

The Alpha's Harem

Chapter 2. Sisters

"What is your name?" Cerese decided to break the silence as the maid led her back into the harem's part of the palace. "Nihan, Moon Lady Cerese," the girl answered respectfully, yet unenthusiastically. "How— do you know my name?" If Cerese remembered right, the High King didn't introduce them. "It's my job to know these things, Moon Lady." The girl's lips curled ever so slightly. "Word reached me of a night-time guest the Serasker personally escorted to the King. Now I was asked to prepare your chambers and, at the same time, send Elowen Sorensen home. Plus, I was told to let you two say your goodbyes. That means that you are Cerese Sorensen, Lady Elowen's sister. Considering we were expecting you in the first place, I am guessing your stepmother decided to try her luck and sneak her own daughter into the harem. She is lucky that the King lets her leave after such a deception and that he did not behead you both." "Lucky indeed." Cerese gave a strained little chuckle. "How does a maid get that much information in such a short time?" The girl's expression soured slightly. "I am not a maid. I am a Serfina. That's very different and well above the maids, no matter their rank. "I've spent months getting ready for the new arrivals, and have pored over all your bloodlines and customs as thoroughly as I could." "Impressive!" Cerese nodded. There was still the matter of the tattoos on her face, but that was better left for another time. Such markings were usually given to the lowest slaves, yet it seemed Nihan had clawed her way out of that nightmare and made a place for herself. "I still have a lot to learn about this place. The summons came so suddenly, none of us was ready." "Yes, your sister seemed—" Nihan mused, "lost." "She is too young for all this." "Some girls get here way younger," Serfina shot back with a chuckle. "They don't serve the Shahanshah, of course, but still." "So, what does a Serfina do?" Cerese decided to change the topic. Just thinking about Elowen serving the usurper High King made her shiver. "We ensure the harem runs smoothly. The lower-ranked guards and all the maids obey us, but if something goes wrong—" "Then you are the ones who pay the price." Cerese nodded, a proud smile playing on her lips. "Indeed, it falls to us to see that nothing goes amiss. The order in the harem is our responsibility as well, entrusted to us by the Valide Luna, so, Moon Lady, do not cause me any trouble, please." "I will do my best," Cerese lied. It would be hard to survive here by being obedient, but she had to make friends as well. They went up the stairs to the second floor and only now had Cerese noticed

that a woman with light blonde hair plaited tightly up was waiting for them by the balcony rails. Her dress was made out of expensive fabric, but it was similar to what Nihan wore, so she couldn't have been a concubine. The suspicion confirmed itself when they got closer and Cerese caught a gleam of gold across her face. A curtain of delicate chains, threaded with small gems, spilt down one side of her features like liquid sunlight, covering one of her eyes entirely. Only when her gaze lingered did Cerese realise— beneath the drape of ornaments lay a golden eyepatch, crafted to look like jewellery, yet hiding the hollow area where one eye was probably missing. Cerese felt a shiver run down her spine. Everybody knew what was happening in the palace just a couple of years ago. The rumours filled the thirteen kingdoms, and even Nytherys archipelago was no exception. “Deniz?” Nihan did not seem to be startled by the sudden meeting. “What did you forget here at this time of night?” “I am a Serfina too,” the blonde woman scowled, her studying gaze piercing Cerese. “Why did you bring this tramp inside the palace?” Nihan scoffed, the corner of her lips curving upwards. “Serasker Jahn brought her, and the Shahanshah ordered her to stay. Why don't you go and take this up with one of them? I am busy.” “Then take her to the lower hall where other servants—” “Deniz, we are not friends,” Nihan stated, and stepped forward while Cerese observed both women. “Yet, I will not be mean and tell you now before you earn yourself a beheading. This is Moon Lady Cerese Sorensen, a woman personally approved by the Shahanshah to replace her younger sister, Moon Lady Elowen Sorensen.” “But— why?” The second Serfina's eye widened. “Ask King Orhan, will you?” Nihan waved her off and turned on her heels, gesturing for Cerese to follow her. The other woman stepped away, bowing her head, despite her lips pursed tightly together. However, she no longer dared to question them. They went just a couple of doors down the second floor when Nihan stopped and knocked. “Enter,” Elowen's voice sounded unsure, but the wave of relief that followed, knowing that she was alive and well, was worth everything that happened to Cerese in the past twenty-four hours. “Moon Lady,” Nihan bowed as they entered a generously-sized room. Although for a palace, it probably wasn't anything special. Soft golden light pooled through pierced metal lanterns suspended from the vaulted ceiling, casting lace-like shadows across silken walls in shades of crushed ruby and deep fig. The air carried the faint hum of jasmine and warmed honey, trailing lazily from bronze braziers shaped like sleeping wolves. Their radiance cast gentle halos upon the pale cream walls and a low chaise lounge upholstered in elegant sage green and gold silk. A long rug in the same colours lay on the marble floor, its intricate patterns telling stories of Nytherys' past. This chamber had been arranged specifically to house the Shahanshah's concubine. Silk curtains framed arched windows, their translucent folds revealing a terrace that overlooked the palace gardens. A carved screen of dark cedar separated the lounging space from a private alcove, where Cerese noticed movement. “Reese?” Elowen gasped and ran towards her older sister, throwing herself into her arms despite wearing just a thin nightgown. “What are you doing here?” “It's a long story,” Cerese stroked her hair, pulling her closer to feel her warmth again.

