

## Chapter 1

### Going to the Ruins and the Stone

Dahlia Gherac sat cross-legged on her father's desk in his private office with her notebook on her lap while reading out loud a poem she wrote. After reading each line about the family's crystal garden, she cast her eyes up from her poem with the hope her father appreciated all her hard work. Cyr however, sat in his chair with his arms folded over his chest and expressionless. He simply watched his daughter as she read.

Dahlia swallowed back her dry mouth when she finally finished the poem and held her breath, waiting for his approval. *Does he like how I'm reading my work to him? Does he like my poem? Does my voice show that I'm enthusiastic? I rewrote it six times to get it perfect. Is it perfect?* Anxiously, she asked in English, "What do you think?"

Her father leaned forward, making his chair creak. Before he could reply, a light and deliberate tap on the door interrupted him.

*Not now, she thought. This is my time with Father. Can't you come back later? If I had the Skill of Thought like Father, I would tell them to leave us alone.*

Cyr looked at the door and then he and Dahlia looked at each other with the same expression. "It's your Aunt Ura," he said in S'Renen.

*It just had to be her.*

Dahlia knew her father *Thought, Please come in, Ura*, to her aunt by the way his brows creased. To benefit Dahlia, he said out loud in S'Renen, "I asked your aunt to come in."

"What did you think of my poem?" she asked again in English. Dahlia wasn't going to give up that easily. With enough distraction, her father would tell Aunt Ura to come back at another time.

Natalie Silk

“I liked it,” he replied in English. “It showed you’d put a lot of time into writing it.” He smiled his approval.

That smile: the one she loved so much. Her shoulders relaxed and the knot in her stomach untied as she returned her father’s smile before blinking the viewer to off.

Now her father looked at the doors. Aunt Ura opened the heavy double doors by using the door handles instead of using her *Skill*. Dahlia frowned, as she thought her aunt was feigning weakness.

“One moment, Ura.” Aunt Ura nodded her head and then closed the doors. Barely over the threshold, she stood meekly and traditionally with her hands resting on her stomach and with the finger tips of her right hand overlapping the finger tips of her left hand.

Cyr patted Dahlia’s left knee and spoke in S’Renen, “Why don’t you change out of your school uniform.”

Dahlia tried to ignore Aunt Ura. “I will. I want to go riding to the Stone. Li and Althea will be meeting me there.”

“Great idea! It’s a beautiful day, and it’s well before curfew. Go and enjoy.”

“When can you go with me to the Ruins?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“I can’t wait to change into my riding tunic and boots,” Dahlia said, as she looked at her dark blue school dress and black shoes. She pulled her single long braid away from her neck, as the day’s humidity made her feel uncomfortable in spite of the coolness of her father’s office.

Dahlia’s father gestured with the first two fingers of his left hand for Aunt Ura to come into the office. Aunt Ura took small, tentative steps, with her hands still resting on her stomach.

She couldn’t help herself as she frowned at her aunt’s choice of apparel and the way she walked. *Why is Aunt Ura dressed so traditionally? Why does she walk like a traditional S’Renen woman? What does she want from Father?*

Her aunt wore a beige colored dress that came down to the floor and a long, green over-jacket. The over-jacket’s corners looped to her middle fingers. A single braid wrapped in five

different character tubes draped over her left shoulder. The character tubes represented in order of importance and according to S'Renen tradition: social status, behavior towards social status, personality, self-impression, and social obligation. Ura's tubes read: noble family, service to all, good-natured, acceptance, and caring. Even though Dahlia didn't like her aunt's dress and over-jacket, she did admire her aunt's character tubes. Dahlia even felt a very small pang of envy. *I can't wait until I'm thirteen years old so that I too will be allowed to wear character tubes.*

*So why is Aunt Ura acting like a shy forest rodent when she's usually so bold. Why did Aunt Ura use the door handles when she could easily open them by using her mind? She must want something very important from Father. That must be it.*

"Would you like to read my poem? I can turn it on for you." Dahlia held her notebook out for her aunt.

"No. No, thank you. Please leave your father and me to talk." When Dahlia saw the interplay between her aunt and her father, she realized that Aunt Ura made a mistake. Her Aunt added, "But, I would like to hear you read it to me later." Ura allowed herself a quick glance at Dahlia's father hoping she softened his mood. Unfortunately, there was no change in his expression.

She jumped down from the desk and walked past her aunt without making a face at her even though she wanted to do so. *I'll act like I've had my thirteenth naming day—which is almost here. I'm no longer a child.*

*Thank you for not acting childishly,* Aunt Ura *Thought* to her niece. Dahlia felt the acid and spite in the inflection which made her shoulders involuntarily tighten at her aunt's comment to her. With her back to her aunt and father, Dahlia grimaced.

