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Honors Thesis

POLITICAL PROPAGANDA IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation
requirements for University Honors

English Department
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

POLITICAL PROPAGANDA IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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English Department

Bachelor of Art

The Critical Introduction and Creative Work explore the effect of the use of Political Philosophies and Systems as plot and worldbuilding in Young Adult Fiction. This is explored through the lens of partisan antipathy and political polarization along with reception theory. By analyzing the current trends of politics as a plot and worldbuilding device in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction, I conclude that most popular fiction has a bias toward western political philosophy. This then leads to concerns over potential echo chambers and polarization. As a recommendation, I demonstrate how diverse political theories can be used in Young Adult fiction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wonderful partner who on a 20-hour car ride convinced me that I could throw out my original thesis idea out and do the thing I actually cared about rather than the one I thought I should write. I love you, Ashley. I also need to thank Shelli Spotts for being the best reader I could have asked for and showing me, I was a good enough writer to attempt this. I wouldn't have tried this without your encouragement. And lastly, while they won't read this, I appreciate my writing group dealing with me as I struggled to take their feedback. Thanks guys for putting up with my bad first drafts.

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Introduction

“The purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself,” said Albert Camus and it sums up the reason for my whole project (quote research). The thesis that follows is a young adult novel that depicts and explores political polarization and especially Western political bias in contemporary young adult fiction.

Before explaining the various problems I ran into (and the various successes) I found in preparing this creative piece, I will establish my goals in writing this piece. The main goal was to establish world-building norms that don't rely on typical Western political systems. They need to serve as a backdrop for the plot and influence some of the decisions made by major characters. This is similar to how western politics serve as the backdrop of various dystopian Young Adult fiction, and I wanted to replicate that with non-Western systems.

Character interaction was a major part of the second goal. Characters needed to have conflicts with each other because of cultural differences and political upbringing. With these two conscious decisions, I crafted the creative piece associated with this Critical Introduction.

This critical introduction then explores the genre and tropes of Young Adult fiction with a focus on Dystopian fiction. The critical introduction explores the implications of those genre tropes when it comes to representing political systems. This concept began when I realized that in my studies of political philosophy and science, I began with quite a bit of bias. My understanding of other ideas and possibilities was always tainted with negativity.

As Albert Camus stated, “A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images,” (Camus 5). I read many novels growing up, and it is only fair to assume those novels influenced the way I viewed the world and formed my own “philosophy.” This seems a valid conclusion from Henry James’ statements in the *Art of Fiction* that, “Literature should be either instructive or amusing,” and his implication is that good novels do both (James). But this begs the question: if literature is instructive in philosophy, then what is being taught? And even more importantly, how is it being taught?

If anything, my studies have taught me that political philosophy and systems are far from the simple caricatures displayed in media. And that is no fault of the media. Political philosophy examines the thoughts of individuals and groups, some of the most nuanced and least understood parts of sociality. As Hermann Hesse put it, “Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish” (Hesse).

Perhaps this sounds a bit critical, that I’m coming into this discussion of the purpose of novels and their effects with a preconceived bias, but I acknowledge that and it plays into the reasons I wanted to explore how novels can affect political opinions. As Hemingway said, “As a writer you should not judge. You should understand” (Popova). And as a political scientist, I judge to understand, so I hope Hemingway can forgive me for my attempt to do both.

To start, Rachel Wadham was not being malicious when she laughed at my question. Instead, it was the laugh of someone who’s experienced in their field, and a novice such as I stepped on a landmine that she thought had been flagged.

Rachel Wadham is a Content Librarian for Brigham Young University, and she focuses on Juvenile Fiction. I'm a potential political scientist and an amateur author who needed her help to find, "Dystopian Books that demonstrate the use of Western political systems in their worldbuilding and plot." Rachel Wadham laughed because, as she said, "That's all of them." As Rachel explained, "You don't need to prove that the genre is oversaturated, just pull up a list by the New York Times or Amazon and show it."

So I did. The following titles are all heavily cited by mass media and scholarly articles as the main examples of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Selection*, *1984*, *Legend*, *Ready Player One*, and *The Giver* (Readthistwice). There is nothing inherently wrong with these titles or their use of politics in their plot. Instead, it is the lack of diverse political theories being used that concerns me.

As will be further explored, political polarization comes from echo chambers (Westfall 145-158). Ones I believe are being made unintentionally in the Young Adult genre. These implications are fascinating for political scientists. All that being said, this work does not aim to prove a correlation or causation of political polarization with the lack of diverse political system representation in Young Adult media. Instead, the focus is to explore how the Young Adult Genre could benefit from diversification and the challenges that will bring.

As part of this exploration, the context of both the political perspective and the literary explanation will be laid out through various theoretical interpretations. Along with this will be a critique of my attempt at adding to the field in a way that would diversify thought.

Explanation of Partisan Antipathy and Political Polarization

The most common concern and field of study in American political science currently is the rise of political polarization (Pew Research Center). More and more, people are moving away from the central position on many policies, with political parties becoming more and more radical (Westfall 145-158). This is a shift in the last decade from a pattern that has been consistent since the beginning of the United States of America (Pew Research Center).

Even more concerning is a rising trend that correlates with polarization known as partisan antipathy. Simply put, this is the vilification of those whom you disagree with. It is no longer enough to disagree with someone, someone with whom you disagree is evil. This has manifested in the creation of echo chambers, the breakdown of communication and cooperation in politics across the aisle, and the rise of conspiracy theories (Pew Research Center).

This is not limited to political opinions. Any vilification of an opposing side creates a sense of justification for your own opinions. It is easy to wave away contradicting opinions if they have been associated with evil. As Edward Said said, "The difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge" (Said 31).

To demonstrate how this could exist in literature, I will use *The Hunger Games*, as it was the catalyst for my own foray into the genre's current tropes. The political background of the events of *The Hunger Games* is simple. There is a dictator over a fictional world of 13 districts. The people in these districts don't have rights or actions in their government other than as entertainment (Collins). The solution to

this political conflict is to overthrow the dictator and establish a democracy, or at least a democracy is implied. A government of the people, per se.

This is considered a dystopia, or a failed utopia/political system. The failure, in this case, is the lack of rights. While I am a supporter of citizens' rights, the concept that a political system is a failure because it does not protect its citizens' personal rights is an entirely Western political theory.

The following is from the third book in the Hunger Games series expressing how political representation will work as an alternative to their current problems:

“Everyone,” Plutarch tells him. “We’re going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government. Don’t look so suspicious; it’s worked before.”

“In books,” Haymitch mutters.

“In history books,” says Plutarch. “And if our ancestors could do it, then we can, too.”

Frankly, our ancestors don’t seem much to brag about. I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn’t care about what would happen to the people who came after them. But this republic idea sounds like an improvement over our current government (Collins 85-86).

When the problem is a lack of a system or theory and the solution is the addition of a system or theory, you have only created a bias towards that system. There is no comparison of systems or theory, and your problem isn’t real, and

neither is the solution. This is fine on its own; it doesn't detract from the other aspects of the plot. The problem is that this presentation can be repeated.

Books such as *Divergent*, *Legend*, and *The Testing* all have similar presentations of political conflict. In *Divergent*, we see this with a conversation about who deserves power, "My father says that those who want power and get it live in terror of losing it. That's why we have to give power to those who do not want it" (Roth 62). This is again a very Western idea, idealized. In *Legend*, we see this with an even more specific slant of Western rebellion. This is the advice of one of the main character's responses to corruption in their militant state: "If you want to rebel, rebel from inside the system. That's much more powerful than rebelling outside the system" (Lu 245). For a Political Scientist, this is a parade of red flags. A pattern has emerged, and it has created an echo chamber of ideology. That being said, these books don't necessarily vilify other systems.

Enter *The Selection*. This book's political background presents a monarchy with a caste system. While the story is basically a season of the bachelor, there is a specific subplot that I want to point out. America, the main character, takes a specific issue with the concept of the caste system and criticizes it heavily. Repeatedly throughout the entire series, America says things like, "So much went through my head. How families are families, no matter their castes. How mothers all have their own worries to bear. How I really don't hate any of the girls here, no matter how wrong they might be" (Cass 267). It not only plays a large role in how America sees the world, but also in the romantic plot lines. We see this in America's response to a romantic partner in a lower class, "You've got to stop thinking of me that way. When it's just you and me, I'm not a Five and you're not a Six. We're just

Aspen and America” (Cass 50). This is a continuing plot complication in the entire series. Her opinions of the caste system and more specifically her criticisms are something that causes conflict with the monarchy she's competing to be a part of.

You cannot get more on the nose than that. A character named America actively attacks the caste system in the fictional world and presents it as the opposition.

Explanation of Reception Theory

Reception theory is part of the broader literary theory exploring reader response to reading. The basic premise is that the audience understands literature based on their personal perceptions and preferences. There may be intended meanings, but the meaning is derived from the individual reception of the literature (Holub 80-81).

This is a very simple concept; people interpret media based on their context and culture. In a very dramatic way, this would be exemplified by the banning of books which is currently happening in Florida (Dunne). The books banned in Florida are not necessarily political statements, they just explore so-called controversial topics (Prose). For example, *A Court of Mist and Fury* has LGBTQ+ themes. *Stamped From the Beginning* is about the history of African Americans and the results of that history today (Dunne). However, the way they are viewed by members of school boards and other legislative bodies completely changes the books' meaning (Prose).

A very famous example that cycles in my discipline's discussions of theories (like reception theory) is the book *1984*. It was banned both in the United States and the USSR. However, in the US it was banned for being pro-communist, and in the

USSR it was banned for being anti-communist (Anonymous ; David Remnick). It could be argued that the intended meaning of *1984* has to do with authoritarianism, however, that doesn't matter—a policy was changed because of how it was received by readers.

Combining Theory and Practice

With these theories summarized and demonstrated in the genre, we can start to make some conclusions and take action. If we understand that the field is already dominated by a particular philosophy, reception theory points to the idea that readers are going to be predisposed to interpret media as such. At the same time, by using the trends of political polarization and applying what has been learned from political antipathy, we see an echo chamber.

This lens of the current state of YA literature does not imply that authors are purposefully creating such an environment. Rather it's a natural progression of creation that occurs as Western authors write to western audiences. While I am critical of this lack of diversity and am concerned about how this could affect political polarization, I believe this is entirely possible to change. It will require authors to take time to use environments and plot devices outside of their comfort zone. It will require readers to take a chance on the unfamiliar. All things, I recognize, are difficult, and I know that because I tried to do it myself.

To accomplish this goal, I spent extensive time crafting the systems and political powers I use in my thesis' plot. None of these political systems described either exist today or have ever escaped theoretical confines. For example, a theocracy does exist in several countries, but not with a matriarchy. As such, I

wanted to explain each of the systems world building, as the effort required does not fully appear in the creative piece. These are backdrops, after all.

Theocracy

This is the first political system the creative piece introduces the reader to, and most likely the least understood in the Western school of thought. This political system generally falls under the aristocracy umbrella, but can also be with a dictatorship. The main distinction from other systems is that this philosophy uses a reliance on a state-sponsored religion for its claims to authority (KHALID 187-209). This can include using religious laws as civil laws, leaders claiming to be a representative of a deity or deities, and punishing citizens for not observing religious rites.

The system represented in my creative piece is a theocracy that claims divine inspiration from three matriarchs who head a moderate bureaucracy. This system based its religious roots on Judaism, Christianity, and most obviously, Islam. Much of the culture represented in the piece was developed from the Arabic Peninsula and my own experiences living in the real-world equivalent. The main viewpoint character is from this system, and it shapes her view of the rest of the systems as well as her political interactions.

Theocracy as a form of government has several benefits. First off, using religion unites your populace, and decisions that are made in the government are easily supported by claims of the religious right. These aspects usually make Theocracies relatively more efficient than other political systems in policy-related as

well as bureaucratic decisions. This trend continues in law enforcement and justice departments—the rules are simply to keep the religious tenets (KHALID 187-209).

The negative aspects of this political system are generally understood to come from the connection between religion and state. Any decisions the government makes can't be disagreed with as that is disagreeing with higher authority related to a citizen's faith (KHALID 187-209). Also, those in power can justify the removal of rights on religious authority which is generally bad for society. And finally, citizens with differing religious beliefs or minorities, in general, are typically underrepresented or oppressed in some manner.

Meritocracy

This is the second political system readers of the creative piece will interact with, and the first that is put in discussion with the theocratic system. A meritocracy is a form of aristocracy where progression in the political system is based on merit and accolades (Daniels 206-223). This political system has a focus on education. The main distinction is an overt focus on removing any sense of inherited power in the system (Daniels 206-223).

The novel uses this system with a council of members who are each an expert in their field. The main element demonstrated in my thesis is that one of the main characters is one of the councilmen of this system. This is a tension point between the point-of-view character and the councilman. Most of the creative piece's conflict is demonstrated between the meritocracy and the theocracy.

Meritocracy is incredibly efficient as a political system, as each role is fulfilled by an expert. If properly managed, Meritocracy outperforms other systems in their

development in industry and technological advancements. Meritocracy also theoretically creates a system of base equality where everyone is in a position to succeed through their merits (Daniels 206-223).

