

Rise of Ahrik

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Toronto International Media

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Published in the United States by [Toronto International Media](#).

ISBN: 978-0-9976550-0-1

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There is a great deal of ruin in a planet. The War taught this to Man. For all his malice and for all his power and for all his desire to destroy, Man failed to see that no annihilation could truly be final. It is true that much was lost—much of love and knowledge and much of filth and hate—but Man lived on. Nothing, even Man himself, could destroy life.

It was life, but it was not living. What remained of civilization settled into the dust of memory. The War sheared families asunder. It drove Man deep into the mountains. It wasted all that grew green. It killed all who loved science, all who desired a better world, and all who fought to control that world. Life—pitiful, cruel, thankless life—stumbled on.

And so Woman rose. She ruled the planet, where the heart of Man failed. She disdained the ancient weapons, the weapons that ravaged the planet. She hunted down these weapons and destroyed them. None killed anymore with aught but her own strength, nor did she wage a war of such destructive magnitude again. Seven generations of destruction had changed life forever, but so had it done for war also.

—Introduction to “Life after War,” Part 2 of *Origin of the Emerald Moon*, by Zharek Jeber-li, in the sixth recorded generation after The War.

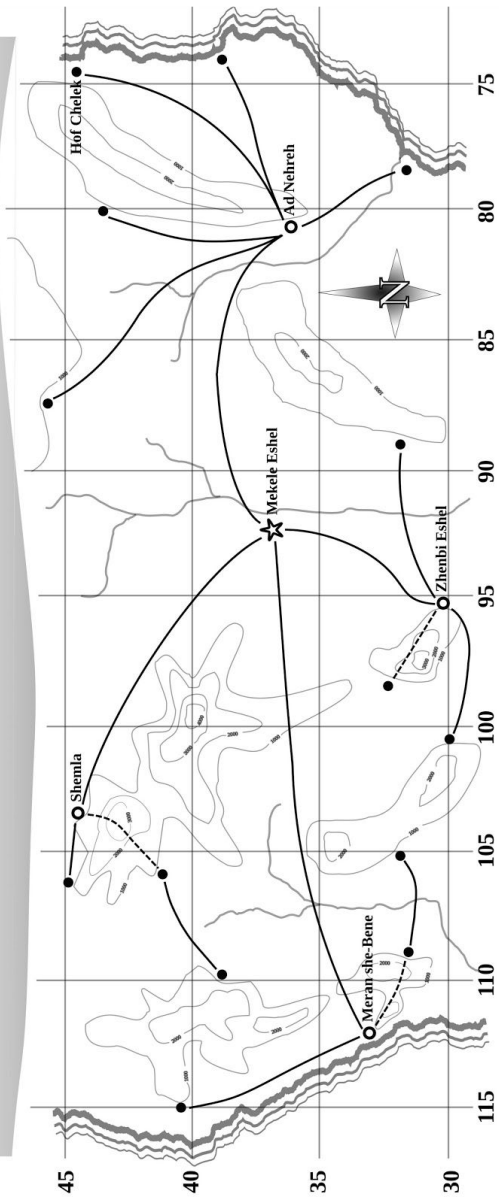


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Uninhabitable Zone



Uninhabitable Zone

The Eshel

- Intercity transporter network
- Cities (minor, major, capital)
- Rivers
- Latitude/longitude grid
- Contour lines (altitude: meters)



Day of Decision

Matron Tamer-li: My daughter decides today.

Sera Tamer-li: I heard she wants to marry the younger twin, but the clan didn't agree to this arrangement seventeen years ago so she could marry a man with no options.

Zhemla Tamer-li: We need a hero, a headline. We're losing business to cheap Kerewi miners.

Matron Tamer-li: [Shakes head] She won't want the older one.

Zhemla: Put it to a vote, then. I move for Zharla to marry Ahrik Jeber-li.

Gazla Tamer-li: I second.

Matron Tamer-li: All in favor? [Pause] It's decided, then. My daughter will marry Ahrik.

—Excerpt of minutes from Tameri clan council meeting, 1 Teshrin Ewel, recorded year (RY) 2498

Zharla brushed a strand of hair from her face and paused to catch her breath, one hip resting on the counter. Her serving



smock was splattered after ladling soup into bread bowls for over two hours. Shahl had asked her to come serve the poor and unemployed at the social hall, but it was only supposed to last an hour. Her feet ached. Her back stung.

Being with Shahl wiped this all away. She felt liberated, out from under her mother's thumb. She relished mingling with people her mother disdained, the disadvantaged, but Zharla was wary. Her mother had a way of intruding on her life at the worst times.

Shahl seemed content to work in silence, but it drove her crazy. She needed something to fill the air between them. "The line just keeps coming, doesn't it?" she asked. She pursed her lips. *What a stupid thing to say.* She really did want to be here, serving, with him.

Shahl stopped midcut, his knife stuck in the bread, which was now halfway between a loaf and a bowl. "That's the thing about the disadvantaged, Zharla." He looked at her with his tender eyes, eyes that looked at her like no others possibly could. "They never really go away."

She reached for a newly carved bread bowl and continued her ladling. She smiled at the next man in line. She'd stopped cringing at their missing teeth and pale skin. It wasn't their fault their lives were confined to in-mountain Meran. Two thousand years after The War, and too much of humanity was still trapped inside mountains. "Shahl, I didn't mean—"

He stopped her with a raised eyebrow. "Zharla, most women of your station don't even realize these people exist."



