

The Sphere

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The Sphere
The Cities
and Return

Iris

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*The pavement rumbles and, rushing,
The half-moons of bare feet appear before you
The arms of the machine operator
Slowly absorb the smell of liquid fuel
And you smell it
The blue
Sphere
Of the tattoos
Its hexagonal steel stitching
Is ink-thin evidence
In the new country
Faith
Is
Something without which there's no life
The brush stroke of the master cuts the scene at the viridian
The verdancy of violins drizzles down
And the lips with the smell of tea
With bergamot ringing in the heat of the tea
And the cooker's flame
The tongue of the flame
A second
A child
I don't
Want to hear the ground tremble with the weight of the child who slips
As its fragile skull crashes
Against the steps of an ancient temple*

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PART 1
The Cities

I

Victorious Tiyan

The Mahdi evening announcements came crackling out of the loudspeakers through the artificially lit air of Kándu. The notes of the music echoed from the grayish-white flanks of the pillars, traveling through the entire space of Kándu. Those who couldn't see the Mahdi signs painted on the sides of the pillars conjured up in their minds a memory of this symbol, this visual mantra, that had been etched in their minds as a background picture. The evening announcements made the symbol come alive, and its colors turned into glowing holograms.

The symbol stood for the two parts of the Mahdilai kingdom. It consisted of the outlines of the pillars of Kándu, rising from the earth, and of the An canopy over Kándu. A hexagonal frame surrounded both the upper city and the lower city, it was the symbol of the safety borders of the new country, the symbol of The Sphere.

The evening announcements marked the beginning of the first hour of the evening. The day of the upper Kánduans working in the government pillars came to an end, and they descended to the dwelling islands surrounding the pillars. The chords sounding from the loudspeakers also declared the end of the workday for

those in the lower pillars of Kándu and for the market sellers, shopkeepers, tailors, weavers, water carriers, street sweepers, cleaners and builders working in the Old Town, which was more colorful than the northern parts, winding this way and that in a maze of houses, market squares and shops. The trams clanking along the main streets stopped to sound their whistles in the north and in the south. Some Kánduans had already gathered together in the squares to hear the daily announcements, people were sticking their heads out of tram windows, a breeze from the air conditioners was blowing along the avenida, carrying the music with it. And those who had special merits and had paid a high price for the mésar stones they carried on their breasts wanted to partake in the post-announcement evening mésar. Hands grabbed at the glowing stones. How could they achieve peace of mind if they didn't make it on time? Without a mésar to pacify the mind, the heavy grinding of everyday thoughts never stopped, and all stone holders wanted to fall asleep with their minds as clean as the serene grayness of the pillars.

Today, on the last day of the second quarter year of the new era in 1426, that is on its 38th day, the Mahdis wanted people to share a moment's silence in memory of all those Kánduans whose productive lives had ended during the past quarter. After the silence, the Mahdis reported that the night before, the Jhazugain had destroyed a sizable group of savages who had been causing constant trouble in the eastern blocks of the Old Town. People were also reminded that every shopkeeper, restaurateur and innkeeper without a special permit would pay with their freedom if they clothed, fed or acted as pimps for any savages of tvils.

The Mahdis further reminded people that the end of the current quarter would be celebrated in five days' time and that those with merits would be rewarded with promotions and highest-category mésar stones. A festive free meal would be served in the city squares, and there would be an extra-long evening mésar. Finally, the Mahdis wanted to announce that it had been established beyond any doubt that the fever raging in southern Kándu had been caused by illegal use of forged mésar stones, and that from now on, the Jhazugain would quarantine anyone using forged

or stolen stones. And from now on, those making or selling illegal receivers would pay with their freedom.

The final triad was sounded at last, and anticipation of the *mésmer* began.

