

Jeskai: The Unknown Way

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The piercing cry of the sparrowhawk rang out as it winged its way over the crimson peaks of Cori Mountain. Soft feathers and sharp wings carved through the sea of clouds, a confident brushstroke against the gray-white canvas. Below, blurs of brown and green streaked by, rice fields melting into villages until they shifted into the striking, vibrant oranges and reds of the Cori Mountain Monastery. Tall pagodas soared skyward, extending the reach of the already towering stone spires and mountain tops.



Art by: Arthur Yuan

The hawk cried out again as it flew over the monastery grounds, letting out a squawk as it dodged an ascending shrinekeeper dragon. As it continued its journey, the expansive human architecture beneath it gave way to the natural formations of the caldera beyond. Obsidian stone of cooled lava flows jutted out in magnificent arcs against the crystal blue waters of the caldera lake, shimmering reflections dancing in the afternoon light.

Suddenly, the hawk dove with a screech, eyes and talons fixed on the promise of a meal. As it descended, it barely missed the human seated in a lotus pose atop one of the obsidian formations. So still was his meditation, so steady his breath, that the hawk did not detect him at all.

The man did not react at all to the shriek of the hawk. Nor did he react to the splash of water below him, nor the sound of squirming scales, nor the gasping struggle and ending of a life. Unperturbed, Asham's breath continued at a steady pace, the sounds of the natural world fading away as he further centered his focus inward.

Breath flows in.

Asham's eyelids fluttered as his chest expanded, the coarse fabric of his robes chafing slightly against his skin. A single bead of sweat dripped across his brow, completing its long journey across his shaved head to linger just at the corner of his eye. Still, Asham ignored it.

Air through the lungs. Mana through the second gate.

In one fluid motion, Asham left his meditative stance, uncoiling with a dragon-inspired grace. His center of mass smoothly shifted as he spun onto his feet, body spiraling with a practiced rhythm.

Limbs glide as claws rend the air.

Asham tensed his hands into a talon-like shape, the momentum from the spiral now extending into languid arcs through his outstretched arms, the steps of the form embedded deep into his muscle memory.

Release the self. Expel breath, and conjure flames!

Asham's eyes flew open as he let out a loud *hah*! His arms thrust out with force, tensed talon-stance hands shredding through air.

His execution of the physical form was perfect.

But no flames manifested.

With a frustrated huff, Asham resumed his sitting meditation. He could feel the mana dissipate like sweat from his body, without even the faintest *spark* of the mystic fires that the form was supposed to unlock.

Again.

Asham inhaled through his nose.

Breath flows in.

He tried to focus, to empty his thoughts.

But in his mind, he saw *her* face.

Air through the lungs.

The stupid grin of that Temur clan fighter, her very presence an insult to the Jeskai temple she visited.

Mana through the second gate.

The challenge she issued against the monastery echoed in Asham's memory. "Call forth your most promising disciple," she said.

Limbs glide—

His pride in being chosen by the elders. His eagerness to humble the arrogant wanderer.

—as claws rend the air—

The entire monastery, watching. The anticipation, crackling in the courtyard. The respect of his fellow disciples, the honor of Cori Mountain, all at stake as he circled the fighter.

—release the self, expel breath—

The fight, all over in a single strike!

... but not the way it was supposed to end.

—conjure flames!

Asham, on his back, dazed, staring at the blue sky and wondering why the clouds churned with such dizzying patterns.

Conjure ... flames!

Silence, save the ringing in his ears.

He had failed.

He was a failure.

Conjure ... flames ...!

The fresh memory collided with his present as Asham found himself flapping his hands helplessly while the momentum of his overeager scorching talon strike carried him off balance. For a moment, he thought he could recover—but his center of mass tipped ever so slightly over his toes, and down he went, tumbling to the blue waters below, landing on his belly with a stinging splash.

Asham scrambled in an undignified paddle within the icy blue, gasping for air as he breached the surface of the lake.

“Nice one, Asham.”

Asham whirled his head around, embarrassment rising in his cheeks—only to be overwhelmed by relief at the sight of the grinning face greeting him from the shore.

“Ru!” Asham gave a powerful kick, cresting the surface of the water with a front flip and landing on his feet. His cloth shoes slid over the surface of the water as he found his balance. With gentle ease, Asham channeled mana to his legs, bounding lightly across the surface of the lake and leaping to catch his ainok friend in a warm embrace.

