

Queen Nakhta de Renaud

Backstory

Species: Red fox (*vulpes vulpes*)

Sex: ♀

Age: 20

Height: 5ft 4in

Weight: 140lbs

Siblings: Absarren (8 years older, male), Bilba and Vilgem (twins, female and male respectively, 5 years older), and Berehn (3 years older, male); all deceased



Species and Cultural Notes

Anthro foxes in this world are born deaf and blind, although they tend to gain these senses after a couple of days.

The common folk of Vulland are relatively conservative in their political beliefs at the time of Nakhta's life. They prefer political stability, especially so long as the taxes don't get too high and the wars don't go on for too long, and the de Renauds have provided that.

They are generally aware that royal life can have its dangers, and true to their overall wish for stability, have greater respect for a monarch who has been on the throne for long enough to prove their ability to survive. However, they can be sensitive to scandals, or perceived scandals, where the monarch of the day may not have earned their position. They also prefer long reigns as these tend to mean that national policies do not tend to change very much.

The nobles and clergy are just as prone to vying for power as the royals, and some of them do this by keeping up with the tastes and preferences of the current monarch.

Queen Nakhta is an original character from the story *Songs of Vulland* (working title). She began life as the youngest of a set of royal siblings and felt belittled and under-prepared for much of her young life. As a young adult however, she found herself

queen and had to rise to the challenge for which only her oldest brothers had been prepared.

Trust & Confidence

(newborn)

Nakhta was the fifth child born to King Gattrem IV and Queen Velise. Given the time period they lacked reliable means of birth control so Nakhta's conception was unplanned, though not entirely unexpected.

Nakhta's mother had ever been a maternal type, and she had paid the most attention to her first-born, Absarren. Indeed, her sense of duty extended further back even than that: she hadn't wanted to marry into the direct royal line but had also not wanted to pass up the opportunity once it had arisen, for lack of attractive alternative options. She found motherhood exhausting, and by the time Nakhta was born she had run out of patience with motherhood. As far as she was concerned she had already produced several heirs to the throne so her job was done, and she looked forward to the permanent birth control that would come with menopause.

Nakhta's father felt much the same way.

The birth went as uneventfully as may be expected, although it was noticed from the day Nakhta was born that she had a slight malformation of her muzzle. This was noticeable on close inspection of the infant but not to a casual observer.

Nakhta's parents made a grand announcement to their subjects of her birth. She was unaware of this, of course. After this she was handed to a small group of wet-nurses and nannies to be raised almost entirely without input from her mother.

These women were older, and experienced mothers themselves. They were highly skilled in providing the type of infant care that the royal family wished for. That is not to say that the care was particularly tender and warm, but that it was efficient and competent. Nakhta was kept clean and fed, and spent much of her time as an infant being held and looked at so that she had somebody with whom to make eye contact, and a familiar face to associate with her care. It would be fair to say that her nurses held and paid attention to her as much they did so that they could justify their salaries, but the effect for Nakhta was that she received interpersonal stimulation so did not feel isolated. There was however a reserved quality to the affection she got from them.

Nakhta opened her eyes a little earlier than most newborn fox cubs, within 24 hours of her birth. This may have been due to her being able to smell that something wasn't right. While she would not have been able to see or hear her caregivers during her first day of life she was able to smell them, which meant that she learned to recognise the scent of her mother immediately after her birth. When she did, she noticed that the smell quickly became absent and was replaced with that of her first wet nurse.

In addition to this, Nakhta's mother had had elevated cortisol levels during her pregnancy due to her not wanting to be pregnant, which Nakhta had been exposed to in utero. This had given her a heightened sensitivity to the hormone. After she was born and noticed that the scent of her caregiver wasn't right, her cortisol levels had risen – and with it, her stress – which had boosted her development and caused her to open her eyes earlier than an equivalent, more relaxed cub. This reaction to stress became a long-term feature of Nakhta's life, and she became known among the nurses and other staff for being a fussy baby.

Objectively the nurses' care of Nakhta was very good: it was consistent and attentive, but Nakhta realised that these women were not her true mother. Occasionally her mother would show up and check on her, and Nakhta would reach out eagerly for her, but her mother would not return the gesture. Nakhta would cry, and her nannies would pick her up and walk back and forth with her telling her that there was nothing to cry about. This did not tend to pacify Nakhta, at least, not quickly. Before long Nakhta stopped reaching out to her mother when she came all together. She reluctantly accepted her vulpine nurses.

She felt more distress around those of her nurses who were not foxes as they seemed especially alien to her at this tender young age.

Another detail Nakhta could not have known at this point - but is worth establishing here - is her siblings' reactions to her. Her oldest sibling, Absarren, was 8 at the time of her birth and had already developed a firm tendency for cruelty, including towards his siblings. He didn't consider Nakhta a threat due to her position so far down the sibling order. He absently decided that he would be able to outsmart and exploit her whenever needed.

