

The Fireblade Array: Volume 1

City of Blaze

by

H.O. Charles

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The Fireblade Array

City of Blaze

Nation of Blaze

Anomaly of Blaze

Blazed Union

Voices of Blaze

Fall of Blaze

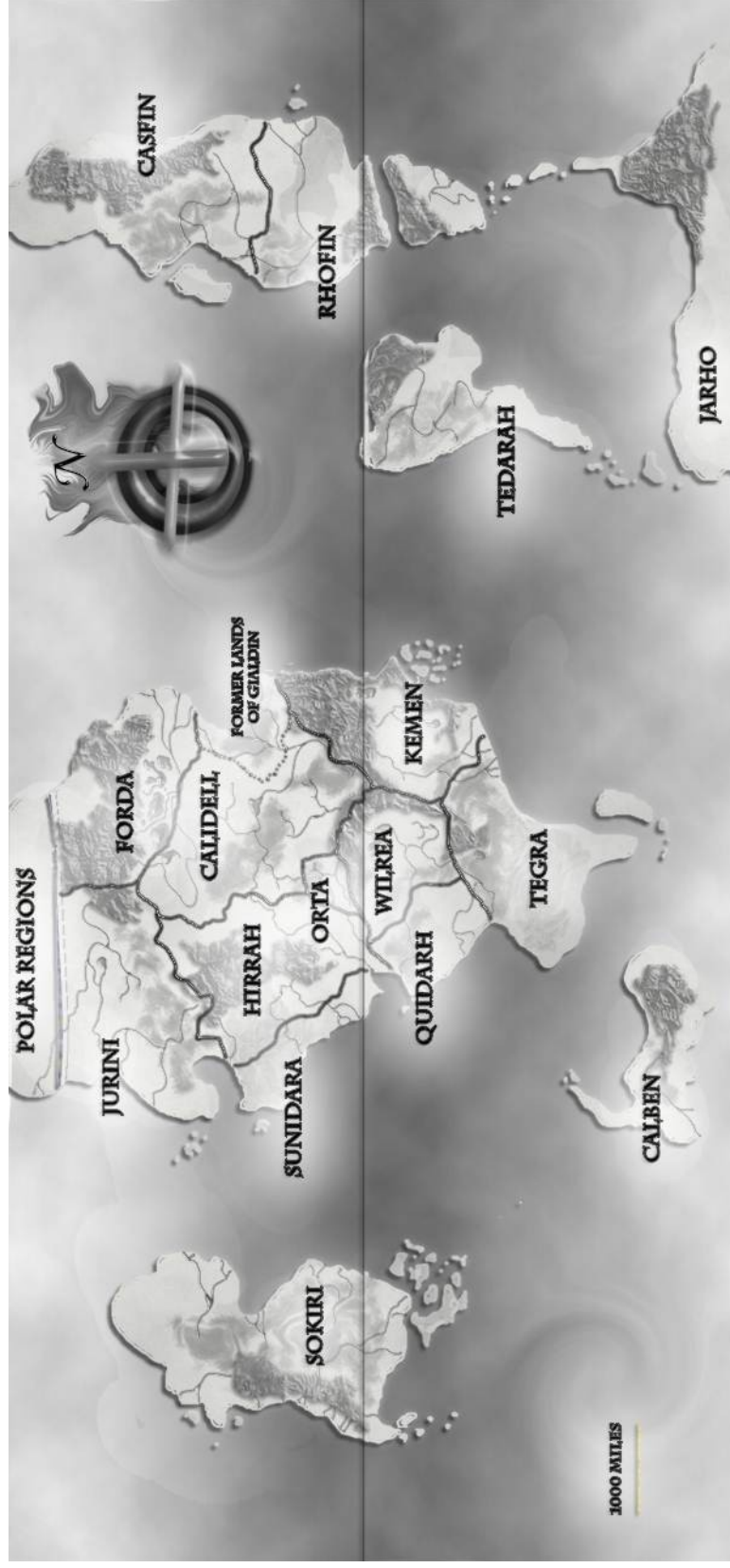
Ascent of Ice (coming soon)

Also by the same author:

Snowlands

For T and the b3tans

An array of fires; an array of lives. The Fireblade's array is eternal, but the beginnings and ends of each life are ever the same. It must always begin with death and end with death.





Contents

[Glossary of Terms](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[About the Author](#)

Glossary of Terms

[<skip to prologue>](#)

Achellon – A mythical place inhabited by the all-powerful fire gods. It is believed that Achellon is composed entirely of Blaze Energy and that it is the true source of such power. It is often described as a place devoid of pain or suffering.