The main critiques of this system come from the fact that not everyone receives the same education or values the same disciplines that the community does (Liu 383-397). If a meritocracy is focused on the structure of society, artists are not going to be paid or respected. If education isn't public in this system, then elitism will persist regardless (Liu 383-397). Not only that, but people learn in different ways, and if the system doesn't account for that you may not get the results you want but the ones the system supports. Finally, the main complaint is that innovation is slow in this theory, as everything will support the current standard—risks are inefficient and the system rewards success.

Imperial Caste System

This is the third system the reader will become acquainted with in the creative piece. The reader will not receive the same level of information about this system, but the theorized system is fleshed out. The other two have more specific designations as they are more common theories, yet this theoretical system is a mix of an Imperial Monarchy, the Mandala systems of Southeast Asia, and the Caste Systems of India. The main characteristic of this theory is a strong ruling class that controls a territory surrounding a central point (Quigley 551-566). Influence and authority are directly proportional to the geographic distance from the central points (Kumar 463-488). This system values citizenry over all other resources.

The creative work showcases this system least. Political systems in general are mainly used as an invisible hand in the main conflict. This was done intentionally in order to play on the trope of Asian countries being mysterious. While it may be strange that I would want to use that while trying to break stereotypes, I saw it as a good opportunity to break expectations and demonstrate the opposite.

This system, like those previously mentioned, benefits from having a non-democratic yet inefficient decision-making process. However, this goes a step beyond as all power resides in one person and that person makes the final decision. This allows for quick decisions and turnaround based on feedback in a country. This system has a strict social hierarchy and gives purpose to those in the society based on their rank (Quigley 551-566). No one is unsure how to help society as society has already decided what is needed. Along with these two, we also see that all aspects of economics and diplomacy are managed by one person which leads to a single-minded government.

Of course, a Monarchy and Caste System have several downsides. If the ruler is unaware of things or not receptive to new viewpoints, the system can suffer. A single ruler is easily corrupted rather than a group, and power trips are likely. A Caste System, while giving structure to society, oppresses the lower ranks (Olcott 648-657). While the creative piece has a modified version to allow for progression, this is not often the case. Even with the progression, it would be very unlikely for someone at the bottom to make it anywhere close to the top (Olcott 648-657). This theory out of all the other theories mentioned has the least representation of public opinion in politics.

Conclusion

I truly did expect this to be simple. Not because it was easy, or because I didn't expect to have to work, but because I thought it would make perfect sense that the solution to an absence of diversity would be to add diversity. Similar to how many literary critics think a novel that is lacking a democracy getting a democracy is a solution. I was wrong.

Flannery o' Connor said it best: "I write to discover what I know" (Anonymous). I discovered that it is easy to critique, yet it is hard to create. As detailed, even when I spent hours crafting and writing systems and political theories that were meant to uplift cultures outside the Western sphere, I didn't stick the landing. Reception Theory raised its ugly head and my readers saw things based on their perception of political interactions. I overlooked Atheism as a defining trait of Western political philosophy, and as something that would take over any other nuance I attempted.

But this is the joy of creation, and the fine art of fiction. Again, Henry James points out that, "The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to [them], and we measure [them] by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what [they] may attempt as an executant--no limit to [their] possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes" (James). In many ways, I'm proud of my failures in the creative piece.

Representation in media is a complicated process, one that I barely hinted at when approaching these non-Western cultures as outsiders. If anything, I hope this critical introduction and creative piece demonstrate how much I want a diversity of

thought in media. Regardless of the worries of echo chambers and biases, it would be more interesting.

And while none of this is simple, I know it is possible. It will take work to change trends, it will take action by amateur authors, and it will take time. I believe that fully, and fully believe my work demonstrates that reality.

The Calligraphy Case Files
By Jordan Spriggs

Prologue

The nub stumbled and ink splattered up from the parchment. Abdu cursed as the golden ink dotted the sleeves of his robes. Standing up from the desk overflowing with parchment and scrolls that hung off the wooden desk, Abdu turned back to the overcrowded library of a room. A single beam of light shone through the rough-hewn hole in the mud-caked bricks that made up the tight walls. Abdu shook off the motes that hovered in the air as he paced.

“Elo-hah, why must this be such a struggle,” Abdu grumbled, “One must honor him in voice, in name, and in writing, but how is that so difficult.”

Abdu turned back to his desk, grabbing the parchment with the splattered lines. He pulled the parchment away from the weights, the small rocks clattered off onto the dusty ground. Abdu brought the parchment into the light, his eyes traced the golden ink lines he had carefully drawn. Following the first line, Abdu noted the curves, each of them proportional to the letters they connected to, except the last.

Abdu crumpled the parchment up into a ball, throwing it to the ground. The parchment ball bounced and landed with the others that littered the floor around the desk and skewed chair legs. Abdu ran his hands back through his dark hair, his fingers splitting his curls. He clenched his hair for a moment then let it go with a sigh. Reaching down with a hand Abdu grabbed the wooden stylus and pulled it to eye level. He looked at the cut and pointed nub, stained dark with the dyes of practice hours.

“No more parchment then, not till the motions are right,” Abdu turned to the air in front of him, pulling his stylus up and his sleeves back. He smiled at the splatters of ink sparkling on his sleeves.

Taking a deep breath, Abdu carefully pushed his stylus into the light. He drew it downwards to make the first letter. *Eleth*. He drew back his hand, prepping the next letter, and let out the breath he had held. Even without ink, Abdu could almost see the mark of the letter in the air. He smiled, continuing the next letter, connecting them at their bases and adding the necessary embellishments.

Abdu paused his stylus mid-downward swipe, prepared to move left with the final letter.

The Hep, the worst of the Eleths to draw at the end of a word, too many curves Abdu thought. His hesitation to write the last letter caused his stylus to flutter in the air. Abdu shook his head, “Elohah doesn’t expect perfection, just persistence.”

And with that Abdu began again, and again. Moving his wooden stylus through the air.

Eleth, Lam, Orn, Hep, Aph, Hep

The letters and their shapes echoed in his mind. The letters of the name of his God.

Abdu’s eyes closed as his hand moved the stylus through the air.

Eleth, Lam, Orn, Hep, Aph, Hep

The darkness of his closed eyes was slowly intruded on by a golden light, one that burned through his eyelids. Abdu’s eyebrows furrowed, his brow scrunched in solidarity. But he continued, to the very last curve of the Hep before opening his eyes. He blinked at the sudden brightness.

“In the name of-” Abdu’s words trailed off as his mouth dropped wide.

There in the center of his room floated golden letters as if he had etched them into the air.

“Eleth, Lam, Orn, Hep, Aph, Hep” Abdu said, his eyes widening. “Elohah...” He whispered.

And with that, the letters blurred and like the ink that covered the desk's wood, the golden light took over the room, and the details faded away.

Prologue 2

Alekcey let out a deep breath. He felt his chest deflate and collapse as he focused his mind. His right hand's fingers tapped absently against his rough but pressed trousers. *This isn't even important for the academy acceptance, you're already in, and you know how to take on someone like Sasha.* Alekcey felt his fingers find his stylus in his pocket, they wrapped around the hardened wood.

The feel of the familiar steadied Alekcey's nerves, his eyes opened and began to blink at the light. His vision was blurry but the sound of the crowd he had drowned out now hit him in full force. The sound of hundreds of people cheering individually in unison reverberated into his body. Alekcey shook his head, wondering if the blurriness of vision was from the chanting.

A sudden change in the cheer brought Alekcey back to his immediate surroundings, his opponent had stepped into the field. Alekcey once again found comfort in his stylus, his thumb rubbed against the well-oiled wood. He watched as Sasha took to the small pedestal in the middle of the sandy arena floor that he waited on.

I'm going to knock that stupid bob of hair into the dit., Alekcey narrowed his eyes as he watched Sasha wave to the crowd that had all but faded in the background. She met eyes with him, giving a small smile and head nod. Alekcey shook his head but gave a half smile back.

Suddenly the crowd hushed, their echoed whispers fading. Alekcey didn't need to look, one of the councilmen had stood.

"Welcome to the grand finale of the Calligraphic Contest," a loud and amplified voice echoed through the arena. The crowd's cheers resounded in response. "Today we have a challenge to our reigning champion, Alexandra Alexandrovna," The voice continued as the cheers continued, somehow beating them out. "Her challenger is Cadet Alekcey Evgenovich who has bested each of his classmates for the opportunity to stand before you this day." The voice stopped, letting the cheers die out before continuing.

"Unlike in previous rounds, Near Lethal Spellings are now authorized. Both contestants are aware and have consented to any bodily harm that could befall them. The contest will end when one or both contestants have yielded or are incapacitated from spelling."

Ah, that's why I was nervous, Alekcey gritted his teeth, his index finger pressed against the wood of his stylus.

"Contestants prepare your styluses!" The voice shouted, Alekcey whipped out his own, as his fingers found their positions to hold it steady and sure. He looked past the tip of his stylus to see Sasha casually readying herself across from him. The metal tip of her stylus glinted in the light.

"On the firing of this pistol, you may make your first stroke. Remember The Forms will fortify you."

"THE FORM WILL FORTIFY YOU" echoed the crowd, Alekcey already had ignored everything but the position of his pen in the air. *A 45-degree slant of the stylus and hard italic lines should keep the spell within its meaning but still let me release it quickly.* Sergey's mind raced, but he released another breath, to focus his mind on the Bukvi that made up the word he was about to write.

And then the screech of a bullet split the air between him and Sasha.

Without hesitation Sergey began his first stroke, writing the first Bukva, relying on the years of practice and habit he had accumulated. *The Writings are not just writing your thoughts into the air or on paper, it's a form of art, one that requires every ounce of your concentration.* The voice of his mentor echoed in his mind. Alekcey's left eye

twitched as his eyes followed the strokes he painstakingly made. *Each angle must be united with the shape of those around it, each bukva must be separated proportionately, and one mistake will misspell... and that's how I lose.*

Alekcey's thoughts didn't shake him, only brought his focus as he finished the last stroke. He released a sigh of relief at the word that gleamed in the air

FIRE

A blast of flame shot away from him, and Alekcey smiled. He figured this move had caught his opponent by surprise. He had practiced for weeks to get the speed of the spell down, its angles had to be perfect for the right interpretation.

But then Alekcey's smile froze, and a sense of panic settled in his stomach. His blast of flame split in two in front of him, revealing Sasha in her finishing stroke, a neon green whip of light cracking in the air. It sliced through the flames towards him, Alekcey watched in frozen horror.

On instinct, he brought his hand up to start a spell to... *Do something anything-*

But it was too late. Alekcey watched as the neon light slashed through his wrist, his hand grasping the stylus falling to the platform.

Alekcey screamed as his severed hand smacked against the wood, blood pooled darkening the platform. He dropped to his knees the shock still steadying him against the pain he knew would be coming.

"Yield," Alekcey said, his voice warbling. The roar of the crowd and the sounds of trumpets was muted to Alekcey. His own vision faded in and out until he collapsed, his head thumping with the cheers and his eyes closed.

Alekcey woke up surrounded by covers and cloth, a single swinging oil lamp went in and out of his field of vision above him. He blinked, and his mind raced to understand his memories. *I was fighting, there was pain- My hand-*

"MY HAND!" Alekcey yelled, launching himself up. The bedsheets wrapped his body, and he fought against them to pull out his arms. Finally, he yanked his right arm free to find his hand still attached to him.

His fingers opened and closed, and Alekcey flexed his hand awestruck.

"Alekcey Evgenovich, You've finally woken up," A voice called him back from his awe.

Alekcey looked up to see a nurse with a clipboard standing in front of him. "Yes sorry, I apologize for the yelling," He said.

"No matter, it appears this is the first time you've been treated for a severing. I'm sure that was disconcerting for you. Luckily for you, it's a simple procedure with the Writings. We will need to continue to have you receive some numbing spells and then some physical therapy to help with the reattachment spells we did while you were out."

"How long was that?" Alekcey interrupted.

"Oh, you were out for about 12 hours, panic and shock along with some of our own spells to keep you calm. Regardless it's good to have you back with us. We will be able to ask you what things feel off now and see what we can do. If you have any pain just let me know. For now please stay in the bed till the Doctors come in to see you."

Alekcey nodded, his eyes fell back to his hand, the memory of his own hand being disconnected played over and over.

The Writings may be able to heal us physically, but it is up to us to rely on the Forms to fortify our minds. His mentor's voice once again echoed in his head and he laid back into the covers, unsure if he'd ever spellwrite again.

Chapter 1

The sonorous syllables slid through the air and into the sleeping mind of Sameerah. She groaned and rolled over in her short bed as the woman's voice called out and echoed in the streets.

"Elohah, tell me the reason you decided we all needed to get up before the sun," Sameerah grumbled as she rolled out from the light covers. Barefoot she stumbled to her desk, knocking some parchment to the floor. Reed pens followed, clattering across the hardened clay that was cool to Sameerah's feet.

"I don't have time for this," Sameerah muttered. Her hands found the feel of wax amongst the leathery papers. Without hesitation she grabbed the candle and pulled it loose, a splatter of liquid hit her nightclothes. *I forgot the inkcap again*, Sameerah shook off the thought, as she jiggled the drawer in her desk. Finally, it slid on rusted tracks, and Sameerah grabbed the box of matches. Turning to the single window between the desk and the bed, she reached up with the matchbox holding hand to pull back the curtain.