Bilba and Vilgem were only 5 when Nakhta was born, but Bilba understood her own world enough to recognise that having a sister would lessen pressure on her to be feminine: she had already spent much of her life trying to live up to the values of her

brothers and be a tomboy. Vilgem had similar feelings; while he was a boy, he had observed the court's behaviour around Berehn and understood that a new baby meant less attention for him, and he was relieved that someone else would distract the often-overbearing attention away from him.

Berehn was the tender age of three, and was not yet clued-in enough about the workings of his world to feel anything other than curious about his new sister.

Freedom & Self-Determination

(toddlerhood)

Nakhta's main take-away from her infancy was that she would be paid attention to, but that love was not really 'a thing'. As much as she, as a completely naive infant, would have liked to have been loved, she quickly learned that there was an unspoken sense that 'emotions are silly', which meant that she had to put away her desire for tenderness.

That made her angry because she felt she had been robbed of love. She didn't take long to develop a strong relationship with her anger, especially as her sensitivity to stress meant that she felt afraid easily, and she was quickly taught that fear was another one of those unacceptable 'silly' emotions. She sensed the emotional coldness and hostility of the people around her even before she could speak, and certainly before she could speak fluently.

Even her nurses didn't fully inoculate her against this. They were there as employees to the royal family and understood that the king and queen would be displeased if they raised the new princess to be too soft and gentle. Indeed, only her wet nurses – those who had cared for her during her infancy – were soft and motherly towards her. After Nakhta was weaned off of them, her care was delegated to other caregivers who were far more stern and matronly.

She had a team of three primary matrons who worked on a shift basis. They included a fox named Dora, an extremely dour and fierce badger named Hyacinth, and an otter named Abigail. All three had served the royalty and nobility for many years before Nakhta was born, and understood the kind of resilient, strong young child the de Renaud family wanted.

Nakhta's team included other nurses too, but these were the main three.

There were a few reasons for the austere atmosphere of Nakhta's upbringing. Chief among these was that Nakhta was a princess, so as such her carers were forbidden from punishing her physically. They had to find other ways of instilling discipline and giving Nakhta and her siblings 'the eye' if they did something wrong, or using a warning tone of voice that left the consequences to Nakhta's already childishly exaggerated imagination, were more acceptable to the king and queen. These matrons also understood that Nakhta was going to live in a harsh world and needed to be prepared; therefore they avoided coddling her 'for her own good'.

The third reason for their austerity may or may not have been intentional. Nakhta would benefit from learning how to bend the rules subtly to get what she wanted, if she was going to try to break them at all. Whether or not her matrons or parents had intentionally exposed her to the kind of upbringing that would encourage her to do that, she would never know.

As Nakhta began to learn how to talk, her matrons and family noticed her developing a lisp due to her malformed muzzle. This became something of a focal point among her siblings, who Nakhta began to recognise as distinct entities. Later in life, Nakhta would remember several occasions when her siblings would use it to embarrass her into compliance. Nakhta herself hadn't paid her speech much attention until she began to be humiliated for it, but once the taunting began, she felt the shame acutely. Even her parents made it clear they were displeased with her speech impediment.

The rest of her family were in perfect physical shape, and while Nakhta took a little while to realise that this was so, once she did, she felt it to be unfair.

Despite this, once Nakhta learned to speak she talked a lot, partly due to her tendency to feel agitated easily. She resorted to denying the existence of her speech impediment, as denying it was easier than remembering to keep quiet or obeying the implied rule of "don't talk".

Control became a hot-button issue for Nakhta, although as a toddler she could not have articulated her relationship with it. She was often coerced by circumstance to act in this way or not act in that way, and this made her angry.

Her over-sensitivity to cortisol worked against her in this respect, as whenever she became stressed she felt that her body was out of control, so obeying the matrons' rules often felt impossible. The matrons themselves were experienced enough to adapt

their behaviour and find ways to make her calm down. Often this involved putting her in time-out, which effectively isolated her so that there wasn't anybody around to control her any more. So long as there was something in the room with her that she could take an interest in, she would eventually distract herself from her rage.

The matrons understood that Nakhta was a toddler, too young to be expected to self-moderate properly yet. However they kept the pressure up and didn't give her an easy time when she had another tantrum, as they believed that her over-reactions were learned, not inherited.

One of the most frustrating elements of all of this for Nakhta was the way her body (at least as she saw it) betrayed her. Her matrons, mother, and siblings repeatedly tried to get her to pronounce her 'S's so that she would stop lisping, but she couldn't do it.

Her timetable was quite rigid, but as a toddler she was not equipped to understand the concept of schedules. What she was aware of was the experience of constantly being told to "hurry up!" or that she couldn't have a treat or meal or play-time yet, for apparently arbitrary reasons.

