

The rock at the top of the seacliff overlooking the Eastward was empty; Onneja was probably halfway to the next town by now, on important Conclave business doing important journeymage things.

Rahelu groaned as she sat down stiffly on the sun-warmed flat-topped boulder—perhaps she could stretch out for a quarter-span and rest her eyes? Just a quarter-span basking in the early summer rays would almost be as good as a bath (gods, she would kill for a bath, though at this point her nose had grown used to her own stench so it could wait).

But no, the sun was already more than three quarters of the way through its arc and it would take at least a half-span to hobble back to the Guild from here.

She should have gone somewhere closer, but her control over her emotions was weak and the ignominy of the morning's ordeal was a fresh wound in her aura. Anyone passing within ten strides of her would sense it without any Guild training, and she had borne all the ridicule she was capable of enduring for the year.

Actually, if she lived the rest of her natural lifespan held in utter esteem, that would probably not be enough to erase the steaming pile of pig manure that currently passed as her reputation. Nheras would see to that.

Ignoring the protestation of her stomach muscles, she stripped off her filthy tunic, her somewhat less filthy trousers and folded them into a square pad. After setting out her newly acquired writing implements (*extortion*, her conscience reminded her, *you extorted a fisher's monthly wage of scrivener supplies out of a poor old man scared stiff of the Guild coming down on him like the Stormbringer's judgement*), she weighed down the parchment with her odd paperweight.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but it seemed that the gold flecks were drinking in the sunlight, effecting a comforting glow.

Working up enough spit to mix her ink took longer. She hadn't had a drop of liquid to drink since she'd stopped by the well in Market Square on her way to see Onneja so her mouth was as dry as stone.

Carefully, she cupped the fragments of her petition in both hands as she gingerly switched to a cross-legged position on top of her makeshift stinking cushion, clad only in her breastband and loincloth. Dredging up all the patience she couldn't muster earlier in the day, she closed her eyes, breathed in and out with the waves and *listened*.

First, she heard the wind. The port city of Ennuost Yrg was sheltered inside the Kuath bay, nestled between the Tsojo river to the north and the Suusradi river to the south, and its wide, shallow harbor was one of the best on the entire Ngutoccai continent. Here, above the Eastward, facing out towards the open Aleituan sea, the salty seabreezes carried the creak of tensioned ropes, the flapping of a hundred taut canvas sails, and the syncopated tread of bare feet scurrying about wooden decks punctuated with the occasional sailor-cry as trading vessels made ready to dock or to depart with the early evening tide.

Next, the sun. Each golden ray tingled against her bare skin and she heard—felt?—them as pure vibrations in the ambient resonance of the world. She visualized the afternoon rays as strings of a great celestial harp, stretching across the arc of the heavens, and the vibrations as individual notes of the Starfather's unending symphony.

Finally, she pulled her focus in close and tapped into the resonance crystal on her left hand. Normally, she wouldn't need to use it for a straightforward Evocation—most first year Guild trainees could Evoke the resonance of a memory going back a few years if they were trying it on an object they were holding and had a personal history with—but this wasn't a straight forward Evocation exercise.

Rahelu's focus wavered as her anger surged and she wished desperately that she could have gone about armed with her spear—Nheras's primary weapon was a weighted baton so she would have had no chance, regardless of her House-born privileges. Forget niceties; Rahelu would have stabbed the point of her spear right in that uppity Ilyn face, then smashed those jeering white teeth into pieces and then—

Skymother, she swore as her breathing fell out of sequence with the rolling waves and her resonance vision collapsed from the flood of adrenaline to her muscles.

Stupid, idiotic, fish-brained excuse for a mage! she raged inwardly. The sun had shifted closer to the horizon while she distracted herself with pointless revenge fantasies and now she only had maybe three spans before day's end. She reluctantly wrested back her mind from mincing Nheras into fish food (who was she kidding, *she* would probably be the one who ended up as the evening meal for alleymutts) and painstakingly regained her rhythm.

