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Azimuth

Book 1 of the Rabki Chronicles

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Azimuth ('azəməTH)

horizontal direction expressed as the angular distance between the direction of a fixed point and the direction of a point of interest or goal

[from the pl. form of the Arabic noun as-samt, meaning “the direction”]



A fair-haired girl child born under a full moon shall be fated to lead man as the sun is setting. She will be protected by another girl child who shall be born under a celestial shower and whose spirit will be forged in fire. Death shall mark them both, but they shall rise from the ashes. Thoughts shared grow in strength, touch bonds and heals - Kismatya shall grace them with her smile so they may share their burdens. Their foes will be greater in number but weaker in spirit. They will splinter those who stand against them even as they unite the tribes of man and beast.

-Romani prophecy



Chapter 1 – Nadya’s world



How can you know what you're capable of if you don't embrace the unknown?

-Esmeralda Santiago

She'd sprinted through the woods to get away.

Before, she had jogged only enough to jaywalk without getting hit by a car. There'd been a few trips outside of Richmond but never beyond Virginia. At least, that was how things had been for most of her twenty-six years. She'd been plain Mia Rayner: red-headed orphan, office worker, regular person with a regular life. One month ago, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Nadya Kilsdova had strolled into her life and changed everything. The little girl brought nightmares, dreams of lost memories, black birds, Gypsy magic, warriors, snakes, and death.

It was too much, and Mia ran away.

She'd driven for miles before parking on a random stretch of road. Wind whipping through her hair, she'd then raced through the woods in the middle of nowhere. She had run away from being Mia Rayner: fulfillment of an ancient prophecy, member of a Lion Tribe, and protector of the child who could change the world. She had run away from Ojal Tansey's murder and the blood staining her own hands.

Running hadn't changed anything though, and the scene had played out exactly as the child had drawn. Standing next to the mountain lion, Mia had accepted her fate. And now, she was running back to the same little Gypsy girl hoping she still had a future.

Technically, she wasn't running – she was riding, and she wasn't alone.

“So, what's next?” Mia kept her gaze on the trees blurring by the window. When there was no response, she turned to look at her driver. Cayden Jodhani had been sent by Nadya to bring her back, but he wasn't just an escort. He'd been her personal trainer from hell for the last month as he'd introduced her to her warrior heritage as a *Rahki*.

The physical training had bonded them in ways she couldn't understand. She no longer even noticed the jagged scar running along his jawline, even though it was the first thing she had noticed when they'd met. Her initial impression of darkness, power, and arrogance in his tall, broad frame still held true. There had been times when she'd actually liked him - when he hadn't challenged her but had comforted her. Those were the times when she enjoyed the light flecks of gold in the deep brown eyes that usually cut through her like a knife. Ironically, the dagger strapped to her thigh had been his gift.

“Now, we return to your charge,” Cayden replied without taking his focus off the road.

Rolling her eyes, she again turned back to the window. If she'd learned anything in the last month it was that the Wolf warrior wasn't big on communication. She had learned more than that though. Ignoring him, Mia tried to replay her favorite memories of Ojal. She didn't want to forget the Rom Elder or her lessons; she also didn't want more blank spaces in her past.

Ojal was convinced Nadya was a *ladatyr* – a special person marked by Fate to save mankind. She'd also believed Mia could be a force of good as the child's protector. The Roma had sought to educate Mia and had shared many fables and herbal remedies from her people. Ojal was the living embodiment of the wise 'Old Crone'. At least, she had been.

Blinking back tears, Mia glanced around until her eyes landed on Cayden again. “Can you at least tell me something? Is Nadya okay? What about the other Roma? Please.”

He met her eyes but remained silent for several seconds. “You would know before I would if the child was hurt.”

“Then the others? No one else was...killed, were they? Did they attack again?” Her breath came in pants that caused Mia’s chest to ache. Pressing a hand against her galloping heart, she waited for his reassurance.

“The Seer’s clan left – no one was injured.”

Brown eyes flicked to hers as she took several breaths and nodded. She blinked when he continued.

“Nicu is guarding camp and your charge. Tobar and Syeira are also there.”

