

Chapter Thirty

Nesryn awakens in the Hall of Altun, disoriented by the time and anxious about oversleeping in front of the rukhin, who might mock Prince Sartaq for his courtly habits. After a restless night, she notices movement outside her door and prepares for the day, washing her face with lukewarm water. She joins Sartaq, who is already saddling his ruk, Kadara, in the empty great hall. They take flight into the freezing dawn, joining other ruks hunting for breakfast. Kadara catches salmon from a river before Sartaq guides them toward a training area for novice riders, where the terrain is less treacherous but still daunting.

Sartaq explains the rigorous training regimen of the rukhin, revealing that children as young as four begin learning to ride on seasoned ruks, with family members accompanying them initially. By their teens, they raise their own hatchlings. Nesryn is stunned by the early age and the perilous nature of the training, struggling to imagine children navigating such dangers. Sartaq compares their methods to the horse-clans of the steppes, where children master riding and weaponry early, a tradition that contributed to the khaganate's military dominance. He highlights the ingenuity of their ancestors, who traveled light and relied on engineers to craft weapons from local materials.

The prince recounts the strategic brilliance of the first khagan, who crossed the Kyzultum Desert with nomad guides, surprising enemies by attacking from behind. Instead of open warfare, the khagan used fear and selective brutality to force surrenders, rewarding compliance and ensuring his reputation preceded him. Sartaq's pride in this history is evident as he describes the khagan's dual **sulde**—Ebony for war and Ivory for peace—and how the Ebony's presence alone often deterred resistance. Nesryn, fascinated, listens intently, drawn deeper into the culture and history of Sartaq's people.

As they soar above the mountains, Sartaq's storytelling weaves a vivid tapestry of conquest and cunning, contrasting the khagan's methods with the brute force of other rulers like Adarlan's king. Nesryn's curiosity grows, and she relaxes into the flight, her earlier tension replaced by a sense of connection to both Sartaq and the legacy he embodies. The chapter closes with a lingering sense of awe at the khaganate's storied past and the unspoken bond forming between the two characters amid the vast, windswept peaks.