Ru laughed, shoving Asham off him. “Still making the cloud-step technique look easy, eh?”

Asham shook his head. “Says the fastest kid in the village. You make my cloud-step look like some kind of lead-foot stance.”

Ru shrugged, good natured. “A memory clearly distorted by nostalgia and humility. Only *one* of us is now an esteemed monk of the Cori Mountain Monastery, after all.”

Asham groaned. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“About what?”

“Exactly.” Asham cast his gaze about, looking to change the subject. “What brings you all the way up to the lake?”

“The family ox needed some water,” Ru answered matter-of-factly.

“Paipai needed water.” Asham looked further down the bank where, indeed, an ox stood.

“Paipai passed last winter. That’s Guaiguai.”

Asham paused. “I’m sorry.”

“A few years in the monastery, and he forgets how farm life works,” Ru teased. “Seasons pass, animals die. It’s how things go.”

Asham rolled his eyes and started wringing out the sleeves of his soaked robe. “I know you though, Ru. Probably bawled your eyes out for three nights.”

“Oh, yes, definitely,” Ru replied. “Paipai meant the world to me.”

Asham shook his head. “You know, there’s easier watering holes closer to the village to take your ox to. Less treacherous paths, too.”

Ru shrugged. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose there are.”

The two stood quietly for a moment, gazing out across the lake, their thoughts broken up by the sound of loud lapping coming from the nearby ox.

“How are things? Back in the village?” Asham tried to keep his question nonchalant.

“Quite well,” Ru replied, one paw scratching behind a pointed ear. “Your parents send their regards. They told me that if I ran into you, I should tell you that they’re very proud of you.”

“I wish they wouldn’t,” Asham complained. “I really don’t need any more pressure right now.”

“Oh, no, I have such supportive parents. My life is so difficult,” Ru teased. His playful banter faltered as he saw the sullen look on his friend’s face. “Hey. What’s bothering you?”

Asham turned and started walking back toward his meditation perch. “Nothing.”

“Your brow is a storm cloud of worry, my friend,” Ru called out after him. “And even the lake water can’t mask the scent of stress in the air.”

“Sharp nose on a dense dog,” Asham grumbled.

“Thorny words from a drenched monk,” Ru retorted.

Asham glowered at his friend. Ru returned his look, arms crossed.

Slowly, the frown on Asham’s face turned into a mischievous grin. “Oh, you think you’re better than me simply because you’re dry?”

Ru’s answer was a splash of water in Asham’s face.

Asham sputtered and ran to give chase, but Ru took full advantage of his head start, feet alighting across the lake like a dancing dragonfly, leaving perfect ripples expanding out with each step as he bound across the water. Try as Asham would, he couldn’t catch his friend or land a good splash. Every time he got close, the ainok managed to dash and dart out of the way, returning with graceful jets of water that always seemed to find their mark.

“You’re cheating!” Asham laughed as he got splashed yet again.

“No. I’m just winning,” Ru called out as he ducked behind an obsidian outcropping.

As Asham’s gaze traced up along the formation, an idea came to mind. He plunged his hand into the water, expending mana to conjure a swirl of air around his open palm. The accelerating winds drew water toward him into a swirling cyclone. Asham quickly scaled up the stone outcropping above him,

trailing a typhoon of water in his wake. From the top, he saw Ru standing on the surface of the water, peering ever so carefully around the edge of the pillar below him. None the wiser.



Art by: Nino Vecia

With a grunt, Asham pulled the zephyr strike before him, the spiraling air drawing up and dumping an entire surge of water down on Ru. “Gotcha!” Asham shouted as the deluge came crashing down.

A surprised yelp. A crash of water. Asham grinned, pleased at his triumph.

The grin slowly decayed as the lapping water showed no signs of Ru.

Asham rushed and stumbled down the stone outcropping, pebbles and stones skittering beside him. “Ru? Ru!” Nothing in sight. No response, save the lapping of disturbed water against the obsidian. Asham stepped out, eyes scanning first the depths, then the horizon, worry rising. Still nothing.

“Ru—” Asham got two steps out before a pair of hands emerged from the surface of the lake and grasped Asham around the ankles, pulling him down. Asham let out an undignified scream as he was pulled under for the second time that day. His surprise melted into annoyance, then amusement at the sight of Ru, dark gray fur puffed out underwater, bubbles of laughter escaping from his snout.

