

Chapter Forty-One

The chapter opens with Sartaq and Houlun spending over a week researching ancient maps of the Dagul Fells, preparing for a dangerous mission into the territory of the kharankui (spiders). The maps are vague, as few riders have dared to venture close enough for detailed reconnaissance. The group faces internal conflict when Borte, Houlun's heir, is ordered to stay behind for the sake of their people's bloodline. Despite her outrage, Borte reluctantly complies, while Sartaq defiantly insists on joining the mission, declaring he would refuse the crown if it meant avoiding battle.

The small team—Nesryn, Sartaq, and Falkan (in mouse form)—departs on Kadara, Sartaq's ruk, after debating whether to bring a larger force. Houlun ultimately decides a small group is best for stealth, with plans to send an army if they fail to return within four days. As they approach the Fells, tension mounts; Nesryn feels the weight of the impending danger, while Sartaq remains silent and Falkan conserves his energy. The mission's stakes are high, as they aim to rescue stolen hatchlings and uncover the spiders' weaknesses.

During the flight, Nesryn and Sartaq engage in a revealing conversation about his reluctance to marry and his views on the khaganate's succession traditions. Sartaq admits he has avoided arranged marriages, preferring a partner who shares his love for adventure. He reflects on his sister Duva's successful arranged marriage but questions the competitive nature of his family's succession. Nesryn probes further, asking if he would ever abandon the tradition, to which Sartaq muses that future rulers might prioritize family over rivalry.

The chapter concludes with Nesryn expressing hesitation about dragging the rukhin into war, now that she knows them personally. Sartaq reassures her, joking about Borte's competitive relationship with her betrothed, Yeran. The conversation shifts to lighter topics, but the underlying tension of their mission lingers as they near the

spiders' territory. The exchange highlights Nesryn's growing attachment to the rukhin and Sartaq's complex relationship with his royal duties.

