

## Chapter 1: Arada

Capria strapped on four sharp circular blades to her back, ever aware they felt more natural in her hands than that cursed comb. She surveyed the weaving room with spite. *This can't be everything*, she thought. The smooth wooden comb sat there, still damp with sweat from a long day toiling, mocking her.

“Will you go get Shay?” her mother shouted from the kitchen next door. “The moon pies are done and dinner will be ready soon.”

“On my way.” Scraping her stool against the hard-packed dirt floor, Capria skipped out of the house.

People shuffled past her quickly on all sides, eager to get home and celebrate the moon festival with their families. The scent of fresh pies made her stomach rumble.

Soon Capria was standing on top of the only hill in the city, looking out over a familiar sight. Stretched out on all sides were packed adobe houses, golden in the warm rays of the sun. Narrow sandy roads weaved in and out through the city, confused in their destination. On the rooftops, women collected brightly colored laundry and hung lanterns to celebrate the festival. Black and grey whiffs of smoke drifted out of the chimneys.

Beyond the houses to the south, rose the Dahn Dunes. Sand and small thorny brush stretched in all directions except the north. Arada was the only stop where the needed camels and gear could be purchased for a trek south across the endless dry dunes. But few outsiders ever came this way and no one who left for the desert ever returned. Its inhabitants were hardened by the constant threat of drought, famine, and vipers. In recent years there had been so many deaths caused by the Mitoke the villagers had taken to wearing throwing disks at all times to protect themselves.

For the most part, Arada was isolated from society. With increasing oppression from the King, people were reluctant to leave the town. Arada was one of the few remaining places his rule didn't extend.

Five years back, the King had tried to send soldiers to collect taxes and extend the force of his rule. All of them had mysteriously died the same night. Mitoke vipers were blamed but Capria suspected several of the villagers. No more soldiers had come after that.

Her pace quickened as she walked down the hill and into the open market.

The vegetable and meat venders packed up their stalls early today. A bone-thin chicken flapped its wings and squawked, sending scrawny feathers flying as its owner moved its cage. The few remaining bruised vegetables were tossed into large sacks and secured on the backs of camels. Several shoppers collected their purchases of dried dates and figs as the market emptied.

She squinted as the fading rays of the sun reflected off the nekas of the people passing her. The thin flexible one-inch silver ring formed around the neck and hung at the level of the collarbone. Everyone wore one. A nekas was the symbol of life and was as much a part of the body as the heart, lungs, or brain. It determined a person's talents, skills, and abilities.

Capria would never forget the day she went to get hers. The day mocked her.

Once worn, a nekas slowly combined with the flesh on the neck as a person grew older. It would eventually disappear entirely under the skin, leaving behind a metallic tint. The nekas could only be removed at death. It was the first part of the body to stop functioning.

She remembered when Rueben, the baker's son had been bitten by a Mitoke. The village doctor had tried to save him but there was nothing that could be done. Once the skin around Rueben's nekas started rotting, everyone knew it was over. His nekas slipped off and he didn't live to see dinner.

There were three different kinds of nekas but in the market place, Capria could only see two. One of them was a simple pattern with three bronze threads woven together. It signified a gift in physical strength. She passed a mason, arms bulging with rocks, and saw that his nekas was woven of three bronze threads.

The second kind of nekas was made from two silver threads with four smaller silver threads interlaced. People with these nekas were more creative. They were typically gifted in weaving, music, painting, pottery, and carving. She fingered her own nekas with this pattern.

The third pattern was extremely rare. No one in Arada had one.

Capria's pace slowed as she passed several stores; the dye shop filled with hundreds of brilliantly colored strings, the bakery, giving off an irresistible aroma, and the sizzling kabob vendor. Capria stared longingly at the lamb kabobs, her mouth-watering. She fingered the lone

coin in her tattered pocket. She had been saving it for weeks; but felt oddly unable to part with it—as if she would need it. With a sigh, she kept walking.

