

A Katta named Shema

"Hello! Welcome to Baqa's seeds and spices shop. How may I help you today?", a Katta named Baqa greeted.

"Hi Baqa, it's me!", Shema replied, as Baqa hadn't clearly recognized her.

"Hey, Shema! Fancy seeing you here again!" the merchant under the tent said.

"It's a pleasure seeing you again too, Baqa. I wanted to get some stuff from you", she replied with her usual friendliness.

It was one of her frequent supply-buying trips. She would visit Shapier's central market three to five times a week, making sure that the inn she ran with her husband had all the ingredients to properly serve the acclaimed dishes they would create for travelers. She was very proud of the innovative recipes she'd come up with, and compliments never seemed to cease, encouraging her to keep special care on every detail of the kitchen work at the Katta's Tale Inn. Her shopping frequency also made her pretty dear to the salesmen who she'd usually buy from.

"Of course", Baqa replied with a smile. "What are you looking for today?"

"I need more sunflower seeds. I know I recently bought a lot but we had an... an accident."

"What happened?"

"Well, we... I mean, Shameen, left it on an uncovered pot and the wind blew most of them away."

"Ah, that hubby of yours. I keep telling you. You should dump him and marry me instead."

Shema laughed. She knew Baqa didn't really mean it, but he had a weird yet friendly way of complimenting her.

"You know I couldn't... but I might think about it if you get me two full pounds of sunflower seeds."

"Anything for you, my dear Shema." Baqa picked up a fabric sack and started pouring big spoonfuls of sunflower seeds, already prepared for selling. "You know, if it wasn't you, I'd swear you were buying this for a spell. Why do you need so much?"

"We mix it in several different recipes. We also use it to be mixed with other ingredients so it will keep them dry... unless we leave it to the wind." Shema's mind caught on to Baqa's comment. "A spell? Can you do spells with food?"

"Oh yes", Baqa answered. "As long as you follow the steps, even us Kattas can do magic at will. Here, my friend will help. Shudah! Come here!"

An older Katta who was in a merchant tent near Baqa's approached. His fur was grey-ish, in a tone that Shema couldn't tell if it was because of his advanced age or his natural color.

"Hello dear, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance", Shudah said in an age-worn, friendly raspy voice. "Any friend of Baqa is a friend of mine. Are you interested in magic?"

"Well, not really", answered Shema, awkwardly. "I thought Kattas couldn't do magic."

"Oh, they can, given they have the right elements and follow the right steps. It's just easier for humans."

"Huh", Shema seemed less afraid of the stranger now, as curiosity was taking place on her face. "But I've talked with the Katta Mystics myself, long ago...", she continued, as a quick memory saddened her expression. "They told me that Kattas do not have innate magical energy."

"That is true, my dear", Shudah explained, "but we can still do magic if we invoke the right spirits. How do you think the Mystics do their own magic? They're also Kattas."

"I... I guess I never thought of that."

"Are you interested in any particular kind of magic?", he asked eloquently and disinterested, almost like he was repeating the question out of habit.

"I... I don't know. What kinds of magic are there?"

"You've got your typical good fortune spells, keeping your enemies away spells, money attractors, love spells... I don't think you need help with that one. Feel free to look between them and tell me if any of them catches your attention".

"Hey!", she smiled flattered at the comment. She moved the rolled-up scrolls back and forward trying to read the first words on them. One caught her attention and she stopped looking.

"To bring life forth...", she read out loud. "I'll take this one."

On the corner of her eye, an older Katta laying on a bench nearby stood up and shuffled around, going away quickly. Almost as if they got scared by her comment. Could they even hear her from there? Or maybe it was Shudah's explanation that got their attention? Or maybe the loud speaking voice and gesturing from Baqa? It probably wasn't even related to her.

"I know another way to make that happen, without magic. I will gladly help you for free."

"Hey. I'm a happily-married Katta", she buffed, with a sudden strong seriousness in her tone.

