

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Nesryn finds herself constrained by time as Falkan's recovery delays their planned journey to the southern watchtowers. Despite her attempts to persuade Prince Sartaq to proceed without the shape-shifter, he insists on waiting, prioritizing safety even with Borte's added support. Instead, Sartaq fills their days by introducing Nesryn to various rukhin clans across the northern and western aeries. These visits range from warm receptions with feasts and celebrations to more reserved encounters, like with the Berlad, where hospitality is minimal. Through these interactions, Nesryn begins to adapt to the rukhin culture, even enduring their potent fermented goat's milk, which initially leaves her choking but earns her respect.

As Nesryn immerses herself in the rukhin way of life, she discovers a newfound sense of belonging. She impresses the clans with her archery skills while learning to shoot in challenging conditions, guided by Sartaq during their flights through mountain passes. Riding Kadara alone leaves her feeling exhilarated and free, a stark contrast to her former life. Sartaq ensures her active participation in clan activities, from mundane chores like cleaning ruk droppings to teaching archery, reinforcing the principle that no task is beneath anyone, regardless of rank. These experiences gradually quiet Nesryn's restlessness, replacing her memories of Rifthold's rigid palace life with a deeper connection to the mountains and their people.

Nesryn's transformation becomes evident as she reflects on her past. The structured world of Adarlan's guards and city barracks feels distant, almost unreal, compared to the vibrant storytelling and communal fires of the rukhin. One evening, Houlun, the hearth-mother, invites Nesryn to share a tale from Adarlan. Though hesitant, Nesryn surprises everyone—including herself—by offering to sing a song from her mother's homeland. The moment is poignant, as she reveals a personal connection to her heritage, bridging her dual identity as a child of both Adarlan and the rukhin lands.

Borte's softened expression and Sartaq's attentive silence underscore the significance of this cultural exchange.

As Nesryn begins to sing, her voice resonates through the Mountain-Hall of Altun, weaving a tapestry of memory and emotion. The fire's crackle accompanies her, and the weight of her mother's legacy fills the space. Sartaq's stillness hints at his deep appreciation, while Borte's earlier defiance gives way to quiet solidarity. This chapter captures Nesryn's evolving identity, as she sheds the constraints of her former life and embraces the freedom and purpose found among the rukhin. Her song becomes a symbol of shared humanity, transcending borders and forging bonds in the heart of the mountains.