Wind.

Sun.

Crystal.

Complete, utter abasement.

A jumble of parchment scraps rise up to the sky from a pitiful figure groveling in a dusty gravel road. Large and small fragments dance in an invisible wind and fly together, torn edge reuniting with torn edge, one after another until her Petition reformed in Nheras's hands.

It was working! Rahelu barely hung onto her breathing pattern and her Evocation as her mind exulted in seeing her Petition again. She drew deeper on her resonance crystal, tasted blood as it trickled from her nose, and shifted her focus from her own debased figure to Nheras.

Her Evocation blurred and she cried out in alarm, but the crystal on her finger was only warm, not hot, so she pressed on and drew on it for more power. The vision stabilized against the back of her eyelids; cradling the fragments in her left hand, she reached out blindly for her writing implements and wrote:

Petitioner Rahelu

Guild rating: Graduate in good standing (accredited on the 15th day of early summer, 530 A.F.)

Seeking: Beginner

Projection: Elementary

Obfuscation: Elementary

Evocation: Intermediate

By the time she scribed the final words and opened her gummed up eyes, the air had turned cool and she came to, shivering.

Shit!

Petitions were due before day's end and behind her, the sun was a dim red and half-sunk into the horizon.

She panicked and nearly spilled all of her parchment fragments (which would have been an unmitigated disaster) as she tried to dress one handed and gather all her things at the same time. The trousers she managed—after some contortions that were hell on her poor stomach—but she forewent the tunic and wrapped it around her possessions: original fragments, new petition, weird rock and all of her other accouterments. It would be better utilized that way.

Her descent from the boulder was an ill-executed slide down one of the sides (the north one, that only side that didn't sloped outwards into an overhang) instead of taking the stairs she'd slipped down that morning; her barefoot flight down the narrow, winding steps cut into the side of the Eastcliffs was hardly better—she took entire, twisting half-flights in leaps, trusting to her memory of which steps were shaky and which had loosened and become unmortared over years of neglect—and she only avoided further injuries by the Starfather's own luck.

This late in the day, the majority of the city streets were deserted as most of the folk from the surrounding countryside would have set out to return home in the late afternoon. Rahelu stayed away from the main thoroughfares—they would be full of palanquins as House-born flitted from one society engagement to another. Instead, she stuck to a familiar path through the back streets and alleyways north of Market (where six times out of ten she would be allowed to pass through unaccosted) and wound her way northwest towards the Guild.

She was two blocks away when someone grabbed her by the elbow.

Gods, she should have paid attention to the growing chill of disapproval, but she'd stretched her resonance sense further than she normally would and had dismissed the sensation as part of nightfall.

"Nela! What have you been doing?"

"Not now, anma!"

She tried yanking her elbow back, but her mother had the vice-like grip of a fisherwoman born and raised in Anuvelomaz and shook her like one of their fishing nets, as if that could shake the words out of her.

“Running around the city half-dressed like a Free Territories savage! Where are your sandals? And your face—”

“Anma, later!” she said, fingers digging painfully into her own flesh as she tried to break her mother’s grip. “I promise, everything later. But if you don’t let me go *right now*, there won’t *be* a later.”

Rahelu struggled fruitlessly for another half a dozen heart beats, as her mother’s searching gaze bore into her eyes.

She hated dropping her resonance wards; hated how it made her vulnerable, how it peeled back the layers of her outer being until her inner inadequacies were completely exposed to the world, so that anyone who wanted to could read her like a book. Emotional control had never come easily to her, and as soon as she had mastered a passable ward, she had never gone without one.

Especially not at home. Her mother didn’t need resonance sense to see past every one of her pretenses; she simply *knew* how Rahelu thought and felt about *everything* and unerringly picked the most devastating way to dismantle her daughter.