Ultimately, Nakhta didn't understand why the grown-ups expected her to do the impossible. That, combined with the boogeyman that her matrons put into her head with their 'eye' and warning tones, made her feel afraid. If she had been asked (and indeed, been able) to put her fear into words then she would have said that the consequences of failure were undefinable, and all the more terrifying for it.

She cried occasionally, but was quickly taught that tears were not acceptable. Diora, Hyacinth, and Abigail didn't necessarily make her feel afraid to cry – at least, not intentionally – but they did have a few stock responses for this, including the rhyme, "Stain not your cheeks with tears of the weak".

One of the reasons that the matrons imposed this 'no tears' rule was that this family in particular had white facial fur, which made tear-streaks more obvious than for regular foxes. To be seen in public or by one's political enemies to have cried at an 'inappropriate' time (that was, any time that was not one of mourning) could be political suicide.

One element of her royal upbringing she did like, even at this age, was the clothing. As a princess, even a very young one, her clothing was lavish, and she enjoyed 'playing' dress-up every day.

Nakhta began to develop a stronger rapport with Abigail. She certainly wouldn't have been able to articulate what it was about Abigail she liked, but Abigail 'got' her more than the other two. She found Diora more difficult to relate to: Diora was of the same species as herself, and that made Nakhta feel as if she was under more intense scrutiny with Diora than with the other two matrons. She didn't develop a particularly special bond with Hyacinth; she was just 'there'.

Ambition

(young childhood)

Between them, the oldest siblings thought their youngest sister posed little threat to them or their career prospects. They were aware that she would probably try to build a spy network to help herself get ahead, but they didn't think she would be effective in this and decided not to prevent it.

The idea of a spy network was mocked enough by the older siblings, especially Absarren, that the concept stuck for Nakhta. She began to fantasise about having one. At this stage of her life her spy network was made up entirely of imaginary friends, all of whom were deferential and completely loyal.

The first – indeed, for a very long time, the only – real member of Nakhta's network was Frederick, a 5 year old commoner boy. They first met when Frederick's father, a banker, visited the castle. Thankfully for Nakhta, this was for regular business so his visits – and tendency to bring his son along – became a regular occurrence.

Frederick was level-headed and polite, and Nakhta quickly realised that he was a good listener, and came to enjoy the fact that she could do most of the talking. He was also acquiescent whenever she wanted to play. During one of these impromptu play-dates she told him about her plans for a spy network. She acted out how she imagined it would work while he rather sheepishly nodded along.

One detail that Nakhta particularly liked about Frederick was that he never told anybody about her network. Of course, she couldn't know for sure, but he (and his quietness) had made an impression on her and convinced her. It didn't hurt that she also told him not to tell anyone about her network "cos it's a secret".

Other members of the royal household did not approve of this play however, so when they were caught playing they were separated, but they had enough contact that Nakhta considered Frederick a friend. Overall, Frederick felt out of his depth with her, but after a few months of this and of maturing somewhat himself, he realised that Nakhta was lonely and felt bad for her.

Absarren's bullying encouraged Nakhta to think about how to get anything she wanted without directly opposing him. Despite her young age she found it quite easy to come up with ideas, even if she lacked the resources to make them happen.

By this time Nakhta had also developed a fairly firm sense of her own status. As far as she was concerned she was the most important member of the family. She had a lot of attendants and she seemed to be on peoples' minds whenever she and they were in the same room, and that was all the confirmation she needed.

This was a self-preservation strategy on her part. She found the idea that she was the smallest, youngest, the only member of the family to be deformed, and apparently the only one not to be able to follow orders, unbearable, so instead she convinced herself that she was special, even among the royals. This idea appealed to her and she adopted it in the long-term. Indeed, she connected this idea of importance with the regal clothing she liked wearing so much, and began to relish the feeling of wearing her best clothes as a sort of armour.

Sometimes she would ask her matrons to prepare one of her state function dress to wear when there was no state function.

Absarren wasn't the only family member she began to develop a relationship with. Bilba and Vilgem also both wanted to rule, but were prone to exclusively ally with one another. They took their cue to do this from a historical precedent of sibling co-monarchs. Bilba, despite being female, was brawny while Vilgem had a keen intelligence, especially for numbers. However, despite their action plan, they never explicitly stated between themselves that they would share power if anything happened to Absarren.

From Nakhta's perspective, the relationship between herself and the twins was frustrating. They were generally less interested in her than they were with each other and tended to see her as an annoying younger sister, but every now and again they would feel generous enough to be nice to her. However, Nakhta was still young enough to hold onto the hope that she would find a loving relative, and the kindness, gentleness,

and patience they showed her was tantalising yet never enough, and too sporadic for her needs.

Nakhta's relationship with Berehn was the best out of all of her sibling relationships. He was only around six at this time but she sensed that he was quiet and thoughtful, at least more so than the others. However, he seemed to feel awkward about talking so she didn't connect particularly well with him.