His words were no longer reassuring. She didn’t get along with Syeira – the Gypsy witch hadn’t exactly welcomed her or kept her opinions to herself. As for the men, she’d barely spoken to either of them. Mia’s thoughts returned to Nadya and her breathing deepened. The trees outside her window blurred further as she focused on the child. She didn’t have a plan, but hope sprang to life inside her.

She was *Pantivya*, and she would protect her charge. That thought repeated in her head as she remembered the month she’d shared with Ojal and the child. It seemed to take hours before she could see Nadya in front of her. The first glimpse eased the ache in her heart.

“Mia!”

Nadya sprinted to her without stopping. The force of her hug sent them both sprawling onto the ground. Mia cuddled the child close and laughed – just holding the little girl made everything better. It didn’t make sense. Nothing had since the child had found her, but she wouldn’t run away again. Whether or not the prophecies or Nadya’s visions were true, her future was with the kid in her arms.

“Did you save me any chocolate, kiddo?”



Chapter 2 – Alone



*The creation of a single world comes from a huge number of fragments
and chaos.*

-Hayao Miyazaki

“So, what is next?”

Mia broke the tense silence as she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. There was no immediate response from the four other adults. Lowering her head, she bit her lip to keep from snapping. Her gaze found the face of the young girl whose head rested in her lap. Icy blonde hair spilled out from a messy braid, freckles were obvious even in the moonlight, and a chocolate smudge marked her chin. Bright blue eyes were hidden as Nadya slept. Closing her eyes, Mia relished the weight of the child and the sense of belonging and responsibility that came with her.

After just a few seconds of peace, the reality of the situation again hit her. Doubts and questions flooded her mind. Nadya should have been at home with her family like a normal kid. But, she wasn't normal, and she wasn't surrounded by loving parents and siblings in a real home, playing video games, or reading books. She was sleeping soundly next to a campfire she shared with...thoughts of the other adults next to her prompted Mia to speak again.

“Who is Nadya's next living relative?” While no one could replace Ojal, there had to be someone else who would care for the child and maybe even continue her own training. It seemed like a good starting point.

“You are,” Tobar Lomas answered with a grin.

“I thought you were her cousins or something?” Mia quizzed, trying to process what he meant. Was she to be completely responsible for the child?

“Nope. We’re *Rabki* like you, well, not exactly like you. We are brothers, half-brothers technically, but we’re *Orkaba*.” Tobar gestured to the second man.

Mia glanced between them - both were tall with brown hair, but they didn’t look or act like brothers. Tobar had slightly wavy, longer hair, a slim build, and was usually smiling. Nicu had a military-like buzz cut, a broad, muscular body, and was usually glaring. She chose to focus on Tobar.

“*Ora...Orkaba?*” She stuttered over the name. Cayden’s guide was the Wolf, but she hadn’t heard the *Rabki* name before or didn’t remember hearing it.

“Yes, *Orkaba*.” Nicu’s deep voice interrupted them. He ignored her and turned to Cayden.

“Got it – *Orkaba* means Wolf,” Mia spoke absently as she turned away from the brothers to study the only other woman in their group. Syeira Durrante sat primly and met her eyes with an amused smirk. Mia wasn’t surprised by the expression or her annoyance at it; the Gypsy woman constantly annoyed her. Jet black curls flowed nearly to the woman’s waist and framed her heart-shaped face, large dark eyes, and full lips. Unlike the bright colors she normally wore, her flowing dress was pure white. The soft material shimmered in the firelight as she crossed her legs.

“*Orkaba* does not mean Wolf,” Nicu growled the correction as Syeira chuckled.

Mia hunched her shoulders against the man’s obvious anger. Tobar’s voice allowed her to look away and pretend Nicu wasn’t glaring holes through the back of her head.

“*Orkaba* honor the Eagle. *Volhiari* is the name for Cayden’s Wolf Tribe,” Tobar corrected gently with a grimace. “There are twelve

Tribes. Each has their own *calnya* or animal spirit guide. Many different clans belong to each Tribe. Actually, there are thirteen Tribes if you believe the ancient texts. Some note—”

“No history lesson,” Cayden interrupted. Maintaining eye contact with Tobar, he gave a nod.

Tobar shrugged and smiled at her again. “*Rabkis* normally find their *ladatyr* before the child turns four. When you didn’t show up, the Seer gained permission from the *Sovmar* to search for—”

“The sove what? Why did Ojal need permission?” Mia was already lost and her head throbbed with information overload.