"I'm sorry, I overstepped. I meant it as a compliment but let me apologize with a gesture of goodwill. You can take it for free, and if you'd like my consultation services to execute the spell I will offer them discounted."

She buffed but nodded and smiled, understanding that he didn't have ill intentions, and rather he just was impulsive at his words.

"Is it... safe?" Shema asked, wary of receiving promises of luck from recent acquaintances.

"It absolutely is. You just need to make sure to execute the steps correctly and it should not be a problem."

"If that's the case, why isn't it more common for Kattas to be doing magic?" she asked, raising her eyebrow with doubt.

"Katta Mystics mostly store these scrolls for themselves, and they declare which ones Kattas can use and which ones they can't. *These* are being sent to archives and some being returned to their human authors. There have been certain risks associated with them, but I understand there is no problem if you follow the instructions exactly. Also, helping them interpret and execute them correctly are the services I offer."

"Yeah...", Shema replied, absent-mindedly. She was lost in the thoughts of the possibility. «Bringing life forth»... having a baby? Maybe she could finally have a baby of her own? She was daydreaming, completely lost from the conversation.

Shema packed the scroll in a bag of her own and took the bag of sunflower seeds that Baqa had given her.

"I really appreciate it. Thank you. I hope to see you again soon.", she said with a more lighthearted stance than before. "Thank you for your kindness and wisdom, Shudah. Baqa, thank you very much for the seeds and the introduction."

"It was my pleasure, dear," Baqa answered, who had been listening silently to the conversation. "You're always welcome here."

"It was an honor making your acquaintance" Shudah added in a very respectful tone. "I also hope to see you again soon. I wish you the best of luck with the spell. You know where to find me if you have questions."

With a final "Bye-bye, good luck to you", Shema waved a hand and moved away walking with her bags. She kept thinking about the scroll and the possibility of doing magic. The possibility of "bringing life forth"? Was this really a way to have a baby? She hadn't remembered how much she desired this until she gave up looking for options. After trying for a very long time with Shameen and not having luck at all, she was convinced something was wrong with her. Even the Katta Mystics couldn't help, and after several requests from her, they found nothing wrong and left her without solutions or explanations. She felt very alone in this... should she resort to magic? But Kattas couldn't do magic. Or could they?

On any regular day, she would have just discarded that scroll as another piece of garbage from a seller trying to get into false promises. But this one had her interested.

For now, she had to focus on the day's activities. There was a day ahead still full of work. She decided to keep the scroll and give it a quick read later. It couldn't hurt to just read it, whatever it contained.

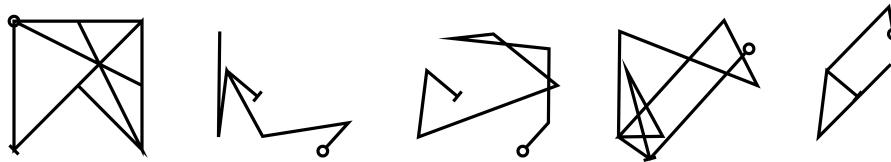


The day was finally over, and Shema could sit down to relax. As she was winding down, sitting on her bed, and her husband Shameen was lying down next to her, she felt the scroll in a side pocket of one of her garments, as she was taking off her jewelry. She heard Shameen breathing heavily, letting her know he had already fallen asleep. This could be a good moment to check it out. How bad could it be?

She opened up the scroll and read it silently:

“To bring life forth.

Draw a circle of power and circumscribe a five-pointed star, with the first point towards the East. Light a candle on each of the five points while consecrating yourself to the spirits, asking for the grace of fertility. In each of the five sacred points, include one of the following sigils, starting from the East-heading point and moving clockwise.



Slaughter the sacrificial goat and spray its blood onto the magical circle. Strip down and kneeling in it hold the sacrificial goat's head towards your womb, and recite the following words:

«I lie here humbly and I give myself to you, servants of Karynth, and I implore you to bring life forth through me.»

Pray in silence and meditate on how life must be given for it to be received.

So be it.”

