

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

2014

Interwoven

Ellen Eubanks

Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eubanks, Ellen, "Interwoven" (2014). *Honors Theses*. 214.

https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/214

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Preface

Fantasy stories have been a part of my mental furniture for almost longer than I can remember. When I was four years old, we took a family trip to Gulf Shores. My cousins, Madalyn and Tara, their parents, and our grandparents came along. I can just barely remember my dad reading *The Hobbit* to my cousins, my sister, and me in the evenings after we had played on the beach all day. I do not recall the first time I encountered *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Lord of the Rings*. From my perspective, I have always known these stories, have always had the fantastic embedded in my imagination. I suppose I simply flowed from the fairy tales I heard as a child to fantasy stories. There was no moment of discovery that I loved them. It's as though they've always been there. Since being steeped in fantasy stories as a child, I have continued reading such tales to this day. So it should come as no surprise that when I began creating stories of my own, they were fantasy stories. From simple daydreams to ideas for novels, my imagination often defaults to fantasy.

Fantasy (and speculative fiction in general) is often looked down upon. People don't see it as having any literary value beyond entertainment. I respectfully but vehemently disagree. Stories have power. Our emotional involvement in stories makes their lessons stick more than the simple presentation of an idea will. They can slip things into our minds without us realizing, sneaking in behind our defenses. Fantasy stories can sometimes do this even better than literary fiction. Fantasy takes us out of the world we are used to, distancing us so that we may see more clearly. We have instant reactions to things in this world, often so ingrained in us that we don't even notice them. For instance, if I describe a man as Chinese, you already have an idea of what he looks like, how he talks, and what sort of job he has. Or if I mention the Middle East, you probably think of Islam, war, deserts, oil, and lots of other things. But in fantasy, we encounter a

different world. We can't automatically judge situations or people in these stories, because the signs we use to make such judgments are different or absent. This allows us to think about the situations presented in the story with less clouding from our biases.

Fantasy is not just escapism, as some critics have said. It can teach us valuable truths that are applicable to our world. Through the stories I have read, I have learned much about courage, honor, faith, and love. I have seen characters stand for what is right against terrible opposition, and I have seen characters fall prey to their own flaws. I have witnessed characters struggle with moral dilemmas, faced the complexities of the world, and learned to see from perspectives foreign to my own. As George R.R. Martin, a well-known fantasy author, says through a character in one of his books, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one." These stories let me escape the narrow confines of my own experience, not out of fear of or boredom with this world, but to learn something.

When I began to think about what I would write for my OBU Honor's Thesis, I was, naturally, drawn to the idea of writing a fantasy novel. For my Directed Study, I worked on doing a bit of research and hashing out some of the background for my story, which has the working title *Interwoven*. I first wrote down a bit of *Interwoven* in 2010. I was taking the AP Chemistry test shortly before graduating from high school. After abandoning hope of being able to accomplish anything else on the open-response questions, I realized I still had a decent chunk of time before the test was over. So rather than staring blankly around the room, I decided to write a story that had been floating around in my mind for a while. I have always wondered what the person who graded my test thought. I hope it alleviated some of the monotony of reading hundreds of chemistry problems.

My thesis today resembles very little its chemistry test beginnings. Parts of the main character remain, but almost everything else has changed. My growing realization of many problems within the fantasy genre was a major impetus behind a lot of the changes. In the past year, I have read a lot of articles and blog posts discussing how fantasy is dominated by straight white male characters. N.K. Jemisin, Foz Meadows, and many others have written extensively about how it is problematic that so many stories are based on medieval Europe, with straight white male protagonists. Like I said earlier, stories have power, and excluding voices can be damaging. Too many fantasy works marginalize people of color, women, gays, and other who are different from the perceived norm. In coming to understand more fully the problems within my beloved genre, I have felt challenged to do better. I do not want to contribute to the marginalization of others. There should be a place for all kinds of voices and stories within fantasy.

In light of this, I decided to base my story on African rather than European societies. I knew this would be difficult, but I did not realize just how difficult. My mind automatically gravitates towards a European-style setting. So often as I wrote I realized that something I had just assumed about the setting wouldn't be true in an African society. From food, clothing, and hair, to family dynamics, social interactions, and names, I have had to reexamine my initial thoughts. I haven't done anywhere near enough research to presume to write about Africa, even a fictional setting based on Africa. I know practically nothing about African in general, much less all the vast differences on the continent. It terrifies me to try to write this story, as I am sure I will make many, many mistakes. But neither do I want to write in a way that blindly continues to propagate the same problems. Thankfully, I am not a famous author with thousands of readers,

so I don't have to worry about doing too much damage. However, it is important to me to pay attention to these issues, even if I never publish a book.

In trying to write a fantasy novel, I have learned that I know very little about much more than just Africa. I constantly ran into things as I wrote that I am unformed about. Geography, economics, religion, travel, language, and more. I don't know how far apart large cities would be, or how long it would take to travel between them with mule-drawn carts. I don't fully understand how my own government works, so how am I supposed to create one? What sort of buildings would be in the less prosperous part of a city that has little wood or stone to build with? It's been humbling to realize how just how much I don't know. It's also made me curious to learn more about a wide range of subjects. In a way, a writer needs to know about every part of life. I hope to continue learning throughout my life.

I hope you've enjoyed hearing a bit about my background as a writer and some of the thought processes behind this story. Currently I only have a few chapters written. I had hoped to condense it into a short story at one point, but I think all the long fantasy series I read has affected my pacing. So instead of a complete story, you get a taste of more to come. Thanks for reading!

-Ellen Eubanks

Chapter One

Nyoko looked up, startled, as her mother barged into her office. Setting down the sales records she had been looking over, she said irritably, "You could knock, Mother."

"It's my business, my building," Anija Saarla, head of the Saarla Traders, told her only daughter. "I don't need your permission to come and go."

"No, but it would be polite of you to warn me before you come in, so I don't jump out of my sandals," Nyoko replied, with little hope Anija would listen. Her mother was unfailingly gracious to customers, but her leadership of the Traders was not characterized by politeness.

"Tsunì sent a message that we're to move up our trip to Koellja," Anija said curtly, ignoring Nyoko's remark. "You and Hiralà leave tomorrow."