He smiled at her and she melted inside. “I’m absolutely thrilled you’re here.”

They kept carving and ladling, and Zharla got into a rhythm, keeping time with the ebb and flow of conversation and the clink of utensils on plates. The din reverberated off the social hall’s walls. Zharla glanced down the serving line at Renla, her faithful personal servant. She preserved propriety while Zharla was with Shahl, insurance against accusations that she’d damaged the family’s honor. Now, though, Renla served vegetables. Her smock wasn’t as spattered as Zharla’s, and her countenance was content as always. Her stubborn curls snuck out from under her servant’s cap.

The social hall was almost full, yet veterans, laborers, and the unemployed kept coming. The stone walls of the cavern had long ago been smoothed down, as had the stalactites on the ceiling. No evidence of stalagmites remained on the floor after thousands of years of feet passing through. They said that during The War humanity had fled to the mountains to escape the destruction scouring the planet’s surface, but now in-mountain Meran she-Bene, their fair city, housed the uneducated and hopeless.

Shahl worked hard to serve these people, his ideals a stronger guide to his actions than self-preservation. He had a singular soul, which was why she would choose him over his twin brother that day, at the decision ceremony. Zharla cared not a whit for the whispers and rumors she heard. The clan elders wanted her to choose Ahrik. Old hags. Let them wed



his precious fame to some witless cousin of hers. Zharla would gladly give up the inheritance as well, if that's what it took, but her mother forbade it. "The family will fall into ruin if you're not leading it when I'm gone, Zharla," her mother always said. Zharla enjoyed Shahl's friendship, and his occasional, glancing touch electrified her.

By comparison, being in Ahrik's presence was a chore that taxed sanity. His self-righteous commitment to women's rule blinded him to its more insipid qualities, and his puckish devotion to himself made everyone around him feel less human. And he *never* looked at her like Shahl did.

The soup line began to dwindle, as did the supply of soup. She heaved a sigh after the last man left the line, then lifted the soup pan from the warmer and turned to Renla. "I'm taking this back to the kitchen."

When she emerged once again from the clamor of the kitchen, she froze. "Mother," said Zharla, "how nice of you to come by."

Renla stood rigid, her gaze fixed on the spoon in her hand. The murmur in the hall had a new, nervous quality. Shahl was as taut as a bow string, and he exchanged pleasantries with her mother on the other side of the counter, his hands fidgeting behind his back. The discomfort in his voice wrenched Zharla's heart, and she clenched her teeth.

Her mother was covered from neck to toe in white silk, her visage stony, hair pulled back in an austere bun. The old house guard, Ahjoz, stood back a pace, eyes seeing



everything, his white stubble a testament to years of service to the Tameri clan.

Her mother leveled a fierce glare at her. “You will leave this den of sedition at once. No daughter of mine will consort with bandits and traitors.”

“Mother!” Zharla spoke loud enough for the patrons seated closest to them to hear, while she steadied herself on the counter, fingers pressed white against the cool, polished stone. The murmuring of those in the social hall died down, and heads turned toward the tension at the serving counter. Zharla reached for another pan, breathing out to calm herself. “Some of these men served in combat.”

Across the hall, Zharla noticed a veteran stand up. His old army uniform jangled with decorations. With military purpose, he moved toward the speaker’s niche carved into the cavern wall opposite, then turned to address those in the hall. Zharla groaned within herself.

Even though he stood on the other side of the hall, the acoustics of the cavern made his voice clear. “Friends, we must examine ourselves! I led a company in the War of Unification ten years ago. Did it end war on our planet, like it was supposed to? No.”

A smattering of applause went up, and Zharla flushed with embarrassment.

Her mother stared at her, arms folded across her chest. “Zharla,” she said, “just because they served doesn’t mean they’re loyal.”



The veteran coughed and held his side, wincing in pain. “Friends, we’re fighting another war over there now, but why?” More applause, and the veteran raised his voice. “Haven’t we left too many of our dead in the Kereu already?” Clusters of men shouted their assent, and the veteran raised his fist. “End this war!”

The social hall erupted in applause, curiosity with the conflict brewing between Zharla and her mother forgotten.

Zharla’s mother glided through an opening in the counter and brushed Renla aside to stand before Shahl, sizing him up with a cold stare. Before her mother could say anything, Zharla stepped between them.

Her mother’s nostrils flared. “Zharla, the clan council has chosen Ahrik. He will be your husband. Leave his brother and come with me.”

Zharla slammed the pan down and jabbed her finger into her own chest. “My husband. My life. My choice.”

Her mother’s smile conceded nothing. “Someday you’ll thank me for this, dear. The only reason you have a choice at all is because those boys are twins. Most women like you don’t even get to choose.”

“Like me?” Zharla asked. “That’s irony for you, isn’t it? I’m so powerful I don’t even know what’s best.” She looked over her shoulder to make sure Shahl was still close.

“We’re joining families today, dear. Shall I ask Ahjoz to escort you, or will you come quietly?” At an almost imperceptible nod from her mother, Ahjoz stepped around the counter.



Zharla held up her hand. Her insides churned with tension, and she fought to keep the tremor out of her voice. This was her moment of freedom. If a gaggle of crones from the clan council thought they could decide her fate, they had another think coming. “My place is here, Mother, with Shahl, not with Ahrik.”