The solemn melodies accompanying the evening announcements reached The Desert, awakening Tiyan from her lonely rizikesh training on the roof of a house with a torn-down facade – its bricks, stones and ornaments taken away to adorn better dwellings. The tvil girl practiced some spiral kicks from the ground, fighting with an invisible opponent. Irritation sharpened her moves, sparking the force of her kicks, as her arms and legs slashed the air and her green mop of hair flew around her head. Tiyan stopped, leaned on her knees with her hands and allowed her breathing to calm down. She wiped her long tvil nose with her shirt sleeve. She didn't stop in order to respect the silence ordered by the Mahdis, but if she was going to fight, it was time to calm down and sneak to The Sandelier. But as soon as she stopped her exercise, a picture of Cici was back in her head, with an irritatingly ravishing simile on her lips. Tiyan blew her nose onto the ground. Cici could go to darz and the Mahdis could celebrate workers gone to darz all they wanted, but it was incomprehensible that they had the nerve to celebrate people's deaths, having first burnt their bodies in a huge furnace with garbage and then blown their ashes through a one-way valve outside The Sphere to mingle with the poisonous gases of the khairon under the deadly blaze of the green sun. Who wanted to share a silence in memory of that, darz it? And the word fever rang too tame. This fever was a fatal disease, causing a slow and agonizing death, burning blisters into the skin and forcing the throat to constrict. It was mainly savages who caught the fever, so why make a fuss? The disease just thinned down the ranks of the savages, as did the Jhazugain.

Cici wouldn't come this time either. She didn't want to come, although Tiyan had at last been offered an opportunity to fight in the Old Town, in the most famous of all rizikesh rings, along the river bend. *The Sandelier* was Tiyan's most fervent dream come true. She sacrificed every free moment to the dance – except for those she managed to spend with Cici. She'd been dreaming of *The Sandelier* for as long as

she could remember, because all the best fighters fought there, and the fights were fought in earnest. The winner was given a pouchful of onsis.

Tiyan wanted to win. She had to win. With the onsis, she'd feed the children in her family. Let the Mahdis reward Kánduans with their merits, promotions and mésmers, and allow the stupid Kánduans to imagine that the greatest of all rewards, permission to move to the upper city, was within their reach and could be earned through hard work. Such aspirations were so far removed from the lives of the tvils that it was no use even dreaming about them, darz it, Tiyan thought, lifting her chin the way Cici often did. Cici might have dreams of moving up, but a ready-meal packer like her would never get the chance.

Apart from success in street fighting rings, getting a fighting permit had called for hard work and an opportune moment. Such moments were few and far between, as Tiyan spent long hours working at The Find, a materials recovery mine in the outskirts of Kándu. Cici didn't understand how much Tiyan had struggled to achieve success; she wouldn't give in and come, no matter how ardently Tiyan begged. Tiyan had promised to escort Cici back to her boarding house at the end of the evening, had sworn she'd do it right after the fight and make sure none of the savages would touch her. She'd kept spewing out assurances, but no matter how Tiyan persisted, Cici merely shook her cruelly black hair, and so Tiyan just went on harping until she'd completely embarrassed and humiliated herself, turned herself into a fool, a nobody, until her voice was like the hiss of a slowly emptying cartwheel tire. She just wouldn't take no for an answer. In the morning, when she'd gone to see her, Tiyan was sure Cici would come today, since both had a day off. When Tiyan finally understood Cici wouldn't come, a breath of anger blew over her like a sudden gust from the air conditioners. Ay, Cici had chosen the Collectivists. If anything, Tiyan hated the Collectivists, hated them more than ever.

The Collectivists were a bunch of idiots holding secret meetings behind the backs of the Jhazugain, where mésmers couldn't reach them. They had assembled their ridiculous transmitters from scrap, and they'd tune in to the wavelengths of the Mahdis in order to listen to illegal messages, stories, tales of a past world that the other Kánduans knew nothing about any more, to catch all kinds of rubbish and rubble floating in the air.

The invisible waves and the messages – bursts – hidden in them were the same old garbage as the materials of the past world buried under the earth which it was Tiyan's job to dig up at The Find. She found the activities of the Collectivists disgusting and was appalled by the heavy odor that filled her nostrils at the find, penetrating her mask as soon as the filter began to wear out. She was disgusted by the fact that people talked about such work in elevated terms, saying it helped to build and maintain the kingdom. The work was cruel, heavy and dusty. Cici and the Collectivists, who thought they were above all the other Kánduans, were actually just digging up the same kind of dusty finds, trying to reconstruct an imaginary world that hadn't existed for centuries, and in order to justify this stupid waste of time, they imagined that their secret work was more important than it actually was. The Collectivists despised mésmers, claiming the perfectly polished mésmers stones contained nothing more intriguing than an ordinary receiver – but was it any more intriguing to hide messages on the wavelengths of the Mahdis?

