
House of Adders



For Ashley
My everything.

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Prologue

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The Crown of the Dead

The Pillars of Gaenna were silent despite the number of Barasani *kiin'id*, the house's kinsmen, who filled the Padikha's Grand Hall. A thousand shrouded faces followed a quiet, morose procession. They dressed in their finest black silks adorned with silver and polished black stones. The ocean-blue and gold banners of the imperial house, Shiir'sam Barasan, were hidden away in the face of Death.

This was not a normal event.

A funeral to honor Shiir Barasan's dead and gone. A coronation to usher in their living and present.

An ill omen, indeed.

Even as the orange light from Farahid's twin suns Tannaat α and Tannaat β , the gods Kaanel and Burre, spilled over those who managed to fit under the *Padikhaar's* roof, a most hallowed time of the day, not a single soul drew hard breath.

Khati followed her father, the man she had adored through all of her nineteen years of life, shrouded like her kin. Her long, lithe body was draped with flowing silk that had been in the Barasan family for generations. Her ebony feet stepped naked across the polished marble floor, accented with gold and green syenite, as she had as a little girl. She took notice of the faces of those whom she loved, respected, and knew as friends. Her elegantly wide and flat nose, a gift from her *Afarek'in* blood that tied her to the ancient Homeworld of Man, picked up a subtle fragrance of incense. But, all of these things held a far different meanings than they had before.

Sabol Barasan of the Golden Eye was dead, carried by His brother and cousins toward the Marble Throne.

Uncle Jaanit tried not to shudder as his composure fractured and cracked with every step to the place where his elder brother had sat for than fifteen years. Though he had claim to his brother's station, Jaanit declined. He was far better at hunting and playing a noble than he was a leader, and he never tried to hide that knowledge. Even as the Lord Consort of the *Sef* of Khaal Juhuud, *Khaan* of Shiir Juhuud, Master of Thuus, Jaanit had not been so deluded as to demand power or a better title from his wife. He was always so organic and free-spirited. But, here and now, Khati saw a very different person. He was the most reserved she had ever seen in all her years.

She was stepping on his tears.

The cool wetness on the tan soles of her feet made Khati's heart threaten to break, again, at the fragility of her beloved Uncle's poise. He had truly admired his brother, just as Khati had idolized her father. They both could not ignore the icy void where Sabol, guiding first-born brother and soft-spoken father, stood with a loving smile and kind eyes. It was impossible to fill. Not a soul she knew or would come know in the years that followed could, *would* fill that gaping wound.

The rise of her father's casket surprised her. She had thought that the Pillars would go on forever. That she would march unto infinity.

Uncle Jaanit and Khati's middle-aged cousins turned Sabol's body until the length of His casket was shown to the gathered onlookers, His head facing the setting twin suns. She moved around the opened casket to face her *kiin'id* from behind her father's corpse.

Amongst the crowded Chamber of the Padikha, she saw only members of Shiira Barasan and those clans which paid fealty to the Imperial House. At the very front was Shaan Tiamaat Juhuud, Uncle Jaanit's towering and powerful wife. The *Shaan* of Khaddam's black robes were as fine as her husband's, her simple crown of silver denoting her as lord over the

kingdom-city. Khati could not see through the woman's shroud, but she knew that Tiamaat mourned deeply for her *Padikhaar* and brother-in-law. They had been as close as He and Jaanit after the marriage.

There was a glaring absence where the *Kha'id a'Naamidija* should have been, standing along the front of the gathered mourners. Her mouth nearly fell agape as she searched her mind for a reason why they would not have come for her father's funeral. *The funeral of their Padikhaar*. At the very least, where was Shiira Joam, the oldest and most faithful of all the *shiiir'id* to the Barasani *Padikhaar*. The dishonor and callousness of their actions pierced her breast with a sensation much like a blade so cold that it burned between her lungs. Khati's full lips quivered and the corner of her eyes stung with another wave of tears.

