

Chapter 19

For the next three days, the crew and passengers spoke of nothing but the second Theophany. Once it became ship-wide knowledge that Talla, Zhair'lo and their company were not only the Heroes of Beshenna, but also the communicants of the first Theophany, the other passengers hounded them relentlessly.

Seeing no reason to hide anything at that point, they gave the Ferry Master and anyone else who asked almost all the details they could remember, having quickly decided to edit out any notion of the mysterious gift, this 'viat ignus' the gods had given Talla, from their story. But otherwise, they described the lights, shapes and colours of the gods. They told about their conversations, the feeling of meshing with a god, and the new Dictate that gods had issued about Sapphics.

"Tara's Dictate!" Zoe would helpfully chime in to all and sundry.

"I do not," Tara would blush furiously, "want it named after me!"

By the time the sun set on the third evening and the shores of Vista came into view on the southern horizon, they had described to their fellow passengers almost every bit of the story they could remember from the time the first bells had rung in Gern, through the Restoration of Beshenna and their trip to Prima.

"It's odd, isn't it?" Zhair'lo said as he leaned on the starboard railing, craning his neck to see Vista across the ship's sides.

"What's that?" Kit asked.

"All the celebrations and repeating of our story had gotten so annoying," Zhair'lo said. "But somehow, out here, I don't mind it."

"The Ferry Master said, 'the sea is a strange place'," Kit quoted softly. "There's something different with being on the water. The smell of the sea, or the emptiness. It's as if what we're doing doesn't count, since we're so far away from the Temples."

"You know, we just met the gods," Zhair'lo said. "Actual gods. That's beyond just the magic of the Tempe. Gods really exist and yet..."

"And yet," Kit said. "They just put us back on a boat like it's no big deal and send us off on a new mission."

"It doesn't feel real," Zhair'lo said.

"Maybe that's the sea," Kit offered.

"Hm," Zhair'lo grunted back.

The two of them sat quietly, watching the gentle wave lapping against the hull as the ship cut through the water, until the helmsman turned the ship gently to port, giving them a better view of the city they approached.

"Vista, huh?" Del came up behind them.

"I wish I could see better," Zhair'lo squinted and frowned.

"I mean, we're going there, right?" Kit asked, wondering at Zhair'lo's concern. "Can't wait a day?"

"Yeah, what do you need to see?" Del added.

"Okay," Zhair'lo pointed. "Look up there between the western mountain peaks and the lower hills on the far side of the city lights."

"Sure," Del said.

"There's a dip there, right?" Zhair'lo asked. "A little, like... a sort of a pass, right?"

"Yes, definitely," Kit agreed.

"I have looked at a *lot* of maps," Zhair'lo said. "As a Seal Breaker, they wanted to train me kind of like a Ranger. They show me maps, give me lots of independent survival training and all that."

"What did your maps say?" Del asked, her interest now piqued.

"Almost all of them agree that that little dip is irrelevant," Zhair'lo said. "Nothing there at all."

"But?" Kit prodded.

"But there was one very old map," Zhair'lo went on. "A map I only remember because it was so faded and so weird. It showed a low priority path, this dotted line that means no one really maintains it properly, okay? It meanders into that little pass, taking no cuts at all, and it heads south into what looks like a city halfway between here and Beshenna. I mean, it was drawn like a really small city, like something they had just founded."

"So there used to be a city tucked in the hills back there, but it's gone?" Del asked as she scrunched up her face. "Why would they let a Temple fall in the middle of the hinterlands like that? It should be safe to maintain and rebuild."

"That's the thing," Zhair'lo said. "It was a very old map, so who's to say how they drew maps a hundred or two hundred years ago. But, on every modern map I've ever seen, they've always marked the boundaries of a Temple - the outermost walls - while drawing nothing inside. They say *that* is for security. So Temples are really obvious on maps. Every city has this triangle with nothing but blank space inside it."

Zhair'lo twisted his lips.

"But this city?" he said. "No triangle."

"Because they didn't mark Temples on old maps?" Kit asked.

"Or because it had no Temple," Del said. She paused thoughtfully before adding, "And new maps don't even show the road?"

"Maybe they started building," Kit said. "But then decided there was nothing worthwhile to build on?"