A wash of the flavor of salt wafted in and Sameerah took a deep breath in, savoring the smell. Her eyes had closed involuntarily but they opened to adjust to the dawn streaks and the clustered cubes of mud and clay that made up the homes across the road. Sameerah smiled to see in the dark homes, a single light flickered into existence in the windows.

She turned to her own, grabbed a match, and fumbled with everything in her hands. The scrape of the stubborn match against the strike pad finally resulted in a flare that blinded Sameerah. She winced, holding the match to the wilted wick and waiting for the flame to catch. Just as the flame began to lick her fingertips the candle caught and she placed it carefully on the window sill.

Then without further ceremony, Sameerah knelt and prayed. Alone in her room, but with everyone else in Al-Kaleq.

Rising up from her prostration, Sameerah sighed. The panic of moments before, now peace. Her eyes caught the flicker of light through her window that was brighter than any candle. Sameerah reached for one of the wooden styluses on the ground and grabbed it as she stood at the window.

Focusing on her intentions, Sameerah held up the reed to the air and recited a verse, "Let the first word of the day be mine, in voice and in writing." She moved her hand with purpose, to draw in the air each of the Eleths that made up the name of her God. Of all the words she struggled with, this one she never had, and with a flick of her wrist, she finished.

She had written the name small and close together, and so a mere sliver of golden light appeared and shot away from her. The light joined the others, each with different sizes and intensities that illuminated the steam rising from the city center and industrial sector against the coast. Sameerah leaned out the window taking in the view, straggling wires dangling across the rooftops and crisscrossing above the dusty awnings. She narrowed her eyes and pushed back strands of dark hair behind her ear as she picked out the cable car trundling uphill towards her.

Right on schedule to its last stop, Sameerah thought, turning away from the window and back to her barely candlelit room. Luckily since it was small, the light did more than enough for her to grab the dark trousers and cream button-up blouse she had left out on the chair the night before. Sameerah stepped through the open doorway to the privy and placed the clothes on the counter of her sink. She turned the only knob, and a shot of screeching steam spit out of the faucet. Sameerah turned away from the sink, to slip out of her nightclothes and wrap her chest before putting on the other clothes.

She turned back to the gurgle of the water that finally reached her, the pressure of the steam splattered it against the terracotta bowl. The oranges became more muted and brown and she reached down to splash some of the water on her face. She looked up

to see her vibrant green eyes and sandalwood skin fuzzy in the condensation on her mirror. Sameerah pulled her hair back, the dark hair laying straight against her scalp as she made a simple bun.

She grabbed her head scarf from the hook on the wall, carefully folding the front so that the creased portion lay flat on her head. The left side was slightly shorter and she threw it over her right shoulder, then threw the muted crimson fabric over her left shoulder. Sameerah paused, adjusting the scarf around her face and shoulders.

And then the scream of a steam whistle made her jump. "In his name, how does that always get me?" Sameerah turned to rush to her front door and cupboard. Sameerah moved the cloth out of the way she tore a piece of the flatbread resting on the cutout shelf. She bit down to hold it in her mouth as she grabbed a piece of goat cheese and a handful of dates. She turned to her door and grabbed the shoulder bag hanging from the door knob.

The bottles of ink and paint in the bag clinked against each other as Sameerah rushed out of the door, pushing the food into the bag. She ran down the steps, bracing herself against the clay walls and narrow stairways to rush out onto the dusty road. A crowd of early morning workers was clambering onto the rusted and clanking cable car. Sameerah adjusted her scarf, making sure it was still positioned after her rush to get to road level.

"Sameerah!" a gruff voice called out, Sameerah turned to see the larger man with a misfitting set of overalls and a scruffy beard waving and smiling. "I saved you a spot!" he said, waving her forward.

"Abdulah, I told you it's Sam," she responded with a laugh. She grabbed onto the pole and pushed herself next to him.

He waved her off, "Nah that's just too masculine, and we have enough of that down in the desalination plants."

Sam looked to the others crowding on the cable car, the older men surrounding them. She leaned in to speak as the steam whistle screamed again, "I guess so, but I feel like my name is too long."

Abdulah chuckled, grabbing the pole as the cable car jerked forward. "You're rewriting the common spells to me, my name is Abdulah but if I got it shortened I'd just be another Abdu."

"Fair enough," Sam said, turning away to look out over the awakening city, steam pillars now firing up and hazing the sunrise. She leaned out to catch a view of the harbor at the end of the road before it curved, dawn light reflected in sparkles on the cresting waves. Familiar sights and familiar smells graced her senses, the flappings of awnings and people calling out.

Except for one, the warship that sat in the harbor, metal plating covering up the wooden hull.

"Sameerah, that's right, the boys were chatting about that yesterday, we had to switch to smaller bellows spells for the desalination. With you working in the ministry I figured you'd might have heard something," Abdulah said with a point to the ship.

Sam shook her head. "I just work for an investigator, I don't hear too much," She said.

"Well I'm just a desalination worker, making basic flame spells and I hear things, you get to learn all sorts of complicated ones so I figured you'd hear more," Abdulah said. Sam turned to see him wink as the cable car came to a shuddering stop. Another steam whistle went off to announce the stop as Sam shook her head.

"Just because I learn them doesn't mean I can do them," She started as Abdulah prepared to jump off with the other workers, "and Elo-hah doesn't see any difference." Abdulah smiled and waved as the cable car whistled again.

"As Elo-hah wills it," he said, but his voice was drowned out by the screech of cables as the car pulled away and around the curve.

Sam turned away looking up the hill they were now ascending. The ship was for sure one from the north, *but why would that be here, it's not any holiday or treaty. Abdulah is right on that I should at least have heard about that.*

She shook the thoughts away, looking at the more ornate buildings surrounding her, a lone traveler on the cable car. The arches and carvings were more dramatic and even domes had started to pop up as roofs. Sam's focus however was forward, towards the main Synasqe. A large crowd was surrounding her destination, the clock face on the building rang out with the clamor of the hour

"Turns out Abdulah was right again," Sam muttered as the cable car screeched to another stop and she hopped out to approach the crowd.

Chapter 2

"WHY IS A EZSLOVIAN SHIP IN OUR HARBOR?" One voice yelled, clambering against the others pushing forward

"IS THERE A TREATY OR A WAR!" another person yelled, the crowd talked over each other as Sam approached. She clenched her teeth and timidly tried to push into the crowd.

"Excuse me," she started, the crowd bustled and pushed her back, the voices of the press taking over any thought. "I'm late to work, can you let me through-" She said before being shoved back again by the crowd. Sameerah looked forward to see the lobby doors, four guards stood in front of them. Their pointed metal helmets glinted in the sun as they held their ground in front of the mob of press pressing forward.

Sam bit her lip and then ducked under and through the flailing people still yelling questions at the silent guards and building. She dug in her bag as she was jostled back and forth, trying to get to the front of the crowd. An elbow hit her face and Sam yelped, reaching up to fix her scarf. She burst out the front, the guards immediately moved to push her back.

"No, wait, I work here-" she said, holding out a card to verify her identity. The man looked down at her through the linen cloth around his face. He narrowed his eyes, Sam felt a jolt of panic run through her.

"Sam!" the guard said, "I'm so sorry, let's get you out of this crowd and next time let me show you the private entrance you can take so this won't happen again."

"Is that you Khalid?" Sam asked with surprise, "You're all fancy today."

Khalid laughed, "I'm not always slouching in the rec room, especially when an entire Ezslovian regiment shows up."

"An entire regiment? Where?" Sam asked as he escorted her through the doors, and the answer to her question was revealed. The hallway was crowded with men standing in lines, their backs as straight as their uniforms. Tight blue material was pressed against them, only a single row of buttons leading up to the collar tight against their necks. They were white, pale in comparison to the people she knew well. Where she was used to the rounder curves of her people, these felt like they were carved from stone. *Especially how they stand, how can someone have that straight of a back?* Sam wondered as she walked down the hall.

A single man with a similar style uniform to the rest stood at the reception desk. The only difference in his appearance was the round furry hat sitting atop what Sam could only assume was a bald head. *This is quite the image, I wonder if I could paint this later, the fur would be hard to-*

He turned to her and raised his nose to look down it, at her. "Ah, I assume you are the escort then, My men and I have been waiting in this sweltering heat."

"I-uh, there's been a misunderstanding," Sam responded back in the common tongue he had addressed her in.

"Nonsense, you work for this ministry don't you?" The large man responded.

"Well I work here yes but-"

"Then you will suffice, they've kept me waiting long enough, no need stopping for prayer in between like you rats waste time with."

"Sir I haven't a clue what is-"

"Perfect, I don't need someone they've picked to waste my time, I'll use you to get to the bottom of this act of war."

"Sir? I-" Sam was cut off as the man grabbed her shoulder and pushed her forward.

"Let's get on with it, this should have been taken care of hours ago," the man almost growled as he pushed her through the doors and into the office space that Sam had been heading to.

Albeit the typical order and peace that she expected had descended into havoc. Sam's eyes widened at the spells being thrown around, various streaks of color shooting through the parchments floating in the air. Sam watched as one of the officers, a little older than her, shook a scrap of paper and then quickly used her stylus to finish whatever word or sentence, and the paper erupted into violet light. The light spun through the parchment on the desk, illuminating one that the officer grabbed to start reading.

"Alright, where is the armory, you can get me access, and then I can-"

"An armory?" Sam interrupted, "this is an investigative bureau, we have some rifles but mostly just in the-"

"Rifles? Perfect, I need to inspect those before anything else, where are they girl?" the man asked.

"Uh, I d-don't think-" Sam started before another voice cut in. Sam turned as she heard the voice echo over her shoulder.

"General Kulak, I thought we had made ourselves clear, no military would be our bureau as we process the news you have brought and our people pray for guidance," the woman was stately, a dark scarf tightly wrapped against her head. Unlike Sam, she wore a black loose dress that went to her wrists and ankles.

"Yes, but this is not the time for prayer, this is the time for action!"

Sam turned away from Hatata Amira and back to the now reddening General as he blustered.

"Here, General, Prayer is action and we expect you to honor that," Amira said sharply in return, "You will wait as we do for the will to be revealed. Then we will talk to you and the regiment you've placed at my doorstep without permission."

"In war, you don't ask for permission to move your troops!"

Sam gasped, along with others in the office, the electric lights flicker and hum suddenly noticeable as the room stopped.

Amira glided past Sam, lightly brushing Sam's shoulder. "General, I hope those words were a mistake, but regardless I will ask you to go with god's will back out that door you barged in," Amira said coldly.

Sam's eyes widened as her left hand clutched the stylus in her satchel, her own nerves exacerbating the tension. The general didn't back down, staring Amira in the eyes, silent rage burned in his eyes.

"Funny how people with such devotion to a deity are willing to claim to direct his will," General Kulak shook his head and turned away. Sam watched as he walked back to the door in silence before turning to the room, his hand pulling the door open. "It doesn't matter what answer you get, the bullet had your-" he paused to throw up air quotes with his fingers, "God's handwriting."

With that General Kulak slammed the door, and Sam winced at the noise. Sam turned away, to look up at Amira who had turned as well to address the office.

"Alright, back to work, Elo-hah helps those who help themselves," Amira spoke in her native tongue, the syllables resonated naturally in the air.

Sam watched as immediately the bustle and noise of spells zipping off people's paper slips and styluses started up again. She turned to Amira, the woman stood with her hands on her hips.

"Hamata Amira what is going on?"

"You know, I wish I could explain," Amira sighed, "know that the Rahbibis are meeting in the central Synasqe."

Sam shook her head, "but why are they here? Why are-"

Amira waved a hand to stop her, "Habibiti, you trust me?"

Sam closed her mouth, pausing before nodding.

"Then come with me," Amira walked forward, gesturing Sam to follow, sending quick glances towards the busy floor.

Sam followed her gaze and then Amira herself down the narrow hallway that led further into private offices. The noise of the chaos of the calligraphers and investigators faded as they moved down the dusty hallway, dotted with frames that reflected the flickering electric lights that swayed above them. Sam glanced at one of the wooden frames, the parchment inside far too faded to understand. Sam narrowed her eyes trying to make out the eleths-

"Sam, in here, quickly," Amira's voice caused Sam to jump and twist around.

Having turned to see Amira holding open a door, Sam stepped in after a moment's hesitation. Sam looked to watch Amira look both ways in the hallway before stepping into the room.

"Amira, what is happening? Who are you looking for?" Sam asked. Shaking her head, Amira reached up to adjust her head scarf, a nervous habit many women shared.

"Sameerah everything I'm about to tell you can not leave this room, do you understand? On the will of Elo, you can not."

Sam shook her head, bringing her thumb to her mouth, and biting at the cuticles.

"One of the Ezslovian aristocrats was assassinated a week ago. General Kulak was under him and blamed us," Amira started.

Sam's mouth opened but Amira continued without waiting.

"We don't know all the details, supposedly more Ezslovians are coming tomorrow, General Kulak came without permission from the other Councilmen and will most likely be reprimanded, but without any knowledge of what has happened... we aren't sure if the party coming is for a declaration of war or to ask for help investigating."

"By the sound of General Kulak's threats I'm not sure we should be expecting peace," Sam commented.

"Exactly, and that's exactly why I need you to do something for me," Amira paused, "I need you to go home."

Sam stepped back in shock, "Go home? Don't you need everyone researching?"