Shema felt shocked and put the scroll down. It seemed like this was deeply dangerous. Sacrificing animals? There was no way she was doing that. But it was meant to “bring life forth”, and this was something she needed to try. Maybe she could take some shortcuts that would lead to the same result.



As the day passed by and Shema came back to her routine, she couldn't keep the scroll out of her head. The excitement of having something so powerful inside her own drawers was energizing and frightening at the same time. Part of her didn't want to give up on it and not create any possible problem, but another part of her was looking to experience and push on that excitement to see how far she could go. After all, the merchant -- was Shudah his name? -- said that she was perfectly capable of doing magic herself. What would it feel like?

"To bring life forth". She couldn't stop thinking about that. She kept mumbling those words to herself. It sounded ambiguous, but the mentions of fertility and womb made it clear that it could allow her to bear children.

This thought was the most exciting one of all. After working so long with the Mystics to help her figure out the source of her infertility, they never reached any conclusions, leaving herself feeling broken but never with a good reason why. She felt conflicted. She couldn't blame herself but she also could not blame anyone else. It seemed like family just wasn't meant for her, and her deep desire to grow her own just weighed like a dream that would never come true. Now, this scroll came into her life, with simple recipe-like instructions to make it happen. The Mystics never asked her to try any magic... could have this been the answer all along? And Shudah had said she should be able to execute it.

What did she have to lose? If the spell didn't work she would not have children anyways. This seemed like a no-risk scenario. With that, Shema's rationality convinced her of giving it a try. She felt glad not to dismiss it easily.

After more thinking, she decided that this would be something she could not share with others. It was possible that they would not approve and would decide to give the scroll away to the Mystics, or worse, denounce her to the Mystics. Doing magic seemed okay for Kattas, or so she learned, but she didn't know how her close social circle would react. After all, it wasn't common at all to hear about Kattas doing magic. Shameen was the one she could trust the most, but he would never approve of such a thing. She could clearly hear his voice in her head. "Nonsense", he'd say. "Kattas don't do magic.", he'd add, without even entertaining the possibility of an alternative explanation. If it didn't work, she knew it'd be worse. "I told you", he'd keep repeating. Eventually, a long time after, he'd keep bringing back the subject, saying she should "stop paying attention to these silly things"... maybe it was best Shameen didn't know about this either.

If Shameen was to be kept in the dark too, getting all the “ingredients” -- at least, it sounded like a bunch of ingredients -- would be a difficult effort. She recounted what she would need to make the spell happen.

The scroll. No problem. She would have it close when she needed to execute the spell instructions to guide her.

The goat and its blood. That was just plain cruel. If the spell required a goat's head and blood she could get them separately. It was going to be easier, and the result should be the same. She could buy a few vials of blood, and say it was for pudding or even some exotic dishes. She would sometimes get goat's milk and goat's meat, so the butchers would likely have heads too and she could probably ask. It would be more unconventional, but she could also say it was for an exotic dish and they would still believe it.

Then, for the symbols and steps, there was no way she would get enough privacy at the inn to do it. Perhaps it would be a good idea to rent an apartment, and she could say she would use it as storage for a shipment. Nobody would suspect, as it wasn't the first time they had done this. It wasn't also entirely false, so she wouldn't feel bad about saying it. Renting an apartment to barely use it with a spell felt like doing a favor to the owner. She was helping Shapier's economy!

Shameen should not know. It was best for her to wait until he would go into one of his multi-day business trips and set everything up there.

And so, she had a plan in mind, and just needed the right time to execute it.



In the next few days, Shema had been talking to a few merchants, making sure they would have an apartment ready for “when the shipment is ready” and the goat’s head for “when I get some other ingredients for my recipes”. She bought a knife, also with the excuse of being used in the kitchen, so she could carve symbols in it without damaging the apartment. She could design the magical circle and the five-pointed star with yarn, and when she was done with it, she would just have to clean up some blood from the floor and be on her way. Shema wasn’t particularly queasy about blood, so it wasn’t going to be a difficult challenge.