All of the children, with the most frequent omission of Absarren, who was being groomed for leadership even at the age of 11, liked to play 'house' once in a while together. It was their best bonding time, but Nakhta often found that as the youngest, she was given the least 'important' role. This made her angry.

Nakhta may have still been very young, but she was just about old enough to recognise who and what she was, and to derive a sense of the grandiosity of it. Her matrons and parents drew her attention to artefacts of the family's thousand-year long history to inspire her – or to instil in her the importance of acting like a princess. They told her how their family hadn't allowed any other to take their reign away from them for that long. They told her about her ancestor, Reynard, who had driven out the previous occupying empire, and about the family's greatest achievements since. Even the castle itself had been built by her ancestors and added to over the centuries.

The stories they told her were not always sweet stories. Many involved assassinations, betrayals, and back-stabbing – sometimes literally. Because of this, not only did Nakhta come to feel burdened by her history, she began to see the potential for betrayal everywhere, including – especially – among her own family.

All of this had the intended impact and Nakhta came to feel the history of her family as if it leaked in through the very walls.

For almost any other child this would encourage maladaptive conditioning. Certainly it began to press on her once she was aware of it, and at this age, her mind was too young to put it all into perspective. However for her, this was her situation, and the more keenly she felt the weight of her family's history, the better she would comply with the various demands placed on her.

Abigail helped her to regain a sense of perspective about all this, at least to a point. It was not in Abigail's interests to undo the sense of importance Nakhta had for her family, but she was able to demonstrate to Nakhta that her family was not all there was to life,

that there were non-family members who had lives that didn't relate to the royal ancestry.

The matron's fulfilment of this need for perspective meant that the king and queen kept her in their employ for a little longer. They noticed Nakhta exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and, while they didn't particularly recognise this for what it was (and even if they did, it was not in their interests to relieve Nakhta of it entirely), they did realise that it was impacting negatively, not positively, on her. They decided to resolve this by keeping Abigail around until Nakhta began to draw strength from her regal station instead of weakness. Any other of the siblings may have felt humiliated to still have their nanny around, but Nakhta only felt relief to have Abigail's support for a little bit longer.

Abigail was kind to her but recognised that Nakhta had been groomed to feel this burdened and was required to feel this way to survive a royal life. Indeed, she judged that it was better for Nakhta if she was aware of the treachery that she would experience if she were to get in the way of her siblings, deliberately or unintentionally. For this reason, she balanced the support she provided to Nakhta carefully against the princess' genuine need to watch her back.

One of the unspoken messages that Abigail gave her was that Nakhta was not a baby any more – or at least, she wouldn't be one for much longer and needed to prepare to leave that part of her life behind. She accepted this as it implied a level of power, which she felt she needed in order to defend herself.

The relationship that Abigail provided to Nakhta conferred several deeply important interpersonal benefits. The first was a sense of security. She made it clear she was very much above the act of ridiculing Nakhta for her lisp. She referred to it whenever necessary but never framed it as a shameful thing - only a flaw, no more, no less. Nakhta also learned that Abigail wasn't above having small, harmless secrets that only the two of them knew.

Another benefit was that of being accepted as she was. The business of being a princess meant that Nakhta often had to be performative for the people around her. Abigail saw Nakhta when she was tired, hungry, frustrated, trying and failing to deal with her lisp, and so much more, and she accepted all of it. Simply put, if Nakhta failed to look and act like a princess in front of Abigail, there were no consequences. That isn't to say that they didn't practice things together to make sure Nakhta performed right, but Nakhta learned that there were 'on-duty' hours and 'off-duty' hours, and if she was with Abigail during off-duty hours, then she could just be, rather than do.

Abigail understood that her role came with an unspoken agreement: "I am only here because your parents are paying me. I'm an adult so I am important in ways you don't yet understand, so you do not approach me unless I'm on duty". She understood that this had the potential to get in the way of a genuine relationship with Nakhta, so she sometimes initiated contact with Nakhta when she wasn't at work. She would seek Nakhta out with something new and interesting – a jay's feather, perhaps – or invite her to buy her weekly supplies. This had a dual benefit of sending Nakhta the message that their relationship was more than just transactional, she genuinely enjoyed Nakhta's company, and of giving Nakhta more of a sense of perspective for her royal role. It got her out of the castle where she could see what life looked like outside. Nakhta loved these trips!

Abigail also found ways to express love to Nakhta. Florid expressions of love were rare in the de Renaud household and she had a professional image to maintain. However, the occasional compliment, a gentle pat on the head, a well-timed smile, and a variety of other expressions of warmth and care let Nakhta know that Abigail loved her.

Abigail was eventually discharged from the royal employ when the king and queen decided that she was no longer needed to give Nakhta the sense of security she had been craving. Understandably, Nakhta was heart-broken, but Abigail had taught her what true personal warmth felt like, and that remained with Nakhta for the rest of her life.