When the last echo of the final melody accompanying the announcements had faded, Tiyan's feet became itchy and began to take her from one roof to another. First to the edge of The Desert, then down a spout to the pavement and, weaving through the evening rush hour at an accelerating pace, towards the river, over the bridge and towards *The Sandelier*, hidden in the river bend. The Sandelier was deep inside an ordinary tavern and had got its name from an age-old chandelier hanging above the rizikesh ring. The glow from the chandelier's dozens of tallow candles made the tarnished crystals throw a mosaic of light on the walls.

The Sandelier was a temple of the savages and lower Kánduans. It was incomprehensible that something like it had been preserved in Kándu, hidden away through the centuries. It would have been enough to astonish even the Collectivists. Tiyan could guess that Cici was frightened of the savages who got steamed up in the excitement of betting, and of the scarred and knotted old savages inhabiting the booths of the tavern, spending all their time turning quick gambling marbles in their fingers. One could never see old men and hags like that in the pillars, darz it. Some achievement, old age.

Tiyan's tribe, the *Saayequtai*, did not go in for rizikesh, of course not, but Tiyan had been allowed to watch the fights with her now deceased uncle. Ela had taken her with him, shown her all kinds of adventures, told her anecdotes and invented stories, and the child Tiyan had been happy to escape the control of adults numbed by yera. She absorbed impressions from the worlds surrounding her home base inquisitively, timidly, voraciously. It was exciting to sit on her uncle's shoulders above everyone else. She sunk her hand into the man's green mop of hair, let the tin music and the beat of the drums lead her, admired the graceful movements of the fighters, the smell of sweat in the air, the odors of the tightly packed crowd, the taut muscles and the agile limbs. The fighters in the ring wove a world of their own around them with their keshes, became enmeshed in its strong cobweb.

And Tiyan imagined herself in the place of the fighters in the ring, an object of admiration. She and Ela were pushed around and called tvils and spotnoses, but Ela just laughed, and Tiyan was bursting with happiness. With her uncle, she was afraid of nothing. She was proud of the man who was amused by people's disdainful looks and the hollow insults that accompanied them. Ela was different from Tiyan's own father in every respect.

Their time together had been precious. When no one was looking, Tiyan used to practice the rizikesh dance. She thought that one day she'd make her uncle proud, show what a *Saayequtai* girl could do. Then Ela had disappeared, and evil tongues had started wagging among the *Saayequtai*. It was rumored that the man had got too chummy with the pillar clerks, had been whoring and getting mixed up with things unfit for the *Saayequtai*. It was whispered that he'd been caught by the Jhazugain and had to pay for his doings with his life and that it served him right, since he'd disgraced the *Saayequtai* oath and the members of his family.

With tears welling up in my eyes I climb alone to the roof to escape the rumors. I like being alone, I need it. The low scenery, the pillars and the gray canopy where the pillars end way up high. I feel like screaming, feel like breaking things, and I kick in a tin-plated chimney stump, kicking and kicking, until it's all dented and gives in rumbling and my toes hurt, and I look down into the abyss of the alley, estimate the distance to the next roof and decide to jump. If I fall and die,

so be it, but if I don't, I'll start practicing seriously and find myself a teacher. I'll become better, harder and more agile than anyone else, so good that the fact that I'm a Saayecutai will make no difference any more.

Noise and music were carried from the forecourt of *The Sandelier*, the air was full of the voices of people betting and the smell of roasting meat. People were packed tight before the doors, others were standing in circles round the cookers. Tiyán slunk into an alley on the other side of the block and climbed over fences and low shacks to the back door. Excitement replaced her irritation. She'd be all right without Cici. She climbed a flight of narrow stairs and stepped into an empty room behind a curtain.

The crowd in the big room was shouting out the names of the fighters, and Tiyán couldn't help smiling when she heard her own name among the others. She went to look at herself in a cracked piece of a mirror and began to wind her greenish hair into a bun at the back of her neck, then took her long-sleeved dress off and wound her scarf from behind her neck crosswise over her breasts, made a knot on the hips, drew the belt of her breeches tighter, removed the pouch hanging from the belt and hid it inside her dress. She tightened the ratskin wristbands in place holding one end between her teeth.

Her reflection in the mirror was fuzzy, but it was the only reflection of herself she'd ever seen, not counting the reflections in shop windows. The girl in the mirror had a much longer and more slanted nose than ordinary people, her eyes were slitted and narrow and glinted like orange-hued marbles. Her light skin was embroidered with spots of different sizes, brown tvil stains. The audience would love her. She knew it.