“*Sovmar*. It’s a council of sorts. All *Rabki* Tribes are represented and decisions are debated, conflicts settled. They’re basically our governing body like Congress is here.” Tobar didn’t look away from her even when Syeira and Nicu shifted impatiently.

“We have our own Congress? Is there a President? Do we have laws?” The logic and normalcy of his revelations were comforting. They also made more sense to her than Ojal’s mystical prophecies and were less intimidating than Cayden’s fighting techniques. Mia frowned as the other three exchanged looks – her questions might be stupid, but she needed answers.

“The *Sovmar* is similar to Congress, but there’s no President. There are laws and customs. Some are from ancient texts and traditions, others are modern. Most things are shared verbally from Tribe Elders - just as the Seer and Cayden taught you.” Tobar paused as if waiting for an acknowledgement of his explanation.

Despite his reference to Ojal, Mia was still delighted to understand more so she smiled and nodded. “Where and when does the *Sovmar* meet?”

When Tobar switched his gaze to Nicu, she forced her eyes over as well.

“A different clan hosts each time. The meetings are set at alternating equinoxes. The next one will be held during the autumnal

equinox next year. A *Helaste* clan in California will host.” Nicu briefly met Tobar’s eyes before looking at her.

That was the most Mia had ever heard the man say. She opened her mouth to thank him but snapped it shut when he looked past her to Cayden. Regardless of whatever else they knew and weren’t sharing, next autumn was a long way off. She needed to know what would happen tomorrow. “Okay, I’ll wait until later to worry about that. You said I’m Nadya’s—”

“No, you can’t wait until later. The *Sovmar* approved the Seer’s quest to find you. You have not been approved as Nadya’s *rahki*. You must petition for approval now to be heard at the next meeting.” Nicu was quick to dispel her erroneous conclusion.

“They have to approve of me? Ojal never said that. I thought this was just between me and Ojal, Nadya too, obviously, but why does it concern anyone else? Why wouldn’t Ojal have told me?” Rolling her shoulders back, Mia tried not to glare at those around her. Everyone had more information than she did, and they refused to share it easily. The need to involve more people brought a spurt of fear to replace her resentment. Things had been difficult when it had only been Ojal and Cayden. A sharp pang stabbed her heart as she again thought of the Seer. Ignoring her heartache, she scanned the others and waited for an answer.

When Syeira’s bracelets jingled and her skirt twitched, Mia turned to her. However, other than a purse of her lips, there was no help from the Rom. Suppressing a sigh, Mia tried again. “Okay, so how do we petition them to approve of me?”

“I will send word. You’ll need to attend the next meeting in person. You can be tested then too.” Nicu stood but didn’t look away from her.

“Tested? Not only will I have to ask for approval, but they have the right to test me?” She hadn’t made it very far in her training so

failing any test was a distinct possibility. Mia frowned at Nicu, but it was Cayden who answered.

“It’s a formality. The ancients did thoroughly test *rabki* candidates and even allowed more than one to compete for a *ladatyr*. Now, it’s a series of questions.” He paused then shook his head. “We’ll continue training as we travel. You’ll meet other *Rabkis* and learn from them before you stand in front of the *Sovmar*.”

“We?” The word slipped out, but Mia made herself ask another stupid question. “You’ll stay with us? All of you?”

An awkward silence fell upon the group. She tightened her hold on Nadya making the child stir restlessly in her arms.

“I’ll take you to the *Sovmar*.” Cayden was the first to commit. He looked at her then dropped his gaze to Nadya.

“I missed my ride; I might as well stay.” Syeira flipped her hair over her shoulder and looked away. Her face softened when she knelt to gently touch Nadya’s hair.

“I need to attend the *Sovmar*. I can travel with you.” Nicu’s agreement was issued without emotion.

Laughing, Tobar rubbed his hands together. “I hate to be left out of the fun, so I guess we’re all going to the *Sovmar*.”

Mia breathed a sigh of relief and tried to relax her grip on Nadya. They weren’t alone; she had help. Those statements repeated several times in her mind. Ojal had wanted her trained so she could protect Nadya. The Elder wouldn’t see her get approved, but that fact only made her more determined. She had let Ojal down when she ran away. She wouldn’t fail again. Closing her eyes, she silently repeated the fact that she had help and tried to breathe.