Productivity

(older childhood)

As Nakhta reached the age of 7, the rest of the household began to treat her differently. She changed too as her cognitive function began to work much more like that of an adult. From age 7 onwards they expected more of her and were prepared to push her not just to conform, but to perform.

A few things didn't change however. Her siblings – Absarren mostly – tested her mettle by talking down to her to see how she would react. Often enough he did this in front of other people to make it all the more humiliating for her, to goad her all the harder into reacting. Nakhta didn't like to directly oppose anyone, not even him, and Absarren and several other members of the family and court considered this an indication of cowardice on her part.

The siblings gave her mixed messages: sometimes they felt generous enough to be nice to her, and sometimes they joined in with Absarren. Sometimes Absarren didn't even need to be present for them to take his attitude. Ultimately Nakhta found this painful and frustrating as she still wanted a warm relationship with her siblings.

Nakhta took comfort in her spy network, and even though it was still imaginary, imagining how she would use it to teach them a lesson was the only way she could retaliate. She made the most of this and imagined manoeuvring herself into a position of power and influence using just her network so that she wouldn't need to directly oppose anyone.

She also liked the idea of ruling without the stresses that would go along with that. As Nakhta imagined it, the main stresses of being queen would include keeping track of an incredible range of details and the likelihood that she wouldn't be able to trust the nobles around her. She understood very well that being queen was like painting a target on one's back, and she found the idea of having to constantly be on-guard stressful. The common thread in all of this was a fear of failure.

With all of these stresses in mind, Nakhta found herself wishing for something she never had before: to be invisible. Or rather, to not be the visible one and to control all of the different things she would need to control from the anonymity of the shadows. That way, if her attempts failed then nobody would be able to see her – least of all Absarren.

Despite all of the animosity between the siblings, Nakhta didn't like the idea of hurting them. She had learned much about unconditional love from Abigail, and the idea of plotting and backstabbing left a bitter taste in her mouth. That isn't to say that she couldn't see the benefit of such things in a power-driven family, and she still had very strong ideas about who deserved to come to harm or even to die, but she no longer considered everybody to require suppressing by default.

At around this time Nakhta noticed something a little bit strange. Absarren, who was usually so bullish, began to turn on the charm with Bilba and suggest that she be sent to the continent to strengthen diplomacy there. When he did this, Vilgem responded for the first time by appearing to switch sides from Bilba: he all but stated that he would accept Absarren's primacy if things ever looked difficult for him. Bilba was not at all pleased with this.

All of this made an impression on Nakhta. She so rarely saw Absarren being charming that she didn't forget it in a hurry. It brought home to her how pleasant he could be if

only he chose to be, and how good a sibling relationship they could have if only he did. She took even longer to forget the drastic impact it had had on the usually staunchly loyal twins. The whole situation demonstrated to her the dynamic nature of politics.

When Nakhta was 10 she and her siblings were taken to watch a public hanging. Her parents did this to acclimatise them all to the idea of execution, on the basis that they would need to learn not to be squeamish about ordering executions in the future. This was a step beyond what several members of the court felt comfortable with, but Nakhta's father insisted that it would be a growth-full experience for his children, as he and his brother had been taken to witness executions as children themselves.

Despite the fact that Abigail had not been family, nor even a member of the same species as Nakhta, at some point Nakhta made a decision that it would never be okay to hurt a member of her biological family. Her history books had appraised her of the repetitive, cyclic nature of the back-stabbings and betrayals that beset powerful families, and she didn't want it to continue in hers. It looked so pointless to her, and when she thought of Abigail she wished that her whole family could be like that: loving and supportive.

That wasn't to say that she would become a doormat. She decided that she would use her power to make sure that it stopped, and she would do it by non-violent means. She realised that that in itself may be taken as a weakness, but it still suited her purpose: if the others underestimated her then they would be less likely to retaliate and she could continue with her plans for longer.

However, Nakhta was still in a rather powerless position when it came to enforcing the kind of safety and security Abigail had impressed on her, so she was restricted to imagining using a spy network as practice for when she would have one in the future. With it, she imagined quelling rebellions and learning of strikes against her before they could happen, and when she imagined that, she felt safer. In her mind, she would act not by killing her family, not by hurting them, but by taking them down a peg or two. Or three.

Nakhta continued to believe that she was the most important member of the household, and that becoming an influential figure would prove that. Growing into an older child added a new dimension to this: she wanted to be active and to prove her superiority by doing something. However, being the youngest of so many siblings and with roles assigned to everyone but her – Absarren was the future king, the twins were probably going to fight overseas (and who knew, become generals?), and Berehn had an affinity

for religious studies that made their parents joke that he would enter the clergy. Nakhta had no such role, and that gave her no way of proving herself.

She found this so unbearable that she created her own belief that she had no role because her importance was self-evident.

Nakhta may have had no royal role but she was educated in a few skills that would be considered appropriate for her: sewing, dance, etiquette, calligraphy, and history.