Finally, the opportunity appeared. Shameen announced that in the afternoon he would be leaving to a town nearby and would be out for a day and a night. It was the perfect occasion since she only needed one afternoon to carry it all out. After helping him get prepared and bidding adieu to him, she set her plan in motion.

She headed to the market and with her usual friendliness she set out to rent the apartment, paying in advance for the use of the place. To make it less suspicious she paid for two days, which would also be a good fallback plan if she couldn’t clean up in time. She first set out to buy the vials of blood, and stuffing it in her pockets she later bought the goat’s head. She still received a few weird looks, but her usual charming extroverted friendliness was enough to whisk any suspicions away.

After gathering the ingredients, she walked toward the apartment to store them for the rest of the day. On her way there, she took small street ways to avoid drawing as much attention as possible. She avoided a few merchants, a few strangers, and had to work around a homeless human woman that was lying on the floor next to the apartment entrance. It was not very common to see humans, even less to see homeless ones. She felt her presence was rather inconvenient being so close to the entrance, but not particularly a risk. Hopefully, she would have gone away by the time that she needed to come back and execute the ritual. On second thought, she asked herself why other humans would not help each other when in need. Kattas wouldn’t do that. But then again, humans were different in many aspects.

Back again to her own business, the ritual was now occupying most of her mind. There was still a lot of the day left, so she left the ingredients at the apartment and prepared mentally to come back to her daily activities. She knew they wouldn’t come to inspect the apartment contents, so there weren’t any concerns of being discovered. Even if they did, she could

always say that the elements were also for her kitchen, and this was the story she was sticking to. She made sure to have all windows covered, close the door, and lock it. When arriving at the inn, she proceeded with her day as usual, hoping nobody would question her quick absence.

Finally, when the day had settled and all chores had been taken care of, Shema wasn't any bit tired. On the contrary, she felt excited, nervous, and exhilarated. She was going through with her magic nonsense, which was thrilling. At the same time, something inside her kept telling her she should not do it. It felt wrong, and that made it even more tempting. Was it really wrong if nobody was affected?

She headed to the apartment and found it difficult to open the lock. She knew there was nothing wrong with it. Rather, she recognized her own nervousness getting in the way. The homeless human woman was still there, and Shema had to look confident to not raise any suspicions. She sighed. "I've got this.", thought to herself and opened up. Entering the room, she lit a few candles to see the place better, as the outside light was already fading. Keeping the curtains closed to avoid any peekers would also be a good idea, and it would deprive her of any natural light. Also, she would need the candles for the ritual anyways.

She went through the scroll one more time. For the magical circle, she took a ball of yarn, and unthreading it, she traced a circle and the star inside it. Her natural talent with crafts came in handy, as while it wasn't perfect, it was certainly accurate in shape. The spirits should not care, after all, how she was doing the ritual as long as she got the same result, she thought. She used the knife to carve the sigils on little wooden blocks, at the best of her ability, and placed them next to the candles, which she arranged around the circle as the scroll instructed.

It was difficult to keep the scroll open and follow the instructions since it would keep rolling up back again. She took a few scrolls and books from the apartment shelves and used them to keep it open. She kept the other scrolls nearby so she could put everything back in the exact same place where it was before. She would make sure to leave no trace of her work after trying this crazy ritual.

Finally, she sat down in the circle. She sighed and read the scroll. She was supposed to start reading some incantations and start throwing blood at the floor, then hold the goat's head. This sounded crazy. Did any of this make sense? There was even a note in the scroll about "consecrating yourself to the spirits". This sounded like a lot of mumbo-jumbo. Maybe she should not even do this, and get back to her daily life.

After all, the reason she decided to go through with it is for the slim chance that it would work, and she could truly bear children of her own. It would be such a nice sensation, to finally carry a child, see them grow, a daydream she had visited many times in the past. It would have her ears and her father's eyes. It would likely learn to talk at a very young age and say things she'd reprimand them for, and then ask Shameen to watch his language around the youngling. Shameen would probably reply that those words came from her and she'd have to accept that she was usually more explicit than him. They would laugh it off and agree to be more careful with the little Katta's education.