Then, with a bitter sneer that slipped through her slowly disintegrating mask of stoic peace, she understood. The Naamid had turned their backs on her in her time of need. Turned their backs on the Empire of Gaennan, that which they had sworn fealty to. Each of the *Naamidi kha'id* knew very well what had happened to their *Padikhaar*. Sabol had died of a cancer in His brain. He had ignored it and His headaches through any number of excuses: it was the stress of His station, or little headache that was "of no importance" and could be easily remedied by a darkened room. Had He seen the imperial physician as she had asked Him, the hand-picked surgical team of the *khaal'sam*, the Imperial Clan, could have rid Him the malady with ease.

The *kha'id* knew very well that she was not robbing her father's corpse. She wanted neither the crown nor His station.

It was the deepest of insults that could have been carved into her heart, her *soul*. It was also an insult that she could not fight, lest she look petty. They had taken a "moral stance" against the daughter of the *Barasani Padikhaar* who was stealing the Throne for herself.

Her dark eyes fell to the shrouded figure below her. Khati could only see the barest of her father's features. He was tall, just as she remembered, and nearly reached a full two meters. The silver casket had to be custom-built. The black fabric—the *Kaffan Saffed al Ansu*, His Black Shroud of Tears—was draped over Sabol's body, from His bound feet to His strong brow. His arms were tied to His sides, knuckles resting against the casket's floor so that His palms faced upward. Khati begged to Farahid's twin gods to not take Him, to allow Him to walk her down the Path a little longer. Khati wanted to scream at Him to take a breath, and stop with His tasteless and childish escapade, so that she could watch Sabol's chest rise and fall again. Her eyes crawled up from that still, empty breast and watched her father's sealed lips for any sign of life. The daughter wondered why her father's mouth would frown as it did. She could only recall

Sabol's perpetual smile from the very start of her memory. The fabric was wrapped around the crest of His forehead and underneath His dome. It prevented Sabol's head from touching the silver, as did His crown. The Shroud was pinched where the Coronet of the Padikha wrapped around His bald head. She couldn't touch Him. Just the Coronet.

Khati realized she had stopped breathing. She took in a full, slow breath to expel the burning she felt within.

The congregation was waiting.

"Bow your heads in reflection," she announced, her lips working to find the words to her part of the funeral, "as to bid our *Padikhaar* a safe journey to the Gate of Light. The place He took in the Clan's Path has come to an end, but we March onward with His voice as a Guide."

Her voice echoed through the massive chamber and sounded as hollow as she felt.

She and the whole of those gathered dropped their eyes to their feet, placing one hand into another with their palms facing upward. Together, the thousand whispers of the Ten Invocations of Bakkir churned through the air as a charged hiss. It left Khati disoriented. It grated on her nerves as would a blade's edge scraped upon unpolished stone. No matter how badly she wished it to end, each word only contributed to the endless seething that she would have to endure. Just when she felt as if she may screech from that growing chant, it ended.

Khati opened her eyes, and pulled her stiff neck straight as to look upon her *kiin'id*.

The funeral, for the time being, was over. Now began the Coronation.

For what seemed the hundredth time, Khati had to clamp down on her composure as she nearly vomited.

Uncle Jaanit turned from his place far to her right, where he stood in front of their cousins who had volunteered to be Casket Bearers, and marched to her. His boots *clicked* and *clacked* loudly along the polished, marbled floor until he stopped just behind her. She heard his black clothes shift and his black stones and silver pieces *clink* against one another as he reached for the Bloodied Cloak of Nerijlissar, prematurely. Khati screwed her eyes shut and struggled not to cringe.

The cloak was an ancient artifact worn by the first *Padikhaan*, the first Empress and second ruler of the Gaennai Empire, Neijlissar *Gaenna-khan*, some four-hundred and seventy-four years before. Made of crimson velvet and accented by golden trinkets, the Bloodied Cloak had been taken off of the body of a man who had stabbed the *Padikhaan* in an attempted coup. Legends of the event stated that, dagger buried in her stomach, she broke the attacker's hand with the hilt of her sword and cut him clean in two. After Nerijlissar donned the

crimson cloak, she and her Saaderiim Imperial Guard cut down the remaining attackers who were shaken by the death of their leader by the woman's own hand. Now, it was the visual symbol of a *padikha's* power, a sign that a *padikha* was favored of the Gannaei peoples' ancestors who watched and waited for them beyond the Gate of Light.