"I do," Amira cut her off, "But they aren't researching the real problem, all they know is there was an assassination. I didn't tell them that the assassin used Sahakti to kill."

Gasping, Sam shook her head, "That's not possible, that's the one rule, well one of two rules, you can't kill with the written words!"

"Our..." Amira paused, her eyebrows contracted, "witnesses state that the deceased was protected by multiple shielding spells, Ezslovians are too methodical with their spelling for there to be a flaw that a sniper could see from the roofs."

"Wait, I thought you said they used Sahakti, who is shooting spells?"

Amira let out a half chuckle, "we don't know, but we do know that on the bullet, engraved into the side was a spell, *Breakthrough*."

"But how, that's not possible," Sam started, "it's not like someone could have engraved it mid-shot, bullets move too quick, and spells go into effect as soon as someone finishes the last stroke, how could you-"

Sam stopped, meeting Amira's eyes. "That's why he accused us, it was written in our language wasn't it?"

Amira nodded, again fixing her head scarf.

"Then why are you telling me this, why aren't we telling anyone?"

"Because Sam, you're the expert on mediums" Amira replied.

Recoiling, Sam stuttered out, "Me? I-I would never-"

"Not the gun or the bullet, but non-conventional spells. You are quite literally the only person I know who has even attempted to write spells without a stylus, parchment, and ink. You're our expert, and I hope you can get at least something to tell them."

"No, No, I'm not- I don't-" Sam tried to respond, frustration building up, "All I've done is paint some and had minimal success, I don't know anything about bullets and guns and-"

Sam stopped when Amira put a hand on her shoulder and then moved up to her face, "That's more than the rest of us, and it's more than enough."

Sam pursed her lips, biting the inside of her bottom lip. "What do you want me to do then?"

"I need you to go home and gather every example you have of whatever you do with paint, and then I want you to take notes so when tomorrow comes we have something to share with the emissary coming. But you'll need to wait till after midday prayer."

"Midday prayer? Why?"

"Because since Kulak saw you, and then saw you with me, I'm sure his informant will want to keep an eye on you."

"Spies? In the bureau? How?"

Amira shrugged, "If we have them in their government, then they are here as well."

Sam's eyes widened but then she shook off the thought, "Then what should I do until then?"

Sam looked to Amira who had started to walk to the door, pausing to answer. "Well if the emissary isn't peaceful, you might want to start writing some stun spells."

And with that, the door closed and Sam was alone in the empty office.

Chapter 3

Narrowing her eyes in focus, Sam dipped her wooden stylus into the inkwell she had placed on the desk. Sam followed the now ebbing notched tip with her head back to the small slip of paper she had placed before prepping the stylus. As she took a deep breath she thought of the word she was about to spell. *Is it the Eleth or the Lam in the middle?* Sam pursed her lips, rubbing her tongue over her teeth, *the Lam connects and the Eleth doesn't- so Lam is second.*

Sam placed the nib on a scrap of paper, pulling down in a fluid motion, her focus on keeping the angles right. Amira often had her prepare spells for the future, usually research or finding spells, to save time. Sam figured that Amira was aware of her struggle with eleths turning into other eleths or switching places as she read and gave her the task to help.

Not that it has, but time away from the bustle of the office to practice isn't something to complain about. Sam broke off the thought as she moved the stylus up to connect two eleths to her left. The Khatt script she was using didn't have any extra flourishes, keeping the meaning of the spell relatively simple- the meaning of the word.

And the word is: stun, Sam thought as she paused at the last eleth, leaving the last stroke uninked. She could imagine the last stroke being slashed across haphazardly, and the word glowing in whatever ink color the calligraphist had used last. But as it was currently the spell would stay dormant, slowly losing its potency over time until the word was finished.

Sam looked over the word she had left unfinished, a critical eye narrowed at each eleth and connection. *Now those two are a bit close, the duration might be a bit shorter than the others.* Sam looked at the connections, checking the angles of the strokes. With a shake of her head, Sam shook away her self criticisms. *It's not like a slight angle is going to affect the overall effect that much, it's not like I'm doing a surgical cut and it must be perfect.*

With that thought, Sam folded the paper and placed it into the small leather pouch with the others she had made. She narrowed her eyes, counting up the scraps in the pouch, *three... four if you use the last one with its flaws.* She cinched up the pouch and hooked it into a place that she could reach in her shoulder bag, Sam stood up to hear a hovering note echoing through the building.

Midday prayer, it's already been 4 hours? I'll have to give these halfspells to Amira later, she'll want me to go out the front with the rest, Sam grabbed her stylus and capped the ink bottle, to drop it into the bag. *I still don't know how I'll be able to help with all this.*

Sam pushed out the door in the hallway, and the sounds of scraping desks and chairs echoed down to her. She turned to take a step towards the bustle of her coworkers moving out from their desks and preparing to leave for prayer.

Narrowing her eyes, Sam caught a glimpse of Bakir and Fatima leaving together. Sam shook her head at the way they tried to pretend they weren't timing their steps to end up walking out together. *Good for them, although I don't know who I'm going to sit with at lunch now,* Sam's thought trailed off, *But then again I didn't do that often anyways...*

Sam joined the crowd and the bustle, elbows, and the tail ends of head scarfs whipped in her face. Keeping her head down, Sam barely glanced at the Ezslovian soldiers still standing erect in the hallway.

The cluster of claustrophobia suddenly shattered as the crowd crossed the main door. Light and heat burned into the building's interior, and a dry wind whispered against the flowing and loose-clothed crowd. Sam broke free of the feeling she hated more than anything as the space around her expanded.

Too many people, too many noises. Sam shook her head, separating from the rest of the group. She blinked in the bright light, watching as her coworkers moved to the right of her towards the main Synasqe.

"May thy will forgive me," Sam muttered as she moved away, touching her forehead and then her mouth. She shook her head to move towards the waiting trolley. With a screeching whistle, the cable car started to move toward the cusp of the hill. With widening eyes, Sam broke into a run. She leaped to grab the salt-worn metal rods that made up the supports of the cable car's roof. Having grabbed hold, Sam felt the car lurch forward, and her feet skipped on the sand-covered pavers.

"Sammeerah?" a voice from the front of the car caught Sam's attention. She looked up as she pulled herself upwards and against the railing of the cable car. A man stood stationary in the front of the car, his hands outstretched and in his left hand, a stylus posed pointing in the air. Shiny blue eleths made up a word that hovered in the air in front of him. "I didn't expect anyone to take the prayer time ride down! Are you all right?"

Sam nodded, squinting at his spell as the car started to trundle and tremble. *Brake? Why would-*

"With the ship shutting down all of the desalination plant spells, they have too much steam turning the turbines and the cable cars are going way too fast, you'll want to hold on."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I had to pull out my stylus for half an hour perfecting this spell," The brakeman replied.

"Do you need help?"

"Just hold on!" the man yelled as suddenly the cable car jerked forward, tilting over the edge of the hill.

Sam held in a scream as the picturesque view of the street leading down to the glistening harbor turned into a dizzying one. The cable car's brakes screeched as gravity and the cable yanked them downwards. Sam pulled herself into the car, her headscarf flailing in the wind. *No time to worry about devotion now*, Sam thought as she looked to see where they were hurtling towards. Unlike this morning, the crowd at the docks and the curve of the track now filled her with fear and apprehension. She twisted to see the Brakeman now quivering, his left hand and stylus wavered near the end of the last Eleth in the word he'd made. The other hand had white knuckles around the brake lever, his whole arm shook as sparks pitter-pattered the metal from below.

"WE'RE GOING TOO FAST! THAT SPELL WILL DERAIL US!" Sam yelled over the wind.

The brakeman shook his head, too focused to respond.

Sam plunged her hand into her satchel, yanking out her stylus, sending scraps fluttering out and away. Looking forward to the impending crash, Sam punctured the air without thinking. She relied on the muscle memory she had built up for the last 20 years, practicing for hours every day. With grandiose strokes that she didn't have time to correct, Sam painted the words into the air, black ink formed the eleths that spelled-

Slow Us

With only a moment's hesitation at the generality of the statement, Sam shoved the thought away and released the spell with a final flourish.

The brakeman gasped as it came into effect. Sam smiled as she felt the reduction in her momentum. She turned to look at her impromptu partner, and then a sickling realization kicked in.

I slowed us down, but not the cable car!

Sam's motions were now sluggish as she struggled to turn her head, she could feel the terror spread through her body and every inch of her widening eyes was heightened. Out of the corner of her eye she watched in fear as the brakeman slowly moved his left hand to finish the spell.

The crowd of people had started to scatter and scream, realizing the danger approaching at a ridiculous speed. And then Sam felt the jolt as all of their forward energy was halted, the cable car wrenching against the spell's will. Sam was launched into the air with the brakeman and they both tumbled slowly as if rolling around in water. The car rolled, its back corner flipping over them still almost stationary in the air.

Gasping, Sam watched as the trolley base tumbled around them, then rolled forward and away from them. Sam and the brakeman felt the bars whoosh past them as they seemed to fall out what was the left side of the trolley. The car slammed into the docks and bounced against the stones, sending pieces into the crowd.

Sam and the Brakeman watched helplessly as it rolled and slid to a stop on the edge of the docks.

And then the spell wore off.

And Sam was sent hurtling forward in the air, all of the momenta hit her at the same speed as the trolley. She flailed in the air, screaming with the brakeman who flew with her. They hit the docks with a smack, and Sam rampantly rolled. Her head hit the stones with a crack and her vision fuzzed and faded as she felt herself come to a stop. Her ears rang with the cries of the crowd she could see rushing towards her.

If Elo-Hah wills it- may my soul be found in the gardens, Amira thought as everything went black and the promise of pain faded into unconsciousness.

Chapter 4

Sam woke up to the feeling of ink on her skin, her eyelids fluttered as her body decided whether or not they should open them. The feeling of a stylus scratching lightly against her arm caused her whole body to shudder, a cry of joy resounded around her.

"She's waking up!"

"Oh praise be to Elo-Hah"

Opening her eyes, Sam grimaced at the bright light that sent daggers through her head.

"Hold on Habbiti, let me finish this spell," a soft voice spoke up, but Sam did not comprehend the words she heard. She started to push herself up from the ground, the soft voice now cursed quietly. Sam squinted, trying to take in the damage for herself. A large crowd stood around her, looking down. Sam glanced to her left to see the Bridgeman rubbing his head, clearly shaken.

A hand grabbed her right shoulder, bringing Sam back to herself and the pain she felt. Sam gasped as every bruise and cut suddenly sang a song of suffering. She looked to see a young woman holding her arm out and prepared with a stylus.

"Listen you took a bad fall Habbiti, but I've gotten most of the major wounds healed, I was just finishing a pain-killing spell when you woke up. If you keep still I can finish."

Sam nodded, relaxing her arm so that the woman could reposition it. She winced slightly, expecting more pain but then was pleasantly surprised. There was only had a dull throbbing in her head and the sharp quick pain of various scratches.

The woman ever so softly moved her stylus to the ink that she had written on her arm, Sam followed the preparation. Sam held in a breath to stop herself from moving, not wanting to cause a misspell. The woman sucked in a breath as well, then finished the last eleth of the phrase stretching across Sam's arm. With narrowed eyes, Sam looked at the very angled and spread-out eleths, each of them sharp against her sandalwood-colored skin.

Dull aches, Sam read before the spell shimmered and scattered away. Sam's brow creased, *Why didn't she just remove the pain? But then again it's working-*

"How are you feeling? Did that work?" The woman asked, Sam, turning to her.

Stretching her arms and starting to push herself up, Sam responded, "Yes I'm definitely feeling better, may I ask why your spell said dull rather than remove?"

"Oh, to be honest, it's something most of us don't understand. But pain is essential to growth. And while your wounds were mostly superficial bruises I could do simple 'renew' spells any deep pains take time to heal. Even with the Sahakti." The woman paused, giving a quick smile before continuing, "you're just lucky you don't have any broken bones, unlike Amir over there."

Sam turned to see the Brakeman gingerly holding his arm, wincing slightly. Sam brought a hand to her mouth. "I did that- oh im-" Sam started

"No," The woman grabbed her shoulder, "you probably saved both of your lives with whatever you did, it kept you from being slammed by the trolley and letting it roll around you. That would have been much messier."

Sam turned back to the woman, "Thank you- pardon me, I didn't ask your name."

With a smile, the woman replied, "Habeeba, but it's just my job. If you excuse me Habbiti I need to treat the other patient."

"Of course, let me get out of your way," Sam moved to the side, watching Habeeba move towards Amir.

"You're lucky we have a doctor on standby here at the desalination plant," A familiar voice called from behind her.

Sam twisted to see Abdulah, holding out his arm for an embrace. Sam hesitated, but let him hug her. *I did just have a dramatic accident after all.* But then she pushed slightly, letting him know she was done with the hug.

"You alright?"

"Yeah," Sam gave a half smile, "Sorry for the dramatics."

Abdulah laughed, "what? That was the most exciting thing that's happened all day, with the plant getting shut down for the day we are all off." Abdulah suddenly lit up, "Oh I almost forgot, when you went flying so did your stuff."

Sam watched as he turned around and reached down to grab her shoulder bag.

"I think I got everything, but it's going to be a bit messed up inside," Abdulah handed her the bag, "Sorry if it-"

"No, that's great, it's never been organized in the first place, thanks for grabbing it for me," Sam checked briefly to see the leather pouch of half-spells she had been preparing was still inside.