"I thought Kegili was going with Hiralà," Nyoko said. Koellja, the city that controlled the area to the northeast, was one of their major trading spots, when they weren't at war. They made the trip there three times a year during times of peace. Four weeks traveling took them out of the hills where Sarralà was nestled and into the plains where the nomadic tribes connected with Koellja lived. They spent a couple of weeks in the city trading goods from Sarralà and the other cities farther away for the handiwork of the tribes, then traveled four weeks back across the plains and up into the hills.

"She was supposed to," Anija said. "You were specifically requested."

"Why does Tsunì want me to go on this trip? I haven't heard of anything that would require my skills." The Saarla Traders were a perfectly legitimate business. However, they were also spies for the queen. Usually it was just a matter of keeping their eyes open on trips to other cities and reporting back their observations. Sometimes, though, there were more complicated assignments. A few of the Saarlàs had more specialized training than the rest. Nyoko was one of

these. She had started training when she was four. Tsuni, the spymaster, hadn't wanted to waste the chance to have a fully trained Darkwoven.

This explained why her mother seemed more prickly than usual. Anija didn't mind their usual way of gathering intelligence. The Traders normally didn't go out of their way to get information, just paid close attention to what they saw and heard during normal business. The special trips involved more active means of gathering information, of which her mother did not fully approve. Especially when it was her daughter going into danger.

Anija began pacing in front of Nyoko's desk. The room wasn't spacious, forcing her to change directions often. "People have been reporting that Koellja is...unsettled. You're supposed to find out what's going on."

"That's vague," Nyoko observed.

"Yes, it is," Anija snapped. "Tsuni's message didn't say any more. She's sending you because she only has insubstantial speculation."

"There wasn't anything about it being one particular tribe?" Nyoko asked.

"It said 'all'," replied Anija, frustration clear in her voice.

"Wonderful. Likely we'll just end up having made a fuss over something trivial."

Grimacing, Nyoko looked back at the papers on her desk. "If I'm leaving tomorrow, I've got a lot to get done."

"Kegili and Hiralá are overseeing the loading, so you only have to worry about packing your own things. I'll go tell them about the change of plans," Anija said.

Nyoko nodded, then turned her attention back to the records she was checking. She winced as the door closed forcefully behind Anija. Maybe one day her mother would stop making such abrupt entrances and exits, though it didn't seem likely to happen any time soon.

Hours later, well after the time she would have normally stopped working for the day, Nyoko was finally finished with the records. Luckily, they hadn't been too frustrating. Just tedious. She needed to find some supper before packing for the trip, having skipped the usual mealtime in order to finish her work. She left the building that housed the offices through the back entrance. She headed towards the refectory on the south end of the Saarla's large compound, passing hulking warehouses on her left and clustered homes on her right. She should still be able to find something left over from supper.

Even though it was late in the evening, a few people were out. Her stomach growling demandingly, Nyoko only nodded in passing to those she encountered. Before she could make it to the refectory, she saw her aunt Jimura approaching. She glanced around for a way to avoid her, but couldn't find one. Jimura never saw Nyoko without having something to say about how her mother was running the Traders.

"Nyoko, what's this I hear about your mother moving up the Koellja trip? Everyone was expecting it to start in a week. A hurried potter makes poor pots."

"There was a message, Aunt Jimura," Nyoko replied.

"Hmph, those meddlers," Jimura muttered. "Well, she's got Hiralala and Kegili taking all the wrong goods. It's like they're not aware they're going to Koellja. No idea of what the market is like there at this time!"

As soon as Jimura paused for breath, Nyoko said, "Now, now, Aunt, I'm sure Hiralala and Kegili know what they're doing. They've had plenty of experience with the Koellja run. I've got to get some food and pack, or else I'd love to stay and talk," she said, tacking on a polite lie.

"What's this? Pack? What are you doing going with them?"

She shouldn't have said anything that would give Jimura more reason to criticize. "I'm replacing Kegili for this run," she said, lowering her voice before adding, "as per instructions." Jimura knew, of course, that the Saarlans were also spies, but conveniently forgot that when she was in a complaining mood. All of the family knew, but not all of the hired workers, hence her lowered voice. There weren't many people out, but it never hurt to be careful.

"Fool thing to be messing around with the trip," Jimura grumbled.

"What can we do?" Nyoko said with a shrug. "I'd best be off, though."

"Go on, then. Make sure you do the run proper, girl."

Nyoko grimaced as she walked away. Jimura, along with a couple of her older relatives, still called her "girl" even though she was twenty-seven. She made it to the refectory without any more stops, for which her growling stomach was thankful. Stepping inside, she could smell hints of what had been for dinner. She walked quickly past the large tables where the family and workers ate meals to the doors leading to the kitchen. Luckily, the cook still on duty was Gesar. He was easygoing and wouldn't mind letting her have something to eat.

"Gesar! Oh most glorious preparer of delicious feasts, would you by any chance have some small morsel to nourish my poor frame?" said Nyoko, smiling.

Gesar laughed. "I suppose for that much flattery, I could come up with something."

"Wonderful man. I shall sing your praises all the way to Koellja and back." Nyoko perched on an empty countertop while Gesar rummaged through the cold box. The cold box was something a Firewoven had come up with a couple hundred years ago. A special stone that held a lot of heat was mounted on the back. The Firewoven they bought it from had created a link that drew heat from the inside of the box to the stone. From the chilly interior, Gesar removed some leftover grilled goat, putting it on a plate.

“No time to warm this up, I’m afraid,” he said.

“That’s all right; I don’t mind it cold,” Nyoko replied. He handed her the plate before going to a cabinet. From there, he pulled out a couple large pieces of dried fruit, tossing them to her. “Thanks,” she mumbled around the food in her mouth.

“We can’t have the master spy starving,” he said with a wink. She rolled her eyes at him. “What are you going to look for this time?” he asked. As a Saarla, Gesar was aware of the full range of Nyoko’s role in the Traders.

“Not really sure,” Nyoko answered between bites. “There’ve been reports that the Koelljans are on edge. I’m going to find out why.”

“Not your normal sort of mission, eh?”

Nyoko nodded. Typically she investigated specific leads, like rumors about an alliance between two nobles, or hints of shady business dealings.

“Got any plan for figuring it out, yet?”

“Not really. I’ll just have to improvise. Talk to people, watch carefully, poke around a bit.”