It was not an thing to be touched prematurely.

Once he caught himself, Jaanit cursed with himself a vicious word under his breath. He returned to an upright posture with another soft *hissah* of his robes. Khati heard her uncle open his dry mouth to speak.

He hesitated.

"I—... I, Jaanit Juhuud, who was wed unto Shaan Tiamaat Juhuud, Chieftain of Clan Juhuud and Lady of the Kingdom of Khaddam, will recite the Oaths of the Imperial Coronation..." Uncle Jaanit's voice waned, finding little strength to go on. "...on the behalf of Padikhaar Sabol Barasan."

The sea of veiled faces watched without jubilation.

Jaanit's voice was suddenly loud, making Khati's frayed nerves jump as it spilled over her shoulder. His words were slow, as if he were having trouble recalling the *Kism ghiir al Taujiit'sam* which he had practiced since Sabol's death.

"Khatijja Barasan, daughter of Sabol Barasan: before you stand your House, your Clan, and your Vassals so that they may bear witness to your Spoken Oath."

"I see and welcome them," she intoned, the taste of bitter bile filtering into her mouth from a small heave. "Ask me what you will as I will be to them as yo—" She cursed herself, much like Uncle Jaanit did. "I will be to them as was Sabol Barasan: their Guiding Light along the Path, their Shield and Sword, their Judge who seeks only Justice and Fairness, their Lord, their *Padikhaan*."

"So it will be done." Jaanit paused, again, for far longer than necessary. "I will speak unto you the Terms of your Oath. Are you willing and able to answer?"

"I am."

"Then answer me, Khatijja Barasan.

"Will you swear, upon Your Place Along Our Path, to act as the Guiding Light for all those kindred who March along the Path of the Gaennai?"

"I swear it upon My Place Along Our Path."

"Will you swear, upon the Face of Your Honor," Uncle Jaanit continued, "to lead the Gaennai to a New and Golden Age? To Expand the Territories of the Gaennai Clans and further

Establish the Longevity of Our People? To Ensure that Peace between the Houses—built in the cooling embers of the Strife of the Pathless, the Age of Mourning—is Maintained? To Uphold those Laws that are Truly Lawful which were created by those *Padikha* who came before you, to Abolish those which are Truly Unlawful, and Judge your Subjects with a hand that is Truly Fair?”

“I swear it upon the Face of My Honor.”

“Will you swear, upon your Breath and Blood and Being, to be stalwart in the Defense of all the Realms of the Gaennai? To take up your Sword, even in the face of Overwhelming Odds? To Stand among your Warriors, whom *you* will Command, who Fight with Passion and their Lives for the continued Freedom of the Shroud of Gaenna, the Bissim Sa, and the Garden of Karaash? To fearlessly Spill your Lifeblood to insure Victory for the Clans? That Your Loyalty, for the Empire that you are about to Rule, remain Unwavering and never be Called into Question, Forever Emboldened until the End of your Days?”

“I swear it upon My Breath and Blood and Being.”

“Will you swear, upon all of these things, to do well by the whole of the Empire of Gaennan?”

“I swear upon My Place Along Our Path, the Face of My Honor, and My Breath and Blood and Being to do all of these things and more. To ensure the Peace and Prosperity of the Subjects who are under my Reign. To Protect my Kin, my House, and all Gaennai from Current and Future Aggressors that Threaten them. And—if I Fail—I will Repent with My Spilt Breath and Blood and Being, accept a Curse upon My Honor, and Step off of Our Path as to allow the Darkness to Take me as it will benefit all the Clans.”

“Then, take unto you the Coronet of the Padikhaan.”

Khati didn't move at first. This was all wrong. Her father was supposed to give her His crown, from His head onto her's. But, to take it from Him like this, to touch His crown in death to ascend to the Marble Throne behind her, made her skin crawl. It was crude and evil. No matter what Uncle Jaanit told her, it felt as if she were doing that vile and despicable thing. Though she knew in her heart of hearts that the *Kha'id a'Naamid* were wrong to take their “moral stance,” playing some political game that she could not yet see, her mind reeled from what was expected of her. Khati knew, too, that she would be publicly accused by those same *kha'id* of stealing Sabol's crown and station in the coming days.

