation was too quiet. They were nearly within reach before As'ad realized the three dwarves by the fire weren't speaking anything more than grunts and mumbles. Two of them sat around an overturned crate and played some sort of card game. The third looked bored to tears. His gaze bounced around the tunnel, and he couldn't stop fidgeting.

It was hard to gauge ages for non-human creatures, but As'ad thought the bored dwarf was significantly younger than the other two. Not a hint of white touched his beard, whereas one of his companions was more salt than pepper and the other had

distinguished patches of gray at his temples. As they watched, the youngest hopped to his feet and grabbed a nearby torch. He lit it in the fire, then headed farther into the tunnel, away from the humans hiding behind an illusion.

His torch had time to light up the very edge of a stack of barrels before the white-haired dwarf yelled.

“Get away from there, ya daft looney! One spark and you’ll blow us all to smithereens.”

The incautious dwarf grunted but turned around and called back in a higher voice than his gruff elder. “I was just curious.”

The name-caller had already dismissed him and returned to the game. “Then use a fae light. And quit pouting.”

The young dwarf returned the torch and did something As’ad couldn’t see that produced a ball of light without flames. His walk back was openly defiant, but the other two ignored him. He didn’t do much aside from walk around the barrels, but it was enough for As’ad to count eight visible containers, with more behind. Plenty to collapse this portion of the tunnel and prevent use for a lengthy period of time. Depending on the nature of this section of the mountain, enough damage might make it impossible to rebuild.

As’ad gently pulled Rahma away from their observation post. He had seen what he needed to. She followed without quibbling, so he assumed she was also satisfied with their reconnaissance. As they walked back, he paid careful attention to the distance and the shape of the tunnel walls. They paused for a moment to ensure no one saw them leave via the tunnel or side doors, then worked their way back to the cart.

Only Fat Carl had stayed in his cage, sufficiently happy with the treats Rahma had

left him. The others were exploring somewhere. As'ad didn't spare extra thoughts for them. Routine told him they would be back by morning. He didn't take down their rock disguise and knew that the enchantment would last until dawn. Normally, such a lengthy illusion would have drained him, but since the fake wall didn't have as many moving parts as a river of rats, he still felt decently fresh. Or as fresh as one could be after walking for half the day and spying for the other half.

"The way I see it, we need to lure the guards out of the tunnel so we can set off the powder." He scratched the scruff on his cheek. "Preferably without blowing ourselves up."

"Naturally," Rahma drawled. "Do you know anything about using black powder?"

"Umm . . ." That was where his plan fell apart. He vaguely understood what it was and to keep it away from open flames, but he lacked the specialized knowledge to utilize the wealth of it in the tunnel.

"Don't worry, Underqualified Piper." She patted his arm with mock condescension. "Today is your lucky day. I know what we need."

"How do you know about black powder?" As'ad asked, ablaze with curiosity.

"I read." She shrugged, then grinned. "One of our neighbors was obsessed with scientific advancements and had several papers on the subject a few years ago. I only read them because my mother volunteered me to entertain him when he broke his leg and was stuck in bed for the first few weeks. That cranky old man wouldn't let me read aloud anything that wasn't strictly factual." She wrinkled her nose. "But I'm glad for it now."

"Me, too! What do we need?"

Rahma walked him through the process. The supplies they needed would be readily available in a city this size, but it would have to wait until morning. The next order of business was figuring out how to get the guards away from the tunnel.

“I think scaring them would be the most effective. Do you think a million rats would do it?” Rahma asked.

“Hmm, maybe. Will that be enough to get them away from the house, too? Or should we get everyone out of the house first?” He stood, pulled out a blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders, then sat down again. “I think we should burn the house down.”

“Thank you,” Rahma offered with a smile. Her growing shivers settled. “I agree. If this is where they collect people before shipping them out to the slave markets somewhere else, they shouldn’t get to keep it.”

As’ad couldn’t see the house from their hideaway, but he recalled its dried-out appearance. “I think the whole thing would catch pretty fast if we caught any of it on fire. What do you think?”

Rahma nodded. “You could play an illusion of fire into reality. That should be enough to get everyone out of the building. Then we can torch it for real.”