“Dark go with you, cousin,” he said, invoking the protection of her element. Gesar generally prayed to Fire, but she was a Darkwoven. She appreciated how he always called on a person’s own element when saying a blessing.

“And Fire be with you, cousin,” she replied, following the Saarla practice of referring to the whole extended family as “cousin.” Letting her finish her meal, Gesar returned to preparing bread dough for the next day. She finished off the meat, moving on to the dried fruit. Turning her mind to the trip, she mentally started packing. She thought over her tool kit, trying to decide what to take beyond the basics. She wasn’t sure what she would need for this assignment, since

she had no way of knowing the possible situations she could be getting in to. She'd also need to make sure she took plenty of obsidian. Running out would make things even trickier.

Finishing the last bite of fruit, Nyoko hopped off the counter. "Thanks, Gesar," she said.

"Any time," he replied. "Oh, I put some of your favorite nuts in the food packs for the caravan." He winked.

Nyoko blew him a kiss. "Whatever would I do without you looking out for me?"

"Waste away to skin and bones, I'm sure," he said. "Now hurry up and pack so you can get some sleep."

After a mock bow acknowledging this command, Nyoko left the kitchens. She made her way to the small house she shared with a few unmarried cousins that were around her age. She opened the door, heading through the communal area to her room without seeing anyone. The door to Kegili's room was open, but the room was dark. She must still be out helping Hiralá. *I should pick her up something nice from Koellja for having to do all the work beforehand*, Nyoko thought. It looked like Thomali had already gone to bed. She'd been up late the past two nights, caring for sick horses. Ibeni and Finawa were out, likely in the city with friends. There were only the five of them in the house. Luckily, they all had their own rooms. A number of Saarlás and many of the workers had homes outside the Trader compound, which made the houses less crowded.

Nyoko's room was small, as were the others. A bed, a chest of drawers, and a desk took up most of the space. She pulled her pack from under the bed. Turning to the drawers, she took out a couple changes of clothes, including one dark set that had trousers instead of a skirt. It wasn't proper, but as the whole point was not to be seen, she wasn't too concerned with propriety. Besides, skirts were terrible for stealth. She folded the clothes, setting them on the bed.

Opening another drawer, she withdrew her tool kit. Small daggers, lock picks, handy bits of cord, knock-out drops, and all manner of other useful items were in the pockets of the leather pouch. She opened the pocket that contained her obsidian talismans. One was completely empty, the other three full to varying degrees. That should be enough to last until she could find a Dark shrine to empty them. Being a Darkwoven gave her certain abilities, but using some of them caused fear to build up inside her. The emotion was different for other Woven. Airwoven got indecisive, Firewoven got angry. If she did too much in a short time, she would be left frozen by terror. However, each type of Woven was also associated with a stone. She could pour the fear into a piece of obsidian, allowing her to do more without having to fight back the emotion. Each rock could only hold so much, though. In a shrine, a place connected to Dark, she was able to empty the obsidian, the emotion held within it dissipating back into the element. She wanted to be sure she had plenty of room to store her fear, as she would likely have to use her abilities on this assignment.

She added a few other things to her pack before setting out some clothes for in the morning. After stripping down to her shift, she washed her face with water from a basin. She cleaned her teeth and, leaving the curtains open so the sun would wake her if her internal clock didn't, went to bed.

Following her nightly ritual, she deepened the darkness of her room, weaving more shadow into what was already there. The familiar shiver went down her spine. As she wove more, the cold settled into the pit of her stomach. Fear: her old enemy, her constant companion. She practiced resisting so she would never be incapacitated by it. Other Darkwoven relied on being able to siphon it off into obsidian, but she couldn't be dependent on that. She could easily be separated from her obsidian on a mission. She had to be comfortable with functioning despite

terror. After a few minutes of this, she released the weave of darkness. The fear would take longer to dissipate. With long practice, she pushed back the emotion, as well as her questions about the mission, dropping off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Nyoko awoke to the faint light of false dawn. Groaning, she rolled out of bed. She pulled on the loose skirt and blouse she set out the night before. Their bright colors were muted in the dark. After tying her many thin braids back into a tail, she grabbed her pack and slipped out of her room quietly. She stole across the common room, silently opening and closing the front door. The graying sky provided more than enough illumination for her Darkwoven eyes. The wagons were already lining up in front of the compound's gate. Walking over, she found the one that held personal belongings, and added her pack. She looked around for Hiralala, needing to report in. She found her inspecting the load of one of the wagons. Some of their cargo was delicate, and had to be carefully stored for the journey. "Good morning, cousin Hiralala," she said as she got close, using a more formal address since she didn't know Hiralala well.

Hiralala was about fifteen years older than Nyoko. Her dark hair had a slight reddish tint, and fell to her shoulders in tight curls. It was held back by a headscarf. She had been traveling to Koellja for a long time. About five years ago, Nyoko had gone along on a run to Koellja. Hiralala had been in charge then, as she was now. Nyoko remembered her being kind, but strict about keeping everything well ordered.

Hiralala nodded, finishing checking over the ropes securing a crate. Satisfied, she turned to Nyoko. "Good morning, Nyoko. I hope the abrupt change of plans hasn't disrupted anything important for you."

"Not at all, cousin. Just dry paperwork. The short notice doesn't seem to have given you any trouble."

"Fortunately, I had already planned what to take, so it wasn't as difficult as it could have been," Hiralala said. "Now, when we get to Koellja, you'll be in charge of purchasing goods to

bring back. Some of the customers who buy from us have particular tastes that I'm more accustomed to than you. And this will let you see more of the city, talk to more people." Nyoko nodded. "You be planning what sorts of things to buy while we travel. Let me know if you need any pointers." Hiding a yawn, Nyoko nodded again.

"Not used to getting up this early, are you?" Hiralá laughed. "You'll soon adjust."

Nyoko grinned back, determined not to let the early hour affect her mood. "At least I can be sure of getting a good night's sleep after walking all day."

Hiralá chuckled. "That's the spirit. Now, go and check on the wagon with the food. Make sure it's loaded properly. The men know what they're doing, but it never hurts to have a second set of eyes on everything."