Again. She was daydreaming about it again. Just another session of getting lost in the fantasy of what could have been -- only if she was able to get pregnant. She felt guilty at that thought. "Only if she could." It wasn't her fault, was it? There was nothing wrong with her. Yet, if there wasn't, why couldn't she have children? What was missing so she could finally be a mother? What did she need to do? She had tried everything, she had even consulted the mystics, and no one had given her more than mere speculations, stories, and superstitions.

Here she was, with yet another superstition. Just in case it might work.

She started sobbing silently, and remembering she was alone, she could afford to cry as loud as she wanted. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she held her head in her hands.

Was she not worthy of having her own children? She had desired to have a big family of her own for a long time, and Shameen was the loving husband she always desired to be the start for it. Yet, they couldn't make that dream come true. Was she broken? Was she cursed? Was it something she had done?

She sniffled and sobbed loudly, nothing could cover that emptiness in her heart. She knew she wouldn't be forever, and her days at the inn were meaningless thinking that she'd have no heir of her own to take on the business one day. As a tradition. As a family activity. Not merely a business, but a loving vocation she wanted to teach and pass on. But there was no one to pass it on to.

She looked at herself, sitting and crying in a "magical circle", whatever it was meant to be. Another superstition. Another lie. Or maybe not. She wasn't sure. She couldn't be sure until she tried it. What if there was some truth behind it? Would she choose to ignore it? She felt trapped. And ridiculous. Mostly trapped, between a fate she didn't choose and options that never helped.

As her sniffing became quieter she heard some background noises. It was a weird wailing, maybe an animal in pain. Maybe... a child. He could hear a baby crying, far away. She felt the urgent need to comfort them, to be there for them. She could be the mother they needed, but she wasn't. And there was no baby for her, no child she could call her own to spoil and love.

Shema broke down in tears again, heavily crying to herself in that empty room. She wanted to have a family, so bad. She'd try everything and anything to get her any inch closer to her dream. It was worth any pain, struggle, or any ridiculous measure.

She was determined to go on with the ritual. It was worth it, and she was decided. She spoke with a trembling voice, reading from the scroll, as she took all her clothes off, leaving them to the side.

"I consecrate myself to the spirits, asking for the grace of fertility."

She placed the sigils with the candles on each of the points of the star, and took the vials of blood, having them drip on the floor around her. She took the goat's head, which didn't feel so fresh after staying in the apartment during the afternoon, and held it against her lower belly.

She could swear the eyes of the goat were glowing yellow. Maybe it was the reflection from the candlelight, but it felt like it was looking at her, mockingly. She felt ridiculous again but kept her mind solely focused on her wish.

She read from the scroll, saying with a firm voice: "I lie here humbly and I give myself to you, servants of Karynth, and I implore you to bring life forth through me."

She felt a cold breeze envelop her, then a freezing drop in temperature. The candles went out, and the goat's eyes were still mockingly shining at her. Shema felt terrorized, confused. A headache suddenly overpowered her, and she could do nothing else than tilt her head back and open her mouth to scream for help, but no sound came out. Everything faded to black.



Shema woke up on the floor of the room. Naked. Dirty. Cold. Uncomfortable. She slowly sat up and looked around her. After her eyes adjusted to the dark, the faint glow of the moon outside between the curtains was enough for her to see her surroundings. She was lying next to the goat's head, which smelled awful. There was the blood on the ground that she had spilled, the scrolls and books, the yarn in the shape of a magical circle. Maybe not a circle anymore, it was broken on a side close to her feet. She likely moved it when she fainted.

Why did she faint? She remembered the cold and the headache. And the dead goat's eyes' shining. She looked again, but there was no glare in them this time. Could it have been the ritual? Maybe it was just an idea in her head, after all, that shining could have been anything.

