

# The Alpha's Harem

## Chapter 9. The First Night

21-26 minutes

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Orhan's jaw tightened, the scar tissue pulling tight across his face. "The Mirror Chamber comes before a consort enters the palace. Not after she's already been claimed." "Precisely my point." Nepherrat stroked one of her birds, her touch gentle despite the steel in her voice. "An oversight we must now correct." "It's archaic. Unnecessary." He waved a dismissive hand. "Most women in the harem never set foot in that chamber." "Those women weren't diplomatic offerings from the other twelve kingdoms." Nepherrat's amber eyes never left his face. "Those women were gifts, tributes. She comes as a consort—her status demands verification." "Verification?" Cerese's voice cracked before she could stop herself. No one acknowledged her interruption. "Her sister was tested," Nepherrat continued, her fingers still working through the bird's feathers. "Before she took even one step towards the harem. I rather liked that one, actually. Sweet disposition. Knew her place." The words landed like stones in water—each ripple spreading wider through Cerese's composure. A wrinkle appeared between the High King's brows. "It's too far away from the palace. My consorts can't be sent away alone this far." "Luckily, you granted her a personal guard." Nepherrat seemed to have a reply to everything. "Naturally, we will send more with her, but, son, it has to be done." Elidi moved closer to the Shahanshah, her hand hovering near his arm, though she didn't quite touch him. "Orhan, think of her reputation. She's already caused talk—three nights whilst the other women waited, Tissa's... incident." Her lilac eyes flicked to Cerese, assessing. "Without the chamber's blessing, the others will never accept her. They'll whisper that she seduced you through dark means. That she used Nytherys' witchcraft to cloud your judgment." "I don't require the chamber to validate my choices, El." These two were indeed close. Cerese realised she was invisible to both of them. "No," Elidi agreed, her voice soft. "But she needs it. For her own protection. Unless you want every woman here plotting against her at every turn?" Orhan's hands clenched behind his back, knuckles white. The muscle in his jaw worked, betraying the war raging beneath his controlled exterior. Cerese watched the calculations play across his scarred face—political necessity against personal preference. She'd seen that expression before, in her father's study, when choosing between the competing interests of different Nytherys islands. In a way, it was sweet of the Shah to worry

about her, although he probably just needed more treatments from her and that was that. "Fine." The word emerged clipped, sharp. "Wise choice," Nephurat's smile returned, satisfied. "I'll make the arrangements myself. She will leave and travel to the Ancient Palace as soon as you are done with her tonight. No one will be telling you how soon that would be, of course, but we can all agree on one thing - the sooner it is done, the better." "I want to see her tonight and also as soon as she is back," Orhan stated matter-of-factly. "Of course," Nephurat nodded, and the bird on her fingers flew away. "Cerese, you may go." She didn't have to be asked twice, bowing and leaving the room with her back towards the door. Nihan gently grasped her arm and guided her, while the royals continued talking. "Melike still has to walk the Moonlight path tomorrow," the Luna Mother insisted, but she couldn't hear the Shahanshah's reply, as the golden doors closed as soon as she was outside. Yet, Elidi stayed. Cerese scrunched her nose. "So, what is the Mirror Chamber exactly?" "Not here!" The Serfina hissed. They hurried back downstairs, passing a couple other Serfina's on their way. The golden doors of her chambers had barely clicked shut before Cerese rounded on Nihan. "Tell me everything you know. What the hell is this chamber?" Nihan moved to check the windows, drawing curtains despite the afternoon light still streaming through. "The Mirror Chamber is located in the Ancient Palace, several hours' ride from here. It was built when the first Shahanshah united the kingdoms, meant to—" She paused, fingers worrying at the silk. "No one knows precisely what occurs inside." "How can no one know?" "Because those who enter go alone." Nihan's voice dropped. "The chamber permits only one at a time. Guards wait outside, servants prepare you beforehand, but once those doors close..." She shook her head. "Whatever happens within stays within. No one ever speaks of it." Cerese's stomach twisted. "Some kind of test, then." "That's the assumption, yes." Nihan fixed the flowers in a vase, her hands steady despite the tremor in her words. "For those entering the Shah's family, concubines, consorts, princesses' husbands, women brought through alliance, even adopted children of significance. The mirrors judge worthiness." "Mirrors." Cerese sank onto the divan, exhaustion suddenly heavy in her bones. "What do they judge exactly? Bloodline? Fertility? Virtue?" "I don't know." Nihan poured water into a gilded cup and offered it to her. "But two of the original twelve consorts— they were replaced after visiting the chamber." The water turned cold against Cerese's lips. "One emerged trembling, tears streaming down her face. Wouldn't speak of it, not even to the Luna Mother. She left for her homeland the next day." Nihan's expression grew distant, remembering. "The other fainted the moment she walked out. She was sent home to recuperate, and another consort was arranged." "And their replacements?" "Passed without incident. The mirrors deemed them worthy." Nihan straightened, smoothing invisible creases from her robes. "Whatever happened inside, they emerged composed and were later able to enter the palace with the others." Cerese set down her cup, steadying herself. Her sweet, sheltered sister had survived the chamber. So could she. Had to. She'd sacrificed everything to keep Elowen safe. She wasn't about to fail some

