



Z'ahkron de la Kosecha

Memory of the Harvest



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—
“*Kada mujer, ombre, i kriatura en Innatraea es un sembrador de algo.*”

Every woman, man, and child on Innatraea is a farmer of something.”

— Zimsway Rinowhn Saying

Najwa pressed her thumb against the plant’s thick stem, her skin catching on its sticky, pungent resin. Its vibrant, purple buds and distinct multipoint leaves brushed against her wrists. To anyone else on Innatraea, this plant was merely a popular trade commodity, moving in caravans anywhere there was coin. And though some peoples, like the Am’ayim, appreciated it, to her tribe, it was life. La Koshecha Kadosh, the haze flower harvest, was one of their most sacred rituals.

Najwa traced the stalk until her fingers found the swollen, unmistakable shape of pollen sacs. A male plant. Left alone, it would pollinate the surrounding females and ruin this entire section of the crop.

Najwa stood, wiping the dark resin on her apron, and raised a hand. A young field tender came immediately. He stopped a few paces away, rubbing dirty hands nervously against his trousers, chest rising and falling too fast.

Najwa let her breath out slowly. Years ago, the sight of a missed male plant would have flared into a sharp, tight-jawed annoyance. But she had learned calm, and didn’t want him to fear her; she wanted the boy to understand.

“Come,” she said gently, placing a warm hand on his shoulder, and guiding him to the plant. “Do you see these clusters here?” She pointed to the sacs hidden beneath the multipoint leaves. “This is a male. You must pull it immediately, before it opens. If the wind catches this, every female plant nearby will be pollinated, and stop producing resin.”

The boy nodded, his shoulders dropping in relief. He reached down and firmly uprooted the plant.



“Good,” Najwa murmured. She stood back up, looking out over the endless golden plains of Ayuwasi around the fields of their harvest. An autumn wind swept past, carrying the deep, sweet scent of the Palo de Sinyales—the sacred, fragrant wooden totem poles carved by her tribe that ringed their camp.

As the wind caught her hair, Najwa’s hand drifted to her collarbone, fingers brushing the blue and purple gold-veined stone pendant resting there, the polished stone carried none of the warmth it should have. It was a new Zuniga Stone, a sacred relic carved from where her tribe tended the rare ore. A gift that held more respect and love than anything else her tribe valued, but to Najwa, it was nothing more than cold, dead weight. Every Zimsway mother passed her Zuniga Stone down to their daughter—a unique, irreplaceable reliquia de familia, carrying the memories of every woman before her. Their tribe’s magic. But the stone resting against Najwa’s skin held no memories. It was an empty vessel, and every time the autumn wind blew across Ayuwasi, the coldness of that stone felt like a fresh, quiet wound.

Her mother, Chaya, had been out gathering seasonal herbs alone. It wasn’t a raid. There had been no warning cries telling them to flee. Just a sudden, terrifying wrongness that had settled over Najwa as a child, in the middle of their tents.

“Mama, onde estás?” She had run through the camp, her little voice calling out, panic rising in her throat before she even understood why. Mama, where are you?

Chaya never came home again. Her mother was simply gone. Taken from them like a leaf falling in autumn.

When her father finally rode out to search, Rahl had only found her mother’s dropped gathering basket lying in trampled, bloody grass. There were heavy, iron-shod hoofprints nearby. An ambush. They had taken her mother, and they had taken the true Zuniga Stone that was supposed to be Najwa’s legacy with them too, whoever they had been. Nearly everything Najwa was supposed to be, and had loved, was just gone; in a moment, that she still didn’t understand.

Her tribe had mourned, but it was Rahl who had truly broken. Her father didn’t die; that would have been kinder. He simply hollowed out.

Najwa still remembered the night his silence had finally crushed her. It was late autumn, just weeks after the bloody grass. The rest of their camp was trying to heal. Through the canvas of their tent, Najwa could hear the rhythmic scrape of a neighbor carving a new Palo



de Sinyales, and somewhere near the central fires, a woman was softly singing Durme, Durme to a restless child. The Zimsway were a family of shared motherhood, and they were trying to survive.

But at her own family's fire, there was only the hiss of dying embers.

Najwa, still just a young girl, sat on her heavy woven cushion, the one her mother had made, knees pulled to her chest. Across the low flames, her father stared into the dying fire, his eyes like ash. Rahl's shoulders were slumped, hands resting limply between his knees. He hadn't spoken in three days. He hadn't carved. He hadn't even looked at her. It was as if his soul had been tethered so completely to Chaya's that when she'd been taken, her father had also been dragged away.