Just then, Ahrik strode through the door to the social hall, superciliousness leaking from every step. His uniform gleamed, and his blade dangled from his hip; he also wore the smirk that Zharla had grown to hate.

Zharla pointed at Ahrik and glared at her mother. “I want nothing to do with *him*.”

“Yes, good morning to you, too, Zharla,” Ahrik said, sounding almost amused. He raised his hands in surrender, then motioned at Shahl. “I’m not here to fight. I’m here for him.”

“Zharla.” Her mother’s voice had a menacing quality. She reached out to place a hand on Zharla’s arm. Her touch was light, but Zharla felt her mother’s fingers coil, ready to spring and snatch like the fangs of a snake.

Zharla gripped her mother’s wrist and wrenched her arm free. Shooting her mother a defiant glance, she turned to Shahl. “I will choose Shahl for my husband today. He will be father to my children.”

Zharla sneered at Ahrik, then leaned toward Shahl, held his shoulders, and kissed him. The kiss was not salacious, a mere peck on the cheek, but Zharla had broken social norms, had shredded them apart, in fact. No unmarried



woman could display affection toward a man in public, especially a woman of Zharla's standing, heiress to the largest mining conglomerate in the western Eshel. But if this was to be her moment of truth, she would make it one to remember.

Zharla risked a scandal, and loved every second of it.

But then her mother's hand closed on her arm in a vice grip and whipped her around. Zharla froze in shock as her mother's hand sailed toward her face, and tears sprang to Zharla's eyes as her mother's palm met her cheek. Finely buffed nails raked across Zharla's face. Too late, Zharla's hand flew up to protect her reddened face. A wave of humiliation washed over her, and she recalled with blistering clarity the first time her mother had struck her, years ago, after her father disappeared. Zharla had asked where her father was, and her mother had backhanded her across the face, forbidding her to ask ever again.

As the sound of the slap echoes from the cavern walls, Renla sucked in her breath, bit her lip, and moved to Zharla's side, but Zharla held her back with a hasty shake of her head. Ahrik stared, as if even he, the military officer, had not expected violence. Zharla kept Shahl behind her. If her mother lashed out at him, she would fight back, because she knew he would not. She widened her stance, ready to defend him.

Then Zharla noticed the silence, the utter stillness in the cavernous hall. She blinked back tears and saw that all eyes were riveted on them. Why? Were they shocked that her



mother had hit her? Were they shocked that she had kissed a man in public? *How could my actions possibly be worse than hers?*

Her mother addressed Ahjoz with a flaxen voice. “Please escort my daughter out the back. Renla, see to your mistress.” Then she swept toward the kitchen and the back exit.

Renla rushed to examine Zharla. Fear covered her face. “Zharla—”

“I’m fine,” Zharla cut her off. She pushed down Renla’s probing hands and fixed her with a steely gaze. “Am I bleeding, Re’le?” she asked, using the familiar form of her name for emphasis.

Renla shook her head, worry in her eyes, but Zharla wiped her face with her sleeve anyway.

“Collect my things, please, Re’le,” Zharla whispered.

Renla bit her lip again and looked down. “Yes, Zhe’le.”

Ahjoz cleared his throat. “Mistress Zharla, if you will.” He didn’t touch her, nor would he dare, but he showed the way out the back exit with one hand. His tone and body language were quiet, almost apologetic. Ahjoz was loyal to the family, but Zharla sensed he felt a wrong had been done, so she turned to Shahl for a goodbye. “She’le, I’ll see you at the decision ceremony?”

“I can’t wait, Zhe’le.” He glowed, the smile covering his whole face, except for the worry he showed when he glanced at her red cheek. His smile very nearly overcame the



hurt she felt. His face was a window into his immense inner strength. It thrilled her to think she would have him as her husband. Let her mother and her aunts on the council rot in their collective idiocy, and let them keep their riches and their precious mining business. Zharla would win this day, no matter what the old hags decided.

Suddenly Shahl's hand was in hers, and Zharla felt a surge of excitement. He slipped his fingertips away, and she realized that something remained in her hand. She opened her palm and saw a necklace, a simple leather strap with a small metal amulet in the shape of a flame.

"It's the symbol of peace," she said. It was also the meaning of Shahl's name: the flame of peace.

"I've got one myself." He opened his other hand to reveal his. "I wanted to give it to you later, after we were done here, but—"

Ahrik laughed on the other side of the counter. "Really, Shahl?" he asked. He shook his head and made a face. "You're trying too hard."

Zharla froze Ahrik with a glare; then Ahjoz cleared his throat again and looked at Zharla and Renla, expectant, arm extended. His face bore a look of apology, almost shame, at what he'd seen.

"I'll wear it close to my heart, She'le," Zharla said as she nodded to Ahjoz. Zharla slipped the necklace over her head and let the metal slide under her tunic, where she felt it cool against her skin.

* * *

Zharla's mother waited for her in the shadow of a merchant stall, posture erect but eyes like a wolf hunting for weakness. Masses of dark-clad humanity eddied back and forth through the cobbled street, and the dimness of in-mountain Meran pervaded all. A caller sang out the news from a niche just down the street, the bustle of commerce ebbing whenever he called out. The grainy smell of the leather market lay thick on the air. Shahl had probably been right here in this market. She pictured him perusing the stalls to find just the right necklaces, a vision to savor before turning to find what her mother had in store.