CAYDEN NOTICED MIA’S eyes close and directed his full attention to her. The girl constantly surprised him. Her sleek, angular body and bright green cat’s eyes were expected. Her lack of training

and connection to her instincts and heritage were not. *Pantivya* were known for their arrogance and independence but not sarcasm and wit. As he watched, her fingers flexed then wrapped tightly around Nadya's braid. He forced his gaze away.

The night sky was almost perfectly clear. The only noises were the hoots of a nearby owl and the crackle of the fire. The natural world reigned supreme at the Romani camp. Simple wood cabins dotted the clearing in a haphazard fashion. The forest provided a natural boundary even as it started to encroach inward. It felt familiar to him, but he knew Mia didn't appreciate it. She'd only just accepted her place as the child's protector and preferred the city life in Richmond.

He had watched her there – a bright spot in a grey world. She had stood out with her hum of energy and power lying just below the surface. It was obvious she hadn't tapped into her instincts until Nadya had found her. After a month, she still stumbled in her rush to catch up and learn. Impatient, proud.

A brief image of Mia standing over the ravine with the mountain lion at her side blazed behind his eyes. It had been exactly as Nadya had foretold in her drawings. Mia had radiated power, and he'd been unable to look away or move. She was a *Rabki* by instinct, if not by training. It was his job to train her.



Chapter 3 – Fireside chats



The moment you put a deadline on your dream, it becomes a goal.

-Harsha Bhogle

The snaps and pops of the fire pulled Mia from her mounting fears. Opening her eyes, she stared at Nadya. She couldn't fail again. Frowning, she acknowledged that she'd only taken the first steps. Yes, she had help but not a plan.

"Okay then, so glad you're all staying! I hate to repeat myself, but I have to ask. What's next? I mean, yes, we have an end goal. How do we get there, and what other *Rabkis*?" Mia started making plans to continue juggling her real world obligations and her duty to Nadya. It had been a difficult balancing act when she'd had Ojal's support.

"Nesti," Cayden spoke only the single word.

Mia followed his gaze to Nicu in time to catch the other's man nod. She waited for more information.

"Nesti Willene?"

Tobar's question made her realize everyone else understood Cayden. Syeira smiled as she gracefully swished her skirt as if dancing to music only she could hear. Mia looked back to Cayden. When he stood as if the discussion was over, she rolled her eyes. "Hello? Who or what is Nesti Willene?"

"She's the leader of a *Takoarta* clan. Think Bears!" Tobar grinned as he answered her question.

"Okay, I didn't know there were Bears here. How many clans are in Richmond, anyway?" Mia sighed as they exchanged another look. Apparently, she was missing something else. Before she could ask, Syeira further cemented the fact that she was the only clueless one.

“Are we leaving tomorrow? How far away is she?” The Roma ignored Mia’s question to address Cayden.

“Tomorrow. It’ll take a day.” Cayden’s gaze remained on her instead of Syeira.

“You think we’re just going to pick up and leave? I have a life here – I have responsibilities. I can’t just leave!” Mia’s body vibrated with the urge to stand and confront him. She hated being forced to stay seated while he towered above her.

“Your responsibility is to Nadya. Remember?” Cayden’s frown matched his growl.

“Yes, I remember Nadya is mine! Mine, not yours! She and I will remain here until you explain why we need to leave.” Mia bit out the words and almost instantly regretted them. She needed Cayden. She couldn’t afford to alienate him or any of them. Taking a deep breath, she reined in her anger.

“I really do need to know more. I have obligations to people other than Nadya. It’ll take some effort to balance everything.” Mia was proud she sounded so reasonable. Relieved, she watched Cayden accept her words with a nod.

Syeira leapt to her feet. “You can’t keep a foot in both worlds, and you can’t drag Nadya into your world. She doesn’t belong there.”

The words ‘as you don’t belong here’ hung unspoken in the air.

“You need to choose them or choose Nadya. You asked each of us to stay. We’ve committed. You must do the same. If not, it would be better if we took Nadya and left!” Syeira’s sharp tone was punctuated by the musical clink of her bracelets.