“Perfect! We’ll have to make arrangements with Suha to give us a signal so we know everyone is safe for sure.”

“Then what? We can get everyone out, burn the house down, and explode the tunnels, but how do we get the guards away from the children?”

A foolproof solution eluded them for a good while. None of the closest decrepit buildings showed signs of life, but that didn’t mean reinforcements weren’t close at hand. They needed something that would cause the dwarves to ditch their charges.

They finally stumbled on half an idea to hide the children with an illusion. As'ad told Rahma to get some sleep while he kept watch; then he continued to ruminate on the idea.

Eventually, the outhouse saved the day. As'ad knew people tended to watch a burning building. When the guards and children escaped the “burning” house, they would run to a safe distance, then most likely turn around to watch. The guards might even try to save it. A half-crumbled well stood midway between this house and its nearest neighbor. While the dwarves were distracted, it would be fairly simple to send the children one at a time behind a wall illusion.

If As'ad made the privy invisible and set up an identical one right next to it, the children could pass through the illusion of the outhouse, which would serve as the entry point for a safe space hidden by another illusion. The guards would have no reason to search a small one-person wooden building for twenty-two children. He trusted that Suha and the older ones could keep everyone quiet while they hid. The dwarves wouldn't be able to find them, and without a house to return to, they should scatter. If need be, As'ad could call up a plague of rats to encourage them to leave.

Rahma agreed with his assessment when she woke a few hours later. She then implored him to rest, vowing to wake him well before they needed to meet Suha.

When she shook him awake the following morning, she continued without preamble, “I think if we time it right, we can scare the tunnel guards out, start the fake fire, have everyone run out, then start the real fire and set the fuse for the explosion at the same time.” The timing would be tight, but once his sleep-addled brain caught up, As'ad agreed that that would be the best plan of action.

While they waited for the purpling of the sky that preceded true dawn, they amused the rats who had returned. Khudha and Alzali were still gallivanting in parts unknown, but Qamar, Sarir, and Yasruhk enjoyed the personalized attention from



both Rahma and As'ad.

When it was finally time to meet Suha, they persuaded the pets to stay with the cart through bribery. None of the rodents noted their departure, as they were too happy with their treats. As'ad's rock illusion was still in place, and they made the trip to the privy without trouble.

Suha appeared soon after and listened to them outline their plan. "Too bad we don't have any trained bears hanging around. The whiny guard was asking if there were bears in the tunnel."

As'ad and Rahma shared a smile.

"That can be arranged," he promised.

She had to hurry back inside then, but repeated her parts of the plan a final time before doing so.

Back at the cart, As'ad renewed the melody to hide Rahma and the rats, then took off to gather supplies in the city. One way or another, everything would be over before nightfall.

### Which Contains a Deceptive Amount of Illusions

Rahma stayed by the cart to keep an eye on things while As'ad bought what they needed. On his way back, he found a secluded area to play the necessary melodies for their plan. Since all of them required concentration, he wanted to be in a place where volume wasn't an issue.

First, he tested the plan with smaller illusions. The trick of leaving off the last note until he was ready worked with his rat illusion, but he had never tried playing two distinct unfinished tunes. He piped a short song for a fire orb sans the final note, then did the same for a single rat. Giving himself a moment to catch his breath, he then piped the last bit for the orb, immediately followed by the end of the rat song. Both illusions went off without a hitch. That relieved his mind of a great burden.

Then he settled in to compose the music he needed for a rampaging bear, a growing fire, and multiple disguises, both stationary and moving. The effort exhausted him. As he stretched out on his back and watched the clouds scuttle by, he renewed the melodies he had assigned to each illusion. It would be disastrous if he misremembered any of the endings.

It took longer than he liked to peel himself off the ground and complete the journey to Rahma. She took one look at him before planting him on a rock and shoving food in his hands. The sustenance went a long way toward renewing his strength. Only when Rahma was fully convinced that he was able to take on the next portion of the plan did she let him stand up.

