

The Demigod's Daughter

by Constance Brewer



Chapter 1

It was a mistake to give divine power to an angry man.

The words danced up to Kadi on a sudden breeze, dust-delivered by the gods. Her magha whispered against her neck.

It was a mistake.

She paused from the task of grinding paint pigment. “The gods don’t make mistakes, they are perfect, that is why they are gods and we are not.”

Her unseen magha laughed in her mind. *Perfect? Oh, my love . . . Even the gods can have a bad day.* To her relief, the presence vanished. She shivered and traced her fingers over the level surface of the wall before her. A sunbeam illuminated the half-completed fresco. She'd sooted the pinpoint dots of a drawing outlining a magnificent tiger leaping from the clouds, paws spread, poised to protect the people of Eshwarum Duar.

Putting her magha’s words out of her mind, she let her gift entrance her. Layers of precise color applied themselves over the dots, coat-by-coat, wet paint shining. She could picture the result. All she had to do was paint it. This was her magic.

She thought of her daughter Jybril's magic, a vibrant spark dancing within her, granting her the ability to dive headfirst into mischief and emerge unscathed. Kadi reached for her daughter's bright spirit. It was like trying to catch a breeze in both hands. She chewed her lower lip and returned scattered attention to the fresco.

Kadi mixed malachite with green earth powder and added drops of water to form a paste of pigment. Once at the proper consistency, she brushed it around the outlined cartoon and blocked-in the shadows. As always, the urge to paint faster lurked. The gift was impatient; it knew the result of the finished wall. She fought temptation. Mistakes were costly; she would have to start over, scrape plaster away, and lose an entire day's work. Her fresco master would be angry.

Lost in her gift, she watched the dot-outlined tiger, filled with color, spring from the painting, growl, and lope around the wall to vanish into another corridor. She rubbed her cheek with a paint-spattered hand. “Tiger, tiger, go away, I’m not in love with you today,” she recited under her breath and set to mixing powder to paste with slow, rhythmic strokes. “Tiger-white please disappear, I’m not in love when you’re not here.”

Fresco dust twirled in a cascade of light. A scrape of heavy boot against stone floor had her hunching her shoulders. She clutched her brush in a death grip and busied herself outlining the tiger’s face so she wouldn’t have to turn around. Her hand slipped and smeared a stripe.

The thudding boots stopped at the entry to the room.

Kadi’s heart was torn, dreading the inevitable yet curious about the mischief. Without turning, she heaved a sigh and asked, “What did Jybril do now? Climb the plants in the hanging garden? Release the palace llarmals into the streets? Throw fruit off the balcony into the courtyard?”

“No, Miss Kadi. Your daughter has done nothing wrong.”

Today was unspoken. She turned, undoing the silk scarf she wore as a filter over her nose and mouth. The practiced smile slipped from her lips as she found not only two palace guards but two soldiers of the Khesari Royal Army, impeccably uniformed and armed with an array of weapons. What in Shavr’s name had her daughter done? “What’s wrong?”

The military hafdar stepped forward. “Zadia Kadi, there has been an incident. Your daughter was playing in the Queen’s bee gardens when Northern maghas stole her away. They thought she was a Queensdaughter. Rest assured, Majdar Foras is doing everything in his power to find her. We will keep you informed.” He motioned for his soldier to retreat.

Kadi’s stomach clenched, and the world lurched beneath her feet. The beautiful light in the library faded to dim pinpoints before her eyes; the wall, her masterpiece, blurred into pale blotches as the world tilted. Jybril? Gone? The word rang in her ears, and paint dripped steadily off the end of her brush and dribbled onto the marbled floor.

No. Jybril’s fast, she’s clever. She’d wriggle free, sneak away, hide under the hanging garden vines, laughing at her own victory. Not lost. She couldn’t be lost. But the soldier’s face said otherwise.

A breath hitched in Kadi’s throat. She forced herself to stay upright, to keep her hands steady, though the paintbrush in her grip trembled. Jybril had been here this morning, sticky with honey, cheeks flushed with laughter. She’d grabbed Kadi’s wrist, tugging her toward the sun-dappled terrace. “Look, Ama, a butterfly!” But the brightness, the warmth, had been stolen.

“Wait! You can't tell me this and walk away. I want to speak with the Majdar! What is he doing to find her? How did Northerners enter the palace grounds? Why did the guards not protect my daughter?”

The hafdar held up a hand. “The Majdar is looking into it. He'll let you know—”

“I demand to be taken to the Majdar! Right now.” Kadi stomped forward as well as she could in soft sandals and glared at the man. “This is my daughter, not some lost llarmal.” She folded her arms across her chest, paintbrush poking her in the side. Her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths as if a drum pounded inside her, each thud echoing through her body.