"Of course, I couldn't help with the healing spells," Abdulah laughed, "I could set you on fire I guess."

"Prefer that you not," Sam replied dryly.

She winced as Abdulah slammed his hand into her back, his laugh blossoming into a bellow.

"I should probably get home, already caused a ruckus," Sam started backing away from Abdulah. *Plus I still need to figure out how to help Amira-*

"Of course, get home and be safe," Abdulah waved, Sam returned his smile, "I'll just stay here to see if they need anything more. Go with peace."

"And with you," Sam muttered to herself as she turned away, her mind already pushing past the accident and back to the task, she had been assigned.

Sahakti has a few rules, but they are crucial for the words we make to work. A spell is applied when the word is complete, could you write on a bullet? The spell would be too small to have the power it would need to break shields.

Sam rubbed her forehead as she climbed the hill toward her living space. As she passed the red sandstone and terracotta buildings, the wind picked up the sounds of prayer circles inside. Sam smiled at the songs of devotion that fluttered in the air with the fabrics stretched out to make shade on the street. But her thoughts quickly returned to the conundrum she faced.

Amira thinks that I can help, so she must think that the medium somehow allowed a spell to work differently. But bullets aren't exactly rare, sure maybe not common, but I'm positive someone has tried to spellwrite on a bullet before, so it can't be that.

Lost in thought, Sam almost tripped on an upraised stone. Catching herself, Sam looked up to see people once again opening their shops and coming out onto the street. Laughter and the smell of various foods drifted out of the now-open doors. Sam paused to watch as a couple of boys chased each other in the street. One of them paused, pulled out a crude stylus, and tried to write into the air a simple spell. Sam smiled as he stuck his tongue out in concentration. The crude Eleths were a misspelling of 'gust' and Sam held in a laugh as it caused a minor twister that sent the speller and the others tripping over themselves. Their laughter rang against the tight walls as Sam continued past them.

Medium is tricky in its influence, Sam sighed, the thought reminding her once again of her studies' main struggle. On one hand, people like that kid can write into the air without ink or paper and get a spell to work.

Sam looked at her arm, imagining the spell that had been written to ease the pain. The ache was still there but even her headache was less.

But then there are things like healing spells, it's almost necessary to write them on the inflicted areas for them to take effect properly. So if the spell was specific to the bullet it would have to be on that medium.

The thought caused Sam to pause, as she stopped in front of her complex. She opened the door into the hallway between house walls. Stepping out of the sun and into the darkness, Sam blinked trying to get her eyes to adjust. She walked up the steps according to memory, turning into her apartment door. Opening the wooden door, Sam finally let the stress go. She dropped her bag and then reached up to let her hair down and take off the scarf.

With another sigh, Sam sunk to the floor next to her bag. *So much for being the specialist in medium-related crimes and misdemeanors, my first actual case where my knowledge is crucial and I have nothing. I need to see that bullet- maybe even the gun.*

Sam looked up from her clasped hands to see the canvas leaning against the wall. The bright paint had been splattered by dark ink.

From this morning, although that was a failed experiment anyways. Sam could still make out the various shapes she had tried to make resemble Eleths and words- but nothing had happened. At the time, Sam had just assumed that she hadn't made the words right, so it misspelled.

But now, what if the theory is right, that different mediums would have different ways of accessing the magic? That would mean the bullet or maybe the bullet's material amplifies an effect?

The thought energized Sam, the possibility that her theory might actually have some application pushing her back to her feet. She picked the painting up off the ground, placed it on her desk, and then reached for the chair.

The chair scraped the floor but Sam was already moving parchment across her desk. *Now, where did I put that Study comparing Ink ingredients....*

Sam's thoughts trailed off as she started to put together a portfolio of everything she had been studying for the last three years of her life. Sam paused at that thought, looking at the piles of parchment, notes etched in brighter ink against inks that had dulled over time. She shook it off, glancing at her failed painting attempt. *I may not know how the bullet changed the spell, or how they wrote it, but I'm going to have stacks of potential observed effects listed by tomorrow- and certainly one of them will be the answer...*

Gritting her teeth, Sam pulled her chair into the desk, preparing for a long night. *At least I hope so.*

Chapter 5

The morning light reflected off the uneven paver stones as Sam huffed as she ran up the hill. Sam looked up to watch as the clock began to ring, their tones would have caused panic if she wasn't shocked at the sight above the skyline.

First the warship and now?

A large dirigible cast a shadow over her work building. Two large propellers spun languidly beneath even larger fins that hung off the side of the airship's plump cloth structure. Sam gasped in amazement, her mind trying to fathom what spells they would need to be constantly writing for the ship to float.

And then the last bell rang on the clock's reminder of what time it was.

Sam shook herself and ran into the shadow, glancing upward before ducking into the building. She was surprised there wasn't a press crowd like yesterday, but then again the military did have a checkpoint down the hill. *How's prayer going to work then, they can't get to the Synasqe?* Sam thought but then voices up ahead brought her attention to how dark it was. *They weren't kidding, the generators were shut down.*

Sam pushed her way into the main office space, floating candles hovered above desks. The commotion of the day before had turned back into the quiet contemplation Sam knew better. Peering through the shadows cast by the various candles, Sam caught a glimpse of Fatima leaning over her desk.

Gently, Sam walked over to her. "Hey, do you know where Amira is?"

Fatima looked up, putting a hand up to block the brightness of the candle flame. "In Elo-hahs name, Sam, you're all right, everyone's been worried- well me and Bakir- well not just me and-"

"Fatima it's fine, just made my commute to work a bit longer since the trolley was out."

"Girl, you crashed the entire trolley and tore up the docks, I don't think that's okay."

"Seriously, where is Amira, I need to talk to her, I'm already late-"

"She's back in her office, some new Ezslovian showed up this morning and they've been back there all morning. They kicked out all the Ezslovian military when the airship showed up. Something is up for sure, but no one knows what is going on- Wait where were you yesterday, I saw you coming in but then-"

"Fatima I can't explain everything right now, I don't even know everything-"

"But you do know something," Fatima waved a finger, her eyes getting larger in the reflected candlelight.

"Keep it down Habibiti," Sam hissed, "even if I did, I can't tell you till after Amira says I can."

"Whatever, just leave me in the dark then."

Sam smiled, reaching out to touch the floating candle, "oh come on, don't disrespect my work like this, I spent a week helping prepare these float spells."

"I know," Fatima said with a wink, "I checked mine specifically so I would t get yours"

Sam rolled her eyes, but a sudden yelp turned her towards the rest of the office. She winced as she saw someone deal with a now erratic candle. Sparks spluttered as the wax shook in the air

"Best get back to Amira," Fatima said behind Sam, pushing her shoulder, "don't want to get blamed for that."

Sam turned around to catch another wink from Fatima. Sam shook her head but took the cue and started to walk back to the hallway. The flickering lights behind her faded and Sam crept down the hallway, the sound of voices muttering against the walls. Her own footsteps and breath became painfully loud as her nerves rose their ugly head.

Pausing before the door, Sam took a deep breath and reached up to fix her headscarf. *Alright, Sam, it's just helping diffuse a potential war*, Sam shook her head, *somehow that didn't help*.

And with that Sam pushed open the door and into the commotion. The conversation didn't pause with her entrance, the room brightly lit compared to the office before. Sam blinked, half raising a hand to block some of the candle's light. Her eyes adjusted slowly, revealing Amira sitting behind a well-lacquered mahogany desk, her cream-colored head scarf perfectly pinned around her face. A candle floated behind her left shoulder, sending shadows of the two men standing in front of her back toward Sam.

Sam blinked, looking at the two men. General Kulak was passionately gesturing towards the other man who stood impassively. Where Sam had been impressed with the decorum and dress of the Ezslovian soldiers, this newcomer made their pressed outfits seem sloppy. He wasn't any more formal, just his posture and poise made the outfit seem more fitted. *Or maybe it just is, he's got silver bands on the shoulders and the buttons are gold unlike the others-* Sam's thought cut off as the man suddenly turned towards her, their eyes locked.

And I got caught staring, Sam looked away from the startling cold blue eyes, only to glance back quickly as she noticed the scar that curled down around his chin. Sam tried to regain her composure only to be startled by Amira's sudden outburst.

"Sam!" Amira stood up from behind the desk, turning to the two men. General Kulak still continued to mouth off in Ezslovian regardless. "Gentlemen, our expert has arrived, would you mind pausing your berating of our culture and government policy so we could discuss the matter for which you are here."

A gasp from General Kulak, brought Sam's attention back to the two Ezslovian men as Amira continued.

"Yes, fluency in core languages is required of anyone striving for the title of Hatata and secondly, while I understand and respect your people live in a patriarchal

system, we do not and you should not expect anything other than our norms while you are a guest here.”

Sam smiled at the rebuke, she hadn't caught all of what Kulak was saying but she knew it hadn't been kind towards Amira and her. To her surprise, the new figure stepped forward immediately and began to speak.

“I apologize for the actions of General Kulak on behalf of the Ezslovian Council, his actions are unsanctioned and will be brought into review once we return and this matter of assassination has been resolved,” The man finished with the smallest of hand flourishes, his voice hard and cold.

Barely an accent in the common tongue however Sam noted, trying to get a read on the newcomer.

“RESOLVED!” General Kulak shouted, his accent much more pronounced and rolling the harder sounds, “Alekey these are the people who killed Sasha! What business do we have exchanging such, such- pleasantries with them?”

Sam winced at the guttural distaste that General Kulak spat his words with. She looked to Amira who let out a sigh of her own.

Alexcey however wasted no moments for sympathy, “It's Councilman to you General, regardless of your age. And the ‘pleasantries’ are not a waste as much as an uneducated war would be. If it is true that they assassinated Sasha as our evidence indicates, war may not be the proper course of action as they hold technology that surpasses our current understanding of the Writings” Alexcey then turned to Amira, “Hatata Amira, I would like to move to the matter at hand so that I can bring back your evidence to the council so we can make our decision. I certainly don't wish to waste any of your time.”

Sam's eyes were wide as she turned with him to Amira. Sam felt the wall press up against her back, giving her a bit of confidence.

“Well Councilman, while always the diplomat I appreciate your sentiment. As political as it is. Let me reassure you that no official member of our government organized a strike against one of your members and we are deeply saddened by the loss.”

And she said he was being political, Sam laughed to herself.

“That being said, as you wish for more proof we are more than willing to work to discover and apprehend the perpetrator and assassin. I'd like to offer our expertise in the use of Medium as part of a joint investigation,” Amira gestured towards Sam, “Sameerah Aziz.”

Sam suddenly felt the eyes of the two Ezslovians weigh on her, making her insides crumple. Taking a deep breath, Sam stepped off the support of the wall while clutching her bag. “Hello, You can call me Sam,” She started, looking at Amira and then towards Alexcey.

Alexcey nodded but then looked past her towards Amira. “And how would this investigation work exactly?”

“Well to begin, I'd ask the expert where she thinks is best,” Amira replied.

Sam hid a half smile as Alexcey failed to hide his surprise.

“I apologize, I misunderstood,” Alexcey said, turning to Sam.

“No offense taken,” Sam started, opening up her bag, “I've spent the last day trying to understand what could have happened, but I'm finding the same lack of water when it comes to the problem. I need to see the bullet.” Sam paused, her eyes now meeting Alexcey's and she remembered what she was doing, “If that's all right?”

“Of course,” Alexcey replied, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the slug of metal.

All that attention to detail and he just keeps the most sensitive part of the investigation in his casual pocket? Sam shook off the thought and reached out to take it from him. “Can you bring over that candle, I'll need more light,” Sam said over her

shoulder, already turning over the bullet to try and find the words. She caught a glimpse of Alexey hesitantly grabbing one of the floating candles to pull it over.

Sam dropped her bag onto the table, an unfamiliar metallic thunk sounding out against the wood. *Odd I didn't put anything like that into the bag...* the thought disappeared however as Sam found the spell etched into the bullet. While the metal had deformed from the impact, Sam could still make out a scratchy set of Eleths.

Break Through

"And you said this bullet passed through the shield spellings that you had set up?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I mean I didn't set them up, but they were set up by some of the finest defense spellers I know," Alexey responded. Sam caught a glimpse of General Kulak puffing up a bit in pride for his men.

"Well unfortunately this only confirmed my suspicions and my questions," Sam sighed, rubbing her head, "The writing is too small for the Eleth spacing to allow for a delayed spell, which means somehow someone wrote these two words between the time it left the gun and when it hit the shield."

"But that doesn't solve the question of whether or not you all assassinated them," General Kulak piped up.

Sam glanced at Amira who was looking through her bag, spreading out the research, and realizing she was supposed to answer turned to him.

"Is your only evidence that this bullet is written in our language? Or is there something else you haven't told us? I'm not an expert in the political relations of countries, I'm here to figure out how it was done."

Aleksey stepped forward, putting up one hand, "That we understand Miss Sameerah, apologies for the impatience. That being said, we need to bring something back to our government to relieve suspicion."

Sam nodded, turning away from them and back towards the desk. "I do have one theory that has to do with the use of a slowing spelling that would allow the person to have enough time to write on the bullet, but now that I see its etching I'm not even sure if that's possible. There haven't been any scholarly sources that -"

"Sam, what is this?" Amira suddenly interrupted.