Her mother's eyes found her, and Zharla gathered strength for yet another fight. She guarded the pleasing thoughts of Shahl in a special part of her mind, ready to be recalled at the slightest need.

Her mother stalked toward Zharla. She focused on Zharla's cheek and then softened. A handkerchief emerged from somewhere, and a look of worry came over her face. "Dear Zharla, I'm so sorry it had to happen this way."

Zharla wanted to shy away, but she knew this would only make it worse. She cringed within as her mother dabbed at her face while Ahjoz glared at passersby who stopped to gawk.

"A mother's touch is always so tender," Zharla said, lying so as not to provoke her mother. As she had so often



done before, Zharla wondered how her mother could be so blind to her own hypocrisy, monstrous as it was.

“Dear Zharla, you are so young, so beautiful.” Her mother’s flowing white dress swished as she reached up a hand to caress the good side of Zharla’s face.

For a split second Zharla wanted to believe her mother’s caress was genuine.

Her mother sighed and shook her head. “You have so much to live for.”

“Mother.” She paused to let a singsong headline pass from the caller down the street. “About my decision...”

“Shhh.” Her mother pressed a finger to Zharla’s lips. “Now is not the time for this.” She smiled as she brushed the back of her hand against Zharla’s face, the same hand that had struck her only moments before. What did it mean?

“Mother,” Zharla said. She brought her hand up to take her mother’s hand, and kissed it before clutching it to her chest. Zharla’s performance had to be just as convincing. *Mother, I think you’re a monster, but you’re the only mother I have. Mother, I hope you burn in sunfire, but please teach me your wiles before you do. Mother, how did I come out of you?* “Mother, I know you love me.”

A calm settled over her mother’s face. “Will you repeat the mantra with me, please, Zharla? An Esheli woman...”

“...serves the Eshel, because it gives life,” Zharla said. She hid her confusion. Where was this was going? Every Esheli woman, man, and child knew the mantra and recited it



every day as part of the prayer to the Lady of the Emerald Moon, but repeating it in the middle of the day felt awkward.

“An Esheli man...”

“...defends women’s rule, because it gives order.”

Zharla hoped for a time when men and women would govern the Eshel as equals, but the only thing that exceeded the clan’s dedication to the social order was their wealth. When her mother finally relinquished control over the family mining conglomerate, then she and Shahl might have a chance to do something about women’s rule. Until then, if Zharla had to take over the business, then she had to play the game, bide her time.

Her mother continued. “We desire order...”

“...because it is safety from The War, when all life ceased.” At this, Zharla was hard-pressed to maintain her performance. Every Esheli learned from infancy that nothing is worth a return to the unbridled violence of The War, but she could not bring herself to believe it. The War was over two thousand years ago, or so they said. Many wars had been fought since. None ended life like The War, and the ancient weapons remained in the past, but if the War of Unification ten years earlier hadn’t brought about a global cataclysm, then she doubted anything would. The War was nothing but a trite story to scare the weak-minded.

Her mother smiled as Zharla completed the recitation. Her voice was almost at a whisper. “Why, Zharla, did life cease during The War?”



Zharla could barely hear her over the clamor of the street. She concentrated on not rolling her eyes. Her mother wanted to give her a history lesson, right there on the street. “Because of the ancient weapons, Mother. Because our Esheli Mothers had not yet discovered the power of the *ketel*.” The taboos against discussing the ancient weapons and the *ketela* were so strong that Zharla had only a vague idea of what they were. Men like Ahrik and powerful women like the Chief Elders were entrusted with giving these words meaning. Zharla questioned many things, but not this, at least not yet. In time, though, and with Shahl at her side...

“And why, dear Zharla, are the *ketela* powerful?”

“Because they are loyal,” Zharla whispered, trying to match her mother’s fervency.

“Yes, Zharla, the *ketela* are loyal. You are a Tameri woman, and a Tameri woman...”

“...is loyal,” said Zharla. Her heart sank. How could she challenge this? What could she say to her mother that would not embroil them in some new fight? The quickest way to start her new life with Shahl was to get to the end of this conversation.

“Now, Zharla.” Her mother caressed Zharla’s shoulders and drew close, close enough for Zharla to feel her mother’s breath on her wounded face. “How will you choose this afternoon?”

Zharla should have seen it coming. She couldn’t avoid the confrontation now. Did she dare make her mother think she would actually choose Ahrik? Could she risk avoiding



her mother's anger now, only to lie to her later? Zharla's heartbeat quickened, and the back of her eyes trembled to think what might happen. She felt so helpless, laying her case before such a heartless judge. "Mother, I can be just as loyal with Shahl as with Ahrik."

Her mother's face twisted in anger. She dug her fingers into Zharla's shoulders and put her mouth next to Zharla's ear. "That is not true, Zharla!" She paused, as if to let the threat in her voice sink in. Her voice lowered. "This is a marriage of families, not individuals. I tried, I really did, but the clan council said if you choose Shahl, he'll be dead by morning."

Zharla's head swam. Shahl *dead*? Her vision clouded with hot tears. How could they stoop so low? This was a deeper level of betrayal than her mother had ever displayed; allowing her tears to tumble was all Zharla could do to keep from lashing out, from remedying betrayal with violence.

But if Shahl had taught her anything, it was forbearance in the face of violence. Violence would not diminish the threat on Shahl's life, nor would it erase her mother's betrayal. Maybe, if she played the loyal daughter, she could run away with him before the ceremony, but she needed to talk to Shahl somehow. She cast her eyes down and feigned submission. "I will choose Ahrik."

