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KARAM

Karam licked the blood from her teeth.

Tricks and coin flew toward her, colliding with the rope that enclosed the ring. It was like an amphitheater, only instead of stone there was fancy wallpaper, and instead of warriors there was Karam.

The Crook's fighting ring was infamous for being the one place in all of Creije where it was legal to beat someone to a pulp, and it did its very best to live up to that reputation. Industrial beams thatched across the ceiling and large bulbs noosed from metal cables, with plush rows of seating that shook whenever the crowd jumped and screamed.

It felt as cold as the people who gathered there.

Though usually these fights had more magic than fists, when Karam was in the ring she put that showy nonsense to bed. Her opponents didn't rely on tricks and charms to win. There were no rules and no magic to offer protection.

It was just her and the blood waiting to be spilled.

Karam's opponent leaned against the rope and ran a thumb across his lower lip.

He was all might and no lithe, every inch of him bulky to the point of breaking. He wore no wrappings on his fists and Karam got a spray of his knuckle blood in her eye that last round.

"Little Wrenyi girl want to play?" he asked in slow Uskhanyan, like she might not understand.

Karam snarled on reflex.

She wasn't angry about the comment, or because it surprised her. It was the opposite. Karam was angry because she expected that to be the first wound her enemies tried to inflict. She seethed because she was used to it.

It had been years and she was still in a perpetual state of not-belonging. Still an outsider. Still never quite Creije enough. It wasn't that her skin was dark, but that it was a different kind of darkness. Burnished brown and decorated with the blue and gold tattoos famous among women in the Wrenyi realm. It was the ornate chains that threaded jewels across her scalp, even now, and the *setwa*—black and blue, like her face so often was—that she occasionally swept over her shoulder. It was the inflection still grasping her words, even after half a decade in this realm.

It was none of that and all of that.

Karam scuffed the soles of her feet against the floor and spat.

“Keep smiling while you still have teeth,” she said.

Her opponent laughed and threw himself toward her.

His fist struck Karam's cheek with more speed than she gave him credit for. She crashed back to the stone.

Her palms broke her fall, which Karam realized a beat too late was not the smartest choice. Her hands were her weapons; better she let her face get broken.

The crowd booed and Karam swallowed the blood slicking her mouth.

There was no way she was going to lose to this *hijada*. This bastard. She would make him yield.

Karam pounced back to her feet and threw herself at him. Her shoulder collided with his side and Karam felt the moment the point of her bone jammed into his gut.

Her opponent let out a grunt and locked his hands around her back, squeezing.

Karam twisted her elbow between them and shoved it into his stomach. His grip on her loosened and with the distance widened she began to punch. Hard shots directly below his ribs.

One hand.

Both hands.

Until she was certain she heard some kind of crack.

He staggered back and Karam jumped, twisting her body seamlessly through the air. The knife of her foot exploded against his face.

The crowd rose.

They screamed for more.

More violence and brutality.

Anything Karam could give to feed their empty hearts.

She watched them grip desperately on to their seats, almost pitching themselves over for a better look. Rows of the poor and the slightly less poor, of the wealthy who tried their hardest to hide it and the dastardly who didn't hide it at all.

But not the one person Karam always seemed to be waiting for.

Saxony was impossible to miss, like lightning in a thunderstorm, and sometimes Karam could almost swear that she felt it when Saxony was near. That she sensed, perhaps, the almighty power that ran through that girl's veins.

Whenever Saxony came to watch her fight, she stood taller than those around her and, if they were standing side by side, which they so rarely did these days, a good six inches above Karam. And even from way in the back rows, Karam could always tell that Saxony was looking straight at her, staring with eyes the same beautiful black-brown as her skin.

Every time.

Though seeing Saxony always made Karam feel like time had stretched unfairly between them—everything they once shared, alight in magic and secrets, was fractured now—it was still better than not seeing her at all. It was a way for them to tell each other that there was still something there. That maybe there always would be.