The two swam up and broke the surface of the water in tandem. Splashes and shouts bounced off the obsidian rocks as the two swam back to shore. Ru clambered onto a flat expanse of stone, Asham right behind him, and the two flopped on their backs, looking up at the cerulean sky, catching their breaths.

Nearby, Guaiguai regarded them with bored eyes, unimpressed.

“You’ve gotten faster,” Asham said.

"Are you sure you haven't just slowed down?" Ru asked.

"... no," Asham replied, sitting up.

Ru waited a moment, panting softly, as Asham stared into the depths of the lake. "So," Ru said, after a moment of prolonged silence, "do you want to talk about what has you so moody? Or did you want to evade the topic with more cryptic self-deprecation?"

"I messed up," Asham blurted out.

"How?"

"I let the whole monastery down. I'm an embarrassment to my fellow disciples, and I dragged the Jeskai name through the dirt."

Ru shook his head. "That ... sounds like quite the tale. What actually happened?"

Asham's story tumbled out of him, a jumble of words and frustration and anger bubbling over. About the Temur wanderer who passed through Cori Mountain Monastery. About his opportunity to represent his class of disciples in the bout. About the humiliating defeat. Ru listened quietly until his friend ran out of steam. With a sigh, he stood and gave a big stretch, then shook out the water all over his body.

"It sounds to me like you didn't let your whole monastery down," Ru finally said.

"Were you not listening—"

"And that you're not an embarrassment to your fellow disciples," Ru continued. Asham again started to protest, but Ru held up a hand. "It does sound like you were embarrassed *in front of* your fellow disciples. But there's more to the Way than just fighting."

Asham scoffed. "Sure, sure. But when the Way leads you to have a martial arts match with an opposing clan, it's hard to say it's not about fighting."

"But this was a Temur fighter. A wanderer, yes? And she asked to spar with a disciple of the monastery?" Ru shrugged. "It sounds like she was interested in an exchange of styles, more than in victory or loss."

Asham shook his head, frustrated. "You didn't hear *how* she asked. It wasn't for an *exchange of ideas*, it was clearly because she thought herself superior."

Ru cocked his head to one side. "Did you not think yourself superior prior to the bout? Confidence in victory is necessary for any fighter, is it not?"

Asham bound to his feet and began pacing. Behind him, Guaiguai followed his movements with his eyes. "You're twisting my words."

"I'm only reflecting back what I'm hearing."

"You're acting so wise, for a farm boy too scared to join the monastery." The words hissed out of Asham. Ru sighed and stood to his feet.

"Ah. We're back on this topic."

Asham shook his head, a scowl taking hold of his face. "The world has changed, Ru. We witnessed the *end* of the age of dragonlords. And destiny called us *both*, when the Cori Mountain elders invited the two of us to study at the monastery. A monastery of free teachings, no longer bound to Ojutai's traditions! But you refused the call."

A low growl of frustration rumbled from Ru's chest. "You're conflating opportunity with destiny, Asham." He waved a hand further up the mountain, in the direction of the monastery. "The monastery was the right choice for you. But the village, and staying with my family, was right for me. We each must find our own way. Yours is as a monk and warrior. Mine is as a farmer."

"You're far too strong to squander your skills with *farming* !" Asham yelled. "Jeskai needs you! Your cloud-step technique is faster than that of just about every disciple that I've trained with."

"A skill honed planting rice across our farms," Ru replied. "And one that serves that purpose well. Do you really see your parents as living a life squandered? Who do you think grows the food the monasteries eat?" Ru thumped a fist on his chest. "I am also serving Jeskai, Asham." The fist softened to an open paw. "And I'm just as disappointed that our paths have split, but I believe we are where we need to be."

Asham stuttered, his next point derailed. "You-I ... That's not what this is about."

Ru sighed. "Sure. Of course not."

Asham kicked a pebble, hard. The two watched it skip across the lake. "The elders called me forward as the most skillful disciple. But I let them all down. So, I thought ... I thought if I learned this final martial form, I'd prove myself worthy." Asham moved his arms loosely through the stances. "*Release the self. Expel breath. Conjure flames.* Only I can't conjure so much as a spark."