Suddenly the noise in the tavern became louder; someone had opened the downstairs door. The stairs creaked, and her former teacher stuck his head in from behind the curtain. His bald skull was gleaming, and he was swiping beer head off his lips.

"Tija, for darz sake, I feared you wouldn't show up," the old man exclaimed. "I've bet a week's onsis on you to win, at good odds, too, so you better be in shape. Even more so if you happened to hear what the mighty darzes announced today. Let's show them."

“Ay, sure thing!”

“Without a special permit,” the master continued, imitating the machine voice of the Mahdis. “Fuck the bastards, we’ve never needed permits here before, and the masked Mahdi whores cannot patrol all over the place all the time.” The old man spat on the floor, and Tiyan followed his example.

“Killing people and controlling them with their mésmers – practical, eh? If today’s announcements are true. I mean about the fever. Gotta be grateful for The Sphere, though; without it, the whole shit would go up in smoke into the khairon. Mind you, darz it, none of us have ever seen the The Sphere, it might not even exist. And the stones and the fever, I’ve got my doubts about those, too.”

“Me too.”

The man handed her a jar of water, and Tiyan gulped the essence-flavored water down so greedily that it spilled and ran along her neck. Don’t waste it, the old man muttered, but Tiyan just laughed. Her bad mood was gone. She’d been sure sure she’d win the fight if Cici stood among the audience with her ravishing black eyes. She wanted to shine in the spotlight of her eyes, that’s what she’d been dreaming about. Ay, she’d fight, better than ever, she was agile and fast and strong, and could handle her keshes without hesitation.

“Where are they? Where?” Tiyan asked, flexing her wrists. The Master had promised to find her new keshes; she’d lost her old ones. The man muttered something about carefulness and other rizikesh virtues before producing the keshes from behind his back. Two slim sticks, arm-length. Tiyan took them, turning them between her fingers. They were the right weight and obeyed her hands, following each move nimbly. Tiyan stuck the keshes under her belt and gave her face a quick rub.

“I’ll go warm up the audience. Wish me luck.”

The man lifted his fist to his brow. Tiyan didn’t see him do that, for she was already weaving down the staircase and striding into the large room. How enjoyable it was to step into the crowd, even if a picture flashed in her mind of her own previous nagging, of Cici shaking her head coldly, and of the stupid stories about the old world Cici had suddenly started telling – as if Tiyan could be interested in anything but the coming fight on a day like this.

She heard pewter tankards clanking, the bright, metallic tunes of the improvising musicians carrying over the din, the rattle of the maracas and the throbbing of the drums. The audience sang and shouted along with the choir: “Rizi-i-ikesh, rizi-i-ikesh.”

*Rizikesh, rizikesh,
Kesh hitting against kesh,
Who will protect you?
Hear the beat of the drums,
First go slowly, then move fast,
first slow down, speed up last,
The rhythm pulsing at full blast.
Did you come here to win?
To win, outguess your opponent,
Where do you come from, winner?
No one knows you.
Not yet, not yet,
Soon soon soon.*

The doors leading to the ring had been opened, and Tiyan made her way through the full restaurant dancing. People gave her shouts of encouragement, and she greeted them, they reached for her, old men muttering something about tvils, and one of the old drunkards even grabbing at her hips, spitting on the floor.

“Is this the tvil that’s come here to fight; why, she’s just a slip of a thing.” The old man’s face was covered with festering scabs, his eyes glistened. Tiyan thought of the disease, the old man was coughing at her on purpose. But the Mahdis had said that the fever only spread through the stones.

“Ay, this is the tvil that’s come to win this darzed fight!” Tiyan yelled, raising her keshes high in the air. The old man shut up, and next to him, his mate chuckled.

An aisle marked out with bells circled the ring between the booths and the audience. The aisle was meant for the fighters to pass through, and people drew back when Tiyan forced her way through the crowd into its middle. She hit each bell with her keshes, uttering wordless wishes into the air. These were her evening bells, her rizikesh announcements.

Her first opponent was already prancing about in the ring. Tiyan jumped in, beginning to raise applause from the crowd, giving a foretaste of what was coming. She clapped her hands and made a few warm-up moves: half a somersault, a handstand with one hand, ending up with a split, and up again. The crowd cheered. Tiyan drew her keshes from under her belt.