Najwa picked up a small, smooth piece of wood from the pile beside her. She held it out across the fire. A silent, desperate plea for him to take his knife. To carve something. To see her.

"Papa?" she whispered.

Rahl didn't blink. The firelight flickered across his face, but his eyes were empty, reflecting nothing. He was a spirit, haunting his own life.

Her arm trembled. Najwa lowered the piece of wood, heartbreak settling into her chest like swallowing too much water. She was entirely alone. Her father was leaving Najwa to her own suffocating silence.

Najwa blinked away the one tear she felt, and lowered her hand from the cold stone at her neck, jaw tightening at the memory.

But it was hers, and not the stone's, that unbearable lack of memory, was what had driven her away. When she was old enough, the peaceful wind of Ayuwasi's endless plains had become something else, and without even her mother's stone, the empty space across their family fire was too much for her. Najwa had packed her few things and run as fast and far as she could, straight into the chaotic, deafening streets of Kinrai. Where she had wanted to drown, leaving that quiet behind her, because maybe then she would no longer feel every impossible thing that had been taken away.

Kinrai had swallowed her whole. With no house, and no family, not a soul in that sprawling city owed her so much as a glance. The Seylan built their whole world around belonging—webs of kin and obligation that caught their children like nets—and Najwa had walked into



the middle of it with nothing. She was a shadow, and for a girl already hollowed out by grief, the invisibility had felt like an answer. She was no one. She belonged nowhere.

So Najwa had stopped trying to belong, she had simply wanted to disappear. The alleys near the trade docks, where foreign sailors drank and urchin gangs ran their own rough justice, had been loud enough to fill her. Najwa had let herself become sharp there, quick-handed and mean, a Rinowhn girl with a razor for a tongue and fists that didn't know when to stop. She had picked fights she couldn't win with people who didn't care, because the bruises and split knuckles felt more honest than the phantom ache at her collarbone. At least the pain she could name had a shape. It wasn't hollow and nothing.

Najwa had learned, in those alleys, that anger was easier than grief. That a girl who bared her teeth was left alone, and that was almost the same as being safe.

Najwa might have stayed lost there forever, a ghost in a foreign city, if not for Kulric, a street tough who had refused to turn away.

He had found her, or she him—it didn't matter anymore—in one of the worst corners of the dock quarter, a place where the urchin gangs sorted themselves into families because their real ones had failed them. Kulric had been like heavy rock and scarred knuckles, a stubborn man who had built his own belonging in a city that hadn't offered him anything easy. When her grief had flared into a razor-thin edge that cut anyone who dared come near, he hadn't flinched. Didn't try to fix her, or silence her, or tell her to go back home. He had simply stood with her in the noise, an anchor of a man who knew what it looked like to be alone and broken, because he had been there his whole life. He was the one who had finally taken her hand, looked at the empty space at her collarbone, and helped her find a way back. Love wasn't a strong enough word.

"Everyone is a farmer of something, ahavah."

The rough, familiar voice pulled her from the memory. Najwa blinked against the autumn sunlight as Kulric fell into step beside her in the dirt.

She turned her head, offering him a rueful chuckle. He was older now, the fierce street tough softened by years amongst her people, the lines around his eyes deepening when he smiled. He handed her a leather waterskin, his hands still bearing the faint, white scars of Kinrai, but smelling of Ayuwasi dirt and haze flower resin.



"Yes," Najwa said, taking the water. She leaned her head briefly against his shoulder, letting his warmth chase away the last cold memories. "Though, I would prefer that something to be a profitable harvest that keeps our tribe fed through the winter."

Kulric didn't reply, just gave her that half-smile he wore when he already knew the answer. They started back toward the main tents together. But before they reached the central fires, Najwa caught a heavy, pungent odor drifting from the curing shed. The long, shadowed structure was the most vital heartbeat of their harvest; a bad cure meant a ruined winter trade. She lifted the canvas flap and stepped inside.

In the dim, fragrant light, a young girl named Sarina was working the long wooden tables. Carefully packing newly harvested flower buds into ceramic jars, her small hands gently pressing black lids onto them to seal the moisture.

Najwa smiled, chest warming at the girl's deliberate graceful work.

She moved past the girl to the corner shelf, where the earlier harvest sat sealed under white lids.

Najwa picked up the first jar, twisting the seal open, and brought it to her nose.

The scent hit her immediately—a sharp, damp odor clinging underneath the sweet floral scent of haze flower.

Najwa didn't sigh, get angry like she used to, or retreat into silence, the way her father had. Instead, she set the jar down gently.

"Sarina, come here, please."

The girl set her work aside immediately and glided over, eyes bright and curious.

Najwa picked up the jar and held it out. "Smell this."