She was required to read long and complex histories and genealogies of the rulers of various kingdoms. This quickly became boring to her and she hated having to recite her family's history, and the histories of the other important folk around her.

Thankfully for Nakhta, not all of the reading was dull. A few of the figures in her history books had been written about in more exciting terms. Whenever she got fed up of reading the dustier material, or became too anxious about the judgement she imagined from all of those high-achieving ancestors of hers, she would turn to these stories instead.

She enjoyed reading about Markrin II, who had defeated a foreign invasion that had briefly occupied Vulland's eastern shores. She also enjoyed Queen Aalredta, who had held the kingdom together during a civil war.

From here, Nakhta developed a passion for fictional works. Most of these consisted of song cycles, but during this time of Vulland's history a new type of work called the 'novel' had begun to develop in popularity. She began to read novels, which were generally above the reading level usually prescribed to somebody of her age. She developed a broader vocabulary thanks to these.

The novels also left her with a tendency to think in terms of narratives, and of the cause and effect that moved narratives along. This combined with her paranoia about her family and encouraged her to reinforce and further develop her unhealthy preoccupation with who was doing – or planning – what behind her back.

Child to Adult Transition

(adolescence)

The dynamics between the de Renaud siblings continued as they always had, and each sibling continued to shape themselves according to the role given to them, and in which it had become unthinkable to them to do anything other than comply with. Nakhta continued to find that disheartening, until she realised the direction Berehn was taking.

He had listened to the commentary his parents had made about him joining the clergy, and had taken to it with great enthusiasm – to the point of becoming zealous and renouncing the political life entirely. He and Nakhta had had a reasonably good relationship up to this point with Berehn being refreshingly reluctant to engage in power-struggles, but his move towards the clerical life alienated the two siblings from one another.

And yet, Nakhta was fast approaching adulthood so her family ceased to be her only social network. Her parents began to give her almost completely free rein to a wider circle of people – nobles included – as a person in her own right, not just as their daughter.

All of this, and puberty itself, presented several of Nakhta's old fears and anxieties to her afresh. For a start, Absarren, Vilgem, and Bilba all took spouses. That opened up the question of marriage for herself at some point in the none-too-distant future.

Nakhta was distinctly wary of the prospect of marriage. For a start, it created the risk that she would have more to manage than she could deal with; probably not monarchy over a country, but still something big enough to be difficult. Until she met her future husband she had no idea how big or unwieldy that responsibility would be. Thinking about this made her irritable, so whenever the idea of her being married off was raised in public she would get angry and storm off, which made her seem a peculiar choice for a wife.

Aside from this, puberty meant that Nakhta grew, and she – and others – began to see what she would look like as an adult. She developed a large chest but remained short. She did however, find that she became rather beautiful of face.

Her sense of sexuality developed too, and that became a new secret that she felt the need to keep to herself. It was only too obvious that she was supposed to marry somebody male, but while she did indeed begin to develop sexual feelings for males, her stronger feelings were reserved for females.

The sex education that Nakhta (indeed, anybody in this era) received could be described as vague at best, owing to the religious fervour and the lack of biological knowledge of the time. It amounted to advice such as “marry a man and you will be blessed with babies”, that the bed was somehow involved, as were the parts that made men and women different, and that she would only need to lay still and let her husband do all the work. Love was considered something quite separate, except for the idea that love naturally followed after marriage, but for a lucky few it could occur beforehand. Because of this vagueness, Nakhta learned nothing about homosexuality, and certainly not of bisexuality, so remained confused for a long time about what her attraction to women meant.

During one occasion of reading about famous figures from her family’s history a few years previously, Nakhta had learned of a prince who had lived approximately 150 years ago. He had never married but instead had become known as an excellent leader and strategist. He had also been known for his knightly behaviour, been a chaste role model, and had had a few close, personal friends. After Nakhta had been having sexual feelings for other women for a while and read this prince’s name again, she connected the proverbial dots and realised that he had probably been attracted to men in the same way as she was to women. This was a great comfort to her as she no longer felt like such an oddball. The prince may have been a distant relative, but at least homosexuality in her family was not unprecedented.

Her personal preference was for large, strong, and confident women. And yet, she herself felt small and awkward.

All of this provided her with a measure of certainty in some areas of her life, but there was so much more that she needed to do to reassure herself. With so much uncertainty and confusion to deal with, Nakhta sought certainty by finally cultivating that spy network she’d wanted for so long. She made friends and acquaintances who were suited for this group, and paid others who she didn’t believe she could lure in under the banner of friendship. As the group began to develop she took to calling it her “special diplomatic service”.

Frederick, her childhood friend from so many years ago, became a solid part of this service. He enjoyed the work, as he had been expected to take to working the fields but had turned out not to be naturally suited to that at all. Nakhta appointed him as an advisor and supervisor of her various assets. He accepted the offer, enjoyed the work, and would occasionally report in, although she would be unable to invite him personally

to court until she became queen. For Nakhta's part, she felt quietly satisfied at being able to follow through on one of her oldest plans.

