

Welcome to the first stage of the Beta draft! After listening to feedback on the first arc of the Alpha draft, I've decided to rewrite a fairly significant portion of the beginning in Gem. Prepare yourself for more of the city and more of Djali, who was pretty popular during initial feedback!

RATING: PG

- Mature Themes

The gods took no more notice than usual on the day that a slave named Kalara was born in the dusty slums of a basement in the city of Gem. The cycle of a soul began anew, as it always did, the web of destiny continued as usual without tangles, the weavers pleased with their work. The sun moved overhead, Sol Invictus forever journeying on his sure path across the skies of Creation. If he noticed her then, he made no motions to show it. Her fate seemed settled the day she was born to a pair of slaves in an underground tenement of Gem.

If she had a last name when she was born, she would never learn it. The most the child would learn from her real parents was the melody of a lullaby sang softly in Flametongue.

Shiyan, shiyan, teyah. Sleep, sleep, my child, for the moon will always set and the sun will always rise.

The Lady Moon will spread thy dreams across the sky.

Shiyan, shiyan, teyah. Sleep, sleep, my child.

For thy days require rest.

The Lord Sun rises on those truly blessed.

Only the melody would remain in her mind, a final memento of parents Kalara would never know. She hummed it to herself as she watched the priests cover their sunken faces with black veils, muttering the prayers of Rest and Succor for their spirits. In time, she would remember only those black, motionless veils instead of her parents' faces.

"No tears, sweet girl." Auntie Niyan wrapped a shawl around Kalara's shoulders and pulled her close, her dark eyes sparkling with reverence. "They have walked this path and will rise again on another. The Road to the Dragons awaits. They are free now to continue their journey to perfection." Auntie smiled warmly, wrinkles gathering below her eyes on her otherwise smooth face. She smiled even as the priests bowed and hurried to the next residence where more corpses surely waited. The wagons of the corpse patrols would come by later to collect them, their hauls only minimally larger than the bodies they usually had to clear in summer when the heat of Gem was at its most punishing.

However, to a child only a few years old, all Kalara knew was the comforting feel of Auntie Niyan's shawl around her shoulders. She had come to their family in a time of dire need, the girl's parents desperate to find a place for their child away from the reach of the Blue Death. Auntie swooped in as the neighborhood good samaritan giving what children she could sanctuary from infection.

Auntie's compassionate, but insistent grip led Kalara away from the home where she had spent her short life, away from the black veils of her parents. Auntie led her to a house deeper in the shade of the lava tube, a house filled with children like herself, orphans left in the wake of the plague.

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When she was older, Kalara would remember Auntie Niyan as her first mentor in 'successful' business ventures, for Auntie was no fool. Unlike others who fled the plague, Auntie smelled the opportunity from far away as a carrion raiton smells the dead. While other Guild members in Gem dabbled primarily in the business of mercenaries, Auntie Niyan secured her specialty in a different kind of trade. Each child in her care earned her a stipend from the Despot's coffer. A smart businesswoman could stretch that if she thinned the soup.

More industrious still, she would ply food and trinkets from the local merchants with her angelic nature, for who wouldn't want to help out good, kindly Auntie who cared for so many who weren't her own? Auntie Sweets, they called her, for she always had pockets of sweetmeats for the children. She kept her charges complacent with the promise of candies every now and then, but only if they were good, if they did what she said and behaved.

Auntie Niyan would smile even as she branded each of them high on the forearm and comforted them with sugared promises. Her kindly middle-aged features belied the strength of her firm, gaunt fingers as she held their wrists and pressed the small round bit of hot metal to their flesh. It was only a little thing and then one got a full belly of candies, a butt of bread, and a bit of meat for dinner. Their happy bellies were a small price to pay to carry the mark of the Guild, a mark of Niyan's own design, for the rest of their lives. All would know them as her sweet children, quality slaves hand-raised in gentleness and primed for compliance and malleability.

Like all the others, Kalara endured the mark without question, for Auntie Niyan was all she knew and the smell of a rare, hearty dinner was too tempting for a child to pass up.

Thusly did Kalara's early years pass until, one day, she dared to ask what became of her older brothers and sisters. Auntie only smiled sweetly, as she always did, distracting Kalara by

requesting she braid her hair as she often liked before bedtime. She sent Kalara to bed that night with warm meat pie and the promise of answers on the morrow.

The next day, she took Kalara to the market with her and sold her to her first master - Spinel Lakni, a retainer of House Iblan.

Kalara would never forget Auntie's parting words. Even as she spoke them, Auntie Niyan petted her hair affectionately and spoke truth. "This is your path, my sweet girl. You are a slave and you must work hard."