"Let's go home to prepare for the ceremony." Her mother slipped an arm around Zharla's shoulder.

"No, Mother...I mean, there's something I need to take care of before I go back." She tried to make her voice



sound as calm as possible, but she did not even convince herself, her voice trembled so. She slid away from her mother's arm and sprang back toward the social hall.

Her mother's voice broke in. "Ahjoz!"

Ahjoz's lithe form darted between Zharla and the door, separating her from Renla at the same time. Zharla stopped short. For an old man, his body was fluid and quick, and his face bore a stern expression, with no hint of the apology it had shown before. Was this a performance for her mother's benefit? Her mother touched Zharla's shoulder with a finger. "Did you really think I'd let you back in there to plan an escape with that Jeberi boy?" She laughed. "I'll hold you to your word about choosing Ahrik. That Jeberi boy means nothing to me, but he means everything to you, does he not?"

The warning in her voice confirmed what Zharla had dreaded, that her mother had never really cared for her. Fine, then. She could play her mother's game of lies, but she couldn't bear to have Shahl's life on her conscience. She may be forced to marry Ahrik, but she could still have Shahl's companionship, and a child by him, if possible.

Zharla scoffed. "You act, Mother, as if love is choice. It is no more a choice than war or hate or violence, isn't it? Our lives play themselves out on someone else's script."

"You have so much to learn, Zharla." Then, as her mother waded into the crowded street, pulling Zharla along with Ahjoz keeping watch behind them, she squeezed Zharla's hand. "You always have a choice."



Zharla beckoned to Renla with her eyes, and brushed her fingers over the scratches on her face. *If I have a choice, then I do not like who I've become.*

* * *

Shahl closed his eyes, trying to sear the moment on his memory, the thrill of her hands holding his shoulders and her lips brushing his cheek, her towering declaration that she would choose him as her husband later that afternoon. She had used the familiar form of his name for the first time. He knew that more veterans would rise to denounce this new war and other men would raise the call for men's rights, but all that could wait. He, Shahl Jeber-li, was going to be the husband of Zharla Tamer-li. Nothing else mattered at all.

"Hey, little brother." Only Ahrik would intrude on such a reverie. "Are you done playing idealist?"

Shahl sighed and considered his fraternal twin. "Being born five minutes ahead of me doesn't make you my big brother, Ahrik. If you want to make yourself useful, help clean up."

Shahl placed his own necklace on the counter in order to lift a half-full container out of the warmer with both hands. A younger man stepped up to the niche at the opposite side of the social hall and began speaking. His voice was softer, and he seemed too young to be a veteran. He began with a call for men's rights—probably a *melmezi* student like Shahl.

Ahrik raised an eyebrow. "You go ahead and clean up. The show is too interesting."



Shahl knew a lie when he heard one, but he saw no gain in pressing his brother. He rested the container on the counter, then used a free hand to hang his necklace on a hook next to the sink, so he'd remember to put it on after he was done cleaning up. "Why do I get the impression that your arrival with the Matron Tamer-li wasn't a coincidence?"

Ahrik grunted. "You're a grown man today, little brother. Seventeen years old, just like me. You should know better than to ask that. Did you really think that getting Zharla to come here would make her choose you?"

Shahl clenched his teeth and carried the container into the kitchen. His brother was especially vile today. Shahl returned from the kitchen and picked up a damp rag. "Why are you here, Ahrik? Couldn't you give me one moment of peace in this world you think is already yours?" Shahl had learned well enough over the years that Ahrik had more regard for his precious ketel than for him. "Don't you have a war to fight or something?"

"Now that you mention it, little brother, I have a bit of news here that should make you respect me more."

"You doubt that I respect you?" Shahl asked, suppressing a wicked smile.

Ahrik's eyes narrowed to slits, but he continued, "Read this. It arrived by courier this morning, just after you left."

Shahl sighed and wiped his hands on his smock. The message was curt:



Shadhir Ahrik Jeber-li:

Report with ketel tomorrow at sunset.

Preparation for space training.

Aanin Sheresh Shehur-li

Shahl raised an eyebrow. Not everyone in the military was put through space training. He grunted in begrudging respect. “May the Lady of the Emerald Moon see Her purpose fulfilled in you,” Shahl said, using the traditional well wishing and handing the message back. He picked up the rag and wiped the counter.

Ahrik shifted his weight, and Shahl heard his weapon clang against the counter. Ahrik’s hand darted down to steady it, but he knocked a dish of salt off the counter instead. The dish clattered to the ground, and Shahl heard salt slide across the polished stone floor on the other side of the counter. Ahrik’s demeanor was unapologetic.

Shahl stopped his cleaning and gripped the counter, his frustration brimming. That blade should have been a symbol of peace, not a symbol of his brother’s conceit. The law allowed a *keteli* officer to wear his blade anywhere, but why would Ahrik wear it to the social hall, where so many spoke out for men’s rights and against the war? Ahrik was just showing the world how much better he was, exuding his entitlement and superiority.



With a peeved look at Ahrik, Shahl grabbed a vacuum pack and sucked up the salt. He picked up the dish and called back to the kitchen, “Can you handle it from here?” At the muffled affirmative, Shahl stuffed the vacuum pack back in its place. Shahl would not stand to see his brother flout the social hall’s norms. “You’re not supposed to be armed in here, Ahrik.” War was an evil thing, but Ahrik couldn’t see it. “We’re leaving.”