As Nakhta began to observe the world through mature eyes she developed a new respect for her father. Gattrem was decisive when there were difficult choices to be made, and he did it without hesitating and seemingly without regret. He was also skilled at thinking on the spot and dealt with new information swiftly to account for unexpected new developments. Nakhta saw this as him being flexible, and it impressed her. He also listened to her whenever she spoke, which certainly helped her to feel less small and insignificant.

Nakhta's relationships with her siblings had steadied but hadn't warmed since her childhood. Absarren still made sure she wouldn't forget that she was the youngest. He mocked her lisp, her size, her bookishness, and her need for praise.

She stopped trying to impress him. However, he had still had enough of an impact on her that she found herself wanting to live up to the standard he set, even if she wouldn't ever be queen. She also harboured a secret hope that one day he would regret the way he had treated her and come to her in a spirit of apology. That is how she imagined the pair of them making up, and perhaps one day, becoming friends.

Then there was Bilba. Nakhta felt let down by Bilba, who she felt could have been a big sister and feminine role model, but Bilba had refused to fulfill those roles for her. Instead Bilba had been physical and strong and decidedly unfeminine, and had mostly scorned Nakhta's company. Bilba's forthright attitude didn't suit Nakhta, who preferred indirect confrontation via manipulation and incorporating make-believe. Still, Nakhta couldn't help but admire her strength and sheer determination.

Vilgem had developed a habit of switching allegiances at the first sign of danger, and this was also a quality Nakhta disliked – loyalty was important to her. For his part, Vilgem was careful and preferred the certainty and safety of money-management over the volatility of international politics.

Both of the twins – Bilba and Vilgem – tended to join Absarren in taunting Nakhta.

Berehn was in some ways the most frustrating of them all, perhaps despite, or perhaps because of, his similarity to Nakhta in age. She had always hoped that they would have the strongest bond and she had tried to connect with him many times, but while he hadn't taunted her in response, he had ignored her. It was a whole other way of making

her feel insignificant, and he hadn't seemed to be doing it out of cruelty, but out of a genuine belief that she didn't matter.

As she grew older she began to write her own commentary on the various histories she had read about during her childhood. This gave others a clear idea of her wit and intelligence.

On the back of this she began to enjoy proving her intelligence, and she got the chance to do so at the special judgement days that occurred by tradition in Vulland (these also offered her a chance to get out of the castle for a while, so she would likely have gone to these anyway). Her father would preside at these trials, and if she heard a factual error, would chime in to point it out. Often this would be a petty thing to do, but she believed it would impress her father, and as far as she was concerned, perhaps it would earn her some praise.

Indeed, spending time with her father gave Nakhta very similar feelings to the ones she had gotten from her relationship with Abigail. He listened to her, was (or at least appeared to be) refreshingly straightforward in his dealings with others, and was content to bring her along for trips outside of the castle. As she was no longer a small child, she never had to be shooed away for being too demanding, so she truly felt like a respected member of the family.

Her insistence on contributing to these judgement days further informed the nobles around her about how her mind worked. They did not doubt her intelligence, but they still doubted her stability.

Closeness in Relationships

(young adulthood)

As an adult, Nakhta stabilised as a woman who tussled with two conflicting needs. On the one hand she desperately wanted friends – and trustworthy friends at that. On the other, she feared treachery, of not seeing it coming, and of the possibility that she would fail to counter it effectively if it did happen. She dealt with this by being generous to a fault to anybody who was within her graces, in the hope that she could win their loyalty. She would also watch closely for the first sign, however subtle, however oblique, of betrayal, and turn any offenders away swiftly and without regret.

She continued to prefer women over men so had not yet married by the time she reached her 20th birthday, a fact that her family considered problematic. She didn't dislike the more handsome men but had never chosen one, so during her 20th year her family took the opportunity of a trip to the neighbouring country to find her a suitor. Nakhta firmly believed that she wouldn't like whoever was chosen for her, and was so sullen about the situation that her family eventually gave up and left her behind. Berehn went along despite having holy orders that may otherwise have kept him at home, out of an interest in visiting a site of particular religious importance: a large monastery close to their destination.

A terrible storm rose up and wrecked the ship. Due to her staying at home, Nakhta was the only member of the family to survive.

When news of this terrible event reached her, she realised that she had no option but to assume the role of queen. Even as she grieved and prepared herself for this enormous and unexpected role, rumours abounded that she had deliberately caused her family's deaths.

This was a strange and rather unfair situation for Nakhta. She was suspected of either having sabotaged the boat or of using her fit of sullenness as a way of delaying the trip until they were sure to sail in a storm. However, nothing could either be proved or disproved. Nobody dared to mention the rumours in her presence, but there was too much murmuring about this for Nakhta and her special diplomatic service not to notice.