He sat, his head dropping in his hands. "I know it sounds foolish. But I have to regain my honor. I have to learn this last form. Then I have to challenge that Temur wrestler to a rematch. I have to win."

Ru sat down next to Asham, leaning a comforting shoulder into the monk's. "If one of the steps of the form is to *release the self*, you sure are saying a lot of '*I have tos*' that would contradict that missive," he said.

Asham opened his mouth to respond, only to realize he had no great retort.

"You also mention your honor, but a simple loss is not an erosion of honor or respect," Ru continued. "The Way says we can lose and still remain honorable. Have your masters conveyed they felt dishonored by your performance? Or are you doing the thing you always do where you hold yourself to a standard no one else expects?"

"That's not ... I don't ..." Asham stammered.

Ru grinned and gave Asham a light headbutt. "Ah. So you're doing the thing."

Asham sighed and leaned his head on Ru's shoulder. "I *have* missed you, Ru."

He half expected Ru to move away, but he didn't. For a moment, Asham just focused on listening to the rise and fall of his friend's breath as the two lingered, the afternoon sun slowly drying out the last dampness from the lake.

Finally, Ru stood and turned to Asham, raising his hands into a neutral stance. "Alright then," he said.

Asham blinked. "Alright what?"

"Show me this form." Ru beckoned Asham with a little wave. "The one you kept messing up when you fell into the water. Forget about *yourself*, and your duties. Teach *me* instead."

A grin spread across Asham's face as he stepped forward, wrist meeting Ru's, ready to spar.

Ai Wen descended the mountain path at a leisurely pace, her step as light as her heart. Her travels had been fruitful, and she had gained much from the Jeskai monks who hosted her the last few days. Though many in her village had warned her of the detached, aloof attitude some Jeskai exuded, she found most of the Jeskai elders she met humble and accommodating. The idea of unity across all clans, once nothing more than a naive joke, seemed ... well, if not likely, then at least *possible*. A moon cycle well spent.

Ai Wen's good mood only improved as a tree just off the path drew her attention. The most ripe, delicious persimmons dangled from the branches, sun-kissed by the late afternoon light. She plucked one from the bough and took a big bite. A burst of sweetness danced across her tongue as juice ran down her face.

"Halt, fighter."

Ai Wen turned around. Behind her, she saw a figure silhouetted against the setting sun. She took another big bite of the persimmon, juices spraying, as she glanced around at who else he might be speaking to.

"You. Temur wanderer."

Ai Wen turned back and squinted at the shadowed figure now pointing in her direction. "Oh! Me! Hail, fellow traveler!" She waved at the figure with her persimmon hand. Then, as an afterthought: "Care for a persimmon?"

"I—no, thank you." The figure sounded a little flustered.

"You sure? They're very sweet," said Ai Wen. She finished the one in hand, then reached up and plucked two more. "I can toss you one if you like—or we can eat together if you're also headed this way, traveler."

"I'm not a traveler. And ... and those aren't your persimmons!" The figure's voice raised in pitch ever so slightly.

"They're wild persimmons, are they not?" Ai Wen scratched her head, perplexed. "Is there a farm nearby? Oh! Are they yours?" She gave a small bow. "My apologies, persimmon farmer!"

"No, they are not—I am not a persimmon farmer!" The figure shook his head.

"Oh, well then, feel free to grab one if you wish—or not," Ai Wen replied. "It is a free Tarkir now, after all." With that, she stowed both persimmons in the pack at her side and turned to resume her descent down the path.

A rustle of cloth above her drew her attention upward as the figure catapulted over her, landing lightly on his feet and blocking her path.

"You shall not escape me—"

"Hah! Impressive!" Ai Wen gave an admiring nod at the young man before her. "Cloud-step technique, yes?" She gave him a quick glance over. "Bald head, cool robes. You're a Cori Mountain disciple, right? You guys make the *best* buns. Nice."

"I—do you not recognize me?" The monk before her looked genuinely offended.

Ai Wen slapped her forehead. "Oh, shoot. I'm so sorry. I met a lot of monks the last few days. And so many of you have the same shaved-head look, so it's been harder to remember faces."

"But ... we sparred," the monk said, sullen.

"I spar with lots of people," Ai Wen responded matter-of-factly.

"You ... you bested me," the monk said.

"I best lots of people," Ai Wen responded, even more matter-of-factly. "Glad it was memorable for you, though!"