Shahl rounded the counter and saw the crescent-shaped keteli blade gleam in its sheath at Ahrik’s hip. Shahl’s earliest memory was of their father giving that blade to Ahrik. Their father had called it *Biriq*, or Lightning, for how fast it flew. It was the last time he’d seen his father alive. “My boys,” he’d said, “I fight so you don’t have to.” When his father hadn’t come back from the War of Unification, Shahl had learned that war and killing held no glory at all. But war and killing were all Ahrik talked about.

Ahrik snickered as they made their way to the front exit. “It’s my right to carry Biriq, little brother.” Another veteran hobbled up to the niche and cleared his throat to gain the crowd’s attention.

Shahl pressed his palm to the reader to open the door. The mechanism clicked, then the door dissolved. Shahl glanced at Ahrik. “Father wouldn’t have carried his weapon in the open like that.”

Ahrik sneered. “What do you know about Father? You’re a pacifist. Not a single one of Father’s ketel returned



from the war, remember? It was glorious.” His tone sounded even more triumphant than normal.

“Ahrik, I know the story.” Shahl stepped through the door and into the vigorous foot traffic of the spice market outside, slowing to make sure Ahrik was within earshot. The sharp smells of saffron and thyme floated over the air. “His death pained me as much as it did you.”

The clamor of merchants rose as they hawked their wares. Shahl would have preferred to go out the back way, via the leather market, since it would have gotten them home quicker, but he thought better of risking another encounter with the Matron Tamer-li.

“Pain?” asked Ahrik. “What caused you pain gave me great pride. One day soon, I will carry Father’s noble legacy into battle, and I pray to the Lady of the Emerald Moon that I will fulfill my duty with honor.”

“Who’s the idealist now, Ahrik? That’s the kind of mindless devotion that got us into this mess in the first place, fighting legitimate opposition abroad and the men’s rights movement at home.”

“Traitor,” Ahrik said with a sneer. “If we don’t fight the rebels over there in the Kereu, we’ll have to fight them here. The honor of those that fight keeps us safe.” He pulled Shahl into a gap between two stalls and stuck a finger into his own chest. “My military honor is the reason that Zharla will choose me over you. Imagine it: the wealth of the Tameri undersea mining empire combined with our Jeberi



military courage. Can there be a more powerful union? We will be the envy of the region, if not the entire Eshel.”

Shahl pushed past Ahrik and into the foot traffic. “You’re wrong.” Zharla despised Ahrik. She’d told Shahl as much, but he didn’t dare tell Ahrik that. No need to provoke Ahrik’s ire without reason. He stopped at a stall to buy some cinnamon. “I know Zharla better than you do. She will choose with her heart.”

Ahrik scoffed. “You may know her heart, but I know her family.”

“Thank you,” Shahl said to the spice merchant, taking the bag of cinnamon and slipping it into a chest pocket. “You know nothing about her, Ahrik. I haven’t lost yet.”

Ahrik patted Shahl’s shoulder. “Shahl, Shahl. Maybe she likes you more than me, but your obsession with men’s rights is almost as dangerous as your opposition to the war.”

“Dangerous?” asked Shahl. “Granting men equal rights is the natural concomitant of a modern society, Ahrik. And if we honestly pondered the kind of peace we’re creating, we’d stop this war in the Kereu today.”

“There you go again, using your big words. Do you really believe them, like you believe Zharla will actually wear that necklace?”

The necklace. Shahl had forgotten it above the sink. Shahl slapped his forehead. *Curse my academic’s memory!* “Wait here, Ahrik. I’ve got to get something.”



Ahrik watched his brother weave through the spice market and back to the social hall, thirty meters away. The spice market filled the wide passageway that ran next to the social hall, a passageway carved out of Meran Mountain as a refuge so many years ago. The light, artificial and dim, strained Ahrik's eyes. The stone walls, smoothed by generations of erosion and wear, still bore a few divots from that hasty work of long ago. He smiled with pride to think on the civilization their maternal forbearers had built. Ahrik saw loyalty and purpose in in-mountain Meran. Why did Shahl want to change it?

Ahrik scanned about for a place to wait. A wizened woman shuffled up the middle of the passageway. The traffic scurried around her as she worked her way up the gentle slope that ran from the beginning of the spice market. The load she carried forced an awkward gait, but Ahrik knew it would be nothing for him.

"Let me help you with that," he told her, swinging her pack onto his shoulder.

She clutched his arm and patted his chest, and her eyes smiled at his uniform. "Thank you," she said. Her voice was little more than a croak. "The army turns out good boys."

She craned her head, turning sideways to compensate for her hunched back. When she beamed, Ahrik saw gaps in her teeth and smelled cardamom on her breath. This woman had had a hard, in-mountain life, but she was a woman. Any Esheli woman, no matter how poor, was greater than any Esheli man.



Ahrik lived to serve women's rule. Ten thousand men stood at his command, sworn to protect him from all harm. He would sacrifice every last one of them to preserve the rule of women. They swore an oath to him. He swore an oath to an idea. This was more powerful than anyone outside the ketel would understand, especially his weakling brother and Zharla, who seemed to believe that order and peace would simply create themselves. Men like Ahrik stood in the breach to defend women's rule, to bring peace to all. Especially to women like the one whose bag he carried, whose bony fingers dug into his arm as he escorted her through the spice market.