Blaze Energy – A fiery power that can be manipulated into weapons, shields, sources of light and even used to construct buildings. It is usually described as blue light in its most basic form, but to most people it is not visible.

Blazes, The – The fires from which Blaze Energy is extracted. Only wielders (directly) and kanaala (indirectly) have access to these fires.

Eisiel – A creature so burned by The Blazes that it is half-dead. Described as charred, oily skinned and wasted in appearance, eisiels kill without remorse. They usually hunt for a specific target, but whether they are instructed to do so, or develop their own fixation through madness, is not known. It is sometimes said that they are former lovers of wielders, whose fires burned them during love-making. They are immune to weapons made with Blaze Energy.

Form (Blaze) – A structure made with Blaze Energy that will produce a specific weapon, shield, light or piece of matter. Forms are altered by defining the speed, vibration and shapes of Blaze Energy that make it. Once constructed, most forms can be deconstructed or unravelled, but the time required is dependent upon the complexity of the form.

Kahr – A male heir of royal blood in the central and eastern areas of the Sennefhal continent.

Kahriss – A female heir of royal blood in the central and eastern areas of the Sennefhal continent.

Kanaala – A man who can manipulate (i.e. wield) Blaze forms or deconstruct them. Kanaala are the male counterpart to wielders, and they cannot access Blaze Energy independently. A kanaala can control the Blazes through a wielder, and he can access her fires before her power is fully matured. He also has the ability to permanently quench a wielder of her power.

Kanaala are the only men who can safely sleep with wielders, though this is dependent upon their grading. For example, a kanaala graded four will almost certainly die if he lies with a wielder graded five and this is due to his limited capacity for her power.

Kanaala are graded according to their ability, with most falling between grades three and five. A kanaala graded ten is considered to be very powerful indeed.

A kanaala can detect the presence of a wielder. The more powerful either one is, the greater the distance at which they can sense one another. Kanaala can only detect other kanaala through skin-to-skin contact.

Kanaala are born with their full potential already reached, and do not mature into their abilities as wielders do. Prospective parents fear giving birth to kanaala, since the child's arrival will almost always result in the mother's death. The same is not true of wielders unless the child has the potential to be especially powerful. It is thought that this difference has something to do with the child's latent Blaze abilities at birth.

Blaze abilities are often inherited, but have been known to spontaneously appear in families where it has previously been absent.

Kefruit – A hand-sized, yellow tree fruit with mottled peel. Its sweet flavour makes it popular in desserts.

Nalka – The physical pain suffered by lovers upon being separated from each other. It usually manifests about ten days after their last engagement in sexual intercourse and is complete within four days of the first pains.

The affliction is usually fatal to those who suffer it before the age of twenty, and so it is not advised that lovers enter into a sexual relationship before they're old enough to withstand the separation.

It represents the termination of the bond between partners and their potential to procreate. However, lovers are able to have children subsequently, but only if they are able to maintain a sexual relationship without undergoing nalka for nine years.

In spite of this phenomenon, brothels and whore houses are prevalent across much of the world.

Partition (Blaze) – A Blaze form that masks wielding from any nearby kanaala or wielders. The construction of most Blaze forms gives off heat, and a partition will impede any further dispersal of that heat.

Pinh – A black, poisonous liquid which prevents wounds from healing. If enough poison is ingested by an individual they will suffer pinhatar death, where the blood becomes too saturated with the substance to perform its proper function. Scars that result from wounds are generally caused by the presence of pinh.

Sarkha – A tube-like implement with a plunger and reservoir at either end, used to clean pinh-saturated wounds that are too deep to be washed any other way. One reservoir is filled with water and the flexible, middle section of the tube is inserted into the wound. Once the water reservoir has been emptied into the injury, the second reservoir can be used to withdraw the diluted poison.

Swift – An orange, ground-creeping flower, native to mountainous regions.

Tanno – A juicy, purple berry with a slightly acidic taste. It is usually skinned, pressed and fermented to make wine.

Vanha-sielu – An old term for an even older group of people, meaning "repeated life." These individuals are born again within two weeks of their deaths, ad infinitum. In each life they carry an identical appearance and are inevitably given the same name by their parents or guardians.

Occasionally, their own fame in previous lives causes them to be named after themselves.

Until the age of 23 they are unaware of their deep past, although several aspects of their character will manifest in the same way through childhood. If memories are forced upon a vanha-sielu before their mind is ready to accept them, it can lead to death or madness. However, familiar faces and objects do not seem to trigger this in young vanha-sielu, which implies that a certain set of words are necessary in order to initiate premature recall.

It is currently unknown how the phenomena of vanha-sielu came about, and new ones do not appear to have been created in recent times.