"Sure," Zhair'lo said. "Any of those things are possible. The memory only sparked inside my head because it's a direct shortcut south to Beshenna instead of going around the peninsula through Sun Soi. But now I'm wondering if the road's even still there, if it's maintained, and what in the nine hells we'd find going that way. If there's no road at all, we were definitely better off staying on the ship all the way to Sun Soi instead of walking."

"I kinda want to know, too," Del said, looking at the southern horizon as the sunlight faded.

After the sun had set, the Ferry Master ordered the anchor dropped and the galley opened. With land in sight, they could afford extra water for everyone and they took their late suppers on the deck, everyone helping to set up chairs around the cargo boxes so they could serve as tables.

"Hell of a thing," the Ferry Master said as he sat down next to Zhair'lo with his bowl of stew. "Lights in the sky and gods coming down. And I just happen to be in port to see it. Life used to be more predictable."

"I've felt that way since I turned eighteen," Zhair'lo said. "One gods damned thing after another."

"Clearly," the Master Ressick's eyes widened. "And now the Frontier for you."

"This ship doesn't go near the Frontier?" Talla asked him.

"Not equipped for anything approaching war," he explained. "And there's no sea route south to the Frontier, or anywhere dangerous at all for that matter. Not in the last, oh, almost twenty years."

"These were dangerous waters once?" Zhair'lo asked in surprise, looking past the cargo containers towards the railings.

"When I started out," he said, his eyes hooding slightly. He thumbed his chest, "Ferry Master Ressick was once an eighteen year old apprentice ferryman. We transported, nine gods, it must have been hundreds of starving refugees from the East to Sun Soi. Trip after trip, escorted by ships full of Fighters to protect us on shore. Sun Soi was almost overrun trying to house all those children."

"He means Yua," Talla said. "That's how Yua came over."

Ressick raised an eyebrow.

"A friend of ours," Zhair'lo said. "From Gern."

Ressick nodded and went on.

"They had to move those refugees out," Ressick sighed. "Got way too crowded. I imagine they're scattered across the continent by now. But, after a couple of years, the war out there ended. I don't know who was fighting. It wasn't us. Sun Soi certainly wasn't in a position to extend itself across the water and build a new Temple. We just collected the poor children, fed them, got them some place safe."

"They didn't take care of their own children?" Zhair'lo asked.

"Hell, no," Ressick said, closing his eyes as he leaned back against a pile of sacks. "Over there, it's the job of each pair of parents to take care of their children. If something goes wrong, if war takes those parents, those children become 'orphans'. You know the word?"

"It means something abandoned?" Zhair'lo asked. "Disconnected? Like a Fighter who separated from his unit."

"Over there, they use it to mean a child without parents," Ressick went on. "The war had left hundreds of them, plus all the women who were also in danger from the absence and protection of the men so many of them had relied on."

"They didn't know how to fight?" Talla asked.

"Out past the frontier?" Ressick said. "No, most places don't raise women as Fighters."

"Oh."

"So that was about it," Ressick said. "We came into the docks we normally used for trading. The Fighters went on shore to look for refugees. We took as many on board as we could and fed them until we could get to Sun Soi. Over and over again until we couldn't fill the boat anymore. After about a year, the fighting ended. My understanding was that the Temple offered to ferry the refugees back, but there weren't any that wanted to go. Life seemed better here than there. Consistent food and shelter, at least. Give people that and a few friends, they really don't want to leave. And they probably remembered their past as a kind of hell."

"It does sound terrible," Talla admitted.

"Yeah," Ressick said. "I prefer the smell of the sea over *that* any day of the week."

He inhaled a deep draught of air, as if the memory had polluted his senses and his lungs needed cleansing.

"But, almost twenty years later, here we are," he said. "Another kind of emergency, another kind of hero."

"You spent a whole year rescuing people," Zhair'lo said. "Going into a battlefield over and over again."

Zhair'lo shook his head, trying to figure out how he'd feel about repeating their march into a disaster like Beshenna.

"I can't imagine," he added.

"The fighting never came near us," Ressick replied. "Maybe the Fighters saw some of it. We just smelled it from the docks."

"The smoke," Zhair'lo said.