mystical test and screw it all up now. \*\*\* The bathwater had been warm enough to scald, steam curling around Cerese until she could barely see the marble walls. Nihan and three maids worked in silence, scrubbing every inch of her and rubbing oils into her skin that smelt of jasmine and something darker, richer. Something meant to entice. "Wider, please," one of the women instructed. Cerese obeyed, biting back a hiss as warm wax was applied and ripped away in swift, merciless strips. Her thighs, her legs and places she'd never considered removing hair from— all stripped bare until her skin felt raw and foreign beneath her own touch. They'd painted her eyelids with golden paint and used a brush on her lashes to make them thick and dark. Rouge stained her lips the colour of crushed berries. Gold powder dusted across her collarbones, catching the lamplight. She had never seen herself looking so... refined before. Nihan wove a golden thread through Cerese's hair, plaiting tiny gems that clinked softly with each movement. The dress they brought made her lips part in awe— sheer crimson silk with a plunging neckline that clung to her curves and an embroidered kaftan on top of it with glittering beadwork, each tiny glass bead sewn by hand. The gauzy sleeves split mid-arm reaching the floor, whispering with her every movement. Completely impractical but utterly stunning. "Isn't it a little too much?" Cerese asked, trying to see if the neckline that plunged too deeply, stopping shy of her navel, could be buttoned up at least a little higher. "This is for the Shahanshah's eyes only," Nihan giggled. "Very appropriate for the Moonlight path. Besides, we will use this." She produced a sheer red veil matching the kaftan and carefully settled it over Cerese's hair, successfully covering her cleavage. "This is how every Consort walks into the Shah's bedroom for the first time," the Serfina explained. "Walk slowly," Nihan reminded her as they approached the harem's main hall. "We don't want you falling and breaking your nose before the Shahanshah sees you. Don't show anyone that you are afraid." Easier said than done. Her heart hammered so violently she wondered if the entire palace could hear it. The hall fell silent as she entered. All eyes were on her, tracking her progress across the polished marble. Melike stood near a fountain, her amber eyes narrowed to slits. Her lips moved, forming words Cerese was grateful she couldn't hear properly, though their meaning was clear enough. It was hard to see the faces of the other women, but she knew they would have time later to get to know each other better. One woman, however, caught her attention. Dressed in men's clothing— black trousers with high boots, an embroidered vest and a shirt with voluptuous sleeves, probably because it was too big for her. She was leaning against the wall playing with her long braid, until Cerese drew closer. She couldn't be a maid or a Serfina, and the female guards all had uniforms. So, this strange-looking woman with a long deep brown braid, chestnut eyes, and golden-brown skin could only be a concubine or one of the twelve consorts. "Good luck, Nytherys," she whispered with a smile so genuine that it took Cerese aback. Haoran pushed the doors wide, and Cerese stepped into the corridor beyond. They led her all the way up to the highest tower, until finally the Moonlight Path stretched before her, lit by hundreds of candles in silver sconces. She

