

Ghani wiped the grimy melange of dust and sweat from her forehead, then warily ran her free hand through the thick, coppery-red fur of the great sand impala that stood before her. She felt childish curiosity and primal fear wash over her in equal measure. The reality of what she was about to do was finally setting in. *How in Dyah am I going to ride this thing*, she thought, gazing up at the impala's hulking form.

A deep thrum reverberated in the air—the massive bronze preparation bell had been rung, beckoning the racers to their starting marks. She'd arrived at the track less than an hour before to place a few bets. That swampshit of a bookie had told her she was too late for that, but he was in need of another jockey.

"It's a bit of an open secret," Dremmin had said with no shortage of pride in his voice. He'd leaned in close, the faded fabric of his cotton doublet smelling of cheap wine. "I don't just take bets. I sponsor jockeys as well...Oh no, the coordinators don't mind—as long as their pockets are lined there's no issue."

Having precious few options she'd agreed to the arrangement. If by some miracle she managed to place, the prize money would be split between them, with more than two-thirds of it going to the bookie. Unfair by any measure, but she hadn't exactly been negotiating from a strong position.

Soon after she had overheard him telling another gambler—a remarkably drunken young pluma with brown feathers and a hooked, white beak—that she was, in fact, a renowned impala jockey in Verell, a nation on another continent far to the southwest. "She's a shoo-in!" he'd told him, "Her odds are very favorable. Since she's entirely unknown in Kidogh no one thinks she stands a chance. It's your lucky day!" The object of the bookie's attention had been surrounded by a small group of other pluma men his age, who spurred him on. "Take the bet Muhil!" one had shouted. Dremmin's jowls had shook as he'd nodded his head in passionate agreement.

She'd then watched the one named Muhil dig into his pockets and fish out what appeared to be the last bit of his money, based on how long it had taken him to find it.

So even if she lost—which she surely would—Dremmin would profit, provided she could hold on. Her first several practice attempts in the staging area had only earned her dust and bruises. If she was unseated during the race the bets would be nullified and neither she nor the bookie would see a single junah.

She strode as confidently as she could with Jihal—the sand impala that the bookie had so generously loaned her—from the beast pens to the starting line. As she walked the stench of animal refuse and sweat gave way to the fresh, open air and boisterous clamor of the stadium floor. Enormous multicolored canvas sheets overlapped above to form a sort of makeshift roof, providing ample shade to competitor and spectator alike. She moved into position behind a starting gate near the middle of the pack, flimsy wooden boards serving to separate each competitor and prevent them from moving forward onto the track before the race began.

She stuck one foot into a stirrup and swung her other leg over Jihal, as she'd been instructed by the stable hand, trying desperately to ignore both the hole in her left boot and the looming presence of the enormous audience. Almost as soon as she had settled into her saddle, a sharp crack emanated from the crowd-side of the starting line and the wooden barrier in front of Jihal and the other impala dropped open with a thunk. Jihal's hooves dug into the dirt and kicked hard, sending them both barreling down the first straightaway of the elliptical track. She felt herself starting to slip, but forced her feet down hard into the stirrups and gripped the base of Jihal's curved horns with all the strength she could muster.

The racers skirted the first bend in a loose pack, riders and beasts struggling for ideal positions. As they entered the next straightaway she saw a rider up ahead of her—a black-furred felesian in a red jerkin—lift his left leg and strike the rider next to him with a vicious kick. She thought she caught a flash of silver as the felesian brought his leg back down and placed his foot in a stirrup. The rider—a human with a blue scarf wrapped tightly around his neck—was knocked off balance and clutched at his side, which forced him to slow and drop behind her. The three riders in front of her then spread out in an apparently defensive maneuver. In doing so they each slowed their pace just slightly, and Ghani felt her body begin to settle into a tenuous rhythm with Jihal as they rounded the second corner.

Dust and sand assaulted her eyes as she continued to gain ground on the leading pack of riders. She pulled Jihal further inside the curve then brought her heels in against him, beckoning him to run harder. Jihal surged forward, and the leading pack of three became four. The rider just ahead of her suddenly slowed, and she swerved away from the wall to avoid a collision. After righting Jihal she found herself neck and neck with the felesian in red. She looked to her right and met his eyes, wide and white with thin, black pupils.

Suddenly pain exploded in her left shoulder and she cried out. Glancing to her left she saw the blue-scarfed human lower his foot back into a stirrup. There had been a thin sliver of sharpened metal on the bottom of his boot. Ghani cursed, then reflexively reached for her shoulder with her right hand as he passed by between her and the inside wall of the track.

The motion forced her other hand, which remained on Jihal's left horn, down and left, turning her mount toward the wall. She felt the familiar warmth of fresh blood running through the fingers of her right hand, then Jihal slammed into the inside wall. The impact launched Ghani off of her mount, flipping her end over end into the central greenway of the stadium. She landed hard, felt her weight knock the air out of her lungs, then rolled several times before coming to a stop in a jumbled heap. She could make out the stands filled with throngs of people, but they all seemed to hang upside down. Then her vision went dark.

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Ghani could just barely make out the blurry form of a stout human standing over her. She blinked slowly, trying to clear her vision. Her hearing had returned before her vision, and she'd

heard him utter several dozen expletives as he approached, some in Plumerr, others in Dera, some in a language she had never heard before.

“You..! You imbecile! You were supposed to lose anyway, why in the name of Deran’s holies did you have to try so hard!”

Nearly every major blood vessel in his head and neck appeared to bulge at once. He stomped his feet on the grass of the greenway like an ill-tempered child, and Ghani noticed the raucous noise of the crowd had diminished. The race was over.

She hadn’t finished.

“Do you have any idea how many junahs I had to pay to outfit that impala? Now I get nothing!”

Ghani managed to sit up, then felt around her body for any major injuries. She found her arms and legs intact, though at least two of her ribs appeared to be broken and her head was full of fog. She rubbed her forehead and swallowed her pride, “Dremmin, I can fix this. Just...”

“You’re going to pay me back every bit of the coin I missed out on today loach! With interest!”

*Ugh, just what I need. More creditors,* Ghani thought, then ran her hand over her ribs again until she felt a sharp pain. *That’s three then.* “I’ll pay you back Drem, I promise.”

It took considerable effort and a fair amount of pain, but she managed to stumble to her feet. “Just give me a few days, I’ll come up with something,” she said. She caught sight of Jihal off to her left, bent over chewing on the fresh grass of the greenway. He appeared unharmed.

Dremmin had grown redder in the face than any human Ghani had ever seen, his skin almost resembling that of a dyaha. All it was missing was an oily, amphibious sheen. He was incredibly sweaty though, which proved a convincing facsimile. “Oh, you had better come up with something!” he said. “You don’t want to know what I do to people who owe me a debt!”

*Don’t tell me,* she thought, *you sit on them.* She pressed her thumb and forefinger to her temples, trying to subdue the throbbing in her skull. “Of course Drem, my good man, just give me a day, uh... two at most. I’ll figure something out.”

Dremmin stormed off, grumbling more curses as he went.

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