"Yes, cousin," Nyoko said. She walked back to the wagon. Examining the boxes of dried meat, long-lasting travel bread, fresh and dried fruit, and other assorted food items, she made sure the weight was well balanced. Finding that it was, she moved on to checking the cords tying the cargo down. After tightening one or two knots, more for something to do than because they needed it, she scanned the wagon a final time, making sure there were no obvious problems. Satisfied, she gave the mule hitched to the wagon a couple of pats. Its only reaction was the flicking of an ear in her direction. "Hmph, see if I pet you again, ingrate," she told it.

"Won't get much more of a reaction out of that one, ma'am," said one of the caravan guards. "Been on many a trip with him, and he hardly ever does more than bat an eye or flick an ear."

Nyoko turned to the man. She remembered his face, but not where she had seen it before. "I'm sorry; I've forgotten your name," she said.

“It’s been a while since your last trip to Koellja. I’ve been going on these runs for a while. My name is Ngeni.”

“Ah, that’s why you looked familiar,” she said.

Ngeni chuckled. “It’s a good thing I spoke to you, or else you would have been wondering for the whole trip.”

“Yes, you saved me from a lot of confusion. Do I remember right that your wife is also a guard? Is she coming with us?”

“That is right, ma’am. But this trip she is staying home with the children. We just had a second daughter,” he said.

“May the Six bless her,” Nyoko said, invoking all the elements. Ngeni briefly bowed his head, acknowledging the prayer. “Now, your family must not live on the compound, or else I’ve been much too caught up in paper work. I don’t remember hearing of a birth,” Nyoko continued.

“We live near my wife’s family in the city,” Ngeni said, but before they could continue their conversation, Hiralá shouted for the caravan to get moving.

“I must go. My post is at the back,” Ngeni told Nyoko. He strode away. Nyoko dredged up a memory from her last Koellja run that having been set to check over the food wagon meant she was assigned to it for the whole journey. Hiralá would stay near the wagon with the most delicate cargo, watching over it with the vigilance of a hunter stalking a lion. She would periodically roam up and down the caravan to see if everything was still in good order.

The first wagon moved through the gate. After a couple more wagons followed, Nyoko walked through next to the food wagon. The Saarla Trader compound was on the southern edge of Sarrala. Most of the other Traders had compounds in this area as well. It was close to the road leading to Koellja, and had fairly easy access to the docks on the river that passed through the

city. Most Traders, Saarlars included, had a store in the central market, but the homes, offices, and warehouses were out here.

This time of the morning, the road was mostly empty. Just one or two people here and there, getting an early start on the day. The Trader area wasn't close to many taverns or other late night establishments, so there weren't any drunks sprawled against the walls of the Trader compounds. The caravan moved east, heading for the large road that ran to Koellja.

Nyoko turned to the woman driving the wagon. "How far will we travel today?" she asked.

"We'll almost get out of the hills, if we make good time," the woman replied.

"Sometimes the road is crowded close to Sarrala and we don't get as far."

"Do we stay often in caravanserais? I noticed we brought along bedrolls," Nyoko said.

"Sometimes, but Hiralal likes to push on. We have enough guards to make it without staying every night in a caravanserai."

Nyoko let the conversation drop, not wanting to distract the driver while they were still in the city. A couple hours later, they turned onto the large road that curved around the desert to Koellja. The sun had risen, shining almost directly in their eyes when it peeked through the hills. They would turn north later in the day. The dust thrown up by the caravan made the air hazy. The grit getting into her throat, Nyoko coughed. She recalled now that the experienced travelers usually tied a cloth over their mouths when the road was this dry. She'd have to dig out the headscarf she'd tossed into her pack the next time they stopped. She was glad she had decided to bring one.

"Forgot about the dust, ey?" the nearest guard said, noticing her coughing.

"I don't see how I could have, with how much it gets into everything. Must have blocked it out," Nyoko replied.

Grinning, the guard tossed Nyoko a length of cloth. "I've got an extra," she said. "I'd like it back when you're done with it, if you don't mind. I'm always losing them, so one less to replace would be nice."

"Of course. And thank you," Nyoko said, winding the cloth around her face.

"Tuck the ends down in your clothes, so you can use them to wipe your eyes," the guard recommended. As Nyoko was following this helpful advice, the guard asked, "You're Nyoko, right? I've heard stories about you."

"Stories?" Nyoko said. "What kind of stories?"

Lowering her voice, she answered, "Stories about the sorts of things you can do. Break in to any building, blind a city with shadow, steal secrets from someone's mind."

Nyoko snorted. "Do I look like the sort of person who could do all that? Exaggerations from me being a Darkwoven and storytellers who've had too much to drink."

"Yes, that's what I said to the ones who told me such things. Still, I do wonder sometimes..."

"Unahi, stop bothering her with such nonsense," said the wagon driver. "Do you think she's going to confess that's she's really some sort of djinn?"

Unahi left off, embarrassed. Nyoko was glad the wagon driver had discouraged Unahi. Most of the stories about her were exaggerated, though a few were close to the truth. Sometimes people acted oddly around her, either reverently or fearfully. It made her uncomfortable.

Around midday, the caravan stopped for a quick meal. Munching on some jerky and traveling bread, Nyoko went in search of her headscarf. She found the wagon with her pack

easily enough, but had to dig around a bit before she could get it out. She finished off the jerky and put the bread between her teeth to free both of her hands. After a bit of feeling around in her pack, she caught hold of her scarf. Pausing to chew another bite and reposition the bread, she pulled out the scarf without disturbing the rest of contents too much. As she swallowed the last few bits of bread, she replaced her pack in the wagon before going off to find Unahi.

Most of the other members of the caravan were resting in the shade of a few trees a short distance from the road. Unahi was among them, chatting with some other guards and wagon drivers. Nyoko sat down next to them, passing Unahi the dust mask with a murmured “Thanks” so as not to interrupt the conversation.

One of the guards was telling a story about an encounter with the desert people. “...stood staring at us, in their weird robes and head coverings. The caravan leader just kept us going nice and steady, trying not to do anything to set them off. That close to Fassa, they shouldn’t do anything to us, but you can never be too careful with them Basaavs. All that sun and heat makes them crazy.”

A wagon driver scoffed at him. “They aren’t that bad. They have a **strange** code of honor, sure. But they’re no crazier than you, Djebe.”

“That may not be saying much, Chomala,” said Ngeni, who was sitting between Nyoko and the storyteller. “Djebe isn’t exactly a model of sanity.”