Jolting, Sam looked up to see Amira holding a metal ball with two hands. "What? where did you get that?"

Amira stepped out from behind the desk, coming to the other side. "From your bag, It has Atolese symbols on it. This one is incomplete," Amira held it out for Sam to see.

"I didn't pack that..." Sam trailed off as she watched Aleksey step forward and inspect the item.

"Curious, I don't read Atolese what does it say?" he asked.

"Well it's not complete but it shares the base symbology of the fire set," Amira started, "as it is now, it could be flame or spark with the right additional line."

"Fascinating," Aleksey responded, taking the sphere into his hands. Sam however was still confused about how the ball got into her bag. *When I crashed yesterday? But the only person I know who touched my bag was Abdullah.*

Her attention was brought back however at Aleksey's exclamation of surprise.

"This should not be working, this piece of metal is being pulled tight by a spring, but in the wrong direction. This should be pulled in the spring is taunt," Aleksey said.

Sam's mind started to whirl and she looked up to see Aleksey knitting his eyebrows together as he tried to pull on the piece of metal. "Can I see that," Sam asked, reaching out?"

He handed it over to her after pulling one last time on the piece, muttering to himself.

Sam rolled the ball over, looking at the piece of metal Aleksey had pointed out. It was weird, it was suspended against a tight spring that should be pulling it down and

around the ball. Sam caught a glimpse of etching on the metal. *Ezslavian? How did Alekcey miss it, it's clearly-*

HOLD

The conversation around her became muted as Sam's mind began to pound against the shore of her sea of thought. *Wait the Eleths are separated, with that much proportional to the size this would mean the spell probably was meant to last for at least a day-night cycle. But why it's not like this metal moving would do anything, its just-*

Sam's thought stopped as she felt the sharp metal point resting against the sphere under the band being held back by the spell. Sam followed the predicted angle of the metal piece with her finger across what she had feared. *It wasn't the medium that they wrote on that changed, they changed the medium of the stylus!* Looking at the line she had just traced on the symbol, Sam narrowed her eyes to read it.

Explode

"Sam? Are you okay?" Amira's voice called out, breaking Sam's focus.

Sam looked up, fear making her hands start to tremble. Everyone's eyes burned into her, but somehow she felt cold.

"I figured out how they did it, and I know what this is," Sam started, gently placing the orb onto the desk and stepping back from it towards them.

"Well spit it out already woman!" General Kulak spoke up.

"It's a bomb and we need to get everyone out," Sam said pushing past them and grabbing the door knob.

"WHAT?" General Kulak yelled, and Sam looked back to see a similar amount of surprise on Alekcey's face. Amira however had whipped out her stylus and was passionately writing golden Eleths into the air. Her hand was steady and moved faster than Sam had ever seen. *But it won't be fast enough, if the hold spell started around midday prayer then the spell will wear off in-*

The room exploded before Sam could finish her thought.

Chapter 6

Everything burned. The smell of flame-scorched clay charred her nostrils, and the roar of expanding walls of fire echoed against the ringing in her ears. Sam felt the bubble of hot air ripple against her arms as she stretched them out to try and block the light blinding her. Her eyes were tearing up but the heat dried her ducts faster than her body could replenish them.

Sam blinked away the spots in her vision, trying to clear her vision. Though her sight warbled with the heat waves from the explosion, Sam could just make out the hazy figure of Amira. Amira stood stoically, stylus outstretched, her silhouette burning with the fire and flames of the flashpoint exploding past her. A single golden verb was spelled into the air in front of her.

Protect

Sam started to smile, pride welling up in her. *Of course, she can spell fast enough to prevent us from getting all the blasts-* Sam's thought stopped as suddenly as it stopped as she reread the glowing spell. *That's not 'to protect, that's conjugated to 'protect them!*

Sam let out a guttural yelp that brought burning air to braze her throat as she moved forward, the initial blast of pain and light fading. The dispersion of the blast revealed that the corona of fire that had surrounded Amira was less of an effect of Sam's perspective and more that her body was on fire.

Whipping out her own Stylus from her pocket, Sam caught the collapsing woman. With widening eyes Sam laid Amira down gently, fear clawed at her dry throat. Amira was still being licked by flames that consumed her clothes.

Sam immediately started to write in the air, her hand shaking but her brows furrowed in concentration. *Eleth, Thah connects to the Firn to the Eleth, and that should be big enough-*

As she finished the last line of the hastily drawn word a wave of energy extinguished the flames around her. Sam winched to see blackened cracked skin poke through the charred holes of Amira's tattered robes. Her face wasn't much better.

"What just happened?" Aleksey's voice interrupted Sam's train of thought.

Surprised Sam looked up to see him standing in the middle of the blasted room, his right hand holding a pistol in the air.

"What do you mean!" Sam's voice cracked, "A bomb went off and the person who saved you is on the ground dying, and you're standing there with a gun? What are you going to do, shoot the char marks away? Grab your stylus and help me save her!"

Aleksey to his credit looked startled and bewildered at the sudden reprimand.

Sam shook her head and turned back to Amira. Gingerly she reached out to place her hand on her chest, trying to sense movement or better yet a heartbeat. *Mom would have wanted me to check for a pulse but too much is burned around her neck...*

But then Sam felt the weakest of chest movements and immediately brought back her hand, to not put any more pressure against Amira's struggling lungs. Sam pursed her lips and brought her stylus to bear once again. *Soothe? I don't know what spells I should use- at least she's not dead, and I can still do something-*

"Wait how did the bomb go off? I thought Amira said the spell wasn't complete," Aleksey spoke up behind Sam.

Sam glanced back, "They had a mechanism to finish it, the metal bar left a scratch that finished the spell."

"That's not possible, a human needs to write the spell, machines can't replicate the Writings," Aleksey responded, Sam, heard him start to pace as she looked back to Amira.

Maybe I could try to spell some sort of rejuvenation-

"You said, 'they.' Who are they?" Aleksey broke Sam's focus again.

"What in Elohah's name is wrong with you?!" Sam snapped, twisting to look at Aleksey who stood still rubbing his chin, his gun still loosely held in his other hand.

"What?"

"How dense of a camel head do you have, or are you just completely incapable of empathy? you sick militant cultist!"

Aleksey blinked his mouth opening and then closing.

"He's... right," A wavering voice warbled out the two words.

Sam turned to Amira who had barely propped up her head, her eyes opening to the crackle of bubbled burned skin.

"Hatata Amira! What are you doing? Don't waste your energy, help is on its way," Sam said.

"I'm fine," Amira replied, "While I definitely misspelled, that protect kept away most of the blast even if it was focused on you all."

No, you're not- You can't see yourself, Sam thought but kept it to herself.

"Sam," Amira whispered, "It's going to take weeks for the best doctors writing complicated spells for me to get better, and as such, I'm giving you full jurisdiction over this case. We can't wait for another event to happen."

"Hatata, what do you mean, I'm an expert in a specific field, not an investigator, why don't you ask any of them in the office?" Sam replied.

Amira paused to take in a shuddering breath. "Because whoever 'they' are, they are everywhere, somehow they knew Aleksey was coming and were able to prepare a bomb perfectly timed for you to bring in. That was on a private spell message that could have only been known by a few in the Ezslovian council. If they are in that deep with the Ezslovians, then years of espionage tell me that they have someone in our organization.

At least with you, the information we know is contained, one less person we have to worry about."

"But," Sam started.

"No buts, just promise me you'll work with Alekcey or whomever the Ezslovians decide, you're our representative. Promise on Elo's will," Amira finished, locking eyes with Sam.

"I-I, I don't-" Sam sighed, "I promise on Elo-hah's will."

Amira nodded, her head laying back down and her eyes closing.

"Amira?" Sam's eyes widened, "AMIRA!"

Sam barely sensed a group of people approaching, questions being thrown around her. Someone pushed past her, already starting to write a spell on Amira's skin. *What am I supposed to do, I don't know how to find spies or terrorists or whatever is going on.*

"Sameerah, people are asking for you," Alekcey spoke behind her.

Sam turned around to see Alekcey offering a hand, his pistol back in a holster on his waist. She reached up and took the offered hand. "It's just Sam, Thank you. Sorry for the insults earlier," She said as Alekcey helped her up.

"No no, I deserved it," Alekcey let out a half smile, "I'm sorry for my lack of sympathy, I can be...inconsiderate in tense situations."

Sam raised an eyebrow, turning to look at the now very focused group of Hatata's working to write spells to help ease Amira's pain. "Who needed me? She asked.

"Well," Alekcey paused, "I heard someone say your name but they aren't speaking in the united tongue so I-"

"Oh, you don't speak Karmeelic?" Sam was surprised.

Alekcey rolled on his feet, pursing his lips. "No, I can speak, understanding a bunch of panicked natives on the other hand is a bit harder for me."

"That makes sense, I struggle with written Ezslovian and Atolese," Sam replied.

Alekcey wagged a finger suddenly, "Wait the symbol was from the Imperial Atolls right? On the ball?"

Sam nodded, "Why?" *It also had Ezslovian, but somehow you missed that.*

"Then I suggest we continue our investigation by flying to the Atolls. If anyone was to gain a political advantage by pitting two of the nations against each other, it would be the Atolls."

"Don't you need to ask your council permission before flying into another sovereign nation's borders?" Sam asked skeptically.

Alekcey smiled, "It helps when you are one of the councilmen and can go under the pretense of beginning the process of the centinineal treaty renegotiation. I was supposed to be there already but then the assassination."

"The Trispelled peace treaty? What is there to renegotiate?" Sam replied.

"It's a formality, one I'm honored to fulfill for the council," Aleksey's voice became more rigid it seemed to Sam. "So is it agreed upon?" Alekcey continued in a more normal voice.

Sam looked back to see they had begun to move Amira out of the bomb-blasted room. She turned back to Alekcey. "I don't have much of a choice, It's the only lead we have," Sam bit the bottom of her lip. *For Amira, Elo-hah help me.*

"Perfect," Alekcey looked up, "I'm not sure where General Kulak went but I'll inform him of us leaving- not the destination. If you meet me at the Airship at 1700 we could prepare to leave in the morning."

"What time?" Sam responded, "And how will I get up?"

Alekcey was already moving out of the room. "Uh, after your evening prayer? I think that's right, and don't worry just come back here," His voice faded as he left the room.

Sam shook her head bewildered, still trying to understand what was happening. She turned to where the desk used to be and most of the wall. The cityscape had been

revealed to her, blue skies and an ocean breeze brushing past her. Sam pursed her lips. "Elo-hah what am I supposed to do?" Sam spoke to the sky, noticing the crowd that had started to gather on the streets below.

Sam looked down at the charred floor, bits of burned paper strewn around. *And I don't even have research to offer anymore, what does Amira think I can even offer in this case?*

Gritting her teeth, Sam shook away the self-doubt. *It doesn't matter, Hatata Amira is counting on me, and she's never let me down. I can at least do what I can. I can start by getting clothes for whatever this journey will be.*

Sam nodded her head, looking one more time out over the buildings of Al-Kaleq, and then turned around with as much motivation as she could muster. Even if her confidence was lacking.

Chapter 7

So let me get this timeline straight, Sam thought to herself as the evening song of prayer echoed through the streets, A little over a week ago someone used Sahakti on a bullet to penetrate a shield that then killed one of the Ezslovian Council members. Sam looked up from the shadowed pavers to see a man on a ladder trying to replace a bulb in the lamppost. Each time he twisted it, the light flickered and shocked him. Sam winced as he finally pushed the bulb into place and he wobbled on the ladder, before starting to climb down.

Their main evidence pointed to us, but to be fair their evidence was limited- Either they knew something more they didn't share with us or that was a quick accusation. I thought things were relatively calm between the three nations. Sam felt her brow furrow, she reached up to readjust the dark head scarf she had chosen to wear. Something is off but maybe I can ask Alekcey more about that decision since he was likely part of it. But then either someone or a group was able to plan for another assassination attempt, this time with a bomb when Alexcey arrived. That would suggest that this person or group- Amira thinks it's a group- is mainly targeting the Ezslovian government.

Sam started to nibble at her cuticles again. *And then there's the problem of someone creating ways of mechanizing Sahakti into weapons. I don't even know where to begin with that. How a stylus not be moved by a person can even write a spell? Then again Atolese is different from the phonetics of Ezslovian and Kamreelic- Sam sighed, How do the investigators do it? This is too much information to keep track of and I haven't even started to ask how the bomb got into my bag the first time.*

"Sam!" Alekcey's voice called out from ahead of her.

Looking up the hill, Sam saw Alekcey standing at the crest, waiting alone.

"Evening," Sam said with a nod as she drew near to him.

He nodded quickly, turning to look above him at the Airship still above the Administrative building. "Do you have everything you need for the journey? Weapons or tools you'll need?"

"Uh, I have some scrolls and my stylus, along with clothes," Sam patted her new larger satchel hanging on her left shoulder, "I'm hoping to go through an Atolese lexicon and find the symbol that had been made on the bomb-"

"We can discuss the strategy once we are on board," Alekcey interrupted, but then quietly, "I don't want any more information out where someone could hear."

Sam shook her head, chastising herself for being careless. *I guess I was just caught up in the daunting task.* Shaking her head one last time, Sam looked up at the Airship. "So how are we supposed to get up there?" Sam asked.