"Smoke and..." Ressick paused a moment, "...things burning that shouldn't be burned." *I know that smell*, Zhair'lo thought.

They sat in silence for a while, scooping up spoonfuls of stew, until Talla spoke.

"I don't suppose you knew what you were in for, did you?" Talla asked Master Ressick. "On that first trip I mean. You didn't know there would be refugees."

Ressick shook his head.

"Just a normal trip with trade goods," he said with a shrug. "They liked a lot of our fabrics. We had a dyeing process they couldn't match. We'd get minerals and medicines normally in trade. Had a pretty hungry trip home the first time, but we brought a lot more provisions afterwards."

"Just like us," Talla said. "We heard there was an emergency in Beshenna, but we didn't really believe how awful it could get. I really-"

Talla's throat caught for a moment, remembering her own naivete.

"I really thought we'd walk right in, that this whole idea of a mob of Enraged men was ridiculous," Talla said, the very act of forcing her voice flat revealing how troubled she felt. "And it was a blood-soaked mess. I'd had no idea."

Ressick scraped the bottom of his bowl to finish his stew.

"Better times ahead," he said, tapping his spoon three times. "After that adventure, I've had twenty years of peace and prosperity. I'm sure you'll do as well, Frontier or not."

"Yeah," Talla and Zhair'lo said at the same time, with matching levels of cynicism.

Going below deck after dark, Zhair'lo came down the ladder and found himself immediately separated from Talla.

"You still can't hog her every night," Del reminded him. "People will talk and we'll get in trouble with Officer Lady over there."

"You can have him tomorrow," Tara promised Talla. "*Z'rus* is waiting for you."

With the Officer having left them to their own devices, Del had had to work things out on her own. Due to the gender imbalance in the group, the four male members had been pulling double duty whenever necessary, which didn't make their ship board liaisons any different from any other night they'd spent with each other the last few months.

Despite what the gods might or might not do in the future about Talla and Zhair'lo, give or take whatever Dictates those three new lightning bolts had come with, Del still preferred to follow the rules about rotating everyone through Service.

As much as we got the gods to rewrite rules for us, Zhair'lo thought, they're still really uncomfortable with Monogamy.

Zhair'lo sighed as he let Tara lead him back into the curtained off part of the ship's passenger section.

They still think it hurts everyone, somehow, he thought. Besides, we don't care about Serving other people, as long as Talla and I can be with each other whenever we want.

Tara pushed her body against his as soon as the curtains wafted close behind.

She has the most... aggressive... kissing style I've ever felt, Zhair'lo thought as he closed his eyes and returned her passion. No space at all for subtlety.

Zhair'lo reached around her back, under her skirt and gripped both of her hard, muscled cheeks in his hands. Tara moaned.

Is it going to be okay to spank her here, where everyone can hear it? He wondered.

Tara had suffered so badly from seasickness on the journey to Prima, no one had ventured to find out how much noise people tolerated on a ferry, where only curtains separated one couple from another.

Zhair'lo's erection started pushing at the inside of his pants, poking at Tara's thigh. She reached down for the laces on his pants, carefully unthreading them while her tongue probed his mouth.

"Someone's ready," she murmured, pushing his shorts down while he yanked on the single string holding her skirt up.

"Always," Zhair'lo muttered back.

I mean, I'm a Seal Breaker, he thought, trying to keep his eye roll internal. They expect me to perform, at a moment's notice, for an audience.

They separated just long enough for Tara to shrug off the white sashes that crossed her breasts, shedding them along with her skirt.

At least Tara hadn't bothered with underwear. With a shift of her legs, she swivelled their bodies as one and pushed him down on the narrow, knee-high cot. Zhair'lo landed with a thump and Tara pushed him on his back.

So... no spanking, then.

Normally, Tara wanted to be bent over something. He could still slap her with either hand or both if she decided to ride astride, but it wouldn't give her the same feeling of giving control over to Zhair'lo.

Sitting back on Zhair'lo's thighs, Tara stroked his erection, probably a force of habit to make sure her charge for the night got hard enough to penetrate her properly.

"If Zia were here," she mused, her fingertips swirling around the ridge of his swollen tip, "she would suck this thing for half a bell."

Zhair'lo smirked.

"But not you?" he asked.