Besides, escorting the old woman brought him closer to meeting up with Shahl at the social hall and getting out of in-mountain Meran and back out to the light of day. The real point of this day was Zharla choosing her husband, not Ahrik chasing after Shahl. He and Shahl were grown men by Esheli law today. Zharla's family had betrothed her to theirs when he and Shahl had been in their mother's womb, even before they'd known she'd have twins. Now that he and Shahl were grown, Zharla had a choice to make. His silly little brother actually thought Zharla would choose him. Ahrik stifled a snicker at that laughable thought.

Ahrik and the old woman continued their slow shuffle. Ahrik shielded her from people pushing past them. Only ten meters left before the social hall entrance. Men filed in and out. Ahrik hadn't wanted to search for Shahl that morning, but their mother had insisted. "Ahrik," she had said, "bring



him back. Your father's legacy is all we have. We can't afford to squander such a high-profile betrothal." The Jeberi clan was well-respected, but not wealthy, so the coming marriage was a social advancement. Twenty-one generations earlier, Ahrik's ancestor Zharek had become famous for helping found the ketela, the elite military class that Ahrik was part of. The Jebera's firstborn sons had defended the Eshel ever since.

"Duty first," he'd said to his mother, forcing a smile. "Sometimes I'm not sure Shahl is fit to call himself a Jeberi." His weakling brother wanted to go read books for the rest of his life. Become an academic. Useless. Somewhere in those books, Shahl had learned that men had the same rights as women. Ridiculous. Women had guided Esheli society peacefully and effectively for hundreds of years. They had even built a republic that covered the entire planet. The current war in the Kereu, cross-planet, was a temporary trouble, but Shahl acted like the very soul of the Eshel was on trial. It was a little flare-up for the Chief Elders to deal with. Why mess with success?

The old woman tugged at Ahrik's arm and patted his chest again. They'd almost reached the entrance to the social hall. "Here, give that back," she said. "I need some shoes."

Confused, Ahrik looked around and only then noticed a dim side passage that led to the next passageway over. Probably the shoe market. The old woman's flowing black robe swished as she pulled him close. Ahrik bent down so far that their eyes were nearly level. She placed a meatless hand



on his head, in blessing, and recited, “An Esheli woman serves the Eshel.”

“An Esheli man defends women’s rule,” Ahrik answered.

In unison, they both recited, “This is safety from The War.” Faithful women like this were the reason Ahrik served in the ketela. They were why he had trained with his ketel all his life, and why he was deploying for space training tomorrow. He and his ketel would fight to protect women’s rule, even if it meant that weaklings and traitors like Shahl were also kept safe. The old woman turned and shuffled off down the side passage.

A loud boom burst from the social hall and the ground trembled. Earthquake? No, couldn’t be. The sirens would’ve gone off. Shoppers froze. Ahrik’s senses sharpened. He felt confusion swirl through the spice market.

A man came out of the social hall a few meters away. His face and hands were bloody, he was wobbling, and he was caked in pale dust. He held his head, steadied himself on a nearby stall, and wheezed. “Help me.” Then he collapsed.

Ahrik sprang into action while the crowd scattered. “You!” He pointed to the nearest shopkeeper. “Help him!” Shahl was in the social hall. Ahrik had to get him out. He feared the worst. He feared that the ancient weapons had been used once again, weapons that hadn’t been seen for over two thousand years.

Ahrik got to the entrance of the social hall. His eyes widened in dismay. The doorway and everything beyond it



was a ruin. He could see right through the opening where the door had been. More men staggered toward the exit, covered in the same pale dust, many with clothes partially torn from their bodies. In the fraction of a second before the men got to the opening, Ahrik slipped in. Most of the men clutched their ears or bellies. Most were covered in blood. Ahrik had never seen a weapon do anything like this, and he'd witnessed every weapon in the modern arsenal, at least at the range.

The steadily growing cries of wounded men filled the social hall. Ahrik stood just inside the doorway and scanned the place. The epicenter of the blast was just a few meters beyond the door. Tables had been blown apart. Bodies were strewn over the ground. Some were writhing and moaning in pain. Ahrik saw gaping, mortal wounds. He saw a human head with no body. There was a fine gray tint over everything. It made all the men look the same. He peered at passing faces through the haze. Could Shahl have walked out without Ahrik seeing? "She'le!" he called out. The only answer was cries for help. Ahrik coughed.

Ahrik didn't want to believe that the ancient weapons could be reborn, but if this is what they did, then he knew why Woman condemned them after The War. No one was supposed to know how the weapons were made. They had all been destroyed. Even discussing them had been done in secret for two thousand years. Ahrik commanded a ketel, and that was the only reason he knew their history. Until that moment, Ahrik had thought that this indiscriminate, destructive power had disappeared from the earth.



Clearly, it had not.

Ahrik suppressed a rising urgency. If Shahl was seriously hurt, it would hurt the family name, but if he was dead, it would be disastrous for Ahrik. Zharla was supposed to have a choice. She would never forgive Ahrik for not protecting his brother, the one she had loved. The specter of not knowing whom she would have chosen would condemn Ahrik to a marriage of inferiority. Better to have Shahl alive, well, and chosen by Zharla than for her to simply settle for Ahrik, with a dead brother haunting their marriage.

