

For a moment, her aura trembled, then Rahelu got a hold of herself. *I rule my emotions*, she repeated to herself mentally. *My emotions do not rule me*.

Especially not inside in a city with the Guild's primary headquarters and their vigilant Seekers. She shook away her thoughts, did her best to Project a thin veneer of Onneja's grey-blue calm and set off in the direction of the XXX.

When she arrived, a full span later, her heart sank as she took in the line of would-be petitioners stretching out the front gate, winding down past XXX and across XXX. It would be two spans, maybe more, before her turn. She dragged her feet over to join the queue, then passed the time balancing on one sandalled foot, idly scratching incomplete resonance wards into the dusty ground with the toe of her other sandal.

"Look at what the tide dragged in," sneered a reedy, nasal voice Rahelu would honestly rather not recognize at all. "What're you doing here, stinking up the place with fish guts?"

Nheras Ilyn was the last person on the entire Ngutoccai continent that Rahelu wanted to see, ever. The taller, older girl swaggered closer, her jewelled armbands and earrings jangling and her cloud of tight brown curls bouncing with every step. Trailing in her wake, like two starving alley mutts were XXX and XXX. All of them wore a small blue resonance crystal on a silver chain around their necks.

Rahelu weighed her options. If she ignored them, Nheras was sure to get in her face because Nheras never took well to being ignored. Being the scion of a minor House on the rise tended to have that effect. If she gave insult for insult, Nheras would take it as an act of provocation (never mind that she'd done the insulting first) and none of them would leave with their dignity intact.

"Nheras," she replied, Projecting her thin veneer of blue-grey calm for all she was worth. "XXX. XXX."

Nheras waved off the comment, taking the congratulations as her due. "I asked you a question, fish guts. When a House speaks, you answer. Why are you here instead of the Lowdocks?"

Rahelu straightened up, planting both feet wide and clasping her hands behind her back, one hand brushing against the rolled up petition in her waistband. "I'm waiting."

"In the line for Petitioners?" Nheras arched one elegantly plucked brow. Gold and amethyst earrings, wrought in the sign of House Ilyn, chimed as she shook her head. "You don't belong here. Go back to the gutters, or better yet, to Chanaz. Don't shame the Guild; no House will take you."

"House Isca took Tsenjhe. She's a Dedicate now."

"House Isca is barely a House." Nheras's aura rippled, shimmering with orange-amusement as her two followers snorted outright. "Still, I suppose I could do them a small favour." She held her right hand and wiggled a set of perfectly painted nails in demand.

Rahelu squashed the dull red anger-spear before it could burst through her own aura, then composed her face into a blank mask. "I am sure House Isca appreciates the favour of a scion from another minor House."

XXX. What had possessed her to say that? Stupid, stupid, stupid! Maybe Nheras wouldn't detect the barb. The older girl had always succeeded in their Guild lessons by virtue of sheer XXX.

"Fine then," Nheras pursed her lips. "Remember that I asked nicely first."

She jerked her head towards Rahelu and her two cronies sprang into motion.

Pinned between a wall on her left, a XXX to her right with would-be petitioners in front and behind, Rahelu had no choice. She darted out of the line and ran for the gate, ignoring the shouts of the people she jostled out of her way. She dashed past the XXX where the line looped around the block, cut through an alleyway between XXX and XXX, nearly strangling herself in her haste as she ducked past a hanging clothesline. Behind her, she could hear the light-footed slaps of booted feet on cobblestone and she cursed her own flimsy sandals which were a hazard all on their own.

She only had to stay ahead for three more blocks. Once she was past the gate and inside the courtyard, she'd be safe. Nheras wouldn't dare try anything under the watchful eyes of the Guild XXX. She'd lost her place in line and would have to wait until the line grew short enough to rejoin while inside the Guild. It would cost the entire day but she wouldn't lose her petition.

Rahelu ducked around another corner, then leapt, cat-footed, up a stack of XXX and swung herself over the gutter and onto the rooftops. Shucking her sandals for better grip, she crouched down close to the roof tiles to keep her profile low and XXX to the next house over.

She paused for a moment, in the shelter of a chimney that smelled of XXX, and closed her eyes for a quick Seeking. The furore back at the line had settled down into a low rumble of general irritation and impatience, a faint green in her aura sight. A tall figure, haloed in lines of gold over a darker green, was stalking away towards the gate, two streets over. Nheras herself, probably.

Figures. Why chase Rahelu down herself when she could get her minions to do it? Said minions had lost Rahelu's trail and were milling around XXX, searching the area. Judging by the swirling grey confusion in their auras, they wouldn't be catching up to her any time soon. Thank XXX that they didn't think to look up.

Rahelu opened her eyes again but clung to her Seeking, eyes watering, as she tried to maintain her focus. Any Guild-trained mage could, of course, maintain a visualisation of their resonance sense over the material world.

Usually though, they were doing so in the controlled environs of a dedicated meditation chamber, not while trying to climb over five more roof tops and drop down two stories while staying ahead of Nheras Ilyn's measured strides towards the Guild gates.