Mia met the woman’s eyes before turning to Cayden. He remained impassive, but he did nothing to dispute the threat. Turning more, she looked at the brothers. Nicu’s arms were crossed over his chest, and he was blank-faced as usual. Tobar avoided her eyes.

“So, you all think you can just take her from me?” It was foolish to believe she could take them on; however, Mia wasn’t about to be

pushed around. She placed Nadya gently on the ground and stepped in front of her. With one foot tapping, she studied each of them in turn. Mia clenched her fists as she met the Wolf's gaze last. "I asked you a question. Do you think you can take her from me?"

A screech rent the air - human enough to warrant concern, inhuman enough to trigger chills. Syeira and Tobar jumped while Nicu lifted a brow before scanning the forest. She and Cayden never broke eye contact. Mia felt a curious relief at the animal's call. The mountain lion had haunted her before she'd accepted her fate. Now, it was comforting, empowering to know she was connected to it.

"We don't have the right to take her. Nadya would fight to stay with you as you are her *rabki*." Tobar stepped forward with his hands raised in a gesture of peace. "However, you wanted help, and you need to accept it. Accept that others have more experience and knowledge. Let us introduce you to this world."

It was easier to accept the chastisement from a friendly face, so she nodded and took another deep breath. "I can accept help, but not orders. If this is going to work then we work together. You ask - you don't deliver commandments and expect blind obedience. You are trained *Rabkis* and, yes, I need your experience and help."

She didn't give them time to respond. Turning to Syeira, Mia forced the words she knew the woman would demand. "You're Nadya's connection to the Romani culture, so I need your help too."

The Rom inclined her head and flicked her hand in a regal wave. The movement sent her bracelets into another melodic jingle. Mia tried to refocus on her primary goals - compromise and support - instead of smacking the smirk off the woman's face.

"I am Nadya's *rabki*. The final decisions are mine. Consider yourselves my advisors. You're experts in your area, but I have to be the one in charge."

Mia wasn't surprised when Nadya's hand slipped into hers. She gripped the girl's hand but didn't look at her as she awaited their de-

cision. If they denied her, she'd be lost. Everything in her screamed it had to be this way though. Despite her ignorance and inexperience, she had accepted her fate. She and Nadya were bound even if the others were aligned against them.

Tobar grinned and plopped down in a seat. "I can live with that."

Syeira pursed her lips and reiterated her point. "You have to listen to all of us."

"Of course." Mia sensed victory, but she didn't soften her expression.

"Fine, I'm in, too." The Roma sat with an elaborate flourish of her skirt.

Cayden and Nicu were slower to resume their seats. She and Nadya stood until they'd done so. Nadya was wide awake, and she had no problem including the girl. It wasn't like she was a normal kid anyway.

"Let's try this again. You want us to see a woman named Nesti, right? Where does she live, and how long will we stay there?" Mia's heart was still racing. However, with Nadya pressed into her side, it no longer felt like the organ would beat through her chest.

"Nesti lives in Boston. She's a knowledgeable, well-respected Elder and would be our best starting point." Cayden still frowned, but his voice was soft.

"Boston?! Boston." Mia parroted.

"We won't be coming back."

Her mouth fell open as she tried to find the words to argue. She paused when his lips twitched and Nadya squeezed her hand. If he was trying to anger her, she couldn't give him the satisfaction. "Perhaps you can outline the full plan?"

"Boston is the first stop for your training. Nadya also needs to train—" Cayden got no further.

“You think to beat up the kid?” Remembering the endless bruises from her training, Mia was determined to protect the girl. Nadya’s laughter stopped her before she could work up a good rant.

“No, Cayden won’t train me. You will!” Nadya grinned as she corrected her mistaken impression.

Staring at the child with wide eyes, Mia couldn’t fathom what she could teach her. Nadya had helped Ojal teach her about the Romani customs, folk stories, herbal remedies, and Fate. They’d only had a month - nowhere near enough for her to reverse their roles. Syeira’s smooth voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Nadya hasn’t yet learned all the responsibilities of her Rom heritage. I am Romani. It is only right I oversee her training.”

Mia felt the need to disagree, but logic kept her quiet. This was exactly why she needed Syeira. She turned and caught the disappointed look on the child’s face.