Djebe mildly punched Ngeni in the shoulder. “Just because I saw a fire spirit once doesn’t mean I’m crazy.”

“Sure it does,” said Ngeni good-naturedly. “Not even the shamans see spirits. Either you’re crazy, or you’d had too much to drink and don’t want to admit it.”

“I’m not afraid to admit to being drunk,” Djebe said indignantly. “But I wasn’t then. Hadn’t had a drink in days.”

“So you admit you’re crazy, then?” Unahi teased.

“What? No!” Djebe spluttered.

The others laughed. Unahi leaned over to Nyoko, whispering, “Djebe is always telling exaggerated tales. We don’t let him fool us.”

“Poor man, with friends like this,” Nyoko joked.

“We’ve told him he should be a Taleweaver, but stays a guard to inflict his stories on us,” Unahi said.

“Ah, you should be glad! A personal Taleweaver for the guards, ready to spread the stories of your glorious exploits,” Nyoko said.

Unahi laughed. “We have such plentiful opportunity for glorious exploits guarding caravans, braving weather and boredom.”

“Surely you have chances to fight off bandits,” Nyoko said more seriously.

“Not very much. The main trade roads are well traveled enough that bandits mostly go after easier targets. We usually hire out with the Saarla Traders, too. You all take enough guards to discourage bandits, unlike some other Traders,” Unahi replied.

Nyoko nodded, storing away the information. Hiralá called for the caravan to get moving again. The wagon drivers and guards went back to their places, still teasing Djebe. The caravan continued along the dusty road, slowly turning north through the hills.

Chapter Three

The rest of the four-week journey passed without any trouble. Nyoko adjusted to the early mornings and long days of walking. It was a welcome break from doing paperwork all day back at the compound. Today, they could see Koellja in the distance. The city sprawled across the plains west of Lake Inhaniyya. The permanent water source was what fed the growth of the city. As the caravan crested a slight rise, Nyoko got a better view. She could just make out the stone and wood buildings of the wealthier and older districts. Surrounding the permanent city was a mass of tents, pavilions, and wooden structures that were easily taken apart and moved. Most of the people of this region were nomadic, driving herds around the plains. They visited Koellja periodically to trade, solve disputes, and reinforce ties with other tribes. Some people lived in Koellja permanently, but much of the population was transitory, as were many of its structures. Nyoko was glad that the city planners kept the streets defined among the constantly changing areas, or else it would have been very difficult to find one's way.

The dusty road was more crowded than it had been for most of the journey. Two days ago, they had passed where the Desert Road met the North Trade Road. Scatterings of Traders from Fassa had come up the Desert Road on their way to Koellja. Most Fassan Traders elected to travel on ships around the coast, but a few specialized in trading overland with the Basaavs in the desert. These usually continued on to Koellja, taking advantage of another market. Nyoko saw two or three Basaavs in their distinctive burnouses also heading to the city.

In a few hours, the caravan entered the outer section of Koellja. The road they were on continued to the walls of the inner section. It was lined with poles that held crystals. Lightwoven did something to these to make them gather sunlight all day and emit it at night. Only the main roads had them, but Nyoko was still impressed there were this many here. Koellja had gotten

wealthier since she had been here last. On either side of the road were tents, lean-tos, and shacks. People in the colorful clothes of the tribes were chatting with friends, cooking food, hanging up washing, repairing tools.

Nyoko watched the people as she walked. At first, things seemed normal. But as she continued watching, she noticed that too many conversations were worried or tense. Too many faces held anxious expressions. Too many people seemed nervous and preoccupied. Nyoko didn't like this fearful undertone to the city. It could all too easily turn into something ugly and dangerous. She sped up, aiming to talk to Hiralá, who was near the front.

She found her watching the people with a frown. Falling in step, Nyoko said quietly, "Do you know how long they've been like this, cousin?"

Hiralá's frown deepened. "I hoped I was imagining things. They weren't this way on the last trip. I wonder what's happened."

"I guess Tsuni did have a good reason for sending me," Nyoko said.

"You be careful, Nyoko. I don't like the looks of this. Now get on back to your wagon," she finished, jerking her head towards the back of the caravan in a dismissal.

As Nyoko slowed to let the wagons pass, she saw that some of the guards were picking up on the mood in the city. They cast wary looks at the tribespeople, watching for potential danger. She was glad to see how observant they were. A few minutes later, Hiralá turned the caravan down a side street. It was still large enough for wagons going opposite directions to pass each other, but a bit smaller than the main road. They were a little distance away from the inner, walled portion of the city. Shortly after the turn, Hiralá stopped at a small wooden building, one of the few permanent structures outside the walls. She knocked on the door. The man who opened it was past his prime, though still able to move with ease. The only hair on his head was

his eyebrows. His skin, covered in fine wrinkles, was, like that of most Koelljans, a shade in between Nyoko's pitch black and the usual Sarralan leather.

"Hirala," the man said in Ghyo, the trade language, "you're a bit earlier than usual, hmm?"

"Couldn't be helped, Chani. We have a special order. The man was insistent on getting it quickly," Hirala replied, also speaking Ghyo. "Do say you still have room for us. My heart will break if I have to go elsewhere."

"Flatterer," the man chuckled. He sucked his teeth, thinking. "It'll be a squeeze for a day or two before some Fassans leave. But they're an easygoing bunch. I don't think they'll mind."

"Waters bless you, Chani, you're a gem," Hirala exclaimed. The caravan began moving again, Chani leading the way. Nyoko noticed that the people here were mostly foreign merchants, like themselves. She saw the heavy clothing and pale skin of mountain folk, brown burnouses of the desert tribes, and the baggy trousers, loose shirts, and tattoos of Fassans. There were even a few straight-haired, brightly dressed Mummertans from beyond the mountains.

They turned down a road that led between some caravanserais. Chani led them into one, and directed them to a chamber between a Fassan merchant caravan and some mountain traders. "I know it's tight now, but the Fassans are leaving soon, so you'll be able to spread out more," Chani told Hirala.

"We'll be fine," Hirala said. Chani left them to get settled in. With Hirala supervising, the wagon drivers parked the wagons in the area on the far side of the courtyard left open for them. They began unhitching the mules while the guards and Nyoko starting unloading their gear. They followed the rhythm they had developed in the other caravanserais along the road. Nyoko had picked up on the system early on, having been trained to be able to follow what a group of

people was doing. Settling in to the work, she began to take stock of the surroundings. Much of the traffic consisted of people staying in Chani's caravanserais. Few locals passed by on the street. She spotted a couple of Koelljan peacekeepers patrolling. Many of the chambers were watched over by a few guards Traders had brought with them. It being morning, most of the merchants were out doing business.