She could see the calculation in her mother’s eyes—how she inventoried and weighed every aspect of Rahelu’s current condition: one filthy tunic, probably torn beyond repair (otherwise, why else would her daughter be clutching the stinking thing to her chest and running through the city clad only in her breastband and trousers?); sandals, missing, presumably broken or lost (that one, her mother would chalk up to plain carelessness); and the face, a score of scabbed over scratches on the left cheek, dried blood under both nostrils, a mottled bruise covering half her torso that would be difficult to see in the fading light, but not difficult enough for a fisher—and the final sum of that calculation.

Her mother wasn’t wrong; Rahelu *had* been rolling around in the sewers, fighting, but this time, it really wasn’t her fault.

Rahelu placed one hand on her chest and drew her palm across the gritty lines of ash and oil, collapsing her resonance ward. She felt her mother’s mental presence through their contact point of wrinkled hand to elbow, and she allowed it.

No, not just allowed it. *Encouraged* it. She recalled the entirety of her experience, right from the moment of Onneja’s silent farewell to the present; every single moment of hope, and anger, and frustration that she had kept dammed up inside; she let all of those roiling emotions flood out of her body and into the world.

Let them all know.

Nheras was probably off regaling her equally odious friends at some stuck up House dinner party with the story; more to the point, so was every other would-be Petitioner who had witnessed their brawl, so it wasn’t even like this was new news. Anyone who was anyone in Ennuost Yrg was already laughing at her comeuppance. How could a Lowdocks brat from Chanaz possibly think *any* House would accept her?

It took a moment for Rahelu to realize that she was free.

“Hurry!” her mother urged in a shaky voice. “It’s not quite full-dark yet; you might still make it.”

She ran.

* * *

Rahelu thrust her left arm through the gap of the closing Guild gate and screamed as the heavy oaken doors clamped down on her forearm. She swore up a storm in Aleznuaweithish and Chanazian, and threw in a few of the more unsavory expressions she’d picked up from the Free Territory sailors who caroused—often—in the Lowdocks for good measure. Her arm hurt like it had been run over by a fully loaded wagon, but it wasn’t broken and she hadn’t dropped her new petition.

Somebody on the other side swore back. Their vocabulary might have been limited to Aleznuaweithish, but their imagination was no less impressive.

“We’re closed,” said a different voice. It was low pitched, female and sounded familiar, though Rahelu couldn’t be sure of that.

“I don’t need to come in,” she called through the gap, waggling the scroll she clutched in her left hand. “I just needed to hand in my Petition.”

“Are you deaf? We’re closed!” growled the first voice. “Come back tomorrow.”

“She can’t do that, if that’s really her Petition,” said the second voice. “The Houses won’t recruit again until next year.”

“Then she can fuck off and try her luck then. Our instructions were clear: we sit on our asses, collect the scrolls, put up with the mewling kits until the sun goes down, and *read* these damned things. I’ve sat on my ass until I couldn’t feel my buttocks; there were scrolls enough to weigh down this stupid crate enough to give *you* trouble so that *I* can’t go and take the piss I’ve needed to for the last two spans. And we’re still supposed to read and sort through these bonfire starters—”

Rahelu guessed Guttermouth (unfair, considering what had come out of her mouth and what she had rolled around in, but she wasn’t feeling all that charitable at the moment) was quite capable of continuing his verbal diarrhea until the stars came out, but she wasn’t going to stand around with her arm stuck in the gate and subject herself to that torture.

“For the love of the four heavens, just take my petition. I got here before you closed the gate, didn’t I?”

“She has a point,” Patience said, raising her voice to be heard over Guttermouth’s ranting. “We were supposed to close the gate *after* sunset, not *by* sunset.” Something tapped her arm. Another scroll? “And her Petition did technically arrive in time, even if the rest of her didn’t.”

Guttermouth cut off his harangue and muttered something Rahelu couldn’t make out through the mostly closed gates.

"I'll concede that," Patience said. "But—" and Patience dropped her own voice so she couldn't be heard through the gates either.