"Well in Ezslovia we have docks for them on the rooftops, here however we will use the lift," Alekcey pointed upward to a circular shadow above their heads getting larger as it approached them.

Sam stepped back with Alekcey, watching as the platform came to a rest in front of them. A man stood in the middle of the circle, a strange stylus poised in the air with several Ezslovian Eleths written into the air.

"Councilman, Lady Sameerah, the Windwalker is ready for your ascension when you are," The man reached up with his hand that wasn't busy with his stylus to tip his small cap.

"Thank you Evgeni," Alekcey responded in Ezslovian, before he reached up to unlatch the railing gate, and opened it for Sam. "Feel free to board."

Sam stepped up the wooden and metal platform, trying to stay out of the way of the spell writer. She looked at the words he had written. The Ezslovian eleths don't connect like the Kamreelic do, which sometimes made it harder for Sam to read them. Without the anchoring, the Eleths liked to change shape slightly or just switch places in her vision. Even so, Sam narrowed her eyes and read the prepared spell glowing orange in the air.

Ascend till the platform is flush with the hole, then Hover.

"Wow that's a long spell," Sam remarked out loud. Evgeni turned to look at her, surprise on his face.

"Well it needs to be detailed, otherwise the Writings don't know what to do," He replied matter of factly.

Sam looked to Alekcey who was not paying attention but instead was looking upward. "Ready when you are Evgeni," He said, grabbing a railing.

Sam followed suit, turning to watch as Evgeni finished the spell with a swipe of his stylus, the metal tip glinting with the orange glow of the spell. Sam gasped as the platform suddenly jerked upwards, pushing the three of them toward the ship. The wind whipped at Sam's head scarf, her pants and blouse rippling with the wind. Sam reached up to place a hand on her head scarf to keep it from flying away. Her eyes widened as she looked out over her home. The evening prayers had finished, streams of golden light rising from the cityscape below her.

"What is happening?" Alekcey stepped up beside her.

Sam looked to him, then back over the streams of gold dissipating over the roofs of Al-kaleq. "It's evening prayer, we finish the day with his word," Sam replied.

"Why?" Alekcey asked.

Sam turned to him. "It's to honor Elo-hah and the light he brings us throughout the day," She said.

"Hmm," Alekcey nodded, "Your god, I've never quite understood how someone could believe in that."

"A god?" Sam replied.

"Sure, just doesn't seem logical to thank something for all the good but then ignore all the bad that happened under their watch as well."

Sam was unsure how to respond, turning to look out over the cityscape. Catching a final glimpse of the prayers of the devoted glowing over the streets, Sam whispered her own prayer. And then the platform snapped into place inside the airship. Suddenly a bustle of other soldiers moved to tie the platform down, Sam feeling the spell wear off and gravity hit her again.

"Welcome back and aboard Councilman, we are glad to have you back and the ship is ready to set course for the Imperial Atolls. All of the furnace spells will be finished when you say the word," A man in a white version of the uniform everyone around was wearing spoke to Alekcey.

"Thank you, captain, prepare to leave within the hour, I'd like to arrive in the morning tomorrow. If that's the only piece of business we have, I'll be escorting Lady Sameerah to her room, and then you can find us in the library."

Library? This airship has enough space for a library? Sam thought as she followed Alekcey past the various saluting soldiers and the captain. He opened a door in front of them, leading to a tight hallway lined with doors. *That's a lot of wood,* Sam thought,

looking to see all of the walls and mouldings made of wooden planks painted a light cream.

"Alekcey," Sam started, "Why do they keep calling me 'Lady' Sameerah?"

Alekcey let out a half snort, starting to climb a set of stairs, "It's just custom, just like your traditions with prayer."

"That's not exactly-" Sam shook her head, "is there a way to ask them to not do that?"

"You think I want to be called Councilman every time I get talked to as well?" Alekcey responded.

"Well probably not, I'm guessing by your tone," Sam replied as they got to the top of the stairs.

Alekcey nodded, and then pointed to this right, Sam looking down the new hallway. "That way is the main navigational deck, if you need to find the captain, most likely he will be there."

Sam nodded as Alekcey turned back to his left and a larger set of wooden doors blocked the hallway.

"And this," Alekcey started, pulling out a key and putting it into the lock, "Is the entrance to the diplomatic suites." He turned the key to unlock the door and held it open.

Sam followed the cue and walked past him, waiting for him to follow. The door closed behind him and he gave a small wave with his hand for her to continue.

"For the record, I will respect your wishes and will call you Sam, however for most of the crew, expect Lady," Alekcey spoke up, Sam arched an eyebrow at the comment.

"Thank you," Sam said in response, "Is Alekcey fine or would you prefer-?"

Alekcey pointed past her to a door on her right. "This will be your suite, the key in the door is for you and will unlock the main door as well," He said, not addressing her question at first.

Sam reached down to unlock and open the door, the hinges squeaked slightly as it opened up to a simple room with a bed against the wall. A porthole let in the view of the clouds and stars from the night sky.

"There is a washroom behind this door and a shared toilet down the hall. Can't have too many pipes running through the ship," Alekcey said.

Turning around, Sam found him leaning against the doorframe of her new room. The light from the lamps in the hallways made him into a silhouette. "Thank you, this is more than enough."

Alekcey nodded, "We should meet up after you get settled in the library to talk plans and evidence, I'd like to lay it all out if we can."

Sam nodded.

"It's just at the end of this hall. Meet me there in 30 or so minutes?" Alekcey asked.

Sam nodded again, shrugging off her bag.

"And uh," Alekcey paused, "only because it seems like Kalmeers struggle with the 'ey' sound, you can call me Alek."

Sam wasn't sure if she was supposed to be offended or complimented as Alek turned and walked away. She heard his door open and close across the hallway, Sam moving to close her own. Sam turned back around to rest her back against the wooden door.

Add this to the timeline, I joined a joint investigation and found myself on an airship with no backup or plan with a crew from a nation that's relatively hostile to mine. Sam chuckled, Amira, you've been wanting to get me into the field, but you could have done it with a local investigation. Not a case exploring international terrorism and political violence.

A sudden jolt shook Sam, and the cabin, the floor, and the walls shifted. Sam caught herself, feeling a sudden increase of vibrations through the floorboards. *Well, we're off, there's no turning back now.* Sam looked out the window, the stars and clouds seemingly moving even though she knew they weren't.

At least we can enjoy the ride.

Chapter 8

Sam stumbled against the wall of the hallway. *In Elo's name who designed this and wants to be knocked around?* Straightening herself with the wall, Sam half-walked, half-tripped down to the door at the end of the suite. Grasping the handle, Sam took a deep breath, composing herself.

What am I doing here, why did I think this was a good idea- Is this a good idea? Sam couldn't answer her thought as the door she was using for balance suddenly opened. Sam fell through, reaching out to grab any sort of support.

She didn't find any.

Instead, a firm hand grabbed her shoulder, giving her just enough stability to right herself. The hand let go as soon as she stood up herself.

"Sorry, I forgot to warn you about the shaking that comes from our method of travel," Alek said, Sam barely noticed him as she took in the view in front of her. The room was relatively open, a central table sat on an ornate rug. The dark polished wood shone under the floating candles and was balanced with the deep blue of the rug. Sam however was focused on the wall of windows that now surrounded her on three sides. Rain plastered the windows, lightning flashing in the tumbling clouds that filled the panorama around her. Sam's mouth gaped as she moved to the window on her right, her hips pressing lightly against the top of the bookshelves that outlined the edges of the room and laid against the glass.

"To be fair, we are a little shakier than usual, the storm was unexpected, as active as the sea is between you and the Atolls, the Captain sends his apologies for the bumpy ride."

"No apology needed," Sam half-whispered, her mind already itching for some way to paint this beautiful scene.

"What?" Alek said.

Sam twisted back to him, the slightest hint of a flush burning in her ears. Sam instinctively went to check her scarf with her left hand. "Sorry, I got distracted, this is beautiful. This is just an office for you?"

Alek nodded, "Well a library to be more exact." Sam watched as he straightened his military jacket, brushing the buttons before stepping towards the table. "Shall we get started?" Alek gestured to the table.

Right, solve a murder, stop a potential war, find terrorists? Sam's thoughts weren't sure what she was focused on at the moment. Sam nodded and stepped forward anyways, her eyes locking onto the map carved into the tabletop.

"Well since the unfortunate accident in your bureau, I have been thinking about the evidence we have compiled so far," Alek turned to look at Sam, "And I wanted to be as honest as I could be since we will be working together."

"Sounds like a good plan," Sam replied. *Honestly, that will help me know where I can help.*

"Firstly, we know a singular person with a rifle fired and killed Councilman Alekcandr, this was done using the Writings in a way that hasn't been documented beforehand and I personally don't know how. Although you may be able to melt the ice of that stumbling block."

Sam looked up to see Alek staring at her from across the table. "Oh, do you want me to explain my theory or-?" Sam started.

"Unfortunately the assassin got away due to mismanagement and miscommunication," Alek continued his voice grating and becoming colder. "We were able to retrieve the bullet and found Kamreelian Writings, which led us to come to your Bureau of Investigations, we were met with a bomb that would have killed another Councilman, one of the main generals over the southern Oblast's forces. If not for the intervention and great sacrifice of Hatata Amira."

She didn't do it for your people, she did it because she's a good person-

"With this timeline, I can only come to the conclusion that whoever has caused these events has the intention to either weaken or antagonize Ezslovia," Alek crossed his arms behind his back, Sam looking down at the map. "I believe that we were not supposed to see the bomb and the language used for the Writings. Unlike the bullet, they expected us to find and see Kamreelian and therefore investigate the Kamreel Peninsula. If the bomb had been successful, that would have brought further suspicion towards your people. Potentially driving us to war."

"But who would that benefit?" Sam replied, her mind racing.

Alek nodded as if expecting the question. "Exactly, Who?" He paused, pointing to the map engraved on the table. Sam followed his finger to see him pointing to the Atolls.

"All recent reports of their politics point to them wanting to leave the international field for 'development.' If that is true, they would know that since the end of the Misspelt Wars and the Trispelled Treaty, the only country to have a standing military is Ezslovia."

Sam nodded, unsure where he was going with the thought.

"If their development is intended to compete with our military, then it makes sense for them to try and weaken and distract us with an artificial conflict," Alek nodded to Sam, clearly sure of his statements.

Sam pursed her lips, thunder rumbling in the background. "This may be confidential, but does the Ezslovian council have evidence that the Imperial Atolls have been preparing for a break of the peace clause set up in the Trispelled treaty? It seems like a jump to assume they are trying to become a military power on a single symbol in Atolese. Anyone can write in the Sahakti or Writings, it's a skill. I can write some spells in Atolese, but that doesn't make me a suspect." Sam watched as Alek started to pace, waving a finger in the air.

"See that's the genius of it, they don't need to break it. They either expect Ezslovia to break the treaty and tradition, or they cause a delay that prevents the renewal of the Trispelled treaty and they are free from any obligation diplomatically," Alek paused his pacing, a glint in his eye, "Honestly it's brilliant politics."

"Brilliant? You're talking about causing death and destruction," Sam replied.

Alek nodded. "Good politics are rarely morally right, Sam."

On Eloah's name, who thinks like that? Sam thought, her eyes widening. It doesn't change the fact that we are running on very little information. And besides that, he hasn't mentioned the Ezslovian spell that was part of the bomb- that's suspicious in and of itself.

"So what do you think?" Alek asked, breaking up the thought process.

Sam shook her head, glancing out the window to watch the water trickle down the panes. "I-uh," Sam paused, "I think what you've laid out makes sense, but I don't feel like we have enough evidence to place the blame completely on the Atolls. A single spell in their language becoming a conspiracy to overthrow years of peace seems a bit far."

Alek nodded, "Fair, but logically who else could it be if it's not Karmeelia?"

That's a fair point, Sam conceded to herself. "But what are we going to do, go into the Atolls and accuse their government? It's not like we have something to show for it."

Alek scoffed, "Of course not, I wasn't assigned to the Diplomatic Relations Council Seat for no reason. I have a sense of class and decorum."

The scoff said otherwise, Sam thought but nodded. "Then what's your plan? We need some sort of proof that we can use to defuse the situation between our countries. Where are we going to find that kind of-"

An explosion rocked the room, and Sam stumbled. She grabbed the table as books fell from the shelves. Sam looked up to the sound of sirens now pulsing in her ears. Eyes wide, Sam pushed herself back to standing. Sam found Alekc crouched, his hands holding his pistol at the ready.

"We need to move, there's too many windows-" Alekc started, his head turned towards her.

"What?" Sam started, her hand reaching for her stylus before yelping in surprise as Alekc dove toward her. He slammed into her as the deafening sounds of glass shattering and bullets slicing the air exploded around her.

They rolled under the table, Sam pressed her head into the wooden floor as panic started to sink in and the glass tinkled as it fell.

"Sam, I- we need a bullet shield," Alekc started, Sam rolled over to look at him. He hasn't laid down but was curled over against the table leg, "I don't have my stylus and they are about to board-"

"Who's they?"

"Doesn't matter, get the shield up if you want to live," Alekc responded before turning and firing into what Sam could only see as dark rain.

Shield

The thought brought her back into her own mind, the shots of Alekc's gun were now deafened as she focused rather than deafening.