Sarina leaned in. Her nose wrinkled instantly, her mouth pressing into a tight, displeased line.

"That is the smell of early mold," Najwa explained, her voice low and even, a tone meant to teach rather than punish. "The moisture was trapped too soon. Check all of these white-lidded jars. Any that smell this way, leave them open until tomorrow so the air can heal them."

Sarina met her eyes without a flinch of shame or fear. "Yes, Mother."

The honorific settled into Najwa, a profound, now familiar victory. She had chosen to become the mother her father couldn't be, the one she herself had lost in the bloody grass all those years ago, to her entire tribe. The girl would go far.



As Sarina turned diligently back to the work, Kulric leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

Najwa looked back at the jars, then at the young girl saving their winter trade, and finally at her husband, letting her fingers drift up to the cold Zuniga stone at her throat, but this time, the touch didn't feel like a wound; not as much anyway.

"I will help myself, husband, when they do the harvest correctly."

He was once again, wisely, quiet.

Najwa stepped out of the curing shed, dropping the heavy canvas flap behind herself. The damp, pungent air of the harvest gave way immediately to the crisp, cooling wind of Ayuwasi. The endless Sea of Grass was already painted in the long, golden shadows of late afternoon, the horizon burning a brilliant amber as the sun began its slow descent.

Beside her, Kulric stretched his shoulders, falling into step as they kept walking toward the center of camp.

Z'ahkron de la Kosecha, their fall ceremony honoring the harvest, was today, and the preparations were alive around them. Their tribe, her people, moved with a joyful, frantic energy. Young men were hauling thick logs to feed the central fires, the sharp thwack of an elder's hatchet echoing nearby as fresh, intricate lines were carved into a newly raised Palo de Sinyales.

The air smelled of roasting spiced meats, sweet flatbreads crisping on hot stones, and the lingering scent of the haze flower resin that coated everyone's hands.

It was a beautiful, joyous sound. The kind that didn't drown out the world, like the cobblestone streets of Kinrai, but instead simply proved they were all alive.

As twilight began to turn the sky purple, their camp transformed. The central fires roared to life, casting massive, dancing shadows against the canvas of surrounding tents. The Zimsway gathered, shedding their dirty harvest clothes for clean, flowing garments dyed in rich crimsons, deep blues, and golds.

Najwa took her place at the main fire, sitting carefully on the same woven cushion she'd cried into as a little girl; Kulric a heavy, comforting presence at her side.

Then, the music began.



It started low—the rhythmic thump of a hand drum, followed by the bright, metallic shiver of a tambourine. An elder plucked the strings of a lute, finding a fast, intricate melody that wove through the crackle of the flames. Voices joined in, singing the ancient songs of their tribe; her people.

Women and men stepped into the open spaces between. Dancing with rhythmic clapping and complex, rapid footwork, the women's skirts spun into wide circles of color, while their feet kicked up clouds of dust. It was a celebration of survival, of another season conquered, of a tribe that refused to disappear.

Najwa watched her people, chest rising and falling slowly. Rvachah. Breathe.

As their dancing reached a fever pitch, the elders brought out the long, carved chibuk. It was time for the ceremonial smoking of haze flower.

This wasn't the trade commodity sold for coins in the markets of other kingdoms. Here, around the fires of Ayuwasi, it was a sacrament. Chibuk were packed with the finest, most resin-heavy buds of the early harvest, then lit with embers plucked directly from the central fires.

A chibuk was passed to Najwa. She took it in both hands, bringing the smooth wood to her lips, and drew the smoke deep into her lungs.

It tasted of pine, sweet soil, and fire. The effect was almost immediate. A heavy, warm loosening spread through her chest outward, unknitting the tight muscles in her neck and shoulders. The pungent, sweet smoke drifted over the encampment in thick clouds, settling the tribe into a deeply connected, spiritual state. The frantic energy of the dancing melted into a slower hypnotic sway. The night outside their fires seemed to fade away as everything softened.

For Najwa, haze flower did what it always had, opening doorways of the soul. Pushing aside the noise of the day so her heart's truth could be heard.

The drumbeat shifted, slowing to a resonant thrum that matched the beating of their collective hearts. Z'ahkron shel ahavah—Memories of Love—was beginning.

Usually, this ritual was reserved for small circles, a sacred experience of memories passed down through their ancestors. But tonight, for the harvest, it was for all of them.

"Please," Najwa said, her voice carrying through the smoke, low and resonant. "Face one another. Hold hands."



Around their fires, her tribe shifted. Dancers sat where they stood. Mothers took the hands of their children. Elders linked fingers with the youth. Kulric turned to her and took both of her hands in his rough, calloused grip.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed softly.