But Saxony hadn't shown this time.

Karam cracked her fists together.

The crowd stamped their war-drum feet.

Her opponent pushed himself to stand and growled a string of curses.

Karam cocked her head to the side and took in his stance. He was running on pride and fury, and she knew how quickly that ran out.

“Wrenyi bitch,” he snarled. “I’ll make you pay.”

Empty threats.

Karam had faced a shadow demon in this ring, on a night where the underbosses gathered and the Crook was closed for the public.

Her grandparents had fought in the War of Ages, among a sacred warrior sect whose duty it was to protect Crafters.

Karam was a child of the Rekhi d’Rihsni.

This man was nothing.

He lunged and Karam spun out of the way, but the hilt of his shoulder clipped her hip and the sheer force of him sent them both rolling to the floor.

Karam brought her knee up high between his legs and he roared. She gave him an almighty shove and then rolled to straddle his hips.

Once she had the upper hand, Karam punched mercilessly, until the blood coated her wrappings so much that they felt slick across her knuckles.

Her opponent spat in her face.

Then, with brutal force, he brought the heel of his palm up to her nose and Karam fell back, a blinding pain flashing across her eyes.

Her opponent threw himself clumsily on top of her, wrapping his hands around her throat and squeezing.

The blood dripped from his face onto hers.

She gasped for breath.

He didn’t stop squeezing.

Karam had killed before, man and demon both, but this fight was supposed to be to the yield. Yet she could tell with one look in his eyes that her opponent wouldn’t let her go.

He was going to kill her and the crowd would cheer for it.

Karam ran her hands up her leg.

It felt like with one more second he might rip her head clean from her

body, but she knew better than to try to pry his hands off. That would waste time and breath, and she wasn't strong enough to loosen the hold of such a beast.

Instead, Karam pushed aside the material on her leg and clutched her hands around the hidden hilt.

A weapon, ready for an occasion like this.

In one swift movement, she brought her knife up and plunged it into his side.

Her opponent stilled.

Karam twisted the knife.

When he made an awful choking noise, she pulled out the blade and slid it into his back.

His hands finally went loose around her neck.

Heaving, Karam rolled him off her. Then she turned with her back still flat on the floor and watched him gasp.

The crowd exploded into cheers because they knew, as Karam did, that the amityguards would not come to the Crook. There would be no punishment or retribution. What did the law matter when there could be anarchy instead?

The man's blood puddled toward Karam's fingertips and she forced herself to her knees before it stained the rest of her.

She knelt over him and said a Wrenyi prayer in the back of her mind. Not for the man, but for the girl. The one she had been when she'd first come to this realm, who cowered at shadows and cried for a family she'd never see again. A girl who grew up wanting to be a warrior, vowing alongside her best friend to topple Kingpins and revive the Rekhi d'Rihsni.

A small part of Karam wished she felt guilt or shame for the way things were now, but it was too late. Too much had happened. She wasn't that girl and this wasn't Granka.

Karam pulled the knife from her opponent's back and wiped the blood onto her trousers.

This was Creije and it was kill or be killed.



KARAM STOOD with her feet shoulder width apart and took a slow sip from the dregs of her water bottle as the last hums of Creije settled into the dark.

Since her fight finished, she had been guarding the door to Wesley's office for exactly three hours and forty-eight minutes, and she was starting to get bored.

But luckily for Karam, she had enough practice killing to know how to kill time.

She pictured Saxony leaning lazily on the wall opposite, legs crossed at the ankles, hair slinking over her shoulder and a dress with geometrical holes cinched tightly over her rounded waist.

Karam sighed.

She needed to stop obsessing over the fact that Saxony hadn't shown up, and wondering what it meant. If Saxony was truly over her and if it was just Karam, still lingering behind, holding on to feelings she should have dismantled months ago.

She needed a distraction.

"Where is he?"