Nakhta's family may have been dead and gone, but Abigail, Nakhta's matron from so long ago, was still alive. One of Nakhta's first actions as queen was to provide her favourite matron with economic assistance – and only her, several people noticed. However, as glad as she was to extend this offer of love and support, Nakhta couldn't quite bear to invite Abigail to visit her. She feared that Abigail would suspect her of terrible deeds, and she did not want to taint the warm memories she had of Abigail with that.

Nakhta settled in as best she could as queen, and the nobles came to consider her well-functioning and reasonable compared to her more ambitious – and therefore dangerous – older siblings had been. It didn't take long before they saw how she responded when she felt insulted: she bristled quite hard and was clearly insecure so felt insulted easily – but they were reassured to note that she was not murderous. Indeed, it was for that reason that they considered her more of a danger to herself than to anybody else. They believed they could use her by feeding her false information, and

that she was unlikely to destabilise the kingdom. They referred to this set of qualities as being “teasonable”.

To the current day Nakhta feels – and realistically, is – woefully under-prepared to manage an entire kingdom, but she does her best anyway. She feels deeply overwhelmed and has defensively reverted to her younger belief that only she is worthy, and that she therefore must manage her country alone, so she does not utilise her special diplomatic service as well as she might. She has advisors to help, but they were never intended to be her advisors, so she was never educated about their loyalties and motivations. Because of this doesn’t believe that she can trust them.

She also refuses to marry, which would also help to spread the burden.

Nakhta was never groomed for the role of monarch – only Absarren and Vilgem were. Not only that, her siblings made sure she knew she was the “least among equals”. At most, Nakhta had only realistically expected to marry a younger sibling of a noble and to spend her life managing his household.

Despite all of her misgivings she continues to lead, but she prefers to do so from ‘behind the curtain’. She tries to remain as invisible as she feels she can get away with, and uses her influence to obliquely achieve the desired effect of the day. She continues to fear making direct decisions regarding trade, government, military activity, and so on in case she makes a bad choice. Nakhta’s fear is that if she chooses badly then she will let down her country, her family, and her bloodline. Absarren, the “king who never was”, continues to haunt her while she is on duty, and she tends to avoid acting in any way that would appear treasonous against him.

Despite her misgivings about marrying however, Nakhta did in fact have children. She understood that she could remain a virgin and allow other branches of the family continue the dynasty, but motherhood appealed to her. When she did, she did parenthood ‘right’ in all the ways she felt had gone wrong for her. She remembered Abigail’s warmth and showed her children love and praise, and gave them equal time as much as she was able to. She watched over them to make sure they didn’t fight. Her courtiers watched all of this and were shocked that she could love so generously. Until this point they had taken her to be self-obsessed, even vain.

Passing on Responsibilities

(older adulthood)

This life stage brought Nakhta a new challenge: of navigating the task of pulling the strings to choose a suitable successor (at least, to the extent that she was able to choose), and of preparing her successor for the monumental role of monarch. This presented her with a moral dilemma. She believed that a person had to be strong in order to be a successful king or queen, and that they would need to be emotionally numb enough to be able to make decisions that would impact millions of people without breaking down from the stress. However, she also believed that it was unfair to subject a child to the pain and suffering that would make them strong enough for that. She had looked at her children when they were very young and wondered what she could do to teach them to be strong without harming them the way she and her siblings had been harmed.

She believed that she had found the best possible solution.

The key to her strategy was the concept of support. At times, her best advisors had made the difference between her success and failure, so she appointed advisors for her children. Each of her children was introduced to somebody – usually male – from outside of the family. This would be a friend to grow up with, somebody who would be likely to develop a strong loyalty to that sibling, and who would later be invited to become an advisor. This last part of the plan Nakhta kept a secret to prevent power-grabs or back-stabbing.

She was also aware that the de Renaud dynasty had reigned for a very long time and that perhaps, a new dynasty would not be such a catastrophe. She raised her children and groomed their advisors with the understanding that it would be possible that any advisor might make a play to become the next king or queen.

In time, her children and their advisors grew up, and she made her choice.

End of Life

(old age)

Whatever Queen Nakhta's fears and shortcomings may have been during her earlier reign, by the time she reached old age she had become a memorable queen with many notes in the annals of history, and she knew that she would be remembered for generations to come.

Nothing could have pleased Nakhta more. Indeed, in her dotage she came to revel in the role of *grande dame*, and took great pleasure for taking credit for all the good things that had happened during her reign – and downplaying the dangers and threats to her rule that had occurred at various times.

On the last day of her life she was surrounded by family who loved her and paid attention to her. This was all she had ever wanted, and she knew that she had made it for herself. This was how she ended her life, and she felt as satisfied as she could possibly be.

Credits

Based on theory by:

Erikson, E., (1951) 'Childhood and Society', W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. chapter 7.

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