What a rush, better than a yera high. She beat her first opponent easily, too easily, in the second round. In the final, she got arrogant and overconfident, deciding to prolong the fight, wanting to entertain the audience, showing off with her flying dodges and attacks. She imagined she'd been allowing her opponent to lead, but suddenly her arrogance turned against her and the man's kesh hit her elbow. And on top of that, she saw a pretty face that looked like Cici's in the crowd. A rage came over Tiyan, of course it wasn't Cici, but her mind went dim and she decided to finish the round off immediately. She let her knee spring up straight into her opponent's chin – a brazen move, totally unexpected.

The scarf she'd wound across her breasts was wet with perspiration. Tiyan tore it off. Her teacher had placed a basin filled with water in the upstairs room for her to wash herself. She never healed the blows she got in the fights, even though her hands felt hot, forcing their way towards the wounds and injuries. Her last opponent was being treated in the next room. Tiyan could have helped him, too, but it was wrong to heal. People couldn't do it themselves, and among the *Saayequtai* it was strictly forbidden to heal people. The scars you got in competitions had to be born proudly.

The water in the basin was cold, it splashed and spilled over to the floor, and her hot skin came out in goose bumps; it was strange to be alone after all the noise and excitement. A picture of Cici sneaked back into her mind. Cici bent forward and narrowed her eyes into a squint, and Tiyan drew back, pressing herself deep into a back corner. The curtain swung open, and a savage girl poked her head in.

“Ay, Tara, it was your pretty singing that made me win the dance,” Tiyan began to babble, rubbing the skin of her naked upper torso, going over the fight in her mind.

Tara was carrying a large jug of beer mixed with lemon-flavored water; it tasted better than anything. Tara said they'd all stay downstairs gambling, would Tija join them? They were waiting for the winner at the gambling table, which was laid out with things to eat and drink. The savages had been trapping pigeons all day and were now frying crickets in the yard. There were jugfuls of beer, even yera, everything; Tija should join them.

“Sure I'll come,” Tiyan heard herself say.

The onsis she'd won were for the *Saayequtai* children. She'd take her winnings to the Saayequtai in The Desert; she'd decided to do that long before the fight, and it was the only reason why she fought at all. First thing in the morning she'd go to the market place and buy jugfuls of water, bread, vegetables and colorful pieces of marmalade, and take it all to the children. That's what she'd do.

The bulging pouch sat askew next to Tiyan's dress. The takings of the winner. She took Tara's face between her hands and kissed her, promising to follow her soon. Tiyan removed the band holding her hair in a bun and let her mane resume its usual shape as a messy mop, then put on her dress. She hid two coins in the folds, tying the heavy pouch filled with onsis tight onto her belt. Then she strode after the girl to celebrate her victory.

Tiyan kept saying she was going to leave, but first she was just terribly hungry and used her teeth to tear large pieces of flesh from the roasted pigeons, snatching oily cumin crickets from the pan and stuffing bread into her mouth. Then she thought her winning streak might continue at the gambling tables, though she knew she didn't usually do well with marbles or even cards. Onsi coins kept changing hands quickly in the company of the savages, and the pouch on Tiyan's belt got lighter and lighter, while her voice grew louder and louder and another jug containing even more powerful stuff than before began to be passed around.

The beer, flavored with spice and spiked with yera, packed a punch: chairs were clanking, her thoughts kept disintegrating and scattering all over the room. Her mind registered nothing but random observations: movements, voices and nut-

meg-flavored vapors of drink and breath. Someone shoved the marbles off their rack – either intentionally or by accident – no one saw it happen. An argument ensued, and it escalated into a skirmish. A table was turned, a clean-scraped frying pan fell clanking to the floor. Tiyan threaded her way to the back door, feeling the need to relieve herself.

There was a lonely lantern flickering above the back door, and the world beyond the circle of light drowned into darkness. Tiyan took careful steps towards the back end of the yard, heard a cat meow and a mouse rustle in its cellophane nest. She'd lost her sandals and could feel every single grain of sand under the soles of her feet. A smell of urine wafted at her from the other end of the yard. Darz, how brilliant she's been, truly victorious.

“Hi, Ticha.”

Tiyan gave a start, stumbling, and had to steady herself against the wall causing the plastic boxes piled against it to come crashing down. Darz it, the boy had surprised her, but she recognized his voice at once. No one else called her by this unusual pet name.