She checked herself and felt mostly okay. She wasn't hurt or painful at all, and somehow lighter. Relieved, maybe? She wasn't sure. It felt different in a way, but she couldn't quite put a finger on it. Maybe the ritual had done something. Or maybe it was the accomplished feeling of going through it? Any embarrassment and dangers had passed, maybe that was it. Or maybe it had been too many emotions for a single day and she just needed a good night's sleep. She decided to go back to her life and arrive at conclusions with better proof. It was better to put this behind her now.

Had the spell even worked? She'd check later with a test of urine and a potion she could get from a pharmacist. But she needed to be careful and not get her hopes up -- this had clearly been a mistake and she needed to get rid of the evidence before it came back to haunt her.

She looked around her again and sighed after realizing the work she had before her. A rotting goat's head, spoiled blood, yarn, and knife markings. It would take a lot to clean up.

She proceeded to start the cleaning so she could soon go back to the inn and get back to her daily life.



Shema woke up, the floor was cold and sandy. Opening her eyes she realized she was outside, on the street. How had she arrived there? She recognized the place, it was right outside the apartment where she was storing the elements for the ritual. She remembered executing the ritual, and fainting... and then nothing else.

Feeling strangely cold and stiff, she checked on herself and almost screamed. She had no fur. At all.

She still had clothes covering her, but no fur on her skin. Her fingers were long and bony, her skin tanned and with undeveloped hairs. Her arms, her chest, her stomach, her legs... her feet! They weren't Katta's feet!

She was human. Shema was in a human body.

She thought about screaming for help, asking how this could happen -- maybe related to the ritual? But she couldn't. She knew how this sounded, people would believe she was out of her mind. Maybe if she could reach out to someone who would trust her, no matter how she looked. Shameen. He would recognize her even as a human.

But Shameen would not be back for another day. Still, staying at the inn seemed like a good idea. It was her home after all. She could always say she was a friend of Shema and they'd believe her. After all, she knew everything Katta-Shema knew, so she could make that excuse believable.

She gathered her clothes and started walking towards the inn. Walking like a human felt so strange, it was more difficult to maintain balance. Her extremities hurt, like if she hadn't done any exercise in a long time.

As she walked, she noticed no one was paying special attention to her, not even as she was trying to move around. Stressed and with an expression of concern on her face, she was ignored by most humans and Kattas alike. It felt like being one of those that make other humans uncomfortable...

...that was it! She remembered -- the woman outside the apartment. She was the one with the tanned skin, the loose clothing, sleeping next to the entrance. How was she inside her? How could she inhabit her body?

This made no sense, she entirely remembered entering the apartment as a Katta and executing the ritual, and then fainting and waking up as a human.

She arrived at the inn as she was going through her memories, trying to understand what was wrong. Asking herself how she turned into a human. She sighed and gasped for air, she knew she was going to get a lot of questions. Fortunately, it was early in the morning, and it worked to her advantage that not a lot of people would be around.

She heard a voice coming from the back of the inn. She froze in terror as she recognized it.

"I'll be right there with you!" Shema's voice said.

But *she* was Shema. Human-Shema, but Shema after all. There could not be another Shema, could it? Furthermore, she sounded so cheerful, so friendly, like she would usually sound to customers. Was it really her? Shema -- *this* Shema -- had her anxiety spiking while she tried to figure out what had happened after the ritual. The situation kept getting more confusing. She interrupted herself as the other Shema -- Katta-Shema -- came out from the door that connected the kitchen and the main lobby.

There she was, her body, her voice, her usual stance, her friendliness. Shema was in front of her while she had been set apart from her own body. This was besides anything else that she could have planned for. She wasn't even sure of what it really meant. Who was she and which body did she inhabit? Meanwhile, had Katta-Shema been aware of anything at all? Was she an impostor? Was she also her?

She wasn't done thinking and without answers, her time for thinking was up.

"Hello! Welcome to the Katta's Tail Inn. How may I help you today?", a Katta named Shema greeted.