Having both of them lay the fuse for the powder doubled the risk, so Rahma had

reluctantly agreed that As'ad could do that part himself. Though taller than all three of the dwarves in the tunnel, she wouldn't be able to defend herself against them if she got caught. As'ad had the pipe and could activate the bear at any time. He was also pretty confident that he could outrun both Rahma and the dwarves. Wasted on cross-country, he was a natural sprinter.

She sent him off with a kiss on the cheek that took him by surprise, as well as the admonition to, "Do your thing, Brown-eyed Piper!" He left in something of a daze until the sight of the house shook him out of it.

The most dangerous part, in As'ad's opinion, would be sneaking into the tunnel through the house. Broad daylight reduced the effectiveness of his rock disguise outside, and it was completely useless for the eight steps between the side door and the tunnel. Suha had mentioned that the hour or so before dinner was a restless period. The youngest ones were tired and cranky, and their guards were scarcely less so. As'ad set the first part of their plan in motion to coincide with that timeframe.

Sure enough, as he slid through the side door, he could hear grumbles and a thin wail upstairs. A soothing voice tried to calm the crier, but he hadn't worked out if it was Suha or not before he was in the tunnel.

The trip to the dwarves' campsite felt both shorter and longer than the night before. He had to move with more caution due to the sloshing of his oil jug when he walked too quickly. After what must have been at least a year, he edged painstakingly around the fire on the opposite side of the dwarves.

The youngster had given into his boredom and now played cards with the others. As'ad kept an eye on them as he sidled past, but no one gave any indication that his presence was noted. Upon reaching the barrels, he paused to take stock of the situation. They were clumped together somewhat haphazardly, and he wasn't sure if they were all close enough to keep exploding after the first barrel was ignited. Rahma

could likely tell him, but she wasn't here.

Just in case, he wound the oil-soaked cotton rope around the farthest keg and through the rest. Then he oh-so- gingerly laid out the rest of the line along the side of the tunnel. At the last minute, he had realized that the white rope would reflect the firelight in the dark tunnel and conjured an illusion to hide it. The gray-speckled rope was now difficult to see. This was great for hiding it from the guards while also causing him mild anxiety as he lost track of what he had already put down.

The first length of rope didn't run out until he had passed the campfire and dwarves. His heartbeat drowned out even the youngest one's whining as As'ad fished around for the end of the next rope, inhibited by the narrow opening that only allowed him to get three fingers inside. Fortunately for his heart and the plan, he located the end without spilling too much oil and was able to knot the two lengths together. As speedily as he could, he laid out the rest of the rope, stopping twice more when the lines ended. He was less careful the farther away from the dwarves he got, but his estimation was solid and he reached the tunnel door with very little extra.

With great diligence, he took out a cloth and wiped as much oil off his hands as he could. He then tucked the oil jug with its remaining dribbles close to the tunnel wall, where nobody was likely to trip on it as they ran for the exit. Taking his time to check that he recalled the correct melody, As'ad stepped as far to the side of the door as he could and played the final notes.

He was rewarded shortly after with a growl and a scream.

Soon the tunnel echoed with snarls from the imaginary bear and yells of panic from the dwarves. Pounding footsteps arrived much faster than As'ad had predicted, and he was forced to reassess their running abilities. It seemed dwarves were very dangerous over short distances.

The trio burst through the tunnel door, hollering and raising a fuss. Then they did something As'ad hadn't predicted: They barricaded the door.

As'ad listened to them on the other side, calling their compatriots for assistance and dragging things over to block the way. His abused heart hammered in his chest as he tried to imagine a way out of his predicament, but the continued growls and roars of the bear behind him made it difficult to think. He was tempted to end the enchantment but didn't want to risk it if the house guards were liable to check.

Realizing there was nothing he could do to escape if the dwarves stayed in the house, he concentrated, then played the conclusion of the music for the fire illusion. During its conception, he had tried to imbue the fake flames with the scent of smoke, as well. He had never attempted that before, but since the pipe could fool both eyes and ears, he was hopeful. The original plan called for starting the real fire before the lack of a smoky aroma could spoil anything.