Despite her caution, Rahelu landed heavily, rolling to take the brunt of her fall on one shoulder and knocking into XXX. She groaned, winded, as XXX cascaded to the ground around her and didn't even bother to cover her face with her arms.

Right on cue, Nheras swanned around the corner and came to stand over her. Rahelu tried to stand, but Nheras *tsked* and planted a booted foot in her stomach.

The trademark Ilyn smirk flashed across the taller girl's face as she tapped one painted fingernail thoughtfully against a faintly rouged cheek. "A better chase than I expected, fish guts, but still sloppy." She extended her right hand again. "Give me your petition. Now."

Rahelu coughed and prepared to spit out a mouthful of bile onto the expensive lambskin boot digging into her midsection. As she did, Nheras casually ground the toe of her steel-capped boot into Rahelu's belly and she wheezed. The whole mess ended up dribbling down her own chin instead.

The other girl released her planted foot, only to follow it up with a light stomp. Rahelu screamed and curled up on her right side in pain.

Ignoring the pain, she scrabbled around for something—anything!—but her left hand came up empty.

Her right hand, though. Her right hand dug around in the open sewer and came up with gold.

Of a sort. Nheras's eyes widened at the sight of Rahelu's aura flickering the queasy brown-green of disgust as she lobbed a handful of squelchy, stinking sewer dung straight into Nheras's open mouth.

It turns out that wealthy scions of the exalted Houses retched just as noisily as a Lowdocks fisher's brat from the back of nowhere in Chanaz. Between the shrill screams of outrage, spluttered death threats and wails of distress, Nheras sounded like three revenant shades from XXX.

To Rahelu, it was the sweetest music she had ever heard.

And the gate—oh, the gate!—it was only twenty strides away, just across XXX. She staggered to her feet and stumbled out of the alleyway as her body nearly

revolted, protesting the movement while her intestines felt like Nheras had taken a warhammer to them instead of her boots.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!” someone shouted as she cut through in the wake of a palanquin (she wasn’t so far gone as to dare cut in *front* of a palanquin!), “what do you—” but the rest of the words were lost to the roar of blood in her ears and the more ominous sound of booted feet close behind her.

She tried to hurry, thigh muscles burning, dodging a XXX loaded with two full pails of water, knocking a XXX onto his rear, bowing every which way in apology as she ran to the gate as if her life depended on it.

One glance back at Nheras’s rage-filled eyes and Rahelu decided her life probably did depend on it. She stretched her legs, tried to force her breath into the measured breathing of Onneja’s morning meditation and swung her arms more quickly, as if by moving her arms faster, she could move faster too.

“Excuse me!” she yelled at the startled would-be petitioners clustered around the entrance. “Please, excuse me! Coming through!”

“A bounty!” Nheras shrieked from behind. “A bounty! House Ilyn will pay a bounty of XXX to anyone who apprehends this XXX. I will have her head to satisfy my honor!”

Oh no. No.

Nonononono. She was *so close*. The gate was *right there*! But Nheras’s words had already sparked a conflagration of purple-greed that rippled through the comingled aura of the crowd. Her peers, her *future* peers, closed ranks against her and left no gap for her to pass.

Before she could even think of another place to run to, another escape route, Nheras caught up. All pretense of House loftiness had vanished; the taller girl tackled her to the ground. Bits of gravel cut into her cheek as sharp nails dug into her back to snatch away her petition.

Her petition. Her only ticket to a better life for her family.

She kept her forehead on the ground as she shuffled around, smearing road dust and gravel into the cuts on her face, and abased herself in front of a pair of lambskin boots. One of them, she noted with dim satisfaction (that she immediately quashed for fear it would show in her aura), was caked with filth.

“Give it back, Nheras,” she whimpered. “Please. I beg of you.”

There was a crackle of parchment unrolling.

“Please, Nheras,” she said again. “I will owe you a favor. One favor, with no conditions. Just give me back my petition.”

“Can a fish grant a favor?” came the derisive retort.

Rahelu cringed closer to the ground as those lambskin boots walked around her in a deliberate circle.

“I can’t believe you wasted ink on this petition. I knew you were a terrible mage but this? This is just embarrassing.”

Rahelu’s hopes shriveled up and died, as Nheras read out her entire petition to peals of laughter from the watching crowd. She remained face down in her obeisance, willing herself not to cry, knowing it was bad enough that everyone watching could see that she desperately wanted to anyway, just by looking at her aura.

“You don’t belong here,” Nheras said as she finished her mocking recitation.

The sound of valuable parchment tearing.

Again.

And again.

And again, until the small ivory pieces of Rahelu’s dreams fluttered down around her head, and she was five years old all over again, lost in the first snows of XXX.

“Go back to Chanaz, fish guts,” Nheras said as she wiped her filthy boot on Rahelu’s only tunic. “And you—yes, you, with the braids—go fetch me a washbasin with scented water, fresh towels and a change of clothes. Now!”