Nyoko helped the wagon drivers take the mules to Chani's stable, using the opportunity to familiarize herself with more of the area. She also kept a lookout for any faces that she recognized. While she hadn't been to Koellja in some time, she had gone to Fassa recently. It was unlikely that any Fassans would remember her from that mission, but an unwary spy ended up captured or worse.

A young stable hand came out as they approached. He led them to some empty stalls, assuring them along the way that the mules would receive very good care. "He's new," Mkembe, one of the wagon drivers, muttered to Nyoko. "We always come here. We know the mules will be looked after." They shared a grin over the boy's mistake.

Most of the stalls they passed housed mules. There were a few ponies, some camels, and a magnificent stallion. Nyoko nudged Mkembe, glancing questioningly at the stallion. Mkembe let out a low whistle. "Must belong to some noble from Mummerta. You don't see many animals of that quality this side of the mountains," he told Nyoko.

"That's what I thought. Why would a noble be staying here? Don't they normally stay in the Inner City?"

"Maybe this one's here overseeing a merchant. Wants to stay close to keep an eye on him?"

"Hmm, could be," Nyoko answered, filing away the irregularity.

They got the mules settled in their stalls, rubbing them down and giving them hay to munch on. As they were leaving the stable, Nyoko noticed a series of scratches low on a post. To a casual observer, they looked like everyday wear and tear, but Nyoko recognized a code. One of their agents wanted to meet here that afternoon, at a fountain near the Great Market and a Fire shrine. She hoped this agent had some information on why the city was so tense.

Later that day, Nyoko wandered the main market of Koellja, observing the people more than the goods for sale. The majority of the crowd was tribespeople, but there was a fair-sized minority of people who, like she, came from other lands. Mostly Traders, selling foreign wares and buying Koelljan products to take back to their cities. Luckily, as she had to come here to trade, markets were a great place to gather information.

As she walked, she watched how people behaved. On the surface, everything seemed normal. People talked, laughed, did business. But there was an undercurrent of nervousness, edging towards fear. A false note in the laughter of a group walking past. A tightness to the smile of a Koelljan running a stall. Faces forcing relaxed expressions when others were watching. There weren't any suspicious or hostile looks directed at the foreign traders, so whatever was wrong wasn't related to tensions with any of the other cities. She would have guessed problems between tribes, but members of different tribes mixed easily in the crowd.

Well, at least she wasn't chasing phantoms. The vagueness of her assignment had made her wonder if there was anything actually wrong. Obviously, there was some trouble, but she would have to do more than people-watch in the market to find out exactly what was wrong. It was still too early in the day for inns or taverns to be very busy. Perhaps talking to shopkeepers would turn something up. She approached a stall selling woven rugs. She still had her job as a Trader to do, after all.

Fingering one of the rugs, she let a bit of worry show on her face. "Has there been much trouble on the road lately?" she inquired of the shopkeeper, speaking Ghyo. Some Koelljans would speak Thengoli, her native language, but it was safer to use the trade tongue. "I heard rumors of bandits."

The shopkeeper huffed. "The road is perfectly safe. The tribes don't tolerate thieving."

"Of course, of course. I just worry that carrying such a beautiful rug would attract...unsavory sorts."

"Never fear, madam. The tribes punish anyone caught stealing most severely. Few risk it."

"That's a comfort." She shifted her regard to a different rug.

"This is a very fine piece, madam," he said smoothly. "Woven and dyed by skilled members of the Enjakka tribe."

"Ah, the Enjakka. The usually stay far north of the lake, don't they?" The man's accommodating expression slipped briefly. *Hmm*, Nyoko thought. *I touched on something there.*

"Yes, they mostly stay north, though a few Traders come to Koellja periodically. They just came recently. Their wares usually sell quickly, so you're in luck that a few pieces remain."

Nyoko pondered the rug. It was beautiful, fine goats' wool and vivid colors. "The dye is well set? I would hate to be caught in a sudden downpour and find it ruined," she said.

"You have nothing to fear. In the unlikely event of rain, the dye will not fade or run. The Enjakka would never let such a faulty job on the market," the shopkeeper assured her.

"Oh, I meant no disrespect to the Enjakka. I let my concern get ahead of me." She had lost the thread of whatever was worrying the shopkeeper. Giving up on finding more information for the moment, she began the process of bargaining for the rug. After wearing down the

shopkeeper to a good price, she bought it and arranged for it to be delivered to Chani's caravanserai. Once that was taken care of, she thought back through the conversation as she continued wandering the market. Was his worry something to do with the Enjakka? He had seemed at ease talking about them further, so probably not. Perhaps trouble with another tribe up to the north? There were few members of the tribes from the coast in Koellja, as it was so far to travel. She decided to go see what gossip she could gather from around the fountain before meeting the agent.

As she perused the stalls, she had noted a few fountains on streets leading away from the Great Market. She hadn't seen a Fire shrine by any of them, but it was most likely that one would be to the southeast, following the traditional directions associated with each of the elements. She strolled towards the fountain she had seen in that direction, checking behind her every so often to see if she was being followed. It was unlikely anyone had pegged her as a spy yet, but people were often suspicious of Darkwoven. She didn't see anyone, though it could be hard to tell with all the people around. For a spy, crowds could be both useful and frustrating.

Nyoko was surprised when she reached the fountain. Two peacekeepers were on duty supervising the collecting of water. Normally the fountains were open for anyone to get what was needed, or at least so she had been taught. Now it appeared that the water was being rationed. She noted a Fire shrine to her right. The agent would find her. Her clothes identified her as a Saarla Trader, and she was the only Darkwoven in the family right now.

She sat on a bench to wait, watching the procedure now in place for drawing water. People handed one of the peacekeepers a token before getting water. A few had tokens of a different color, and were allowed to take more. Stable owners, artisans whose work required water, and other such people with more need, she surmised. She wondered about these new

restrictions. Koellja was known for its plentiful water, due to the nearby Lake Inhaniyya and the ruling Council of Waterwoven. Something must have changed.