Najwa closed hers, and Innatraea faded into the dark behind her eyelids. She felt Kulric’s hands, the heat of the roaring fire on her face, and the sweet taste of haze flower on her tongue.

Najwa sighed, reaching for the Zuniga Stone at her collarbone, bracing for emptiness, the cold dead weight of missing generations, a phantom wound left by the bloody grass where her mother had been taken.

But as Najwa’s soul brushed against her pendant in the quiet dark, warmth wrapped around her grief, and fractured it, bringing something new.

It was empty, yes. It held none of her mother’s memories, her family’s memories, the souls of so many matriarchs since the beginning of their people.

But an empty vessel wasn’t a grave. It was a field. Like freshly tilled soil, waiting for seed.

Najwa didn’t need to draw her mother’s memories from the stone to be Zimsway Rinown. She didn’t need to be haunted by the hollow space her father had left behind. She was their Matriarch. She would simply be the first.

With a sudden, fierce rush of emotion, Najwa opened her heart. Placing the memory of this moment into her stone. Pouring the deep, sweet smell of autumn harvest, the unyielding beauty of her tribe singing in the dark, and the unbreakable warmth of Kulric holding her hands into the stone’s very core. She seeded it with love, until the stone against her collarbone felt like it was humming with its own quiet heartbeat.

When Najwa eventually passed it down, her own daughter, a girl not yet born, wouldn’t feel emptiness. She would feel the moment Najwa had finally chosen to stop running, when silence had been broken by love, and then the rest of her mother’s life would unfold.

Najwa opened her eyes.

Across from her, Kulric was watching, the firelight catching his hazel eyes. He could see it, she knew, he had always been able to see her.

“You are smiling,” Kulric murmured, his voice a low rumble that could barely be heard over her people’s chanting.



"I am," Najwa said softly. She let go of his left hand, bringing her right up to touch the Zuniga Stone at her throat. It was warm. Not the deep, layered warmth of generations it should have carried, not the weight of every matriarch who had come before her, but warm nonetheless. A beginning. A first seed in soil that would take years, lifetimes, to grow.

She intertwined her fingers back with his, leaning forward, and for a moment they just breathed together, letting the enduring heartbeat of the Zimsway wash over them both.

"Care to tell a foolish husband what has his matriarch so pleased?" he asked, giving her another of those crooked, quiet smiles that said he already knew.

Najwa looked out over her people, breathing in the sweet smoke and the cold wind of Ayuwasi. "I was just thinking about what we are farming today, ahavah." She squeezed his hands. "I think we have a good harvest."

Not a perfect one. She didn't say that, and didn't need to. Her husband, she was sure, heard it anyway.



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Kulric sat with his back against the Palo de Sinyales nearest their tent, long after the fires had burned low and most of their tribe had gone to sleep. Smoke still hung in the air, sweet and heavy, though the chibuk had been put away hours ago. Haze flower. He didn't need it. He never had, not like the Zimsway did, the doorways it opened in them weren't his, and he'd made peace with that mystery a long time ago.

He watched Najwa move through the last of the evening's work. She was checking the curing shed one final time, lifting the canvas flap and ducking inside, her silhouette briefly lit by the lantern within before the flap fell closed behind her. She would be smelling every jar. He knew this because she did it every harvest, and because he knew her the way he knew the layout of a street at night—not from study, but from years of walking it in the dark until his feet found the path without thinking.

Wind off the plains, cold now, the kind that reminded him how far Ayuwasi was from anything he used to know. Kinrai's nights had been warm, even in winter, the balmy jungle heat, and too many bodies packed into the narrow streets radiating off cobblestones long after sunset. The cold here had taken him years getting used to, and some nights, like this one, he still felt it through the old scars on his hands.

Kulric flexed his fingers and thought about Najwa's smile.

Not the one she wore for her people, the warm authority of a matriarch who had chosen every one of them as her own. That smile was real, but it was also a decision, something she put on the way she did clean clothes in the morning, because it was what they needed from her. He had watched her build that smile over years, layering it carefully on top of the girl he had found in the dock quarter with bloodied knuckles and a mouth full of curses she didn't pronounce half of the right way.

No. The smile from the ceremony had been different. Something had broken open when she touched the stone, and it had made his chest tighten.

The canvas flap lifted again and Najwa stepped out, wiping her hands on her apron. She saw him and her expression softened, the matriarch falling away for a moment to show the



woman underneath. She crossed the short distance and sat down beside him, close enough that her shoulder pressed into his arm.

"All the jars?" he asked.

"All the jars."

"And?"