“Moon Festival blessing!” Several villagers called out as she passed. It was one of the few days in the year when they acknowledged each other with more than a grim smile.

After walking past the gauntlet of stores, Capria took a sharp right onto a nearly deserted street. Particles of sand swept toward her on a hot, dry wind, sending her light cotton dress billowing behind her thin figure. She quickened her pace; as usual she had become distracted as usual by the bustling village.

Soon, she was at the blacksmith’s old wooden door knocking loudly. A moment later the tall door creaked as a boy struggled to pull it open. The sounds of metal striking metal rang out from within.

The dark-skinned boy with a dirty face took one look at Capria then ran dutifully toward a two-story building. “Shay, your sister’s here!”

She took a seat on a stone still warm from the day’s heat.

As she waited, she thought about life as an adult, now that she was no longer in school. She knew how much Shay enjoyed laboring in the smithy forging weapons and tools. It was a safe space for him. She wished that her own trade brought her as much joy.

One’s trade was supposed to determine their life path; but every time Capria sat down at her loom she couldn’t help feeling the fates had gotten something terribly wrong. The sounds of a camel chewing its cud echoed the crushed feelings Capria had harbored deep within since she had received the results from her *famostolios*.

Ella apprehensively scanned the report until her eyes reached the bottom of the page. “It says, ‘Capria has been gifted in endurance, weaving, and detecting unseen forces. Her score in detecting unseen forces is two points lower than the required level for those pursuing a career in this field. Capria has displayed a high level of competency in endurance and would make a natural weaver,’” her mother finished reading slowly and looked up at her daughter, concern etched tightly across her tanned forehead.

Capria sat in stunned silence.

A weaver.

That was all she would ever be.

Her face clouded and she stood angrily.

“Sweetheart,” Ella tried to console her but Capria dodged her mother’s embrace.

After locking the door in her room, she collapsed on the bed sobbing.

“Why?” she moaned into her thin blanket. She thought about the hours she would have to endure in front of a loom back bent, meticulously attempting to tame string. She knew she was made for something else, something meaningful, something of significance.

It was not until the sun had set and darkness settled over the city that she was able to stop. She rose from her tearstained bed, and went into the kitchen where her mother was stirring a pot of soup.

“Where’s the paper?”

Ella turned slowly. A look of surprise and concern crossed her face then vanished. “It’s in the chest. Sweetheart, I’m so sorry.”

Capria dragged her feet as she climbed the stairs. In her mother’s room darkness greeted her.

Scrambling for a match, she lit a candle. Still, she could only see a fraction of the room.

Reaching behind the bed, she ran her fingers along the base of the floor. She stopped when she felt something smooth and cold.

And so Capria had become a weaver, with a loom of her own, as her mother had promised in an attempt to stem the tide of her tears.

The parchment in the smooth cold box had not offered her an out that night, nor any other night she had returned to it, wishing after a hard day’s weaving that this was not really her life. The numbers scrolled through her head again, branded like images of failure behind her eyelids.

Weaving Skills: Improved by fifteen points, now 30.

Detecting Unseen Forces: Improved by twelve points, now 26.

Endurance: Improved by eleven points, now 26.

Handling Animals: Improved by six points, now 21.

Physical strength: Improved by three points now 18.

All gifts/skills need to be 28 points or higher in order to pursue a career.

Capria’s thoughts were interrupted as the sound of metal striking metal stilled—she sighed.

A tall young man with black hair emerged from the smith's shop. His arms, roped with muscle, spoke of many hours wielding a smith's hammer and tongs. His bronze three-threaded nekas that indicated a gift in physical strength, glistened with sweat.

Capria's eyes fell to the three parallel scratch lines that made her brother's nekas unusual. The implanted nekas was already beginning to grow into his skin in certain areas. Despite this, she could still clearly see the imperfection.