“Very well, come with me. Majdar Foras thought you'd not take 'he's working on it' for an answer.” The hafdar spun around and headed out, soldier falling in behind. The guards walked away.

Kadi glanced at her plaster and paint, the wet fresco. It would be ruined. She threw down her brush and bolted after the soldiers.

The hafdar led everyone out of the labyrinth of the library wing. At the bottom of the wide steps, another soldier waited, holding the reins of four llarmals. Three were muscled army geldmales whose half-camel ancestry showed strongly. The other was a fine-boned, pretty fullmale who leaned toward the llama side of his family. He pricked long, black-tipped brown ears and studied Kadi.

The animal's chin was higher than the top of her head and the army llarmals were even taller. Their eyes were orbs of burnt umber and observed her with interest. The llarmals smelled earthy and sweaty at the same time. The sorrel geldmale snorted and the others replied with grunts of their own.

She stopped short. “I haven't much experience riding, recently.” It had been years since she chased after her brothers on llarmal-back.

“Hence, why the Majdar sent Raahi, there. He said to tell you even his four-year-old nephew can ride Raahi.”

Kadi straightened and approached the curious llarmal. She held out a hand and let the beast sniff it. The llarmal nuzzled her cheek with velvet lips. She stroked the downy coat on his neck as he blew a stream of oaty breath in her face. Jybril would love him. She bit back a sob.

“Climb aboard; we don't have time to tarry.”

The little llarmal folded its legs and collapsed to the ground to make it easier for her to mount. She swung into the saddle and grasped the horn shelf. Raahi lurched to his feet and set off with quick strides.

The palace grounds sprawled like a small city of stone and shadow, too vast to notice a missing little girl, its winding paths and towering halls stretching the journey far longer than Kadi could bear. As they descended the hill toward the market, the scent of saffron and roasted almonds clashed with the bile rising in her throat. Vendors called out their wares, the hum of daily life oblivious to the fact that her world was shattering.

She tightened her grip on the llarmal's reins, fingers aching from holding on too tightly. The beast shifted beneath her, its muscled frame moving in fluid strides, yet she barely noted the rhythm. There was an empty place where her daughter should be.

Up the hill toward the military garrison, the khotte, dust coated Kadi's lips, dry as the words she couldn't bring herself to say. *Please, gods, let Jybril be well.* A hollow prayer carried by the hot wind, lost amid the distant turmoil of the city.

The garrison loomed ahead, an unyielding slab of granite that dwarfed the surrounding buildings. Compared to the palace's beauty, the army's headquarters were cold, functional and merciless. Upon arrival, the group dismounted and Kadi stepped into the atrium, the space vast yet suffocating, the air thick with sweat and polished steel. War gods loomed in statue form, their stone faces impassive, watching her as if gauging her strength.

Bull paintings lined the walls, their fierce stares too close to the rising growl in her chest. Her gaze flicked to the chipped mural of the ancient Battle for Ajshakan, its cracks spreading like fissures through her resolve. She should have been focused on Jybril. Yet somehow, even now, her mind cataloged the art, seeking distraction when no distraction could erase the truth.

"This way, Miss Kadi," the hafdar announced, motioning her down a lengthy corridor and opening a plain wooden door with a stylized bull in the center. Kadi tugged her stained tunic down with paint-spattered hands and smoothed it. Across the expanse of the room, she saw Umed Foras seated at a hand-carved teak desk. He smiled at her with a trace of hunger, as if Kadi were a fine brood llarmal he coveted.

"Kadi, come in, come in," Foras called as he rose. A tall man, he towered over Kadi, broad-shouldered and handsome enough, still in top shape despite his age, with dark hair silvering at the temples. He wore a plain khaki uniform, unadorned with anything but rank. The scent of sandalwood incense filled the air.

"M-Majdar Foras," she stammered in way of greeting. Halfway into the room, she whipped her head around. Another man stood near the wall, hands tucked into the voluminous sleeves of a blue silk zherwani, eyes sharp as obsidian, and a silver crescent tattoo glowing faintly at his temple. A magha. Her mouth went dry. She stole another glance. The magha was unknown to her. Relief and disappointment warred. It wasn't *her* magha.

Foras strode forward, too close. His fingers wrapped around hers, the grip firm, possessive. He pressed his lips to the back of her hand, lingering long enough to make her skin prickle. “Kadi, my dear. Call me Umed.”