Before long, a man came up to her and said, "What's the price of bread in Sarrala these days?" It was half of an identifying phrase used by their agents.

Nyoko replied with the other half. "Two pennies for a day old loaf, five for fresh, and fifteen for cake."

He sat on the bench next to her. He looked to be around Hiral's age, in his early forties. Short curly hair, dark Sarralan skin, eyes just as dark. His muscles, practical clothes, and calloused hands marked him as a laborer. The old burns on his arm narrowed his job down to smithing or glasswork.

"What do you think of our city?" he asked quietly.

Our city, Nyoko thought. *Curious*. Scanning the crowds, she replied, "People are afraid. I haven't caught any signs of tension between tribes, or with foreigners, so I haven't figured out why yet. But there is definitely fear not far beneath the surface."

The man nodded, also watching the mass of people. He stood, turning to look at Nyoko as he did. "Come, I will take you somewhere we may talk."

Warily, Nyoko stood and followed him. She kept her hands ready to grab her knives. They went down a street that led further south of the Great Market. They appeared to be heading into a sort of artisan quarter. Rope makers, weavers, leather workers, blacksmiths, glass blowers, and the like had set up shop. These were everyday workers, providing services for ordinary tribespeople come to the city. The high quality artisans that catered to the wealthy or that did specialized work set up inside the walls.

Soon they came to a blacksmith's shop. "This is my forge," the man said. Nyoko followed him inside. "I have a small space screened off a bit from the noise and heat where we can talk." Nyoko watched everywhere in case of an ambush as they passed a couple of apprentices working on what looked like horseshoes. The man knew the right question, but he could be an imposter who had tortured the information out of the **real agent**. Or he could be the real agent, double-crossing her. As her teachers had drilled into **her**, **carelessness cost lives**.

The small room set on the side of the shop offered slight relief **from the clanging hammers**. A window let in a breath of fresh air. A glint of light drew **Nyoko's attention** to a small mirror set so one could watch for eavesdroppers. She looked, **and found its twin on the other side of the window**. She was pleased with this level of caution.

"My name is Kaheem," the man said, speaking Thengoli now **that they were in private**. "I'm very glad you have come. The city will be close to rioting before **much longer**."

Nyoko raised her eyebrows. "You seem to think I will do **something to prevent that situation**. Why?"

"Surely you must!" Kaheem said passionately. "Sarrala cannot **stand by and let Koellja be destroyed**."

"And why not? Koellja's problems create opportunities for **Sarrala**."

"Not with the way things are headed," he replied. "The scale of **trouble would cause chaos across all Zemwebe**."

Crossing her arms, Nyoko said, "Explain."

In a low voice, made almost inaudible by the sounds from **the forge**, Kaheem said, "Someone is siphoning water away from Lake Inhaniyya. The **Council hasn't been able to stop it**. Most people only know that the lake level is going down. **So far, the lack of rain** has been

blamed. But people are losing confidence in the Council. Once it comes out that some person is doing this, there will be panic.” He began pacing. “The Council is supposed to protect and provide for the people. If it proves ineffectual, things will get bad fast. And if the lake disappears, there will be war. Whether between the tribes, or with other cities, it will come. You must find out who is doing this and stop him!” he ended, leaning forward insistently.

Nyoko considered. Kaheem might be right in predicting the scale of trouble. If so, she would be serving her city by stopping Koellja’s collapse. Even if he were wrong, she would be able to trade information about the culprit who was stealing the water with the Council. She could get all sorts of agreements from the Council for that information. She’d have to be careful when telling Hiralá about this. Hiralá would want to send a message back to Sarralá and wait for the reply before doing anything. She always preferred to follow protocol. Unfortunately, there wasn’t time for that. The mood in the city was too precarious to wait.

“When will the Council be meeting next?” Nyoko asked. “And where?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at the Council building, if things don’t change because of the situation.”

“We need to find out what their plans are and what they know. What can you tell me about the building?”

Kaheem hesitated, obviously uncomfortable with the idea of spying on the Council.

Repressing her impatience, Nyoko said, “I’m a spy, Kaheem. This is the sort of thing I get sent to do. I need to know what is going on with the Council in order to help. Now, what do you know that will help me?”

Not altogether reassured, Kaheem answered, “Since the Council is made up of the strongest Waterwoven, they set their own wards around the building. The building’s made of

wood, two stories, but not very big. Smallish windows, only a couple doors. The middle of the ground floor is a large meeting room. Some of the surrounding, small rooms are for the personal use of the Council members. Others are for city planners, scribes, clerks, and other such people.”

Nyoko pursed her lips, considering. “I need to see the building. The outside, at the least.”

Kaheem looked as though he were going to object again. Nyoko fixed him with a stare. He sighed, defeated. “I can take you. I need to pick up a repaired tool from the Inner City anyways.”

Nyoko got back to the caravanserai as dusk was falling. Some of the purchases she had made earlier in the day were being delivered. Most of the wagon drivers and guards were still out in the city. Hiralá was there, along with the two guards on duty. Nyoko felt a flutter of anxiety, watching Hiralá inspect the goods as they were unloaded. It had been a while since she had done any actual trading. She hoped she hadn’t made any bad purchases. Hiralá’s expression wasn’t giving any hint of her opinions.

Nyoko came up and stood next to her as the last few rugs were unloaded. Hiralá didn’t speak until the workers had left with their cart. “The Enjakka rug was a good find,” she said, turning to Nyoko. “There usually aren’t any left by the time we get here.”

“Thank you, cousin,” Nyoko replied. More quietly, she said, “May we speak in private? There is a matter I wish to discuss.” Hiralá gave Nyoko a considering look for her formal words and tone. She turned to the two guards on watch. “Why don’t you two go enjoy yourselves in town? Nyoko and I can handle things here.”

The guards exchanged confused looks. Then one shrugged and grinned. “I won’t argue with that, ma’am,” he said. “Come on, let’s go find that tavern the others were talking about,” he told the other guard.

“All right,” she said. “Thanks, ma’am,” she said over her shoulder as they left.

“So, what have you found out?” Hiralá asked, keeping her voice low, as there were other people around in the caravanserai.

“I met with one of our people here,” Nyoko began. “He told me that someone is draining water from the lake. Most only know that the lake seems to be drying up. I’m going to try to find out what the Council knows about the situation, and do what I can to help.” She took a deep breath, preparing for the inevitable argument.