tried to steady her breathing and to remember everything Nihan told her to do. Rules and ceremonies were important in this place and mistakes were not tolerated. The Shahanshah's guards opened the doors before her. The moment when her life would change was finally here. And she wasn't ready, despite all the promises she had made to the High King on her first night here. She found him near the windows, backlit by moonlight. He stood tall and commanding, black and gold silk night robes cascaded over his powerful frame, whilst his amber eye flickered as he took her in. "My Shahanshah." Cerese bowed as deeply as she could, and Orhan stretched out his hand, inviting her in. The Luna Consort approached slowly on trembling legs, sinking into a deep bow before taking his offered hand. She pressed her lips to his knuckles, then brought his hand to her forehead as tradition demanded. His skin was warm, the familiar scent of cedar and sage surrounding her. "Raise," he said calmly, his hand slipping from her grasp. He had done all this too many times before for it to count as anything special. She knew that much. Movement from the adjacent room startled her momentarily, until she saw the Serasker emerging from the study. "Follow me, Luna Consort. Your equipment is arranged for your comfort here." Cerese blinked. "Equipment?" "You said the Shah will have to take another dose of your tonic, and we are currently out. I ensured he took it on the clock just as you instructed, but he is still a little weak and dizzy at times." A low growl left Orhan's chest. Jahn bowed briefly to his sovereign. "My apologies for the bluntness, my Shahanshah, but we shouldn't conceal any information from your Healer." "Fine—" Orhan waved them both off, his breathing laboured. Understanding crashed over her, followed swiftly by relief so intense her knees nearly buckled. They weren't going to— This wasn't about— She must have been a complete i\*\*\*\*t to think that he was interested in sleeping with her when everyone already believed they had consummated their union. No one would question him. There was simply no need for him to touch her. An unfamiliar feeling scratched at her chest, but she brushed it away, preparing herself mentally to work instead. It was for the best. She may have been a fraud of a favourite, but at least she had found her place here. The High King himself owed her his life. This meant safety. This meant a future. The women of the harem would eventually turn their focus elsewhere when a new favourite emerged. Until then, Cerese would secure their respect through her work as a healer and spend the remainder of her days in peace. This was good. Favourites come and go. Trust of the High King was priceless, and she was indeed earning it. "Right," she nodded, trying to sound cheerful. "Let's see how much you have improved, my Shah, and then I will brew a new batch of medicine for you. Soon we'll be done with detoxing, and it will be wise to then concentrate on restoring your strength." Cerese's fingers moved to the veil's edge, ready to lift it away, when Orhan's hand caught hers. She froze as their eyes met. The candlelight flickered across his ruined face, shadows dancing in the hollows of old wounds. She swallowed hard and yet he still did not speak a word. A pointed cough shattered the moment between them. Jahn stood near the doorway, examining his fingernails with exaggerated interest. "It's my duty," Orhan said

quietly, releasing her hand. "Tradition dictates that the Shahanshah remove the veil of his chosen consort." "Of course." Cerese managed a smile that felt far too tight. It was also the Shahanshah's duty to bed her, but who was counting duties? Certainly not her. "My apologies," she muttered. He lifted the fabric and set it aside, eyes not leaving her face. His lips twitched just for a moment, but he did not say another word. "Please, take a seat, my Shah," she offered softly. Orhan settled onto the cushioned seat near the windows, which told her more about his condition than any protest would have. She knelt before him, hands hovering near his chest, and summoned her magic. The familiar warmth bloomed beneath her skin, spreading through her veins like honey in hot water. She pressed her palm to his heart, feeling the steady thump beneath silk and muscle. Cerese felt his energy, the magic inside him and his beast, who was dormant right now but keenly aware of her presence. There were barely any dark spots of poison left; the Shahanshah was on the right path, and that meant that her prescription was accurate. "It seems that you have improved significantly." She smiled with her eyes closed. "Allow me to continue—" "Of course—" Orhan nodded, watching her. Her warm palm moved up his chest to his face, and he felt goosebumps all over his flesh. Cerese felt the rough skin of his scars beneath her fingertips, when suddenly an uninvited vision flashed across her mind. Wings— massive, feathered— spreading across a blood-red sky. The throne, the sky wolf's onyx throne ablaze, vines with spikes seeping into someone's flesh. Claws raking across marble. Blood pooling, so much blood, spreading in dark rivers between the tiles. And a roar so loud and unexpected that it made her gasp and jerk her hands back as if she had been burned. Cerese stumbled backwards and landed hard upon the floor in front of the Shahanshah, panting from the shock. "What happened?" Orhan leaned forward. Her pulse hammered against her temples as she considered her response. It was the first vision in her life, but it was so real that she had no doubts. She did not imagine it. Fear consumed her. Healers did not have visions. She didn't even know if this was the past or the future. It could be anything. What if she tapped into the Shahanshah's memories? Would he spare her then? No, it was safer not to share anything. "I slipped." The lie came easier than expected. "My apologies. I am usually not that clumsy, but I have to say that your body and my medicine have worked very well together. A few more doses and you will forget that it ever happened." His eyes narrowed, studying her face. It was hard to tell whether or not he believed her. "Your beast, though." She repositioned herself so that she was kneeling before him as it seemed a little more appropriate. "He's taken damage from the venom. I'll need to brew something restorative. It'll help to replenish your strength faster." Orhan still stared at her. "With your permission, of course." She offered a little smile to him, fidgeting with her dress. "Do it," Orhan waved at her, and she scrambled back to her feet, heading straight to the study where her equipment waited. To her surprise, she found a separate table for her herbs and vials. The Shahanshah's desk was now filled with scrolls and papers again. The Shahanshah and Jahn joined her in the room moments later, spreading maps and