Fake Hand was leaning against a lamppost under a burned-out lamp in the middle of the yard, his silhouette visible in the darkness against the yellow candle light shimmering behind him. Fake Hand was a cripple and a cruel boy; all the savages were scared of him. He never joined forces with anyone, preferring to move around on his own, and as far as anybody knew, he never used yera. Hand was cunning and could make savages do whatever he wanted, especially girls, in spite of the fact that his face was half-covered by reddish scar tissue, his nose had been broken several times, and one of his scars formed a deep canyon across his entire face, forcing one eye to be permanently half-closed. No one knew where he'd got his scars, since despite his physical inability, he was difficult to beat on the rare occasions he ended up in a fight.

“Congratulations. You looked good, quite impressive, Flying Knee.”

“Ay, whaddya want from me, you darzed monster?” Tiyan slurred, more drunk than she wanted to think she was. “I already lost everything, nothin' left any more.”

Hand's face melted into his usual leer.

“Thanks for the compliment; you’re sweet, too. But I ain’t interested in your pouch – I mean the onsis,” he corrected himself, raising an eyebrow.

“What you doin’ here all alone?” Tiyan asked, pushing strands of hair off her forehead. She was Tiyan the Victorious.

“You know me. I’m a shy one.” As he smiled, his scarred skin tightened around the corners of his eyes and mouth. One of his front teeth was broken.

Tiyan let out a chuckle. Yes, she knew what the boy wanted. And suddenly she wanted it, too. She had to forget Cici, who was already shrinking into a thin shadow at the edges of her memory, thanks to the beer, yera, and of course the magnificent fight. Let her stay there, let her disappear completely. Who cared about some kid from the pillars? Cici hadn’t come to see her fight, but Hand had, even though he hated crowds.

“Look, nothin’ left.” Tiyan opened the pouch and shook a piece of a broken comb into her palm. “Ay, just this comb.”

“You wanna come with me, ‘ay, just this comb’ girl?” Hand asked, gesturing towards the second floor of the house opposite. “I could show you somethin’. Besides,” he continued, apparently not realizing he’d already won, “I just saw a Jhazu patrol a couple of blocks away. They’ll soon be here, and you don’t wanna stay till they get here.”

“No, I sure don’t.” She didn’t. Tiyan understood she was too drunk to escape the Jhazugain. “Ay, let me first take a pee over there.”

II

The eyes in the night

Fake Hand was gone when Tiyan woke up on a thin rag of a carpet with only her dress as a blanket, the boy's touch still tingling on her skin. She felt strong and fulfilled. She attacked the boy right away, tore his trousers off and climbed on top. Hand was babbling something about a workshop, but Tiyan didn't listen, just stuck her tongue deep into the boy's throat. Well, this is okay, too, Hand had said, laughing, and had let Tiyan take over. Darz it, she'd never again get mixed up with this guy.

Her head was buzzing when she staggered up, and she had to bend double and lean on her knees for a moment. Hand would be back, she had to get away before that. She was no longer angry at Cici and what she'd said, only irritated by the savages sleeping along the walls in the crowded room, the air that was heavy with sleep, the nightly chirping of the crickets and the kesh stick at her feet – the other one had disappeared to who knew where. She'd only dozed off for a moment and was still drunk.

The victorious rizikesh girl was moving away at a fast pace, throwing her a mischievous look from her orange-yellow eyes; she had nothing to do with the

inebriated twilight Tiyan had turned into. She'd have to go back with empty hands, with nothing to give to the children. She could already see their pleading eyes, their empty bowls falling to the ground and the knowing face of the porridge seller when Tiyan didn't come to the porridge cart in the morning to tell him about her fight and to brag about her victory. The echo of the yera she'd drunk kept knocking about in her head, she yearned for more. Cici didn't trust her. Ay, I wonder why?

Tiyan wriggled into her dress, searched for her scarf; it was in a heap in the corner, reeking of frying oil. Of course the onions hidden in its folds were gone, and she couldn't find her sandals either. Tiyan scratched her ankle. It wasn't smart to wander around in the alleys at night, but she was restless and wanted to go to her people.

The Kándu night was still, the temperature had been lowered and the wind had died down. The silence of the night was an immaterial nocturnal phenomenon consisting of the hum of the air conditioning and the distant rumble of the heavy traffic along the ring roads. The Kánduans had been driven into their corners by darkness and the exhaustion caused by the mesmer; the savages had been exhausted by yera. The only light came from the yellow spots of the safety lights high up where the truss structures were, where An began.