With that, Ai Wen began descending the mountain once again.

An arm shot out, blocking her path forward. Ai Wen arched an eyebrow, tilting her head to look more closely at the rude young monk in her way. He glared back with determination.

"I am Asham of the Cori Mountain Monastery. And I have tracked you down to demand a rematch."

"Asham ..." Ai Wen's brow furrowed in thought, then burst up. "You're the disciple I met on the first day, no?"

Asham let out a scornful chuckle. "So, you do remember me."

"The name was helpful." Ai Wen shook her head. "But I cannot give you a rematch."

"Why not?" Asham said through gritted teeth.

"Because our bout was not a match," Ai Wen replied, gently brushing aside Asham's outstretched arm.

Asham pulled his hand back into a fist and turned to put his whole body in Ai Wen's path. "You insulted me then, and you insult me now with this refusal!"

"My boy, no insult was intended," Ai Wen said, her patience waning. "And even then, you have little reason to be so bruised and sensitive." Her eyes narrowed. "As respect for your elders' hospitality, I will not take offense at this ... whatever this is. But I kindly implore you to step aside."

Asham stood before her, staring into her eyes. Slowly, he crossed his arms.

So, Ai Wen promptly threw him off the path.

With dizzying haste, she thrust one foot behind Asham while twin open palms landed on his chest, giving a firm shove that sent Asham sprawling down the cliffside. She watched to confirm the arc of his fall took him flying backward into the pazoberry bushes below that she saw earlier, landing with a satisfying *wumph*.

Ai Wen shook her head as she resumed her walk down the stone path. No need to injure the lad, but honestly, the disrespect ...

A sudden rising heat behind her triggered an instinctive sidestep from Ai Wen. A gout of flame nearly singed the fine fur fringe of her traveler's cloak as she barely dodged out of the way. The Temur warrior spun around to see Asham standing, hands ablaze and held out in a talon pose. The glow from the firelight danced across Ai Wen's armor and flickered in her eyes.



Art by: Wayne Wu

“Interesting,” she said.

“I will not be denied my rematch!” Asham shouted.

Asham glided forward, footwork weaving a spiral path as he launched strike after strike. Ai Wen nimbly dodged out of the way of each blow, but the flames grew larger and larger with each missed swing. *The boy has some prowess with this stance*, she mused.

Asham leapt off the ground, both hands raised above, fiery draconic talons ready to claw down across Ai Wen’s body, crying out. “I *will* defeat you.”

But Ai Wen was faster.

She thrust a single arm up, grasping Asham by the neck, the surprise and force of the aggression knocking the wind out of his body. Then, as though he was little more than a bundle of rags, she brought him smashing down into the stone steps behind her, slamming him into the ground with a crash. Stone and bone alike cracked at the impact.

Asham laid on the ground, gasping for air. *Broken ribs. Unclear how many.* He tried to will himself to stand, but even a simple breath sent another stab of pain shooting through him.

Ai Wen stood to her full height, shaking back her hair that had fallen in front of her face. “I am Ai Wen, elder of the Sahn Ni family of Clan Temur.” She shifted her stance, and Asham saw a massive bone and steel sword glimmer at her side. *She didn’t even use her weapon in either fight ...*

Ai Wen crouched down, bringing her face close to Asham. “I said our bout was no match, not as a jab at your pride or of the Jeskai, but because a fight between an elder and a disciple is no fair match. I merely was curious to measure the strength of the Jeskai youth, and you did perfectly fine that day.”

“You ... you ...” Asham tried to speak, but his breath still only came to him in wheezing rasps.

Ai Wen leaned in closer.

“What was that?” she asked.

“You ... can’t be that much older than me,” Asham managed to squeeze out. But it mostly came out as a wheezing breath, with a little burble of—*oh, no, was that blood?*

Ai Wen laughed heartily. “I will take that compliment, young monk! It takes much to maintain this glowing, healthy skin in the frigid cold of the north, you know?”

She stood, looking down at Asham. To his surprise, her expression was not one of anger, or even pity, but respect. “Honestly, young monk, pride is your greatest weakness. Clearly, you must have had some sort of a martial breakthrough, to come at me with that dragonfire stance. An impressive feat for just a few short days.” She looked around, then whispered conspiratorially. “Plus, I expected you to have many more broken bones from that.”