"Sarina caught the rest of the mold. The girl learns fast." There was pride in her voice, he was sure that she was already thinking about what to teach Sarina next.

Kulric put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, and she came, which held its own meaning. In the early years, when she had first brought him back to Ayuwasi—a Seylan street tough who didn't know a male plant from a female one and couldn't tell a Palo de Sinyales from a fencepost—she had rarely let anyone see her lean on him. Leaning meant putting your weight down, and that, she knew, could be taken out from under you. He understood. He had learned the same lesson in the streets of Kinrai.

"You did something tonight," he said, not a question. "With the stone."

She didn't speak for a few moments, her hand drifting up to the pendant at her throat. The gesture was the same one he had seen a thousand times—fingers finding the stone, pressing it against her collarbone—but the set of her jaw was different. Usually, when she touched the stone, her whole body tightened, a flinch so practiced it had become invisible to everyone but him. Tonight there was no flinch.

"I planted something in it," she said. "A memory. Our memory. The harvest, the singing, you." She turned her head to look at him, and the firelight caught the amber in her eyes. "It is still mostly empty, Kulric. Most of it is still cold. But it's not a grave anymore." Her eyes drifted somewhere else. "Tonight I made it a field."

He didn't answer right away. Quiet between them meant something like peace. Not the story of a father staring into the ash, or a mother gone with no answer. It was a bond between them. Two people who didn't need to fill the air to know the other was there.

The wind picked up, and Najwa pressed closer against him. He could feel the small tremor in her shoulders that she probably thought was hidden. The ceremony had opened something, and wounds always bled before healing.

He thought about the girl in the dock quarter. The way she had swung at him the first time he'd come too close, a wild, artless punch thrown by someone who had never been taught to



fight but had figured out the basics through sheer fury. He had caught her wrist—gently, the way you’d stop a door from slamming—and she had looked at him with those amber eyes, and he had seen it. Not the anger. Something deeper. A grief that went all the way down, and a girl who would sooner drown in it than ask anyone to pull her out.

He hadn’t known anything then, not really, just that she was alone the way he was—not missing a family, but lacking the idea that it was something you could have at all. That had been enough. You didn’t need to understand someone fully to know their pain was your own.

Kulric looked down at Najwa now, her head resting against his shoulder, hand still on the stone. She had dragged him out of Kinrai and into this impossible life on the plains, taught him to tend plants he still couldn’t always tell apart, and given him a home.

But the wound was still there. He could see it in the way she checked the curing shed three times instead of once, in the way she still flinched when the autumn wind blew a certain way, in the way she held every child in their tribe as if they might be taken from her. She would never be done carrying it. That wasn’t how grief worked, not for the Zimsway, and not for a street tough from the dock quarter who had his own scars that ached when the weather turned.

Kon sufrimiento viene también amor. With suffering comes also love. He had heard the elders say it so many times it had become part of his days, like the scrape of a carving knife on wood or the beating of a hand drum. In Kinrai, suffering and love had been separate things—suffering was what the streets gave you, and love, if you were lucky, was what you found in spite of them. But the Zimsway didn’t see it that way. To them, the two were woven into the same thread, inseparable, and pulling one only tightened the other.

Sitting against this carved pole, holding the woman who had taught him what it meant, he didn’t need the elders to explain it anymore. Najwa would never stop reaching for the stone and finding it lighter than it should be. She would never stop listening for her mother’s voice in the wind. She would never be perfectly, entirely whole. And the love she poured into her people, into him, into every jar of haze flower and every child who called her Mother, came from the same place in her chest where the wound still lived.

“Come to bed, ahavah,” Najwa murmured against his shoulder, and he could hear the exhaustion in her voice. “The harvest will still be there tomorrow.”

Kulric pressed his lips to the top of her head, breathing in the smell of haze flower resin and cold wind and the faint, sharp scent of the Palo de Sinyales at his back.



“So will we,” he said.

She pulled away from him just enough to look up at his face, and there it was again—that smile. Not the matriarch’s, not the one built for her people. The real one. Tired, and cracked at the edges, and still standing.

He stood, and offered her his hand. She took it.

The wind moved through the camp as they walked back to their tent, stirring the smoke of the low fires and the sweet, lingering scent of the harvest. Above them, the sky over Ayuwasi was so full of stars it looked like the night itself was breathing.

Najwa’s hand was warm in his. The stone at her throat hummed with its small, new heartbeat. And the silence of the plains held them both without breaking.

Nothing was perfect. She was still the sharp-edged fragile girl he’d found years ago, on the inside. And he was still the street tough he’d always been, in the small ways he would never get rid of. But their lives held warmth now too, and that was answer enough for now.