"Not today," Tara narrowed her eyes on his erection. "You look plenty hard. And I'm really wet."

Zhair'lo smirked and Tara extended her legs, one at a time, to plant her feet on the floor and straddle the entire width of the narrow bed.

These cots aren't great for sleeping, but they do have some benefits for Service.

Tara angled her body forward, capturing Zhair'lo's erection against her vulva. With her arms bracing herself on the cot by his shoulders, she lined up his head against her lips.

Straddling like that, she's wide open.

Tara pushed down and the mesh struck their minds, burning them together in a tingling rush that consumed first his body, then made him viscerally aware of her body.

...

Tara hadn't Served Zhair'lo since the night the gods had declared their new Dictate.

It rearranged her entire brain, Zhair'lo realised. She's... she's different.

The strange tang of bitterness, the feeling that everyone around her disappointed her in some way, had faded away to an aftertaste, a faint glow on the horizon, a vague misgiving.

As he plunged into her depths, he tasted her ease, smelled her aura of comfort and contentment.

Tara still experienced some discomfort with Talla and Zhair'lo's insistence on having sex so frequently, but that paled in comparison to how she had felt even a week ago.

In the background, Zhair'lo saw images of N'shid, Tara's female friend from Salacia, and a lot more recent images of Zoe, up close and extremely personal.

Madre Zen! Zhair'lo exclaimed, catching just the fringes of those images. Tara and Zoe have been getting together a lot. When have they had this much time?

Zhair'lo shifted his hips, felt the stress on his erection, felt it stiffen as he reamed Tara's entrance a little, also felt the stress it created for *her*, because the mesh let him feel her body too.

He understood that part better, even since the gods had telepathically explained it to him.

You needed sex, the voice in his brain, the voice of Madra Zen, said, you needed it and yet you hurt each other so much with it. So we gave you the mesh. If one of you hurts the other, if one of you feels any pain, the other will feel it too. Your strength is empathy, and where your empathy fails is your greatest weakness.

Zhair'lo had realised early on that he differed from other men in that he gained a great deal more information about his sexual partners. More than that, though, he could access more of his partner's thoughts and feelings than his partner could access from his mind.

"Tara," someone called out in a taunting whisper.

"Huh?" Tara gasped.

"Is that... Zoe?" Zhair'lo asked.

"Do you need some... *help*?" Zoe's voice whispered from behind the curtain.

Tara moaned and Zhair'lo felt her desperation inside his own head.

Yes, yes, we want some help.

Zhair'lo didn't know what the 'help' could possibly mean, but Tara's desperate need for Zoe, a burning between her thighs, became a burning between his thighs. He could feel the way her body ached as if his own body ached.

"Yessss," they hissed out together.

Zoe slipped in under the curtain and crawled over to kneel at the bedside, her head almost touching Zhai'lo's.

"You don't mind me helping, Zhai?" she prodded him.

I can't object, Zhai'lo realised, Tara wants it so bad and I kinda wanna at least know what she means.

"The mesh," he croaked out.

"It'll be fine," Zoe said softly. "If you relax, it's fine."

How could she know that?

"Tara," she said. "Turn around."

"Turn around?" Tara gasped. "I-"

"You can do it," Zoe said firmly. "And then I can help."

Tara winced and nodded. She shifted her weight to her left foot and lifted her right, twisting at Zhai'lo's erection as her vagina turned aside.

You can't break a mesh, Zhai'lo thought in a panic, or if you do, it really messes you up.

Tara raised her right leg over Zhai'lo's head, turning her body sideways while keeping his penis deep inside her.

This is uncomfortable for her insides, but I can take it.

Still, Zhai'lo felt the way it poked at parts of Tara's organs that she didn't particularly care to have poked.

Once she had both feet planted on the deck to his right, Tara lifted her left leg and slowly rotated her body, trying to keep her body centred on Zhai'lo's erection as she turned and moved her left leg to the far side of the bed.

"Hoo," she breathed softly.

"There we go," Zoe whispered, leaning in close to Zhai'lo's ear. "Tell me how this feels."

Tara leaned back on her hands, gently rotating her hips. Zhai'lo watched the muscles in her shoulders working as she did this, watched her shoulder blades twisting around her spine.