Revulsion twisted in her gut. She pulled away, wiping her hand against her tunic. *Not your dear. Never your dear.* “Where is Jybril? Where were your soldiers? They are supposed to protect the citizens of Southern Eshwarum Duar.”

“It will be fine, Kadi. I've given orders for the army to prepare to ride as soon as we discover which group of worthless Northern rabble did this terrible thing. We'll find her.”

“How did someone take her from the palace grounds?” she demanded, gaze bouncing from his impassive face to the silent magha and back. “I thought you were negotiating with the Northerners for peace. Why would they do this? I thought the grounds were safe. Are your soldiers so stupid? Are the palace maghas that incompetent?” Her tone rose with each question. She crossed her paint-splattered arms over her chest and scowled to hide the trembling.

Foras shot a glance at the other man.

“The soldiers could not have prevented it,” the magha said in a low voice at odds with his wiry build. “Nothing the court magha could have protected against.”

“Why? What happened?” Kadi stopped herself from pacing the room like a caged tiger. Her hand brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face. Calm. Remain calm. She needed them to find Jybril.

The magha raised a long-fingered hand adorned with rings. “The kidnappers opened a passage right into the inner grounds. There was no way to prevent what happened.”

“Why Jybril? Why not take the Queen? Or one of her children?”

“Unfortunately, Jybril loitered in the bee gardens. She should not have been there, but an open gate was too tempting for your child. The Northerners mistook her for a Queensdaughter. Who else would be in the inner gardens of the palace? They were likely under orders to snatch any royal they found. A guard saw them but by the time they summoned me, it was too late.”

This time there would be no white tiger to save her. Kadi stood alone with the realization that her daughter was missing, captured by Northern rebels. She swallowed hard. Jybril was alive. Her essence lingered in Kadi's mind like a sunbeam. The gods would not take her little girl, not before they took Jybril's damned father. “Who are you?”

“I am Pehlaj. I have come to help Majdar Foras reunite North and South Eshwarum.”

“Well, mighty magha, you're not doing a good job. I want my daughter back. Do your magic and help me! Go get her. Open one of these passages and take her back.”

“Umed did not exaggerate your impudence, child.”

“I am not a child. I am a mother with a lost daughter who shouldn't be lost if maghas did their jobs.” Kadi took a deep breath and another. Her voice came out level. “I expect you to go after her and bring her home. Is it too much to ask?”

“We will do what we can,” Pehlaj told her, voice cold, “But I will not jeopardize negotiations over one naughty little girl. You may be related to the Queen, but the relationship carries no weight with me.”

Kadi flushed with rage. *How dare he criticize Jybril!*

Foras made a calming gesture. “No need to antagonize one another. Pehlaj will help me find your daughter in the course of negotiations. You must be patient, Kadi.”

Out of patience, she stuffed the desire to shout deep within. Despite herself, her hands clenched into fists. She eyed Pehlaj. “Why can't you open one of these passages, find her, and take her back from the rebels. Go after her,” Kadi demanded, stepping toward the silent magha. “Open a passage, do your magic. Bring her back.”

Pehlaj's eyes, dark and ancient, settled on her like a poised blade. The incense swirled around him, unmoved by the tension thickening the air.

“It is not so simple,” he said finally, voice smooth as polished stone.

“It should be simple for someone like you,” she snapped. “You're a magha of the court, a master magician of arcane pathways—aren't you?”

Silence.

The air shifted. A soft breeze, though no windows were open, rustled the scrolls behind him. A shimmer pulsed along his sleeves, and Kadi caught a faint glimmer of veins of energy swirling on his arms.

Still he said nothing.

Her pulse raced. “Don't stand there cloaked in power and pretend helplessness. You say you're here to reunite North and South Eshwarum? Start by saving the child. *My child.*”

Pehlaj turned his head slowly to Foras, the faintest frown flickering across his face. The Majdar gave a shallow nod.

Pehlaj exhaled and finally spoke. “I do not build passages, Zadia Kadi. Passage discipline belongs to another branch of our order.”

“You can destroy cities, but not save one little girl?”

His eyes narrowed. "You presume too much."

"No," she said, voice breaking. "You assume too little of what it means to be a mother."

A beat of silence passed before he gave a low, cold reply.

"I wield fire and lightning, not threads of movement through space. The passage they opened was not mine to trace, nor to follow. I would if I could. I would already be gone."

Kadi stared at him, chest heaving, a sick weight blooming behind her ribs.

He peered down his long nose. "Passage builders are exceedingly rare, and it is not my specialty."

"What *is* your specialty?"

The magha exchanged another glance with Foras. He gave a thin smile. "War."