It could be dangerous to move around during the forbidden hours, and Tiyan tried to keep her eyes peeled and be wary. She could see the river as a black ribbon at the edge of the Old Town. She went down to the river, sneaking along the bank, breathing in the aroma of the waterless, muddy riverbed, the deep, safe smell of the earth, crouching as she proceeded towards the bridge and, behind the bridge, The Desert, the city's most distant inhabited area, which the river cut apart from the rest of the town. On the bridge, Tiyan pressed herself close to the railing, crawling on all fours so she couldn't be seen. The Jhazugain hardly ever patrolled in The Desert.

The age-old, cozy buildings of The Desert leaned on each other with their brows crumbling, dark, with downcast eyes. The shoulders of the buildings slumped, their walls kept shedding tiles and plaster slowly, like reptiles shedding their skins. The meandering alleys grew narrower, the buildings were connected by covered bridges, clotheslines and hampers hanging between them.

A child whimpered behind a door half off its hinges. Tiyan stopped. Yes, she heard the whimpering of a sick child, abandoned, from behind the cracked door on her left. The stolen m smer stones, the fever. One could see sick people in The Desert, too, with dead skin scaling off their faces in red flakes. The disease killed its victims, and people believed it was extremely contagious in spite of the fact that the Mahdis said otherwise. Tiyan had heard that this was why sick people were abandoned in deserted buildings and left to die. She went to the door, cracking it open. A bundle rustled near the wall by the door, a savage child, perhaps five years old. She couldn't turn away, couldn't leave the suffering child. She knelt beside the child, swept the hair off its face, drew the hands clutching its eyes apart. The disease had brought red spots on the feverish child's skin, his cheeks were flaming hot, his brow was flaming hot, and delirious words came out of his mouth.

She had to clear her head and pull herself together. Tiyan breathed on her palms, placing them on the child's feverish forehead, felt blood and life throbbing under the hot, thin skin. She tried to locate the disease, uncover its nature and origin, it couldn't be the stones, never. She hadn't used her healing powers for a long time and thought this was why she kept getting lost in the labyrinth of veins and cells. But it wasn't that; suddenly, instead of ordinary inflammation, she ran into something deep, hard and cold, which paralyzed her for a moment, nearly took her life, and would have if she hadn't removed her hands from the child's forehead. A strange light dyed the child's face, and its eyes stared without blinking, lifeless eyes, from which an alien, shadowy look shot out, piercing her, and it made her think of the Mahdis. She thought she was looking into the eyes of a Mahdi and saw what the eyes of the rulers were like. The eyes of the creators of the kingdom were not human, they were powerful spirit eyes and they saw her, looked straight at her.

Tiyan stumbled into the alley, gasping for air. The child was left behind the door; the door was hanging off its hinges, creaking, changing into a grimacing mouth in the pale light of the safety lights, cackling, and Tiyan broke into a run, her legs obeying slowly, reluctantly, her heart bursting. She was lucky to be so near home, her own people, she wanted to be with them, with the *Saayequtai*, where the Mahdis had no business coming. She strode up the familiar stairs, coming into a blind alley.

From the window openings on the upper floor came a *Saayequtai* hum, accompanied by a drawling melody of the naqqala. Tiyan sneaked into the building's inner courtyard through a half-open gate, nearly stepping on a beetle struggling in a puddle of water. Her foot came down on the essence-flavored water puddle spilled from a bottle, and the beetle was thrown into safety on dry land. Tiyan pushed the fabric hung over the doorway aside and crept up the stairs. She was safe, it had been nothing but a savage child, none of her business, she'd forget about it, about the eyes and the shadow.

There was no-one on the lower floor at night, its large window holes had been blocked up with bricks; the space was used for meals and for stacking all sorts of necessary things abandoned by others but still useful: potsherds, stove burners, door handles, canteen bottle caps, lumps of plaster, beautiful smooth stones, colorful pieces of plastic, cellophane strips. And suddenly Cici was back in her thoughts, affection for her stinging like a knife, disappointment damping the flush of victory, even the victory itself was no more than a memory, all her winnings gone. "Stop, you're getting on my nerves." Cici kept repeating these words in her head, brusquely, again and again. Before leaving, Tiyan had called her a darzed tightass pillar cunt. That wasn't very polite either.