The yelling outside his door subsided. Waiting for the "fire" to be discovered was both tedious and fraught with tension. The illusion had been designed to start on the third floor, in the corner farthest from the tunnel door. It was supposed to spread too fast to be conceivably put out by a fast thinker, but not move toward the second floor or the stairs before everyone could get out. Still, it was risky creating an illusion that he couldn't see and control.

Shouts that had nothing to do with bears or leaving one's post finally reached his ears. The children had discovered the fire and were letting the world at large know about it in no uncertain terms. In the confusion of frantic yelling and stomping, As'ad thought that one of the dwarves had confirmed the flames and that all of the guards had left the building. Lighter but no less panicked footsteps caused the stairs to creak ominously, and the riled voices of frantic children filled the gap left by the dwarves.

As'ad was beginning to wonder how long it would take for Rahma to notice that a

real fire wasn't starting and no boom was going to come from the mountain when he heard the sound of heavy things being shoved across the floor. The tunnel door cracked open soon after, and Suha peeked her face in. She couldn't see him, of course, but she said, "We're the last ones," then pushed the two teenage boys behind her toward the side door.

Not wasting any time, As'ad hurried out after them. He snagged the oil jug and upended it over the pile of broken crates and other castoffs that had been used to lock him in. While the oil drained onto the makeshift kindling, he ducked back into the tunnel—leaving the door wide open—and used his flint to ignite the rope fuse. His first attempts fumbled due to his shaking hands, and the continued yelling from outside added to the pressure. He had just heard someone call for water when the fuse lit at last.

Pausing only to be sure that the fire continued beyond the initial spark, he turned his attention to the space under the thoroughly emptied jug. This time, his efforts produced results on the second try. Out of the corner of his eye, As'ad could see light from his fake flames flickering outside the nearest window. Checking one last time on the fuse, he felt a surge of triumph as the mini blaze rounded the bend. Then he took himself off through the side door.

Outside, the dwarves raced back and forth between the well halfway down the small hill and the house. As'ad looked more closely and realized that two of the guards were running around, one manned the well, and the other three watched either the chaos or the fire. Since they only had one bucket and what appeared to be a helmet, their firefighting toils were largely in vain.

Relying on his still-intact rock wall facade, As'ad eased his way along the mountainside until he found a good niche to stand in. No curious glances turned his way. Suha had taken advantage of the guards' preoccupation and was efficiently directing the children through the fake privy one at a time. She never took her eyes

off the dwarves and only sent the little ones through when she was sure they wouldn't be observed. Rahma waited somewhere on the other side to help corral and quiet the escapees.

As'ad wondered when it would occur to the dwarves that they had a couple of strong-backed young men who could be useful in the fire-dousing endeavor. He was destined to wonder forever because a muffled explosion, immediately followed by a louder, bigger boom, shook the ground. The guards stopped what they were doing to stare at the mountain, but no evidence of the detonation showed from the outside. They had wisely chosen to stash the spark pepper a safe distance from the house. One more dull roar interrupted the agitated argument that started when the guards realized their shipment was well and truly gone.

Laughter from a rock might have been enough to distract the dwarves from their heated discussion and attempts to assign blame, so As'ad held it in when he heard one of them accuse the bear. By then, Suha had whisked everyone out of sight, and while it was difficult to tell where the illusory fire ended and the real flames began, As'ad felt confident that there was no saving the house at this point.

The dwarves wound down the debate, then looked at the inferno and seemed to reach the same conclusion. The reminder that they still had a profit to protect got them moving again. They spun around to check on the captive humans, only to discover an absence of any other living creatures. One of the guards took the lead and began barking orders. The dwarves separated into pairs and spread out to search, united in this, at least. As'ad worried that his illusion wouldn't hold if any of them were familiar with the usual terrain and noted the anomalous placement of the privy shack.

His fears never came to fruition. The searchers accepted the evidence of their eyes and didn't venture into the small space that housed the hidden children. As'ad had chosen not to make that illusion one-way. He knew it would be hard on them to wait in silence when they couldn't see what was happening, but he didn't trust that the

youngest ones could keep from reacting if a guard came too close.

As he maintained his own rigid posture to keep a chunk of the “cliffside” from shifting, he watched the dwarves move farther and farther away. Once he deemed them out of sight and out of hearing range, he forced himself to count to fifty before dropping his illusion.