Tavia Syn stepped into the narrow hallway, silver dusters spread across her pale fists. Her boots were half razor blades and her short black hair shielded the top of her eyes like a cloak.

It was a shame she didn't know the first thing about how to fight, because she sure looked the part.

"The underboss is busy," Karam said.

"Busy doing what?"

Karam shrugged.

She wasn't interested in Wesley's dirty dealings. Whatever secrets he had, he could keep them to himself. He'd earned that right.

After all, it was Wesley who saw the potential in Karam when she'd first come to Creije and fought in back-alley rings. He convinced the old underboss to give her a chance tending door and when Wesley became underboss

himself, he kept her on as his personal guard, bringing her with him to the top. She owed him more than she cared to admit.

Tavia snarled and crossed the hall in twelve pounding steps.

She seemed to be favoring her left leg, the ankle of her right barely touching the floor without a grimace. Her sleeves were rolled up and there were new bruises swatching up her white arms like a watercolor.

Tavia really did not know how to fight.

Karam flattened her hand against the wall. "Come back with an appointment."

Tavia glared, which Karam did not find intimidating.

The problem was, that for all of her black magic and even blacker lipstick, Tavia had the unfortunate problem of being infamously moral. And morality in Creije was not something to be frightened of.

"Move," Tavia said.

"Leave," Karam said back.

She was getting a little sick of Tavia using her easy rapport with Wesley to get her way.

She thought it made her an exception to the rules.

It did not.

So, Tavia did what anyone who made a living with sleight of hand would do, which was to shove Karam to one side and make for the door.

And Karam did what anyone who made a living punching people would do, which was to punch Tavia right in the face.

The busker spun from the blow, palms bracing against the wall for support. She heaved in a breath and tried to steady herself. Her back remained to Karam, obscuring any chance for her to survey the damage she had done.

A black eye, probably, to go with the lipstick Tavia was pulling out of her pocket.

Karam frowned as Tavia popped the cap and lifted a shaky hand to her face.

When she smacked her newly painted lips together, the sound was unreasonably loud.

“I don’t have time for this,” Tavia said. “You’re going to regret trying to stop me.”

Hei reb, she was such a makeshift warrior, with pocketknives up her sleeves and slits across her nail beds. A street kid with a chip on her shoulder, ready to take on the world.

Karam tried to hold her temper.

Saxony would be very angry if she killed her best friend.

“You cannot be threatening me,” Karam said. “So I will assume I knocked the sense out of you.”

There was a bruise already forming across Tavia’s cheek. She lifted her lips into a callous smile and said, “When I take you down, it’ll be the best night’s sleep you’ve had in ages. You might even thank me for it.”

Karam almost laughed. “And then Wesley would kill you in my place,” she said. “We both know his soul is as dark as they come.”

Tavia closed the gap between them. “Wesley Thornton Walcott doesn’t have a soul,” she said.

And then Tavia kissed her.

Karam practically threw her across the room, spitting as Tavia ricocheted off the walls.

Insane, Karam thought.

Tavia had gone insane and Karam was going to have to kill her for it.

Right after she rinsed out her mouth.

Twice.

Karam took a step forward, wiping her lips furiously on her sleeve.

Then she stumbled.

Her legs were suddenly shaky and unsteady beneath her. Too heavy to lift off the ground.

“Try not to fight it,” Tavia said. “Saxony would kill me if you got hurt because of this.”

Tavia looked like she was frowning, but Karam couldn’t quite see. The room blurred, then focused, then spun until it distorted again.

Karam felt her pulse slow, and when she tried to look at her surroundings,

or shake her head and piece together the multiple distortions of Tavia, her eyes started to close.

She brought a heavy hand to her mouth.

A smudge of lipstick inked across her thumb.

Gray magic. Black magic.

Opposite her, Tavia pocketed the lipstick with a wistful sigh.

“You are so dead,” Karam said.

And then she was down.