Zoe crawled down the length of the bed and pushed Zhai'lo's legs apart. The coolness of her breath ran up his thighs, then the heat of face radiated into his skin as she moved closer to where his body met Tara's.

A tongue flicked out, touching his testicles, sending a shiver through both him and Tara. Zoe wiggled the tip of her underneath and around each of those dangling orbs before working her way up the exposed part of his shaft.

Then she slid off of his skin directly onto the stretched edge of Tara's vaginal entrance.

I felt that! Zhai'lo wanted to squeal with Tara's delight. *I can feel what-*

Zoe's tongue hit Tara's clitoris and Zhai'lo's brain exploded.

That's what it's like?! That's what it's like?!

Involuntarily, Zhai'lo thrust up into Tara as hard as he could.

Nine gods!

"Go, Zhai," Tara begged. "Go. Hard. Gods!"

Zhai'lo withdrew partway and hammered into Tara again.

Zoe reached her hands under Tara's thighs and gripped them from behind so she could keep her mouth on Tara's vulva, licking as fast as she could while Zhai'lo pounded away.

Yes, gods, yes! This is what she needs!

Zoe? You're in the mesh?

Of course, of course, of course. A mesh is a place for three. Who ever thought otherwise?

Zoe couldn't be as aware as Zhair'lo was, not in this place, but she knew she'd joined them, knew it was okay, and hung on to her friend's genitals as hard as she could to stay joined, licking from his shaft, across Tara's entrance and up to her clitoris as fast she could.

Nine gods! Zhair'lo screamed into the emptiness.

The three of them reached orgasm at once, Zhair'lo's erection pulsing along its length where Zoe licked, releasing semen deep inside Tara when he thrust. Zoe clung on, licking with each pulse. Tara pushed her weight down to give Zhair'lo as much depth as she could facilitate.

A third pulse.

A fourth.

...

The mesh, strained by the triple occupancy, dissolved but Zoe kept licking, her brain fried and her behaviour deeply instinctual. Tara shifted her weight and Zhair'lo's erection popped out of her vagina, its head exposed against the outside of Tara's body.

I'm still coming even though the mesh is broken?

He fired a fifth pulse over her vulva between it and Zoe's lips. Zoe, still straining, moved her mouth down to lick the length of his shaft while it fountained semen over Tara's smooth mound and Zoe's lips and nose.

"Gods!" Zhair'lo gasped, still ejaculating over both of them.

He could no longer sense the emotions or skin sensations of his cohorts, but he could sense his own, grunting as the two of them kept up the motions that emptied him completely.

Gasping, Zhair'lo tried to speak but couldn't get any words out.

Tara shivered and slipped off him sideways, the bed barely large enough for her to curl up on her side next to him. He gave her a bit of space while Zoe wiped semen off her chin and nose and folded her arms over Zhair'lo abdomen and looked up at him with one raised eyebrow.

"Did you feel it?" she asked him.

Zhair'lo nodded.

"Feel what?" Tara asked.

"Her tongue," Zhair'lo said. "I - I could feel *her* licking *you*."

"Ni-ice," Tara muttered into his chest. "Good for you."

"The mesh fit *three*," Zoe said, her voice soft as she closed her eyes in pleasant memory. "You were worried. But it was -" Zoe took a deep breath and sang out the last words - "-just fine."

"Yeah," Tara said. "The same thing happened in Beshenna when we had to revive the Big Hero over here. Scared nine hells out of me that time."

"But you're not scared now," Zoe whispered. "That's the difference. You don't believe anything they taught you anymore. And we knew Talla could do it, but now we know Zhai can, too."

Zoe closed her eyes as if she meant to fall asleep draped over Zhair'lo crotch, but jerked awake.

"Stupid cots are too small," she said as she slid off the foot of the bed. "Good night."

She slipped between the curtains which silently closed behind her as Zhair'lo pulled Tara in more tightly against him.

"I don't think I have a second one in me tonight," he muttered.

Tara grunted her acknowledgement and said nothing further.

Vista boasted a lot of land.

When they'd approached by ferry, Master Ressick carefully guiding the ferry past hundreds of small fishing boats, they'd seen the way city growth had spread far and wide across the coast.

Parked on the docks, that sentiment hadn't changed.