Leaving the pretend privy and rock wall that protected the children in place, he passed through the fake wooden shack and quietly called for Suha and Rahma to start bringing everyone out. That illusion could stay until it wore off on its own. He didn’t want the guards to come back and notice the difference.

The girls led their tense and fearful crew into what passed as a yard. Suha helped arrange the children in a line. She and Rahma led the littlest ones by hand while the oldest boys brought up the rear to prevent stragglers. Flames, both real and not, reflected off more than one pair of wide eyes as they walked around the house.

As’ad ranged on ahead, taking them in the direction of the handcart. Only two of the dwarves had come this way. Since one of them had already experienced a bear encounter less than an hour ago, As’ad played a quick ditty to renew the experience. He left the song unresolved so it would be ready when he needed it.

Retrieving the handcart took only a few minutes, but every second chafed. As he fought to get the vehicle moving on the unfriendly path, he became aware of a significant flaw in their plan: They didn’t have a destination apart from not here . Nor did he know how they were going to feed and care for twenty-two orphans.

As’ad worked hard to keep the growing dread off his face. When the route finally leveled out, he offered to let the smallest two ride in the cart. Rahma and Suha had been carrying them for a while by then. The boys in the back offered to hold the young ones who clamored to be picked up as soon as the girls’ arms were free.



Situating everybody so they could keep moving only took a few minutes, but it felt far longer. The sun had slipped behind the mountains by now, the light fading fast.

The two in the cart fell asleep as the group reached the edge of the abandoned warehouses the woman in blue had led them through the day before. The rest of the children were too tired to complain or give away their position, for which As'ad was eternally grateful.

Rahma appeared at his side, a child clinging to each hand. In a voice that he could barely hear over the wheels of his cart, she asked, "Do you know where to go from here?"

He did not.

"I can help you with that," an unfamiliar and silky smooth voice said.

### Which Ends Well

A s'ad whipped his head around to find the mysterious stranger who had led them to the orphans in the first place standing in the middle of the road.

Before he could say anything, the woman lifted her hand. "The dwarves who came this way will not trouble you."

Rahma and Suha looked from the regal person blocking their way to As'ad and back.

He carefully set the cart down and released the pole. Positioning himself between the woman and the rest of his party, he asked, "Who are you and what do you want?"

She assessed him with her eyes, and he wondered what she saw. After a moment, she nodded deeply.

"You may call me Adva." Her gaze moved to the exhausted children. "I can find safe havens for each of these younglings."

As'ad shifted his weight. Her words hadn't seemed overtly threatening, but he had no reason to trust the word of a stranger. A stranger who had initially led them to the children. Had she planned for As'ad and Rahma to steal the orphans for her? Or were her motives pure? Unconsciously, he reached for the pipe he had kept on his person.

Adva's eyes followed his fingers. She took a single step forward. "Test me with iron," she offered.

As'ad stiffened. He licked his lips, then walked to the back of the cart. The small cooking pot he wanted was, of course, under one of the sleepers. Rahma hurried over to take the child from him. When he had the pot, he strode toward the woman with caution but not fear.

He held out the pot, and she lightly wrapped her hand around the rim.

“See how it burns. You can trust my words.”

The sizzle horrified As'ad, and he hastily pulled the pot away from her. He looked into her eyes and knew. This was one of the beings he had read about while researching caves for Aladdin. The iron-burned ones could not lie or go back on their word.

Solemnly, he asked, “Do you promise to find the children good, safe homes where they will be loved and cared for, that they can leave when they are grown and choose to do so?”

“I swear to do everything in my power to place each child in a good and safe home where they will be cherished and provided for until such a time as they are grown and ready to leave,” Adva stated.

As'ad nodded. “Very well. What needs to happen now?”

“If you will follow me, please.” The otherworldly woman bowed to the group, then slowly began walking away. Rahma asked in a low voice why he was trusting Adva. He told her the woman couldn't lie, then promised to explain later.