Wielder – A wielder is able to control Blaze Energy and access The Blazes independently. Wielders are exclusively female, born with the potential to reach a certain level of ability,

but they can only access their powers independently once they reach the age of twenty. Until then they must employ the aid of kanaala to help them wield.

A wielder can detect the presence of another wielder. The more powerful either one is, the greater the distance at which they can sense one another. Wielders can only detect kanaala through skin-to-skin contact.

Wielders are graded according to their ability, with most falling between grades two and four. A wielder graded ten is considered to be very powerful indeed.

They are banished from Calidell and any discovered in the country, or found to be wielding, are immediately executed. Those born into unsuspecting Calidellian families are usually tracked down and exterminated.

Wielders must choose their bed-fellows carefully, as they have the potential to burn their lovers alive. For this reason, most wielders will marry kanaala or remain celibate.



Prologue

The third day of the first month, 3216 P.D.

Pain tore into his muscles, ripped through his veins and suffused his vision with its hard, white light. His lungs spasmed in their efforts to breathe. To his left were the legs of a table, and Morghiad reached out to steady himself with them, but his hand missed and thumped into the flagstones instead. Even those were moving far more than they should have done. He flicked his eyes to the man standing above him.

A wry smile was creeping along Silar's features. "I barely touched you. Now, do you want more, or did you have too much of Baydie's wine-" His brow furrowed. "Morghiad?"

The air was dense and heavy enough to press hard onto his shoulders, but Kahr Morghiad forced his muscles to lift him from the ground until he was able to stand. The smell of sweat, viscous and rancid, filled his nose. *The sword - he needed his sword.*

Morghiad stumbled toward where he thought it had fallen, and he found it cold and singing upon the stones. He took hold of it, and ran from Silar. He ran as fast and as hard as every sinew and ligament in his body would permit, and all conscious thought evaporated from his mind. There was only pain there, still ripping and tearing at him, but it was not his.



Silar blinked at the empty space for a heartbeat, then sprinted after Morghiad. If he hoped to catch up with the man, then every yard he seized now would be half a yard less than he would have to catch later. Though both he and Morghiad were equally as tall and could see over the heads of other men, Morghiad was better at converting that height to a longer stride. In such situations there was no choice but to follow as keenly as one could.

He catapulted himself out of the door of the practice room and yelled for the men to join him. At this pace there was no point in softening his feet, and the sound of his footfalls thundered between the rough-hewn blocks and into the blackness ahead. The castle had always seemed to him an elaborate, yet damp cave. It was full of unyielding

turns and mismatched lumps of rock. Here and there, braver rays of light dared to touch the basalt walls. The rest shied away, and tried their best at illuminating the surrounding town instead. Even that appeared unnecessarily dim at the surface. Often he wondered why he had ever chosen to stay in such a place.

The sounds of Morghiad's footfalls ahead of him were becoming more distant, and Silar was in danger of losing him amidst the maze. At his best guess, they were headed for the royal and guest quarters or the gardens below, but that was not a great deal of help. One could spend an entire day searching for a person in either of those areas. Silar had to push his legs to work harder.

He could hear the men gasping and thumping their feet behind him; perhaps five or more had managed to keep pace. He shouted to Morghiad again, but no response came. *How was he supposed to help when the man was so uncommunicative?* What Silar *could* deduce, however, was that this had something to do with Artemi.

Morghiad had a peculiar sort of compass in his head for that woman. It had been evident twice before, when the kahr had chosen the most unlikely of paths in looking for her. Together, he and Silar had stridden with unfounded purpose through the streets of the city, and had reached three dead ends where Morghiad appeared eager to find a way through the walls.

Then there had been the embarrassment upon reaching her, where they arrived at the wrong street level but were directly above her. Morghiad had given away nothing with his expression, as was typical for him, but Silar recalled the amusement in Artemi's smile when they had finally seen her. She must have felt their mistake just as Morghiad had.

Silar could still remember the way she had looked on that day, with hair the colour of old gold and fire that streamed over her shoulders and to her waist. And her eyes... Silar had always had a soft spot for those warm, dark eyes. The soft light had just about been strong enough to show that they were not black, but had easily picked out the cheekbones beneath, and the lips, and the infamous jaw of stubbornness that supported them. She was not an imposing woman, especially not in the green scarves of a benay-gosa, but she was *the queen*.

He could no longer hear Morghiad's steps over his own. The corridor opened out into three hungry mouths. If he chose the wrong entrance, he could be slowed by whole minutes. Silar stopped and held his breath to listen.

"Left fork, men!"

He thrust himself into a hard run again. At the next junction he would most likely have to gamble on the direction Morghiad had chosen, and he had nothing better than chance to aid him. He called to the kahr a second time, but still it was only his echoing footfalls that answered back. Whatever this was, it had to be a terrible thing. Was Artemi hurt?