"There's barely a two storey building anywhere," Kit said as they prepared to disembark. "You can see the Temple walls from almost anywhere, I bet."

Fresh from the giant buildings of Prima, where cramped conditions placed a high demand on land, the change surprised everyone.

"They really don't need to build up?" Tara asked. "Like, ever? They must have so much space."

"The advantage is the sight lines," Zia said, nodding up towards the clearly visible Temple. "See those towers on the corners of the Temple? From up there, you can see ship masts coming for a long, long way."

"They've got towers along the coast though," Bree pointed to the east. "I'm sure they can signal from there."

"Naw," Zia said. "They've been attacked here. Not recently, I'm sure, but often enough to remember the sting of it and keep their eyes open. The city's not flat like this for no reason."

They stayed quiet a while as the rest of the passengers lined up on deck and prepared to see them off. Most of the cargo on the ship was bound for Beshenna in the name of reconstruction.

Master Ressick had said the ferry would only stop in Vista briefly.

"As much as I enjoyed your company," he had mused, "The relief effort is paramount. Sigil of the gods or not."

"We'll need to report into the Temple," Talla said. "Unlike everywhere else we've been, no one here is expecting us."

"Or your sigil," Del pointed out. "I'll visit the Library. No one here knows anything about the Theophany, so I should be safely ignored. Make sure you include me in your report."

"I'm heading straight to Form," Talla said. "See if I can get a map of this goat path of Zhair'lo's."

"It's gotta be there," Zhair'lo said. "But it probably means we're walking, alone. Doing our own hunting and cooking and everything."

"Hopefully we can requisition supplies," Talla said. "We'll see what Form says."

"I'm coming with you," Tara told Talla.

Every pair of eyes widened to look at Tara, who folded her arms in resolution

"I - um - okay?" Talla said.

"You're going to get some pushback," Tara said. "Whatever this secret route is, you need to know how to push Form people."

"And you're pushy?" Bree asked.

"The pushiest," Tara nodded firmly, her eyes still on Talla's. "My creche took a vote when I was five."

Bree shrugged.

"Tara and I," Talla reiterated, "will visit Form and get a map and whatever other information we can."

"Everyone else will stick together," Zhair'lo said. "We'll store our gear at the southern barracks. If I remember right, it's directly opposite the docks on the other side of the Temple. It *should* be close to that weird path I want to take south."

"Let's get to it, then," Talla said as the planks were set in place between the ferry and the dock.

Talla held the God's Sigil upright in her left hand, pinched between her thumb and index finger, not exactly in anyone's face, but as a completely unsubtle indication of her authority.

The Form woman across the counter from her, a woman assigned the charge of caravans and logistics, tried to frown down at her impudence but even she couldn't remain undaunted in the face of the glowing and clearly supernatural item, and her two assistants remained fearfully silent and wary.

"We're not clear, though," the woman in Officer's orange said through teeth gritted in a kind of uncomfortable wince, "why you really need to go that way."

From behind Talla, Tara stepped up on her right side and folded her arms in resolution.

"The gods told us to get to the frontier," Tara replied. "So we're going to the frontier."

Talla rotated the sigil so that the Officer could, once again, see the glyph for Firosh on its obverse side.

"Yes," the Officer said. "But certainly you could have taken the Ferry to Sun Soi - you could still take the next Ferry - rather than take this rougher course -"

It would have been better to bring Del to this meeting, Talla thought, she would know how to talk to Form women and could argue this Officer in circles. But Del's busy in the library. At the very least, no one is denying the existence of Zhair'lo's weird path.

"I have a Seal Breaker with Ranger Training in my entourage," Talla said. "He knows the way. He's seen the route already."

"A Seal Breaker?" the Officer looked shocked. "And a Ranger..."

"The Hero of Beshenna," Tara pronounced. "He knows what he's doing."

The Officer's eyes blanked out at that pronouncement.

"We just need a modern version of the route," Talla said. After a pause, she prodded further, "An updated map. He only saw an old one."

The Officer had started ruminating when Tara had mentioned Zhair'lo's status and remained glassy-eyed to Talla's addition.

"One can't imagine," the Officer spoke to herself, her eyes still glazed, "that the danger from such a Hero would..."