Hiralá gave her an incredulous look. “Do what you can to help? Have you forgotten that you are from Sarralá? Your loyalty is with our queen, not this Council.”

“Stopping Koelljá’s collapse serves the interests of our city. The chaos that would follow could only harm us as well. We would lose trade, for sure, and possibly lives.”

“There could be substantial opportunity in such an event,” Hiralá countered. “And anyways, Tsuni gave you no orders to help, only observe. This decision is not yours to make, Nyoko.”

Nyoko gritted her teeth. “There’s no time to go back to Sarralá with a report. By the time we got back and a decision was made, it would be too late.”

Now Hiralá’s expression turned dangerous. “Are you proposing to defy orders and assist an enemy nation?”

“These people are not our enemies!” Nyoko snapped.

“They are not Sarralans,” Hiralá replied heatedly.

“That doesn’t make them enemies!”

“Do you think they will appreciate your help? A foreign spy? They will capture you, maybe torture you for information or kill you, not welcome your assistance. They would attack Sarrala if they saw a profit in it. Do not be so foolish as to think they would do otherwise.”

Nyoko glared back at Hiralá. “I cannot stand by and do nothing while watching the violence that will follow Koellja’s collapse. So many people—people, Hiralá, like us—will die if this isn’t stopped.”

“If you do this, I will not defend you. I will not help if you get in trouble. You will be cut loose.”

“So be it,” Nyoko answered defiantly.

Chapter Four

Nyoko stood in the shadows of a street leading to the Council building, watching. It was late afternoon. The Council was meeting inside. The wards hadn't changed from the day before, when she came with Kaheem. Normal people couldn't see the faint blue lines set in the ground around the building. Since she wasn't a Waterwoven, she couldn't see them clearly, but she had been taught enough to know what they were. Fortunately, she had practice at getting past this kind of ward.

They weren't there to stop people from getting in, only to alert the Council members when an unauthorized person approached. People with permission to come to the building would be given a small token that would let them pass the wards without activating them. If a person without a token tried to cross, something inside would register the intrusion. A bowl of water would be disturbed, or glyph would appear on a mirror. The method varied. Without a token, Nyoko had to use a different way to get past the wards.

Nyoko looked around again, making sure no one else was near. A nervous Kaheem stood at an intersection down a street on the opposite side of the building, acting as lookout. He would whistle part of a song if anyone approached from his direction. Nyoko closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and mentally reached out. She delicately drew out part of the shadow cast by the building, stretching it along the ground. When it reached her, she pooled it under her feet. She slowly drew the shadow up around her, close to her body, under her clothes, so it wouldn't be noticeable against her black skin. Once it reached the top of her head, she checked to make certain every part of her was covered. The cool, not quite tangible feel of the darkness was all over. Opening her eyes, she walked forward, ignoring the anxious feeling in her stomach caused by using her power.

Most of her concentration was required to hold the shadow in place. The darkness was from the large shade cast by the Council building, so it didn't want to stay constrained in a thin layer over her body. If she didn't focus, the shadow would slip and expose her to the wards. Since the shade from the building had been over the wards for some time, they would recognize it as belonging there. But if the wards sensed Nyoko within the shadow at all, they would alert the Council. Nyoko sent a quick prayer to Dark that the Council members hadn't heard that some Darkwoven could fool wards this way. Many Darkwoven didn't have the skill or strength to do what she had just done, so it wasn't common knowledge.

In her hand was a rolled piece of paper made to look like the messages she had seen delivered here yesterday. Were someone to notice her, she would, with luck, be taken for a messenger. She made it to the front door without being challenged and went inside. As soon as she was in, she relaxed her concentration, releasing the shadow around her. She quickly walked down the empty hallway, looking for the stairs to the second floor. Locating them, she went upstairs. She hurried into an empty room above the meeting chamber. She paused, making sure she had made it in undetected. When no one came barging in demanding to know what she was up to, she wove darkness so that she would blend into the unlit room. If someone came in, the darkness would hopefully give her time to slip out undiscovered. She fed most of the fear resulting from this weaving into the obsidian talisman on a chain around her neck. She left a little, as always on a mission. A measure of fear kept her alert.

She knelt, putting her ear to the wooden floor. She could hear indistinct voices from below. Reaching into a pouch sewn on the inside of her shirt, she pulled out a long, very thin tube. Old Geya, a very strong Airwoven in the family, had made it for her. The outer metal layer surrounded a core of pumice. Pumice was the substance associated with Air, as obsidian was

with Dark. Geya had infused this pumice to draw air through one end to the other. Nyoko wedged a knife between two floorboards, creating enough space for the tube. She put her ear close to it. The voices from below were much clearer now, the sound from the room drawn up through the tube.

“...disastrous to let the people know!” a man was saying. He continued, “We are having enough trouble even though they think it is just a natural phenomenon. There would be widespread panic if they thought we were under attack.”

A different voice spoke up, a quite elderly woman judging from its sound. “If we do not tell them this is the act of a human, they will believe that Water has abandoned us. Do you wish to have a religious crisis on our hands, Mokar?” A few murmurs of agreement followed the woman’s assertion. Nyoko wondered how Kaheem had found out someone was behind the lake draining if the Council wasn’t spreading the knowledge.

“But how can we tell the people some person is doing this when we have no idea who it is or how to stop him? Instead, we should suggest that we are being tested by Water, or that one of the other elements is gaining power in this area. Then, when we have a more solid plan of how to fix it, we can explain what is really happening. We might have to face complaints about why it took us so long to discover that it wasn’t a natural occurrence, but that’s better than riots.” This was from a different woman. This speech was greeted with loud exclamations of approval. Nyoko picked out Mokar’s voice from among them.

“You would have us lie to our people?” the elderly woman said once the room had quieted down again. “They have placed their trust in us to rule them. Deception has no part in leadership, Shashana.”

“Leaders must do what is best for their people,” Shashana replied. “Sometimes that involves hiding things that would do more harm than good if known. Floods, Zhoukita, it’s not as though we’d be lying for selfish reasons. We’re trying to protect them!”

“We do them no favors if we mislead them. They will despise us if we lie and they find out,” the elderly woman, Zhoukita, said.

“Then we will not let them find out,” Mokar replied.