Immediately Sam went for the spell she had practiced for months in her first self-defense course. She took a deep breath and quickly made the first stroke.

Don't think about the Eleths, just remember the strokes- Sam moved with certainty, one she didn't always have when practicing. *Long connectors between these Eleths, we need this for as long as we -*

"SAM WE NEED THAT SHIELD UP!" Alekc yelled, before firing twice more.

Sam shook her head, her stylus trembling for a second. "Almost there," Sam replied before finishing the last stroke. The word glowed in the air above her

DEFLECT THEM

Sam rolled over again and pushed herself up to a crouch next to Alekc. The bullets still whizzed past but Sam watched as one slowed and changed course as it neared her.

"It's up," Sam started, "But I didn't have time for you, so you'll just need to stay near me. What are you shooting at?"

Alekc nodded, "Nothing, but someone in an airship is unloading on our ship and this area. I'm just returning fire to try and discourage boarding."

Sam looked to the windows now jagged with broken teeth, the water poured in onto the shelves but she couldn't see anything with the light behind her. The alarm still blared overhead. "I don't know how long this spell will last, we should move towards the door while we still can!" Sam shouted over the noise.

Alekc only nodded and started to stand with her.

Sam and Alekc hunched over, starting to move towards the door on their left. Sam watched as the bullets deflected away from her, a slight smile coming to her face. *It worked? A spell I wrote worked as intended-*

The bullets stopped. Sam looked to Alekc who stood up beside her, his shoulder still tense and gun at the ready.

"Why did they stop?" Sam whispered, unsure why she was whispering.

"I-I'm not sure," Alekc took a step forward. Sam raised an eyebrow to keep her spell close to him.

"Alekc the spell is going to wear off, we need to get out of this room-" Sam started, but before she could finish a flash of light blinded her. Sam blinked, her hand

finding the door handle as she tried to clear her spotting vision. Sam rubbed her eyes, squinting to watch four figures fly through the windows. They hit the ground with a roll, discarding glistening wet gliders to the side. They whipped their stylus into the air, various colored symbols appearing around Sam.

Elo-hah help me, Sam thought, embracing a certain and painful demise.

The crack of a pistol shook her, and one of the masked figures staggered back as the bullet took him in the face. Sam looked to Alekc who was frantically reloading and then up at the figure finishing the symbol in the air.

Fire? FIRE

Sam panicked and jumped at Alekc. She knocked him to the ground, his gun and ammo scattering across the wood. A blast of flame shot over her, the whoosh of air catching her headscarf that had long lost its modesty. Sam looked up from her panicked roll to see the other two still finishing their spells.

Alekc leapt from the ground at the one closest to him, the figure finishing the symbol and a blast of ice catching Alekc's hand. Sam's eyes widened as the ice barely slowed Alekc who then proceeded to use his new frozen club of an arm and slammed it into the figure's face. The ice splintered and so did the assailant's face, the figure collapsing. Alekc turned to the other fighter only to find that the figure was waiting for just that.

The other combatant finished his spell, a bolt of lightning striking Alekc in his chest and sending him toppling over the table and into the small shelves.

Sam looked up to see the original flame spell writer as surprised as Sam was to see them. Apparently, they had been just as surprised at Alekc as she was.

That didn't mean they wasted any time grabbing her hair and yanking her up. Sam screamed in pain and chucked an elbow back at her assailant. They barely flinched, moving to try and pin her arm. Sam looked to see the lighting spellwriter starting to write a spell directed at her.

Sam with her own free hand scribbled into the air with her stylus, the eleths messy and disjointed. *Even a Misspell would be enough-* Sam thought, still fighting off the person yanking her hair. The man yanked hard, trying to pull her away from the spell, tears appearing in Sam's eyes as she yelled in response.

"GET -!"

Away

The misspell exploded, shattered pieces of the shining light that had made the eleths screamed past her but then the wave hit. Sam was flung into the air, smacked into the ceiling, and then fell back to the floor with a crack.

Bit my tongue, Sam tasted blood as she struggled to stay conscious from the shock and impact. She looked behind her to see no one. *The spell knocked him out the window-* Sam felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She turned back to see the other attacker desperately pulling themselves back into the cabin.

The figure screamed as the broken glass cut into their hands and arms as they pulled themselves back in.

Sam saw out the corner of her eye her stylus on the wood. She stretched for it as the man pulled himself back into the library. *Too slow, I won't be able to-*

Suddenly the man was grabbed by the throat and lifted up, only to have his head slammed into the window frame by Alekc. Alekc without hesitation let go of his throat, pistol-whipped the figure, and kicked him out the window.

Sam coughed blood in response, trying to push herself up. "Why did-" Sam started, "We could have-"

Alekc immediately turned to see her struggling, sliding on his knees to her and gingerly trying to help her up.

"We could have talked to them- why did you-" Sam couldn't finish the sentence as she struggled to stand.

Alekc nodded, "You're right, except all the proof we need is right there."

Sam followed his finger to see the discarded gliders shaking with the storm's wind rushing through the room. There, printed in silver, was the Imperial Crest of the Atolls.

Chapter 9

The alarm blared in Sam's ears, the pounding sound mirroring the pounding in her head. She stumbled with Alekc, each of them reaching out to brace themselves on the shaking walls. Sam looked to her left to catch Alekc looking down at his right hand. Sam winced at the black and blue skin, the after-effect of the freeze spell that had caught him. Alekc shook his head, his matted hair bouncing on his forehead in response.

"You alright?" Alekc asked.

Sam nodded, trying to smile. She winced instead as the air she sucked in sent a wave of screaming scorching pain through her chest. Sam blinked dots out of her vision as she felt Alekc rush to her.

"What's happening? the infirmary is just down a level- I can get a"

Sam waved him off. "I think broke some ribs," Sam hissed out, "just need to get to the doctor."

Alekc nodded, albeit hesitantly it seemed to Sam. "do you think-" Alekc paused, "Can you descend the stairs or will that cause more pain?"

Sam looked down the stairwell they had stopped at. "Maybe," Sam looked over to Alekc, glancing at his hand again, "could you help support me with your left side? I don't want to hurt you anymore."

Alekc nodded, holstering his pistol before offering a hand. Sam gladly took his support, waiting for the wobbling and the spikes of pain to stop before nodding to him. Alekc took the first stair and Sam braced for the pain as she followed. Each step was painful, but with Alekc's support, Sam was able to descend with him. She winced as the airship jostled, twisting her foot placement on the last step. Before Sam fell, Alekc grabbed hold, keeping her up.

Sam let out a particularly loud hiss, tears welling up in her eyes, sounds deafened for a second.

"I'm all right, I'm all right-" Sam tried to wave away Alekc again as she rebalanced herself against the wall.

Just got to get to the infirmary, don't pass out, just don't pass out, Sam's thoughts raced as she tried to shake the spots out of her vision

"I NEED NURSES!" Alekc yelled next to her, "MOVE IT NOW!"

Sam looked up dizzy from the pain to see people running up and down past her.

"Councilman- we've shot down the other ship, however, we are concerned with our current capacities and we are unsure if-" a new voice started.

"I don't care, take care of it! You are in the way!" Alekc berated the random soldier. Sam watched as he pushed the man out of the way. A set of three soldiers dressed in red approached them, a gurney being pushed between them.

"No, no-" Sam stuttered, "I'm fine, I promise I'm all right."

"Get her in the gurney," Alekc pointed and snapped with his left hand. "She has at least a broken rib and I'm worried about internal bleeding."

The three soldiers started to assist sam into the gurney. *Internal bleeding, no they need to be worried about a punctured lung- with how much pain I'm in I would guess I have both at this point.*

Sam laid down on the gurney to the medics' approval, one moving to the back to push while the other two each took a side.

"Sir, we will also need to check on your hand-" one of the medics started.

"No no, her first, we need to make sure she's alright- I'm not going to explain to the Karmeelean government how we let an official representative die on our ship-" Alekc

spoke faster than Sam could keep up. The dots in her vision had come back stronger, Sam shook her head to try and remove them.

"Councilman, with all due respect, you cannot help her," One of the medics interrupted, "We are fully capable, but you won't be with a frostbitten arm."

Frostbite? Sam's thoughts interrupted her comprehension of the conversation. The dots retreated from her vision as worry crept in.

"Alekc!" Sam shouted, the medics jumping in surprise. "Listen to the doctor- you need treatment, otherwise you'll lose your hand!"

Alekc's face suddenly peaked into her vision of the ceiling above her.

"Promise-" Sam started but the black dots in her vision were too much and everything became hazy.

"I prom-" Alekc's response cut out as Sam finally caved and passed out.

Sam woke up to the rocking of her bed. Blinking at the raw sunlight that filtered in through the window, for a moment she forgot where she was. *A strange dream to be sure, weird that I would want to be on some sort of adventure- I'd much prefer my desk.*

Sam's thoughts stopped as she noticed the swaying that had woken her and the wooden walls and ceiling surrounding her. *Elo-Hah help me, it's not a dream-* Sam paused, trying to take in the signals her body was giving her. *Am I all right? I don't feel pain, my breath isn't laboured.* Sam began to sit up and then immediately winced, but the pain wasn't a sear of pain like she remembered. Sam looked down to see her chest and shoulder wrapped in white bandages. A blue glow emanated from each of them, spells written on each of the fabrics.

"Fascinating aren't they," Alekc's voice caught Sam off guard and she jerked in bed. Which she regretted immediately as several spikes of pain went through her body. Sam turned to see him sitting on a chair against the wall.

He immediately put up a hand, "take it easy, you're not fully healed yet."

Sam however was more concerned with covering herself with the blankets.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I was sleeping on the chair when your movement woke me."

"You are that sensitive?" Sam replied while still checking to make sure she was modest. She reached up to find her hair loose. *My headscarf- I need that.* Sam looked over to see Alekc approaching her.

"To the noise made while I'm sleeping? Yes, comes with the experiences in the academy," Alekc reached out with his left hand offering Sam's headscarf. "I'm assuming you are looking for this."

Sam nodded, taking the scarf and starting to wrap it around her hair and head. *Elo forgive me.* Sam's silent prayer cut off as she saw the same glow coming from Alekc's right pocket.

Alekc followed her gaze and then nodded. He pulled his hand out of his pocket, his shirt coming untucked as well. Sam realized his uniform was noticeably wrinkled, *he must have not changed since the fight.*

"Yeah, the medics wouldn't let me leave without a spellwrap of my own, turns out frostbite is more serious than I thought. I will say I'm not particularly attached to this hand anyways," Alekc chuckled.

Sam raised an eyebrow at what she assumed was some kind of inside joke he shared with himself. She waited for him to turn back to her, unsure what to say.

"Sorry," Alekc tightened up, "Are you alright? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No no, you've done plenty for me, is your hand okay?" Sam responded.

"No issues should fully recover in a few hours, same with your injuries," Alekc said, "They did most of the custom spell writing already, had to get fluid out of your left lung."

Sam shook her head incredulously. "Those are good mobile medics, you had people capable of those spells on hand?"

Alekc puffed up a bit, "I picked them personally, It feels great to have the best of the best in the positions they should be in. It's the Ezslovian way."

Sam laid back in her bed. "Is that why you are a councilman then? To be the best?" Sam muttered. Her eyes widened as she realized the thought had been vocalized.

Alekc for his part was unperturbed, "No I'm here because I think I can be. You don't know your skills until you've been tested."

"And those doctors were tested when?" Sam replied, curiosity about the Ezslovian culture and Alekc's motivations racing through her mind.

"When they saved my moms," Alekc replied without hesitation.

Sam was taken aback by the abrupt answer.

"Five years ago they both got into a bad accident, the doctors that saved their lives now work with me. I know they are capable. After all, if I can trust them with my moms' lives I can trust them with my own," Alekc finished.

Sam opened her mouth to respond but then Alekc continued, but his voice had softened.

"And for all the Ezslovian talk of getting the best person for the right job, they were the first doctors to not wonder why I was their son."

Sam blinked slowly, unsure still where this conversation was headed.

"It's something I appreciate about you karmeels," Alekc chuckled, "My moms would have been respected without needing to prove they were the best. Maybe that's not 'fair' or 'equal' but-" Alekc cut himself off.

Sam waited in the pregnant silence.

"We will be landing shortly on one of the outer atolls, I'll be in the captain's deck to assist in docking. If you need anything more, feel free to ask anyone on board for assistance. They know to help you."

And with that Alekc left the room. Sam sat bewildered at the train of events and the sudden passion of Alekc. *Love of your parents is hard to beat when it comes to passion, Sam nodded at the thought. It makes a bit more sense why he was receptive to the authority back home, as much as they talk about equality here, there are certainly more guys on board than not. But perhaps that's because this a military vessel?*

Sam shook the thoughts away, *I shouldn't be critiquing culture I don't understand fully, and besides I am grateful they had the doctors Alekc chose.*

Sam stood up from her bed slowly. *Instead, as much as I can, I'll try to apply their mentality or at least Alekc's. This is my test and I won't know if I was the right choice till after.*

Sam gritted her teeth as the pain slipped in, dull but painful. "And I want to be the right choice right?"

Regardless, I need to be there when Alekc talks to the Atolese, something still isn't right with this and while I trust him, we can't go in guns blazing.

With that, Sam opened up her wardrobe and prepared for her next step.

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