Kalara could only stare on as the world around her moved on without acknowledgment or care of her fortune.

"You will do for this good man what he says. Be diligent, be obedient." She cupped the girl's chin in her hands, her heart true in her advice to her young charge. "The world will never be what you want of it in this life. Walk your path well and the next life will be kinder." Auntie gave her one last look, her gaze searching Kalara's face as if she were well and truly a proud parent about to send her child off to her first day of school. For her part, Auntie tried to make sure she was not selling her sweet children to those who were overly cruel.

Somewhere deep down, Kalara knew, had always known. She had always been too smart to accept the lies about the older children that Auntie always told them. The truth felt like a stone in her stomach, a bitter truth which had been lodged there for a long time now. She watched with tearless eyes as Auntie Niyan completed her transaction, setting the scroll of paper that represented Kalara's contract into the calloused palm of Spinel.

Auntie haggled for a discount on account of the other mouths she had to feed and their long working relationship, even as Kalara watched on in numb obedience. Auntie had apparently been selling children to the same vendor for a long time. The miner turned overseer didn't have a fine eye for noticing the forgeries she had made of the childrens' ownership papers, or he simply didn't care as long as the papers effectively passed an audit, which they did.

Kalara, whose surname she had never learned from her ailing parents, became documented on her contract as a surname-less child, her name stripped from her along with her past. But such was a small crime in comparison to letting the poor girl die along with her parents or in the streets according to good Auntie Niyan.

But what did a slave need with such distractions? Good Auntie bid farewell to her darling 'daughter' and set back towards home with one less mouth to feed, her soul not made at all heavy by her small lies for greater good and profit, for her financial success meant she could harbor more children safely for a time before their little worlds could be ruined by the harsh reality around them.

Spinel Lakni barely acknowledged Kalara's presence as she stared on at him full of uncertainty. He didn't even bother to look at her, the man still reading his work orders as he spoke his usual orientation speech with the ease of monotonous repetition. His skin was darker than hers, his gold ear cuffs and rings shining in the softly lit darkness of the Sunken Bazaar, such finery as befitting a retainer of House Iblan, the famed goldsmiths of Gem. Though he had a roughness to him, having once been a mining slave, himself, before he'd struck gold in his 35th year of service.

"Work is sunup to sundown. Breaks for meals and prayers. Don't be late or you won't eat. Don't steal or I'll have your fingers, girl." He showed no emotion save certainty as he stated the dire consequences of theft. At a nod, a boy not too much older than her stepped from the back of the stall where he'd been unloading boxes of ore. He looked her up and down before smiling wide, the dust and dirt that clung to him making his teeth gleam like pearls against the rest of him.

"Well, you better come with me, then!" The grimy boy dared to make fun of the overseer. "He gets grumpy before lunch!"

"None of your funny business, boy!" The distracted Spinel grunted in response and continued his work without even turning his head to them. "I trust you'll get her settled in by next shift."

The filthy boy strode through the tunnels with long steps, bouncing along through the softly lit shafts with the familiarity of one who'd made the trip a thousand times. Kalara followed behind in solemn silence, only making noise when she stumbled in a shadowed area neglected by the mirrors and glowstones.

"Tsk. You will learn!" She heard him speak nearby, the boy completely comfortable in the darkness.

She felt his hand take hers and found herself led along until they reached a modest lava tube subdivided by stalagmites and thick canvas curtains supported by strings anchored into the adjacent cave walls. Each compartment had a small sack filled with cotton to act as a bed and a small box for storing equipment and clothing.

"Welcome to my humble abode!" The boy spread his arms wide and puffed his chest as if he were showing her the most opulent parlor of the Red Stone quarter. He acted as if the entirety of the apartments all belonged to him, even when it was obvious that they didn't. Spurred by his enthusiasm, Kalara looked over the drab space attempting to find some wonder in it, but failed miserably.

She soon found the boy's face in front of hers mimicking her own stern expression. "Serious Girl! Do you have a name or should I call you Queen of Scraps?"

Taken aback for a moment by his playful chiding, Kalara's grimaced deepened. "It's Kalara." She huffed at him, crossing her arms to hide her discomfort. "Filthy Boy! Do you have a name? What on earth is a Scrap, anyways?"

"It's Djali!" He hopped back a step and held out his dirt-covered hand to her. Kalara stared at it for a moment before taking it with some hesitation. Djali shook her hand once with a strong jerk. "And a Scrap is what you are now!"

Kalara looked unsatisfied with his explanation.

"Trust me, Serious Girl..." He put his hands on his waist, proud in his role as orientation giver. "There are worse things to be in Gem!"