Dahlia made her reply known by opening one of the double doors with her mind and closing it behind her with a loud slam. She was not beyond slamming doors. She hoped the noise made her aunt jump—or at least annoyed her.

The girl walked in place while making sure her foot falls sounded as if she were walking down the hall then she crouched

close to the doors so she could listen. Dahlia quietly and carefully put her notebook down so that both hands were free when she realized she could better balance herself by leaning against the doors.

“This Lady, from the House of Gherac, wishes to speak to his Lordship.” Dahlia rolled her eyes at the thought that her aunt was making sure the formal request had the correct tone and quality of submissiveness.

“Ura, you may treat your fiancé like an idiot, but don’t you dare try to do the same with me,” Dahlia heard her father say. Dahlia snickered silently to herself.

“Please, Brother, I wish a favor of you.”

Dahlia strained to hear a reply. Did her father *Think* to Aunt Ura? Then she heard her aunt continue.

“Agon-Sa and I will be married soon and he has no true position in his House.”

“His father told me the W’Jol of First Star will give him a district to govern after you’re married.”

“A region populated by Zonpres. That’s no true position. Please . . . There’s a rumor that no one is assigned to the seat of Twelfth Councilman of Second Star. Perhaps Agon-Sa could take the appointment.”

Dahlia heard her father give a chuckle. “Agon-Sa is hardly a competent Representative for Second Star. If I nominate him, I could lose my own position. What would happen if he found out that his fiancé helped him earn that seat, provided he did get the appointment, it would humiliate him. Agon-Sa might be a fool but he is a W’Jol. After all, Mother made sure that you would marry into a very large and powerful House. Your dowry and betrothal were very expensive, remember that.”

“I never wanted to be betrothed to him.”

Dahlia heard her father’s chair creak as he leaned back in it. “What you want is to make your House stronger.” Dahlia waited. *Was this the end of their conversation?*

“I understand that you will be voting in the Council to allow women to have appointments as Councilmen- women. Please allow me to have an assignment, however remote, from Agon-

Sa.” Now Ura tried to recover any losses she had made from her mistakes. “My appointment could only add to our own House.”

*What a huge mistake Aunt Ura made!* Dahlia thought.

“I can promise nothing.”

As Dahlia heard a rustling of skirts, she quickly got up and grabbed her notebook. When she heard more talking, she squatted against the door again. She could tell from her aunt’s voice that she had abandoned all formality.

“Cyr,” Dahlia thought Aunt Ura had reached the point where there was no chance in gently persuading her father. She could tell this by the tone in her aunt’s voice. Dahlia wondered if her aunt would ever be appointed. Did her future uncle have a better chance than her aunt?

Now Aunt Ura said threatening, “If you don’t appoint him, maybe the Senior Elder will.”

Cyr tried to contain his anger as he didn’t like to be threatened especially by someone from his own family. “In exchange for what favor?”

Dahlia heard a gasp and quick steps coming towards the doors. Scooping up her notebook, she quickly stood and darted down a side hall and ran up one of the staircases to the next floor. When she hid by an alcove, she gasped for air, she hadn’t realized that she was holding her breath. She peeked up and down the hall to see if it was safe to go to her rooms. She really didn’t want to meet her aunt now. She wished she could just concentrate and *Move* herself to her rooms.

She walked purposely with her chin up, eyes forward, and shoulders back. She hoped her nonchalant expression and purposeful gait would not expose her guilt. She allowed herself fleeting eye contact and a single smile at one aide or another. As she walked down another hall, she made sure not to look at common maids as they stopped their activity, bowed, and turned their backs to her. *I’m now safe!* She took in a deep breath of relief. The gentle scent of flowers in the two urns on each side at the head of her bed greeted Dahlia as she opened the doors to her rooms.

She put down her notebook on the table that she used to do her school work and eat most of her meals. Pulling off her school uniform, she carelessly tossed it on the floor. Then she kicked off her shoes as she walked to her closet. Dahlia left the trail of discarded clothes and shoes for a common maid or Shota to pick up later.

Dahlia rummaged through her closet in search of a light riding tunic and leggings. She stepped back in disgust with her fists on her hips, while thinking that she'd need to inform her mother and father the maids weren't quick enough to return all her riding outfits. She'd have to make do with heavier riding clothes that were more appropriate for a cooler day in the third season, *Lauthe*. *Maybe it would be cooler on the Mountain because of the altitude and the dense forest*, she thought, as she pulled out the clothes and quickly put them on. She found a pair of neatly polished boots next to the other shoes in the closet and jammed her feet and calves in to them.