Rahelu shifted from one foot to another impatiently, then bent and twisted her shoulders one way, then the other. The bones of her spine cracked as she arched her back, wincing as the motion pulled at her abused stomach muscles.

What were they discussing in there? She was tempted to give in to a quick Seeking, but these two would be Guild-trained Supplicants at the very least; they'd sense her in an instant.

"If you're going to stand there and debate procedure, could you at least release my arm and let me in while you do that?" she asked. "I'll be a good little kit and sit in the corner until you decide. Or I can help carry the crate so you can go take your piss."

"I'll piss on you, you little wiseass," Guttermouth said, but the gate opened all the same and Rahelu stumbled inside gratefully, rubbing at her arm.

The two mages on the other side of the gate wore the leather armbands of Dedicates; Guttermouth was an unfamiliar face but she recognized Patience on sight.

"Anenje!" she blurted out, before she remembered that Anenje had long abandoned her Chanazian name for one that was a close Aleznuaweithish approximation. "Sorry," she bowed twice and corrected herself, "I mean, Dedicate Tsenjhe. I apologize for my presumption."

"Look at you," Tsenjhe smiled at Rahelu. "You're all grown up. I didn't know you were here! Why didn't you look me up? Are your parents well?"

"They are," Rahelu said, feeling warm.

Tsenjhe recognized her! The Dedicate had asked after her parents! That was something Rahelu had not expected. The older girl—woman now, she amended—looked very different to the Anenje she remembered from her childhood, the very polished picture of a Dedicate: clad in immaculate pressed dark trousers and navy tunic with the sigil of House Isca emblazoned on her right breast in copper thread and the fine longsword on her hip; with freshly washed hair that had been combed smooth and fashionably braided instead of lank, greasy locks hanging loose about her shoulders. Every inch of her was as well groomed as Guttermouth—*more* well groomed, since he wore his expensive shirt of sky blue (woven from the finest wool, its buttons carved from mother-of-pearl) in a careless rumple.

Tsenjhe looked as if she had always belonged; had never spent a day—let alone the better part of five years—diving for lakegrass and shellfish, caked in mud, and covered in insect bites.

Even if Tsenjhe's smile was the same, the two of them stood so far apart now that Rahelu didn't know how to bridge the distance. Perhaps if she passed...but even then, as a Dedicate, Tsenjhe would outrank her for many years.

No, things were not the same. Could not be the same. So she left Tsenjhe's first question alone and said: "Thank you for asking. They'll be so pleased when I tell them you did. I..."

Rahelu trailed off at Guttermouth's glare, then dropped to the ground with alacrity as she remembered her place. "Honored Dedicate, I am shamed. Please forgive me, I beg you."

She prayed—she hoped—that she wouldn't get her second beating of the day but she braced herself anyway, for the inevitable kick in her ribs (*the left side, please let it be my left side*) or her head, if Guttermouth felt like he had been sufficiently disrespected. A certain amount of initiative was tolerated in Aleznuaweite—admired even, if the initiative led to healthy profits—but disrespect was not.

Strict adherence to the hierarchy ordered by Exalted Dominances—monarchs of Aleznuaweite—throughout the ages was what had made the nation into the dominant trading power in all the world. That discipline meant every citizen understood their purpose in service to the Dominion and allowed Aleznuaweite to prosper. And any act or speech that had even the tiniest sniff of rebellion (however remote and whatever the intention) was punished swiftly.

The kick she was expecting never came. She dared lift her head a fraction off the ground to peek through her hair: instead of looming over her, Guttermouth had stalked off to one corner of the courtyard to...

Oh. OH.

Guttermouth might dress like a House-born but he certainly didn't act like one. Rahelu got up and dusted herself off, straightening out the slight crumples in her rolled up scroll. "He really is very nice, isn't he?"

"His bark is a lot worse than his bite."

"Can he do that? In the Guild courtyard, no less?"

"Keshwar can pretty much do whatever he likes."

She glanced at the crate resting on the flagstones beside Tsenjhe. It was packed so full of Petitions that the lid couldn't be jammed shut. "You really have to sort through all of this tonight?"