She trailed off and shook her head. Three blinks later, her eyes leveled on Talla.

"Very well," she said. "You may accompany the Carters headed south along that road tomorrow morning. We don't send anything... that way... very often."

The Officer hesitated again, biting her lip a moment as she chose her words carefully.

"Carters?" Talla asked. "But-"

"You can accompany that caravan roughly half way," the Officer went on. "It will then return here and you will have to continue on your own to Beshenna. Can you manage?"

"Halfway?" Talla stammered.

"We'll need provisions for the second half of the journey," Tara interrupted.

"Halfway?" Talla asked again.

"That's all," the Officer cut her off abruptly. "The caravan departs tomorrow morning at the seventh bell, with or without you. I have other work to do and I will have to make sure the caravan is provisioned for your additional numbers. Please make sure to sleep in the Temple tonight - all of you - as you will be counted amongst the H'rem."

"I - alright," Talla said.

The Officer turned about and nodded to her two junior assistants to come with her as she began drawing out scrolls.

"That was weird," Tara said.

"Did she say 'danger'?" Talla asked. "Why is there 'danger'? And why would Zhair'lo make us immune to the 'danger'."

"More importantly," Tara put in, her voice pitched uncharacteristically low. "What the fuck is halfway between here and Beshenna, along a road everyone is pretending doesn't exist?"

They took their supper in Vista's southern barracks. Given the lack of threats along the border with the forests and mountains, the Fighters had chosen to keep that facility generally understaffed. This left Zhair'lo's squad with plenty of bunk space and practice time with the archery targets.

"How many days since we were on a range?" Zia complained after seeing the spread of her first quiver of arrows.

"Yeah," Z'rus agreed. "I feel it slipping away."

"At least you guys can practice all night," Bree said. "They told us we have to sleep in the Temple tonight. No women in the bunks are allowed here."

Talla and Tara hadn't returned yet, and Del had taken to the library alone, leaving six Fighters to practice on the range, while Illya, Tina and Zoe watched.

"Wait," Zhair'lo said after he'd shot his quiver. He looked at the three girls sitting on the benches. "Didn't all three of you take archery training?"

"What?" Kit asked.

"They all do, right?" Zhair'lo turned to Bree. "Isn't it mandatory for everyone? I know Talla did."

"Yeah, yeah" Tina groused. "But none of us are as good as all of you."

"So?" Zhair'lo asked.

"So," Illya put in. "We don't want to suck in front of you."

"I suck in front of him all the time," Zia called back from the firing line, loosing an arrow after a breath.

"Get up there," Zhair'lo insisted. "They're stocked with 10 kilo beginner bows."

"I *have* Strength," Tina sighed as she stood up. "I can handle the 15. I'm just going to miss a lot."

With an authoritative slice through the air, Zia landed another bull's eye and turned to look over her shoulder at Tina.

"You won't suck less by not practicing," Zia told her. "Battlefields are terrible. You don't want to be unprepared."

"Right," Tina said.

By the time Del arrived for the evening meal, Tina, Illya and Zoe had spent their arm strength and the entire group had retired to the mess tent. Though Vista hadn't fully staffed the barracks with Fighters, it hadn't scrimped on the kitchen staff. Food, however, didn't get prepared by the cooks until it was ordered.

"Is Talla back yet?" Del asked as she joined the group.

"Nothing yet," Zhair'lo said. "Form is on the far side of the Temple, though, and there's no telling how long she had to wait."

"Did you find anything?" Bree asked. "Because you look like you found something."

"I found a really vague reference in a very old story," Del said. "It's a different spelling. 'Viat' has a 't' sound on the end, but this word was more like..."

Del trailed off for a moment.

"We don't really spell out this sound," she explained. "It's like how some words have 't' or a 'k' on the end but you don't *quite* say it."

"The glottal stop?" Zoe asked, raising an eyebrow. "Like in 'button'?"

"Glottal stop?" Del asked.

"That's what it's called," Zoe said. "It comes up a lot in poems and songs. You pronounce the 't' in 'baton', but not so much in 'button', right? Your voice just kind of stops for a bit and keeps going, though."

"Sure," Del shrugged. "So there's a way, in old Temple Script, of writing the 'glottal stop' on the end of a syllable. And I found a usage of 'via' with that glottal stop on the end. It *would* sound more or less like 'viat' which is what you heard."