Adva's pace was easily kept by the weary walkers, and they soon reached more populated areas that were better lit. She led them through the city gates, then east along the main road for longer than As'ad wanted to walk. She produced a faery light from somewhere and kept walking without turning to check that she was still being

followed. Before As'ad reached his limit and acted on the impulse to take a nap where he stood, she directed them off the road and into a thick stand of trees.

Not long after they entered the grove, she stopped and turned to face them.

“Those who come with me cannot leave for a time. Decide now if you want to be safe in a home of my choosing or if you want to make your own way in this world.”

Suha stepped forward. She gestured to the two older boys who still carried a couple of the smaller children. “I can't speak for Zawar or Wasi, but the rest of the children are orphans and have no one else. They will all go with you.”

Adva nodded.

Rahma pulled Suha to the side for a discussion that looked intense, though As'ad couldn't make out the words.

Their guide reached into a pocket and retrieved a small item. She held it out, away from the group, and whispered something else As'ad couldn't interpret. Not unlike when his illusions came into being, a dark, door-shaped hole appeared among the trees.

Suha hugged Rahma fiercely, then walked to the wagon and picked up one of the sleeping youngsters. She looked at Adva, who nodded; then she moved through the impossible doorway.

The oldest boys herded the other walkers in the same direction. One by one, they vanished until the only child left was the last sleeper in the cart. Adva delicately scooped the little one into her arms and stepped forward. She paused at the gateway.

“This is your final chance to join me.”

Tears stood in Rahma's eyes as she pursed her lips and shook her head.

"No, thank you," As'ad informed the woman as he grabbed Rahma's hand.

Adva studied the pair for a moment, then departed without another word. The black rectangle disappeared seconds later.

Rahma turned into As'ad's chest and sobbed, "You were right. Suha didn't want to be rescued. She wanted a new adventure."

He held her as she cried, running a soothing hand up and down her back. When her tears slowed, he said, "I'm sure you will see her again someday. And you were right first. She did want to be rescued from Hadia."

"Ooh, that woman!" Rahma growled into his shoulder. Then she started shaking for a different reason.

Surprised at her laughter, As'ad gently pushed her back so he could see her face. "What's so funny?"

"Hadia is going to be soooo mad when she finds out she has nowhere to sell stolen people anymore."

The pair concluded that the patch of woods they found themselves in was as good a camp as any. The trees provided a nice windbreak, but the temperature had dropped beyond pleasant. Rahma used the cold to convince As'ad that they should sleep side-by-side and use the tent canvases as extra blankets because it would be warmer than setting them up. He was too fatigued to protest.

When the midday sun filtering through the trees finally woke As'ad, he lay next to the bundle of blankets that he was pretty sure still contained Rahma—though he couldn't see any of her—and ruminated over the last few days. None of Pozik's

guards had seen him or Rahma; he trusted that they were safe from reprisal.

Then he thought about the last month or so. Then the months before that. His life had always had a clear before and after. He used to define his experiences as before the orphanage and after. Or before Aladdin and after. Now it was abundantly obvious that everything could be slotted into Before Rahma and After Rahma.

There was no way he could return to his original plan of moving the con to Bavenpier and forgetting about Rahma. Nor could he ask her to join him in his criminal lifestyle. She expected honesty and would hold him to it. Her ideas about using the pipe for entertainment purposes had merit, but he couldn't do that anywhere in Sharamil; the whole country would figure out what he had done. And he couldn't ask her to leave her family to make a new life with him.

Glumly, As'ad extricated himself from his bedroll and the tent canvases. Determined to let Rahma sleep as long as she needed, he quietly apologized to the rats that woke when he began digging around the handcart for breakfast supplies. They accepted his delayed offering of food and soon resettled in their nests.

Starting a cook fire a little ways from the trees, As'ad chuckled to himself at the memory of their second real conversation. He didn't count the words they had exchanged in Nahr, since that was mostly an interrogation on her part. The first conversation, having been comprised of accusations and more questions, probably didn't count, either. So the encounter at the tree she had unwittingly turned into a bonfire was likely the real first conversation.

Too bad there would be no conversations soon.