Where had Shahl gone? Did he leave something here? Ahrik couldn't remember. He worked his way toward the counter, examining faces as he went. Kneeling down, he wiped blood from one slick face. Not Shahl. The stench of blood made bile rise in his throat. He fought it down. He had seen many men wounded in training before, and he was no stranger to gaping wounds, but the scene before him was larger and more destructive than anything he had thought possible.

When he did not find his brother after a few moments, a new sense of panic began to take hold. His training kicked in. He forced himself to breath slowly and think. The cinnamon. It had been in Shahl's pocket. He smelled it now, despite the dust. The tang of cinnamon led him to a balding, middle-aged man wedged between the counter and the stone floor, slick with blood. His face and torso were a mess, and Shahl was pinned underneath him. Had the man's body shielded Shahl from the blast? Ahrik hoped so.



Ahrik gripped the dead man and pulled. His hands slipped free, slick and red. He got down on his knees, found better purchase, sank his shoulder into the dead man's side, and pushed with his legs. The body slid off of Shahl. To Ahrik's relief, his brother breathed out and then sucked in a full breath of air. He checked his brother for visible wounds and found none, except for a bit of blood that trickled from both ears. His vitals seemed okay.

Shahl's eyelids blinked open. "Ah'ke?" he asked, dazed.

"Quiet, She'le. Can you move?"

Shahl nodded, and Ahrik pulled his brother's arm around his own shoulder, gripped Shahl around the waist, and lifted him to his feet. Ahrik turned to go back the way they'd come, but it was packed with people now. Healers fought through the front entrance. The leather market. They could go out the back way. If Shahl had any injuries, Ahrik hoped they were mild. He pulled Shahl through the opening in the counter and toward the kitchen. He was relieved when Shahl began to walk, mostly supporting his own weight. Other than an occasional grimace, Ahrik saw no obvious signs of pain.

A peace forces officer stood in the kitchen, an island in a sea of pandemonium, herding people out the back exit. When the brothers arrived at the back alleyway, Ahrik paused to let Shahl catch his breath. He glanced up and down the street. Good, Zharla was gone. She wouldn't see Shahl's injuries and sympathize with him.



“Ah’ke,” Shahl panted. “I need to sit.”

Ahrik eased him down as gently as he could.

“Are...are you okay, She’le?” Ahrik slumped down beside his brother. A healer came over, but Ahrik waved him off.

“There’s worse off in there.”

Ahrik breathed a sigh of relief. The scent of leather was refreshing. Ahrik looked back at his brother, who winced as he tried to shift his weight. Ahrik felt a pang of regret at his harshness toward Shahl. Was he too hard on him? “Here, Shahl, let me...”

Shahl fended him off with one hand. “No, no, I’m okay. Just winded.” He brought a hand up to his neckline and pulled out his necklace. He fingered the flame-shaped pendant, then breathed a sigh of relief. Shahl took a few deep breaths, then asked, “Ahrik, what was that? What happened?”

Ahrik rested his arms on his knees. He hung his head. This was bigger than his distaste for his brother. “Have you heard of The War?”

“Who hasn’t?” Shahl let out an uncomfortable breath.

Ahrik looked for signs that his brother’s condition had worsened but saw none. “During The War, they used explosive weapons, chemicals mixed together to create sudden kinetic force.”

A squad of peace force officers filed up the alley and into the social hall.

“Hmmm,” Shahl said, “it sounds almost like you read that in a book.”



“Quiet, little brother. Believe it or not, I read books. Just about useful things. Not like you.”

Shahl scrunched up his face and sat up a little straighter. “It’s more useful to build than to destroy.”

“Not if you want to keep people safe.”

They had a staring contest, silently rehashing an argument they’d had a dozen times in recent months. Even an explosion wasn’t enough to cool Shahl’s stubbornness.

Ahrik shook his head. “The kinetic weapons were supposed to be a thing of the past.”

Shahl winced. “I...ouch...didn’t think that kind of chemical reaction was possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible, just very tightly controlled. Geothermal energy and subatomic propulsion make that kind of kinetic force unnecessary today, but it was once the foundation of human civilization.”

“You surprise me, Ahrik.” Shahl’s smile mocked him.

Ahrik shot him a warning glance. “It gets worse, Shahl. During The War, the most destructive weapons used atomic force. They ravaged the planet. They destroyed the far side of the Emerald Moon.”

“Uncontrolled fission?”

Ahrik shook his head.

“Fusion?” Shahl whistled in disbelief.

Ahrik nodded.

“So, who did this, Ahrik? Who would attack a peaceful social hall?” Shahl grunted in pain.

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“I don’t know. Your men’s rights movement and the antiwar folks seem peaceful enough. The government might not be happy with it, but they wouldn’t attack a social hall, not like this. It could be some reactionary women’s group, or it could be the Kerewi rebels, but I doubt it. Reactionary women aren’t usually violent, and the rebels are half-a-world away, cross-planet.” Ahrik stood and reached a hand down to help his brother up. “One thing’s for sure: whether we want it or not, war is upon us.”

“Yes,” said Shahl as he struggled to rise, “but do we fight it my way, or yours?”

*An Esheli woman serves the Eshel,
because it gives life.*

*An Esheli man defends women’s
rule, because it gives order.*

*We desire order because it is safety
from The War, when all life ceased.*

—*Mantra of the Esheli Woman*

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