"I came for you. I am sorry I wasn't there when they took you." "I am pretty sure it wasn't a coincidence," Elowen scoffed. "You know her." "Yes, Stepmother sent me away for the day to have you taken instead of me. Luckily, it is fixed now." "Cerese," Elowen tucked her head into her sibling's chest, sighing, "I thought I'd never see you again, yet here you are, coming to my rescue the way you always do." Cerese kissed the tip of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of cinnamon. "Listen to me, Elle," she whispered. "They will help you get to Nytherys, but do not go home." "What?" Elowen pushed herself away, brows furrowed. "Reese, what are you talking about?" Her lips trembled as realisation settled in. "You— you didn't come to get me," she stuttered. "You came to sacrifice yourself and replace me." She was always a clever girl. "That's not a sacrifice." Cerese smiled, brushing her fingers through her hair. "That's fixing a mistake that should not have happened. It's my place, not yours." "Cerese, women die like flies in this palace," Elowen whispered, eyes trailing towards Nihan in the corner. "A daughter of Nytherys was only invited to keep up with traditions. There would never be any kind of good, or for that matter, normal life for you here. Whatever life you might have here, it would be cut terribly short. Please, reconsider." A proud smile crawled up onto Cerese's face. She wouldn't expect anything less from the last kin her mother had left her. "I'll be just fine." She cupped her little sister's face and kissed her forehead. "No," Elowen pushed her away, pressing her lips tight. "I refuse. They have already brought me here. It's done. I will be the one staying!" Cerese exhaled heavily and turned to Nihan seeking help. The whole situation was breaking her heart. "Apologies, Moon Lady," the Serfina stepped in. "The decision has already been made by the High King himself. "Moon Lady Cerese is staying, and we will send you home since you haven't walked the Moonlight Path yet." That was actually lucky since if Elowen had walked the Moonlight path, which ended in the King's bed, it would all be over for her. "I am supposed to walk the path two nights after tomorrow," Elowen pushed. "It has been decided and announced." "But the King has changed his mind," Nihan replied respectfully, shooting Cerese a gaze as tears began rolling down her younger sister's cheeks. "I am afraid the order was issued, and you have to leave, Moon Lady." Elowen's shoulders drooped. This was a defeat. "Reese, what have you done?" She covered her face with her hands. "I am a bit offended that you don't believe in my power of survival." The sisters hugged again, the younger one sobbing while the older stroked her ginger hair with motherly gentleness. Nihan lowered her head to avoid seeing their goodbyes. "I also need to inform you that, according to traditions, despite the Shahanshah's rejection, you will be sent home with his gifts and a monetary compensation of two thousand mirams." Another sob echoed, but Cerese glanced at Serfina and mouthed "thank you." "Do not worry," Nihan smiled back, "the Moon lady will be sent home on the royal ship. She will have guards escorting her the whole time." Cerese nodded and returned her attention to Elowen, grasping her shoulders and pressing her fingers tight into her flesh to ensure she would remember her words. "Elle, I want you to listen to me carefully. Do not go home. Do not let the Stepmother