“It’s okay, Mia, you have other jobs to do right now,” Nadya advised with a smile.

Feeling lost and disappointed in herself, Mia focused on the pragmatic issues that were within her control. “How are we getting to Boston? My ride won’t seat all of us. What stuff do we need to take...as we aren’t coming back?” She stuttered over the last part as she tried to push down the fear and uncertainty clenching her heart.

“We have access to available vehicles, and it won’t take long to get them. We do need to pack everything here—” Cayden tried to answer, but again she interrupted him.

“What about Ojal’s stuff?” Mia squeezed Nadya more tightly when she realized she should have waited until the child was asleep again.

“Her clan’s already left, and they’ll handle the details.” Syeira inclined her head with a significant look at Nadya.

“Okay, thank you.” Mia was curious but refused to ask more questions in front of the kid. She did intend to follow-up with Syeira privately. “So, what else then?”

It took almost an hour to finalize their plans to prepare her for the *Sovmar*. Cayden provided few details despite her constant interruptions. She intentionally avoided asking for more specifics on the *Rabki* world. It was easier to discuss real world issues and her main concerns centered on Nadya. Cayden handled most of the answers with Tobar adding occasional details. Nicu remained silent while Syeira’s comments managed to be informative and mocking.

Mia’s refusal to leave without giving a two-week notice at work caused another argument. Tensions rose as she and Cayden leaned forward during their heated exchange. She tried to use a softer voice since Nadya had fallen asleep again. Her tone was still sharp when she defended her position.

“I can’t teach Nadya the remedies and history, but I can teach her how to handle her responsibilities. What kind of example would I set if I just ran away?” Mia gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes. Silently, she dared Cayden to mention that she’d already run away. “I’m trying to do what is best. I will do what I think is best.”

His abrupt nod ended the discussion. Mia was surprised she’d won, but that didn’t mean she appreciated the looks of shock sported by the others.

Risking a glance at Nadya to confirm she slept, she turned her attention to the cabin where she’d last seen Ojal. The image of the Seer dead on the floor was forever burned into her brain. An iron band squeezed her aching heart. When Nadya squirmed, Mia realized she was squeezing the child. Looking away from the cabin, she reluctantly broached the painful subject in a roundabout way. “Ojal’s clan left?”

Syeira tensed, but she still answered the vague question with a pointed look. “Yes, they were uncomfortable staying where the Seer had died.”

Mia refused to ask for an explanation, but she also refused to look away. She held the Romani’s gaze with a glare of her own. The sound of her tapping foot was the only noise during their silent battle of wills.

With a long sigh, Syeira looked away first. “Rom custom has specific traditions when dealing with death. Her clan feared the Seer would be angry and return as a mulo, the living dead. They arranged for her body to be moved and prepared for immediate cremation. They’ll spread the word of her death as they move on.”

Mia felt the iron band clench painfully around her heart once again. She pushed the conversation aside. It was all she could do to focus on Nadya instead of succumbing to grief, anger, and fear. The next two weeks would be her chance to let go of her life before she moved on, literally and figuratively. Nesti was in Boston, and there would be more clans after that as they traveled across the U.S. before attending the *Sovmar* in California. There was a lot to worry about; however, she didn’t feel comfortable expressing those worries. It was one thing to share information and another to share feelings – the group surrounding her wasn’t one that inspired warm and fuzzy feelings.

“Okay then, we have a plan.” Her nerves were stretched tautly, and she wanted to run away again. However, she planned to take Nadya with her, and they were only running to their cabin. More worries flooded Mia’s mind. She had only two weeks before they started a new path together. It was a path she’d never expected nor could ever have dreamed of even after a month in Nadya’s world.

With the others around, the child would be protected and cared for, but there were other ways she could fail. She was particularly concerned about meeting other *Rabkis*. *Rabkis* who, unlike her, were

trained and knew what was going on. *Rabkis* who didn't need to ask stupid questions. Mia refused to ask any other questions, even though many danced in her head. It was important to concentrate on what she could control, what she could do. Right now, that meant she could get the sleeping child to bed. The most pressing issues had been resolved, and she had a plan. It would have to be enough for the moment.

“We're going to bed. And no, I'm not training in the morning.” With only a gentle nudge, Nadya woke up enough to follow Mia to their cabin.