"Especially," Zoe held up a warning finger, "if the next syllable or word starts with a vowel. Then the glottal stop comes in harder, more like the actual letter you were stopping. Via becomes 'viat ignus'."

"And what does *that* word mean? That 'viat'?" Zhair'lo asked impatiently.

"It turns 'road' into 'on the road'," Del said. "Or maybe 'of the road'."

"So the gods gave Talla 'fire of the road'?" Bree asked. "That doesn't mean much."

"Nor change what we had from before," Zhair'lo sighed. "Still-"

"Hey!" a shout came from the entrance flap to the mess tent.

"Tara!" Bree shouted. "You're just in time for dinner. Do we have permission? A map?"

"Way more than that," Talla said. "We have a caravan we can join."

"A caravan to where?" Zhair'lo asked. "There's nothing-"

Tara cut him off with a wave of her hand, as she and Talla squeezed in at the long table.

"This is going to take a moment," Talla rolled her eyes.

Zhair'lo listened quietly, with the same attentive, half-lidded, brooding look Del had, until Tara and Talla had finished their tale.

"That means there's a city still there," Zhair'lo said. "That city I saw, the one without a Temple marked on the map? It's there, somehow."

"Why would the Goddesses allow a reactionary city this deep in our hinterlands?" Bree asked in horror. "That's... that's just ridiculous. It would be so easy to conquer."

"Maybe it's not worth the resources?" Renzi offered.

"The alternative is that there *is* a Temple there, and we just hide it?" Tara said.

"That *seems* less likely," Del said. "But I wouldn't put it past them. Why would either situation exist?"

"And why is it automatically okay if *I* go along?" Zhair'lo asked. "Why in the nine hells would *that* matter?"

"That part is easy to explain," Del told him. "For the Temple, that means loyalty. Whatever is over there, they want it kept secret and they're expecting you to maintain confidence."

Zhair'lo grunted and looked at the other male members of the squad.

"We're all Fighters, I guess," he agreed.

"Tested and approved," Kit put in.

Z'rus and Renzi shared a wry look, wrinkled their noses, and said nothing.

"Regardless, we're out of here tomorrow morning," Talla said. "And while you guys can stay here, we have to bed down in the Temple. We're designated part of the H'rem for the trip south."

Talla shrugged and sighed, not looking forward to breaking the group up. She glanced over at Del.

"We'll be 'on the road' tomorrow," Talla said. "We'll see if I can make fire somehow, or melt rocks."

Del shrugged back, clearly weary.

"They won't have us Serving tonight, then?" Del asked Talla.

"No, they know we haven't slept in a Temple for at least a week, right?" Zia reminded her.

"Why's that matter?" Kit asked.

"Uh," Zia's eyes went wide in a moment of panic.

"It's fine," Del said wearily. "Madra Zen, let's not flip out over that after all the other stuff we've been through."

"We don't normally tell men about this," Tara put in.

"This is 'first week of school' stuff, though," Bree added. "I kind of assumed you guys knew."

"We can only hold the Temple's magic in us for about a week," Tara explained. "It's one of the first things they teach us. It's why we have to sleep inside the Temple, no matter how crowded it is. We get charged up while we sleep, and it lets us go out and, you know, *Serve* men, placate them, keep them in line. After about a week, that charge dissipates, which is why caravans have to be so careful."

"It's also why the Relief of Beshenna had to move so fast," Del added. "Because once the Goddess dies, the Temple doesn't charge us up anymore."

The boys took a moment to think about this.

"So," Renzi said. "All those crews up on the mountains in Gern - the ones building the sun-mirror thing - how do they get Served if the women lose their magic?"

“They cycle caravans through, I imagine,” Del said, looking up thoughtfully. “They’d retire every night to the nearest camp. I bet the H’reem from passing caravans always have extra women along. I’m sure they know how to work it out.”

Renzi nodded and lapsed back into silence.

“Anyway,” Del said with a sigh. “We should head back to the Temple, otherwise it’ll be our fault if some guy in the caravan goes Catatonic.”

“Right,” Zhair’lo said. “Finish dinner and get some sleep, then.”