Before he could work himself into a full snit of crankiness, Rahma appeared looking adorably ruffled, though she had evidently taken the time to tame her hair. She accepted the food he handed her and polished it off as if she hadn't eaten in days. Given the chaos of their time in Jabal, mealtime had fallen a bit to the wayside.

The beauty sitting next to him set her empty dish to the side, clasped her hands in her lap, and turned to look at him with an inquisitive air. “What’s bothering you this morning?”

As’ad didn’t feel up to the task of dodging her pleasant persistence, but he tried anyway. “Nothing,” he lied with a shrug.

She leaned closer. “Are you feeling let down after yesterday’s excitement? That’s common, I hear.”

He wanted to know where she had heard that, or from whom. “I’m relieved it’s over. Who told—?”

Rahma narrowed her eyes and talked through his question. “Is it that you are facing a crisis about what direction your life should take now?”

His jaw dropped. “What? How—?”

Pleased to have hit her mark, she settled back. “It’s obvious. You never like scamming people to begin with, and now you’ve run out of places in Sharamil to use the rat con. You have learned how to use the pipe for other things, but you can’t do any of them here because word will get out and you’ll find yourself in prison.”

Listening to her voice the conclusions he had come to earlier that day was surreal. And she kept going.

“I’m also pretty certain that you have become fond of me.”

Heat burned As’ad’s ears and worked its way across his face and down his neck.

She set a hand on his arm and smiled sweetly. “I am very fond of you myself. Which means I know that you want a different life than what you have now, but I bet you’re

feeling like you can't ask me to give up my family and Sharamil to follow you somewhere else. And you know that I won't stick around if you continue to scam people."

He numbly shook his head. Everything she said was true. Wielding her honesty like a weapon yet again, this time it was poised to cut out his heart.

Rahma returned her hand to her lap, and he felt the absence of her touch as the warmth seemed to leach out of his arm. She raised her eyebrows. "So. What are you going to do about it?"

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. Nothing helpful, nothing harmful. Flat out nothing at all.

She rolled her lips between her teeth to keep from smiling outright. "First things first," she said, taking up the reins of the conversation again. "Do you have feelings for me? Positive ones," she clarified in a teasing warning.

As'ad finally found his voice, but his tangled emotions jumbled his words. "Yes! You're the— And I . . . Mmmm!" He clenched his teeth and gave a wordless growl as he tried to spit out everything he was feeling all at once.

"Wow." The smile Rahma had been holding back grew. "Where's that silver tongue of yours, Mr. Con Artist?"

His thoughts finally clunked into place, and the perfect answer came to him. "Apparently, it fails in the face of real love."

"Nice save!" She beamed at him. "Now forget words and just kiss me already."

"Yes, ma'am!"



Sometime later, after more kisses and several confessions of love and recitations of the wonderful attributes each person had come to value in the other, Rahma tilted her head against his shoulder and announced, “We should get married today.”

As’ad snorted. “Wouldn’t your parents like to meet me first?”

They had been sitting by the dying fire and looking at the pretty picture Jabal made from their copse of trees, but something in her manner caused him to sit up and look at her directly.

“They have! And while they can have no objections to me marrying the savior of Sharamil, they might be less thrilled to find out how long we’ve been traveling together without being married.” A wicked gleam shone in her eye, and As’ad knew she had won.

Finding a priest in Jabal to marry them was ridiculously easy compared to their most recent adventures, even with the complication of finding one who would allow rats to witness the ceremony. As’ad did put his foot down in one regard. He had his new wife write to her parents immediately after the wedding. Since they were heading back to visit after a brief stay in the mountain city, he wanted his in-laws to have time to work through their shock before the newlyweds arrived.

Rahma’s parents welcomed their son-in-law (and his rats) with open arms. To his shock, but not Rahma’s, arrangements had been made with her uncle to outfit the young couple with accommodations and an apprenticeship by the sea. Her father’s brother owned a couple of trading ships and was hoping to expand in the coming years. If As’ad and Rahma wanted to learn the business and someday captain one of his ships, they were more than welcome. As’ad’s dream of living by the ocean, which had been so hidden he hadn’t recognized it himself, came true, and the couple was close enough to visit Nahr on a regular basis.

Life couldn’t be more perfect.

Thanks for reading!