The girl forced herself to bend over the empty shell of her father and ran her fingertips along the golden crown and the silver laurels fused to its surface. Khati withstood the want to touch His face. Pressing her fingers along the sides, she tried to move it. The crown gave little

ground, jerking to a stop not a centimeter from where it had rested above Sabol's brow. Khati had to push the crown harder, toiling not to let slip a garish grunt. It finally yielded to her frantic pushing, the shroud around Sabol's head loosening as his responsibility was freed from him.

The temptation of a tantrum played at the feathery remains of her ragged senses. The woman wanted to scream, cry, do whatever she could to shirk her responsibilities. She wanted so badly to toss the crown down the aisle she had marched through. But, she didn't. Her father wouldn't have liked it.

Khati placed the Golden Crown, befitted with opals and sapphires and rubies, upon Her head. The gravity-repulsor headband She wore around Her cables of ebony dreadlocks, meant to keep the Crown from falling to Her neck, did not removed the strip's own struggle against Farahid's pull. Khati's homeworld tugged down on the nanite-coated band of plastic as if to add insult to injury, to remind Khati of Her infinitely unfair existence without Her father. She felt as if She might collapse under its weight.

The girl felt the biting edge of the laurel wreath's intricately carved leaves against her fingers. Their symbolism for Victory felt far removed from Her coronation. When She was certain that the crown would not fall, Khati allowed Her arms to rest at Her sides, fighting the churning bile inside Her that desperately wished for escape.

From behind Her, Jaanit grasped the red and gold Bloodied Cloak of Nerijlissar and draped it over Her shoulders. He came around to attach the golden chain from one fastener to the other. He stepped away, revealing a gaudy mash of blood red and shining gold over Her black mourning robes. Her crown pinched Her shroud in much the same fashion as it did with Her father. The glittering ocean-blue and gold badge of Shiira Barasan glinted the fading light as both Kaariel and Burre disappeared behind Farahid's horizon.

"My Kinsmen! My Clansmen! Before you stands our Lord!" boomed Uncle Jaanit, putting his overwhelming grief his voice's power. "Show thine fealty to the *Padikhaan!*"

The masses dropped to their knees, nobles and *kiin'id* alike, and placed their foreheads to the floor before their new master.

She was Khati Bara—

No.

The woman would no longer be known by the pet name Her father bestowed upon Her. It would not be proper.

Now, She was Her Imperial Majesty Khatijja Barasan, the Sovereign of Farahid—Cradle and Paradise of the Gaennai People—*Khaan* of Shiira Barasan, *Sef* of Khaal Barasan, and Lord

over those Vassals who resided there; *Senirsef*, Chieftain of Chieftains; *Emniremiraan*, Princess of Princes; *Shanirshaan*, King of Kings; *Suultaan a'Suulta*, Sultana of Sultans; *Khanirkhaan*, Khan of Khans; the Guiding Light along the Path of all the *Khaal'id* and the Child of the Gods Kaanil and Burre; Commandant of the Custodian Houses Juhuud at the Gate of Gaenna, Shish at Addom Gate, Bo'ghaar at Tanhassar Gate, and Togaan at Sedar Gate; Lord of the *Shiir'id a'Naamid*, of Amaat upon Atos, of Taamket upon Channakr, of Nabon upon Babahr, of Raak upon Mabmaat, of Tahssan upon Ros, of Anunnar upon Ahassun, of Sidenna upon Salaiit, and of Joam upon Sar who were the Wardens of the Garden of Karaash, and all their Vassals; Guide of the Fledgling Houses Tansaah, Draifa, and Timir of the Blue Reaches; Champion of the Baddauin and Guardian of Shiir Kaluaar upon Cennet; Second Imperial Monarch of the Barasan Dynasty; and *Padikhaan* of all within the Empire of Gaennan, Dominion of the Gaennai.

Khatiija wished upon the Path and her Ancestors that She wasn't.