correspondence across the polished wood. Did they really trust her enough to speak freely in front of her? But as she carefully tuned in and began to listen to them, she realised that they weren't talking about any secrets. Just checking what villages and towns needed what, and how soon they would be able to get it there. Their voices became white noise as Cerese grounded angelica root and measured out powdered moongrass, her hands moving through familiar patterns whilst her mind replayed those flashing images. Fire. Throne. Wings. And blood. So much blood... What on earth was she shown? And why? Hours passed. The moon climbed higher beyond the windows. Her mortar and pestle kept rhythm with the low rumble of male voices discussing the benefits of some new armour she didn't understand. Finally, she strained the mixture through silk, capturing the pale blue liquid in a crystal phial. "It's ready, my Shah." The men stopped talking, and Orhan gestured for her to come closer. He drained the detoxifying elixir and the new tonic in a few short gulps, grimacing at the bitter taste. "I can work on the taste next time." She lowered her head sheepishly. "We can try adding honey or a syrup—" "No need," Orhan shook his head. "Jahn, we are done for tonight." "Of course, my Shah." The Serasker gathered his maps, rolling them with practised efficiency. "You still need to complete the ceremony with your new Consort. May Asena bless her womb with your offspring." He left, giving her a curt nod, and heat flooded her cheeks. So, they were going to do it after all. How awkward... The door clicked shut. Silence filled the chamber, and her nerves pulled on her inner strings again. Of course, they needed to consummate. It was her main duty in the palace after all. "Undress." Orhan's voice carried no inflection. "Go to bed first." She didn't know what exactly she was expecting, but probably not that. Somehow, seeing Tissa try to seduce this man back then, even despite her murderous intentions, Cerese thought that the Shah and his concubines had to enjoy each other's company. Maybe she should have prepared a dance too... He was the one to be seduced, not her. Cerese's fingers fumbled with the intricate fastenings of her crimson gown, each hook and clasp seeming impossibly complex. The silk fell down her body, pooling at her feet. She kept her shift on—surely he didn't mean everything— and climbed beneath the furs. The bed smelt of cedar and something else, something distinctly him. She lay rigid, staring at the canopy above, counting her own heartbeats. One hundred. Two hundred. Five hundred. Maybe she needed to try a seductive pose? Not that she knew any... She tilted her head and saw the Shahanshah back at his desk, reading some sort of document. He wasn't in a hurry to join her. Her eyelids grew heavy despite her racing thoughts. It had been hours since she entered this room. Exhaustion crept through her limbs like fog through a morning field... She blinked once, twice... and without meaning to, the darkness consumed her. \*\*\* Morning light stabbed through her closed lids. Cerese blinked awake, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. It took a moment to remember where she was— the Shahanshah's chambers, his bed. Alone. She sat up, clutching the furs to her chest. Orhan slumped in the chair near his desk, head tilted back, mouth slightly open. Still in his night robes. His breathing came deep and even, the sleep of

complete exhaustion. He hadn't touched her. Again. She gathered one of the sheets around her torso and tiptoed towards him. Could she seduce him now? She wasn't sure how. "My Shah—," she called him gently and stretched her hand towards him, but this time he caught her and twisted it so hard she whimpered. "Ce—Cerese?" His face changed when he saw her and he stood up in a hurry, pulling her closer. "I— I'm sorry—" She blinked away the tears. "I wasn't sure whether I had to wake you up or—" "It's fine—," he drawled. "Did I—" A knock on the door disturbed them. "Come in!" He ordered, still keeping her pressed against his body. Two maids walked in and gasped, noticing the couple. The rumours of her being a favourite would keep spreading for sure. Even though she was still untouched by the mighty Orhan Velkhanor. \*\*\* The carriage waited in the palace's outer courtyard, its dark wood panels gleaming beneath fresh lacquer. Cerese descended the marble steps with Haoran shadowing her movements, his hand on his sword's hilt. They barely let her have breakfast before she was urged to leave for the Old Palace. Cerese noticed the same woman in man's clothing leaning against the entrance column, playing with her long dark braid. She straightened as Cerese approached, pulling something from her pocket. "Here." She pressed a string of white jade beads with a golden tassel into Cerese's palm. "Take them to the chamber with you for luck." Cerese studied the polished beads, each one carved with symbols she didn't recognise. "Can we take things into the Mirror Chamber?" "You can take whatever you like." The woman's smile held no humour. "Won't matter, though. Nothing helps in there anyway. All you need is luck." She clasped her shoulder briefly. "Ishani Al'Prindir of Kahirre. Good luck, Cerese of Nytherys." She strode away before Cerese could respond, boots echoing across the courtyard stones. Nihan was waiting for her at the carriage with a few other servants, mostly male. "I wish I could accompany you, truly. But Serfinas aren't permitted to leave palace grounds without the Luna Mother's explicit permission." She gestured to the silent guard. "You'll be safe with Haoran and— my brother, Emir." A young man stepped forward, dressed in a eunuch's uniform. Bronzed skin, turquoise eyes beneath thick lashes, moon phase slave tattoos on his face matching Nihan's. He bowed low, extending his hand toward the carriage door. "Luna Consort." Their gazes locked and Cerese's breath stopped. Her instincts never lied to her. It was the man who had attacked her on the very first night.