see your money and new wealth. Go to the Eclipsera convent and send a letter to Khael to come and marry you there, as he promised. Together you will live a happy life, and the money can be used as your dowry, bestowed by the High King himself." Elowen bit her lip. She loved Khael with all her heart and knew he was heartbroken when she was taken. The promise of a life together with her beloved was a dream that was impossible this very morning, but now... now she couldn't feel happy. Not when Cerese was staying behind. She sniffled. "Do you promise that you will keep yourself safe here?" They both knew that Cerese had secrets. Secrets that were too dangerous for the palace. "Of course. I will keep my head low and live a comfortable life. And I will write to you all the time. I swear." The sisters laced their arms around each other tight one last time, and even Cerese let out a pained sigh, trying to hold back tears. "Go," she whispered. "Go, be free, and let me live my life here, Ellie." "I will write to you every week," Elowen promised as Nihan firmly took her hand and led her away. "And I will pray for you! Every day!" "I know." Cerese forced a smile right before they disappeared, taking a deep breath once she finally stood alone in this foreign place. Minutes felt like an eternity. She looked at her muddy boots, knowing that she needed to change and take a bath. Her life depended on presenting herself well here. She couldn't be seen as a lesser concubine. Her standing was already awful as it was. "Can anyone help me?" She raised her voice, and a young woman dressed in a simple maid's uniform entered her chambers. "Moon Lady." She dipped into a curtsy, swiftly covering her eyes, lips, and heart with her palm, a sign of respect in Fenrisar. "I would like to take a bath." Cerese tried to sound authoritative, yet respectful at the same time. "My travel was rough." "Of course, Moon Lady," the maid replied eagerly. "Allow me to help you undress and prepare your bath robes. Then I will escort you to the bathhouse." "A bath house?" Cerese's brows went up. Did that mean there was no bath in her own room? Would she have to share it with others? Just the thought alone made her shudder. Clearly, she did not know enough about the capital and its traditions. Something she would have to fix as soon as possible. The maid helped her to change into a white flowing robe with long sleeves and a pair of soft leather slippers. She prepared a set of towels, and asked her to follow. They walked down the dark corridors of the harem, illuminated only by the torches with real flames, until finally they entered a spacious, humid hall. "This is the bath house," the maid smiled nervously. "Please, continue to the very end. The door on the left leads to the cabin designated for you." "And where are you going?" Cerese did not wish to reveal how ill at ease this place made her feel at such an hour, yet it was truly dark and eerie, with the muted lights doing little to illuminate the surroundings. "I will get your body oils, shampoo, and other things we are required to use with the Moon Ladies," the maid reported. "I will need to get wax as well for—" "My legs are as smooth as silk," Cerese chuckled. Nytherys was an archipelago of healers; they were pretty advanced with beauty products. "That's—" The girl in front of her blushed. "That's not for your legs. That's for— other areas." "Oh—" Cerese let out a nervous laugh. "Understood. All right, I will wait for you." The maid

left, humming a little song, and Cerese felt the atmosphere of this bath hall pressing on her. She decided to look around to feel at ease. No one should have been here at this hour anyway. Cerese stopped at a round marble sink in the middle, full of warm water. She let her fingers slide over the top of the surface, creating ripples as she thought of what tomorrow would bring her. The ripples died down, and Cerese saw her tired reflection on the water's surface. A dark shadow grew right behind her out of nowhere and before she could react, someone painfully grabbed her hair and plunged her face beneath the water.