Tsenjhe shrugged. "It's not as hard as you think. The sponsored Petitions, those that we can verify are genuine, go in one pile; the rest—"

"—go into the bonfire," Guttermouth said, jerking one thumb in the direction of the fire pit that stood in the middle of the courtyard as he adjusted his trousers. "Don't be so shocked, kit. There're at least five hundred Petitions and limited places for Petitioners. No House will waste time and resources on an unsponsored Petition; it's a poor return on investment."

Rahelu's heart stopped for a beat.

It had all been for nothing then. Leaving Chanaz, five years struggling through her Guild training, fighting with Nheras—all pointless. Even if Tsenjhe and Guttermouth were willing to accept her Petition on a technicality, they would have burned it straight away anyway.

She should have stayed at the market to sell fish with her mother.

“I...I’m sorry for disturbing you, Dedicates,” she said. Her voice sounded strange to her ears; it seemed to come from so far away that it was like someone else’s voice altogether. “I...thank you for your kindness.” Rahelu looked at the scroll in her hand, unsure what she should do with it now. She didn’t want to take it home; the instant her mother saw it, she would know Rahelu had failed.

She could leave it here to burn, she supposed.

That thought *hurt*, though. Nheras and the others had laughed at it, but she had paid in blood and sweat for her Petition. She doubted anyone else whose scroll sat piled in the crate before her—sponsors or not—could say the same.

She kept the scroll and turned to face the gate; it was all she could do to leave at a measured walk instead of breaking into a run. She caught another quick murmured exchange between Tsenjhe and Guttermouth before a light smacking sound as one of them cuffed the other, then footsteps sounded behind her—from the cadence, it just *had* to be Tsenjhe—and somebody turned her around and took the scroll from her hands.

“Here,” Tsenjhe said, as she laid an arm around Rahelu’s bare shoulders, as if they were children again, and walked her back towards Guttermouth and the crate. “Why don’t you take a seat,” she nodded to the bursting crate, “while we take a quick look at your Petition?”

Numbed, Rahelu did as she was told and perched on top of the lid, holding her bundled tunic in her lap. Anenje, wonderful Anenje, was being kind but Rahelu held no illusions about the outcome.

“Here,” Guttermouth said with a frown in his voice. “What’s this?” The tap of a blunt finger against unrolled parchment. “Where’s the seal of authenticity from the Guild?”

Rahelu looked up to see him grabbing up another scroll—one that had fallen out of the crate—and rubbing its parchment suspiciously between his fingers.

“This isn’t a genuine Petition,” he said slowly, as he compared the feel of the two parchments. “The script is good, a perfect copy even, right down to the flaws in the imprint of the Guild seal.”

He handed off the two scrolls to Tsenjhe, who stared down at her Petition, then switched his scrutiny to Rahelu herself, pinning her in place with his eyes. “Where did you get this forgery?”

“It’s not a forgery!” she said. “It’s—fine, it’s sort of a forgery but it’s not what you think.”

“You admit it then,” he said. “I’m impressed; if I had been more distracted, I wouldn’t have noticed. But how?” he asked. “How did you do this?”

“I had a Petition,” Rahelu said, then continued in a rush before he could repeat all those accusations about forgery. “A *real* one. With a genuine Guild seal of authenticity.” She fished the torn fragments out of her coarse bundle and held them out for him. “And *this* happened. I didn’t have time to get another one.”

Or the coin. Somehow, it always came back to having enough fucking coin.

“You were the commotion this morning?” Tsenjhe asked.

Rahelu nodded.

“Document reconstruction is advanced Evocation,” Guttermouth said. “Even if we were to believe you—which I don’t, by the way—your Guild rating says you don’t have the ability to do it.”

“Use a direct Seeking then,” she challenged him. “Go ahead. You’re about to turn me in as a criminal anyway.”

“I’m not going to string a little kit like you up on charges of forgery for this,” Guttermouth said. “What do you take me for?”