Asham felt a reflexive surge of pride then shame at the utterly crushing compliment. *But why was she whispering, as if there was anyone else to overhear? And why were there so many black spots dotting his vision?*

“You’re going to be fine, Asham. I leave you in good hands.” With that, Ai Wen gave a conspiratorial wink, then continued down the path. Asham listened to her footsteps recede, trying to peer at her. But even lifting his head was so exhausting, and really, a little rest sounded quite nice.

As blackness enveloped him, he almost didn’t hear the light patter of clothed shoes approach him. Almost didn’t feel an outstretched paw rest gently on his forehead.

Asham awoke with a start.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark room around him. A familiar scent filled the air, one he couldn’t quite place until his sight had adjusted to the dimness: plum blossom root. The main ingredient in a healing poultice often used in his village.

He was home.

He shifted a bit and immediately regretted it. His chest ached with a dull soreness that went deep. Beneath him, the familiar cool bumpiness of a bamboo mat pressed against him.

At the foot of the bed, he saw Ru wake with a start from the chair he sat in.

The two looked at each other for a moment.

Then they both broke into laughter.

“I ... am a fool,” Asham said.

“Yeah,” Ru agreed.

“How did you—”

“You weren’t subtle about your intentions on the day you first produced flames with that form.” Ru stood, exchanging the incense at the foot of the bed for a fresh stick.

Asham groaned. "Master Qi must be furious—"

"I told the monastery you, uh, fell down the mountain," Ru said. "Overexuberant training."

"Embarrassing," Asham said.

"Everyone believed it immediately," Ru followed up.

"Even *more* embarrassing," Asham amended.

"Your parents came by to see you," Ru added.

"Surprisingly, less embarrassing. I'm sorry they saw me like this, though," Asham said.

"Lift your hands. I should refresh your bandages."

Asham obliged, sitting up and grimacing through it as Ru slowly unwound the fabric across Asham's chest.

As the last bandage came off, Asham marveled at the blacks and blues that danced across his skin.

"Could have been worse. Much worse," Ru said.

"She must have held back," Asham conceded.

"Maybe. Either way, you're lucky." From a pouch nearby, Ru pulled out a fresh stretch of cloth. He opened a ceramic jar, and the pungent smell of ointment filled the air. With a small brush, he began applying the ointment to the bandage.

"No, we've established this. I'm a fool. An embarrassed fool," Asham sighed. Ru, graciously, said nothing this time.

"Thank you. And ... sorry. You were right. I let my passions, and my ego, overtake my sense."

"Lift," Ru said in response.

Asham winced as the cool ointment contacted bruised skin.

"I think ... I think I need to visit the other monasteries."

Ru rolled his eyes. "Of course, your solution is to leave," he said.

"No. Not to run away this time. To expand my training. Cori Mountain has taught me much. But I clearly need to gain a broader perspective—and a broader understanding of the world, and of the other clans."

Ru gave a sharp tug on the bandages, and Asham grimaced as he sucked air in through his teeth. "So, you admit it then," Ru said.

Asham frowned. "Admit what?"

"That you joining the monastery was you running away." Ru looked Asham in the eyes. Asham held his gaze.

"Yes," Asham finally answered. "I ... I don't think I could have admitted that to myself before today," he continued. "I'm sorry it's taken me this long."

"Because you're an embarrassed fool," Ru replied. "We have established this, after all."

Asham smiled. "You saved my life today—"

"Two days ago," Ru interrupted.

“Two days? Waymaster, help me.” Asham shook his head in disbelief, then pressed on. “You’ve always had my back. Even when I hid from my feelings, from my parents, from myself, you still supported me. Helped me train, on top of your own duties, your responsibilities to your family, at the disruption of your own way. And I—”

Ru leaned in, kissing Asham. Soft. Gentle.

Surprise quickly melted into a warm happiness, as Asham kissed him back.

The two parted, looking at each other, the moment lingering before Ru broke the spell.

“I should clean these bandages,” he said, standing with the old, discarded ones. “We have to get you back into traveling shape if you’re to continue your journey.” Asham sighed as Ru walked to the door. There, Ru paused.

“And I’ll be here when you return,” he said, then left without looking back.

Asham leaned back in the bed and sighed.

The warm, familiar scent of the incense filled the room.

Outside, high above, a sparrowhawk’s cry pierced the overcast sky as it flew on across the lands of Tarkir.