In her excitement and rush to go riding, she almost forgot her riding hat with its veil that protected her face from flying wayward insects. She went back to her closet and grabbed it from its stand on the shelf. As she left her rooms, she absentmindedly adjusted it on her head.

She didn't care if her gait was almost a run, unseemly for the daughter of a high-placed Councilman, as she raced down the stairs that led to the courtyard.

She walked into the receiving area of the family's stables and looked around the well scrubbed and airy room. Light streamed through the clean windows. The different smells of all the polishes, soaps, and oils for hieretes, tack, and the stalls all mingled together.

Dahlia audibly cleared her throat to announce that she was waiting. When no one came into the receiving area, she walked to the back of the stables and looked into one stall after another. Each hierete craned its long neck out and looked at her. One bleated an acknowledgement and pranced, its claws clicking against the floor in anticipation of being ridden.

After looking into the fourth stall, she called out for the head stableman. "Old Stableman, come here now! It is I, Dahlia." She called out the request formally by addressing one of the family's Zonpres employees by their job and seniority. A shadow stirred and then a man came into the stream of light. He tipped back his hat made of bark, with a calloused and grimy hand.

Dahlia quickly looked around to make sure they were alone and no one else was in earshot especially a relative.

"We're alone, Miss. Good morrow to you," he said, as he rolled the sleeves of his sweat-stained tunic farther up his heavily freckled arms. In fact, his face, hands, and forearms that were not shielded from the sun by a tunic or hat were mottled brown. Her mother said that he had 'freckles on his freckles.'

"Hello, Almot!" she said, giving her special friend a bright smile.

Almot returned Dahlia's smile as he took a used cloth out of a pocket of his well worn and loose pants to wipe his forehead and push back the dark red hair out of his face.

"You have new sandals," Dahlia said matter of fact.

"Yes, Miss. I needed them."

"I told Father that you did."

Almot nodded his head in reply. Then his gray-blue eyes creased even more from another smile. "Well, Miss I assume you would like your hierete. I'll go get him ready."

She nodded her head in agreement. Just then, the new Zonpres stableboy, who looked to be about seventeen years old, came through one of the doors. In one quick movement Dahlia turned on her heels while pulling the veil down over her face before turning back to Almot and the new attendant.

"Are the back stalls cleaned out?"

"Yeah. They are," said the new employee.

*How rude!* Dahlia thought, as he tried to stare through her riding veil. She tilted her head down so that the brim of her riding hat shielded her eyes. *I won't give him the satisfaction.*

"Stop your dawdling and go get the Miss's saddle and tack!" The stable attendant walked slowly, as he occasionally glanced over his left shoulder in the hope that Dahlia would remove her

veil. He was being so obvious in wanting to see what she looked like in person. “Move!” The command startled the stable attendant, but he did leave. Almot shook his head and muttered under his breath, “Useless.”

Dahlia could hear her hierete’s claws click against the floor as he was led to where Almot and she were standing.

“I can saddle the hierete,” the new employee offered, as he tried to make amends for his rude behavior.

Dahlia thought, *I want him to leave us and just go away.* With her chin still down she said, “No, I want Old Stableman to do it.”

“You heard the Miss.” The stable attendant made himself appear busy by sweeping nonexistent dirt against a wall while Almot began putting the riding tack on the animal.

Almot noticed that Dahlia was still uncomfortable because her shoulders were turned in, and in spite of the veil, her head was slightly bowed. He also saw that she tried to keep her back to the new stable attendant at all times. Almot had a feeling that she wanted the young man to leave. “Go to your bunkhouse and wait for supper.”

The stable attendant rested the broom against the wall and walked out towards the stable employees’ bunkhouses.

Almot saw her shoulders relax but she kept her veil over her face. When her hierete scratched its left side with its back claw and shook its head, she took the gesture as a sign of agreement from her favorite animal. The hierete too was more relaxed now that the new stable attendant was gone.

When the tack was in place, Almot handed her the reins, and she climbed into the saddle. Dahlia coaxed the animal out into the open yard before she nudged the hierete into a trot. She saw another stableboy hauling grain and two gardeners working in the family’s private gardens, as the hierete cantered by. She ignored the employees as they lowered their heads. Then she saw her Uncle Tholawm and waved to him. Her uncle couldn’t see her face because of the veil, but she gave him a smile any way.

*I hope he doesn’t tell me another one of his stories. Please, please not like the one from the last family dinner. He regaled me*



Stars' Fire

*to boredom. Yes, I know all his many stories by heart, of his riding a hierete in the mountain ranges of the three provinces of S'Renen. I know that he always believes that hieretes shouldn't be cooped up in stables; they're meant for the mountains . . . Rocky terrain . . .*

Dahlia looked up and saw her father standing in the balcony window of his office. She waved to him, and he returned the wave.