Shay's high cheekbones and sharp jawline were similar to his sisters. Because of their closeness in age, people sometimes wondered if they were twins. Capria had always thought this was ridiculous as she was more than a foot shorter than him, and had a much darker complexion.

Sometimes Capria wished she was more like her brother—content with her place in the world.

Shay stood with his chest inflated. "Do you need my brawn to help you carry something home?" Most people took him too seriously. Capria knew better, she poked him in the chest.

"Oof." He resumed his normal posture. "Last one home has to clean up supper," he said leaving Capria in a cloud of dust and sand.

"Hey! We should at least start at the same time!" she yelled after him.

He turned and grinned.

"Don't I have any advantages as a younger sister?" Capria shouted, as she sprinted after him.

Despite the fact her brother was fast and had a head start, she began to catch up as they approached the hill.

Soon she was running right beside him.

A group of boys gathered around a chicken fight stopped their cheering when they noticed Shay. "Hey, its scar!" One of them shouted.

"When are you going to fix your broken nekas?"

Someone laughed.

Capria looked over at Shay.

His eyes turned cold.

Shay began to pull away.

"Shay!" Capria ran faster, but his burst of speed put him just out of reach and her legs were starting to feel like rubber.

Taking a sharp left down an alley behind a row of houses, Capria changed tactics. As she rounded the corner she ran straight into a stranger.

Both Capria and the man crashed to the ground, a cloud of sand and dust enveloping them.

Capria hopped to her feet. “So sorry! I didn’t see—”

Her words died on her tongue as her eyes caught up with the rest of her. The stranger was tan like the locals, but much taller. He wore all brown with strange blocks of mustard yellow. There were strange armored pads on his arms and legs too. Sweat dripped down his bald head as he stared at her.

His eyes! Capria unconsciously took a step back, they were black and green.

She’d heard some people from the far north had eyes of this color but she’d always wondered if it was true. She’d never seen anyone with anything more than hazel eyes, yet here a man was with black eyes that had a bright ring of green around them.

The man’s neck bulged, a knot of wiry muscle. “I’m looking for someone,” he said. His voice was surprisingly soft, almost musical in nature, but his accent was foreign.

“Can you help me find this person?”

A spark ran down her spine. The way he stared at her neck made her uneasy.

The man’s sharp black and green eyes never left her. He took a step toward her. Something under his cloak glinted in the dying rays of sunlight. The way his hand lingered near it sent a wave of fear over her.

“I’ve come along way.” The man continued taking another step toward her. His every movement was graceful and fluid.

Capria froze.

“Come now, I don’t have all day.” She thought he said, but she was already running and couldn’t be sure.

There were no sounds of pursuit, but Capria didn’t slow her pace until she was home.

Panting, she steadied herself for a moment against the back wall of their courtyard before pulling herself up onto the hard mud wall. She grabbed a branch from an olive tree and dropped to the ground, landing silently.

At the back of the house, she jumped up to grab a ledge below the second floor window. Hoisting herself up, she jumped through the window and into her mother’s empty room. “Shay?”

She called, hoping he had arrived and would be waiting outside the curtain to scare her the way he often did when they raced home.

There was no reply from downstairs.

Suddenly, she felt as if Shay had been gone forever.

A chill swept over her, and she ran into the kitchen in search of her mother.

The aroma of Cardamon spice and the sound of noodles popping in oil greeted her.

“Have you seen Shay?” she asked.

Ella eyed Capria suspiciously and her eyes flitted over Capria.

“Moon and stars child! What have you done?”

Capria looked down and saw her knees were bleeding and still had bits of rock and sand in them.

“Mother!” Capria pushed away Ella’s inquiring hands.

“And why would I have seen him?” Her mother asked, “you didn’t lose him on the race home did you?” She smiled as she turned back to the hot pan of noodles, well aware of her children’s competitive nature.

Capria could feel panic rising in her throat. *Where is he?*