Rahelu blinked. “You aren’t?”

“Gods, no. Do you have any idea how many idiots try to forge seals from sponsors? Some of them even manage to fake the proper resonances quite convincingly. If I had to arrest every one of those dimwits, I’d not have a moment to myself until the end of harvest.”

“Enough, you two!” Tsenjhe reached around Guttermouth’s shoulder and poked at the fragments in his hand. “Rahelu, if you really can do document reconstruction—”

“I can’t!”

“—or something like it, then I’ll let you in on a little secret. The Guild seal is special; it remembers what it is, even if it’s destroyed. Anyone who’s skilled enough in Evocation to reconstruct a document can reconstruct a genuine Guild seal.”

Guttermouth nodded. “You reconstruct that seal properly, I’ll sponsor you myself.”

Rahelu stared, open-mouthed, and glanced at his armband. “But I’m a nobody and you’re, you’re—” she swallowed, hard. “—you’re House Ideth.”

One of the four Major Houses. First and foremost among them, depending on who you asked.

He shrugged. “What of it? House Ideth values talent over bloodlines.”

While the Ideth trainees had stood out to Rahelu by virtue of being the only one who were polite and courteous to her, that didn’t mean anything. Guttermouth had to be joking.

“Keshwar’s mother has a long-standing policy of offering recruitment bonuses to anyone who discovers new talent.”

His mother? What did his mother have to do with anything?

“And,” Tsenjhe continued, “Atriarch Ideth places a high value on her son’s advice.”

Her head spun. *Guttermouth* was the son of Atriarch Ideth? “You pissed in a corner of the courtyard. You said—” and she racked her brains for a moment, then repeated his Aleznuaweithish curses back, word for word, complete with his exact inflection and tone of voice. “I’ve been calling you ‘Guttermouth’ in my head the whole time.”

Tsenjhe guffawed and slapped her thigh. “That’s you alright.” She held out Rahelu’s rewritten Petition to him as she turned to throw the other scroll. It flipped over end to end as it sailed through the air and landed inside the fire pit with a resounding *clang*.

Rahelu winced.

“Thanks, Tsen.” Keshwar put on a wounded look as he took the rerolled parchment back from Tsenjhe. “See if I buy you dinner again.”

Rahelu blinked and looked again: how had she missed the way the two of them stood, their bodies angled towards each other, the way Keshwar’s eyes lingered on Tsenjhe’s face?

Suddenly, the comments from Kiran and Nheras earlier in the day were making a lot more sense.

A roll of parchment tapped her impatiently on one shoulder. “Well, kit? Can you do it or not?”

Rahelu scooped up the fragments of her old Petition and breathed deeply. It was harder to focus without the rhythmic song of the waves; harder to willingly conjure up her memory of the morning’s fiasco. She sweated, struggling to pull the whole vision together again in her mind’s eye, before she realized she was doing this the stupid way.

She didn’t need all of the Petition this time; just the seal. And Tsenjhe had said that the Guild seal remembered itself.

Focusing her mind through her small training crystal (warm against her chilled fingers), she called to the Guild seal itself— unbroken crystal to crystal dust mixed with fine violet resonance ink—and rode the resonance echoes back in time to the last moment the seal was whole.

Her resonance crystal grew unbearably hot as the fragmented pieces of the Guild seal in her hand flew up and out of her hand, then melded themselves back into a seamless bit of parchment.

A heartbeat later, she cried out as the training crystal on her hand exploded, leaving a ring of scorched skin around her finger (but the finger itself, thank gods, was still attached to her hand).

“Great gods of Heaven, Fortune and Judgement,” swore Keshwar, as he reached out to take the circle of reconstructed parchment from her hand and touch the repaired Guild seal: it shimmered under his finger, proof of its authenticity.

Tsenjhe smiled and patted Rahelu’s sore arm. “You may have grown but you haven’t changed one bit. Come lean on me; let’s get you home.”