The smell of incense and candles made of cooked animal fat floated into the staircase. Tiyan climbed past the second floor, not wanting to arouse attention. Her fingers felt the cracks on the walls, the soft cobwebs in them. A humming group of *Saayequtai* had gathered in the large room with an emptied jug of yera in the middle – the intoxicating yera dust mixed with water filled your whole body – children lying there in hungry sleep, wrapped in rugs and rags, tallow running down the sides of the candles, flames flickering, and corners disappearing in darkness. It was suddenly very difficult to resist the temptation to join the others. In the melody woven by the strings of the naqqala, she could sense a yearning for the ancient regions where they had once lived, as their stories told them, regions now buried in khairon. Yes, she knew yera wasn't the same as the Desert River with its stagnated thick brown mud – the current of yera flowed freely, foaming and bubbling forward in its bed. An invitation tugged at the hem of her dress, it would be easy to join.

Ever since she'd started to wear a worker's ID tag around her neck, Tiyan had been afraid to meet her father, because she had broken her oath. After her mother's death she'd sworn an oath, like all *Saayequtai* when they grew up, and in taking the oath she'd promised never to aspire to any position whatsoever in Mahdi society, never to try to be part of it or get mixed up in the life of those not belonging to the *Saayequtai*. She'd promised to stay near the ground, together with other members of her tribe, and to learn their own language, wordless communication that could put them in touch with ancient powers and their lost native country.

Most of the young *Saayequtai* did not question the oath, for they were already hooked on yera, and it was easy to follow the example of others. Tiyan didn't want such a fate, she despised the false pride acquired through yera. Yera turned its servants into a closed box: the lid was shut and the outside world disappeared, with death wrapping itself around the user in the box. The ID tag gave her a little more freedom, since the Jhazugain didn't control the comings and goings of workers as strictly as others without tags.

"Blood means memories. Feeling means memories," her father and other aged people kept saying. A long time ago the *Saayequtai* had been despised even more. In those days they hadn't lived in isolation as they did now. They'd quite openly sold yera extracted from the poison of the naja snake in the outside world. Yera was a much more potent relaxant than pure distilled spirit or the beer that could be bought in the taverns, but the Mahdis had forbidden its production and turned them into criminals, given the Jhazugain a reason to capture and disgrace them, and their adults had grown hostile towards the entire outer world when their need for the drug couldn't be fulfilled. The *Saayequtai* had retreated to the abandoned blocks of The Desert and lived in isolation there. Finally they'd been allowed to get limited rations of yera from the Mahdi pharmacies.

While the adults were trying to enter a trance, the younger ones kept rushing around, trying to tend to their children, trying to earn onsis by selling scarves and mats woven from rags and window shelters crocheted from strips of thin plastic. They needed onsis to buy food and drinking water. They caught vermin, rabbits and rats and mice, and cooked their bones to make candles. With their shoulders meekly

hunched, they entered Mahdi pharmacies to get the rations allowed them by the Mahdis. Yet the young *Saayequtai* had to break rules in order to be able to satisfy their needs: after closing time, they stole more yera from the pharmacies, with the cold fear of getting caught resting on their shoulders. Under the constant shadow of the Jhazugain cloaks they caught najas and made poisonous potions in their ramshackle laboratories. They dried snakeskins in the wind blowing from the air conditioners and used the skins to pay for their food. The *Saayequtai* didn't want trespassers in their territory, and for the most part they were left in peace, but they were called tvils in the Mahdi language. Tvil. It was like spitting at a person in the face. Their own name, the *Saayequtai*, was a bond between them and it distinguished them from the others. It was the only word they still remembered of their extinct language.

Tiyan crept across the attic, pushed through an open roof hatch and climbed out into the night. The jagged silhouette of The Desert with its chimneys and water tanks spread before her. Up here she could imagine herself alone, not belonging anywhere.

Cici often talked about An and the old world, and it was fascinating to fantasize about unattainable dimensions. For the lower Kánduans, An was merely a source of innumerable rumors and stories, both juicy and absurd, for no-one could deny a story that began to spread at a tavern table.

Tiyan liked to listen to Cici talk, but before their quarrel about the fight Cici had suddenly brought up the *Saayequtai*, and had made her angry and wary even before the quarrel. Ay, she didn't want to think about Cici's words, didn't understand them; words were like fast-slithering snakes, as difficult to catch and stun as najas.

Her lower arm was still throbbing where her opponent had hit her. Tiyan sat down by a chimney, drew her knees against her breast and lowered her chin to her knees. Suddenly she was overwhelmed by the fear of losing Cici. She couldn't bear it. Cici had become the most important thing in her life, ay, perhaps second to rizikesh only; she was in love with Cici.