Perhaps the king had finally discovered her secret, though that seemed unlikely given the precautions Silar had taken. Silar had been fanatical about paying off and suppressing the voices of every one of the king's spies that heard of it. It was really very fortunate that Silar's mother had bequeathed him a spy network capable of spying on other spies. She had left him with that and other gifts, including her teachings.

Even the wittiest of us are victims of our hearts, she had said to him.

Yet I am both foolish and a victim, he thought back at her.

The grey walls of the tunnels gave way to simple pictures of characters in history, and most were military leaders, royalty or hunters. Silar and Morghiad had once spent an afternoon – a very unsuccessful afternoon – trying to find Artemi among them. The paintings were exclusively male, which was probably by request of the king. He did not seem to like as women much as he ought to.

Heavy oak doors punctuated the spaces between the portraits, and a bed maker peered nervously from one of them. Silar was on the right trail! The floors here were covered with wool rugs that sought to trip him as he ran, but soon the war portraits gave way to those of long-forgotten royalty. There was another junction ahead of him: soft carpets to the right and descending stone steps to the left.

He shouted for Morghiad a third time and stopped to listen for any manner of reply. His patience was rewarded by the distant yelp of a woman and a crash of metal dishes.

"That'll have to do," he muttered, and followed the sound toward its source.

A league of darkened likenesses and scenic landscapes passed by him, and the faces became more recognisable as he pushed forward. The carpets gave way to marble, the hallway opened out nearly twenty feet in width and the ceiling ascended from a heavy arch to sprawling vaults. To one side, a wide-eyed servant hurried to tidy her dinnerware.

These were the guest quarters, and were typically occupied by brown-nosing nobles and spoiled, royal children from across the borders. It was still a cave to Silar, just a larger one with richer vermin inside it.

His earlier pause had given his men time to catch up. Three of them had made it through the catacomb of passageways. Silar signalled for them to hurry, still tearing down the hall with what remained of his breath. When he rounded a hundredth corner, he found Morghiad hurling his weight at one of the doors.

The kahr did not acknowledge his presence; his expression was stone and his mind focussed elsewhere. His green eyes glittered with a kind of shining death as he threw himself at the door.

Silar said nothing more, and synchronised his movements with his friend. Once, twice and three times they shouldered into the wooden panels. The frame began to crack and splinter at the hinges.

One more.

Boedrin, a short and improbably quick soldier, joined the battering ram for another push. The door gave out a wistful moan, and before it had completed its descent to the

travertine floor, Morghiad had stepped onto the centre panel, leapt and came to land in the middle of the room beyond. In a smooth extension of the motion, he drew his sword into an arc and thrust it downward.

Silar tumbled into the room behind him with the others. In a breath he froze. He knew the outcome of the scene that progressed before him, and his role in this was done.

Morghiad's blade twisted through the air, and proceeded to cut through his opponent with deadly precision. The recipient of the strike made no sound as he fell, and his hands only released slowly from the neck of the woman he held. The ground had its claim upon her too, and Artemi eventually became free of his grip with her hair swirling upward into the air about her.

Silar's legs no longer had any strength in them. He fought to take a breath, and his mind would only talk to him of the sights of which this was reminiscent. It was similar, it told him, to throwing a pitch log onto the fire and causing the flames to blossom about the sides.



Chapter 1

The fourteenth day of the ninth month, 3210 P.D.

This afternoon in Calidell's capital, Cadra, was a fine one indeed. The city was a feast-day layer cake of houses and streets that had been carved from the local green stone. In the very richest areas there were only two levels, and in the poorest there were six. The streets wove between these levels with bronze guardrails that marched along the sides and channels that drove rainwater down to the ground.

Life on the lowest levels was a rather gloomy existence, as the only daylight seeped down from the foot-wide wells that bore their way to the surfaces above. Orange paraffin lamps shed their own feeble light here and there, and there surrounded them the noises of cart traffic, footfalls and chatter. The sounds never ceased, even at night-time, and they would reverberate along the roads and through the fabric of the stacked houses like incessant, tiny earthquakes.

War had moulded Cadra into its present form, and the defensive walls were beyond any ordinary man's concept of vast. Their height seemed to caress the clouds, while their width took a full minute to traverse. A thousand years earlier, the city had outgrown its fortifications, and no one had the money or inclination to rebuild them or add extensions.

New residents had built their homes on the outskirts, only to be obliterated with each successive assault that was waged upon the city. Then one day, and following a particularly vicious attack, a brilliant Cadran mason had hit upon the idea of building up instead of out. The king of the time, Rugosa, had been impressed with his plans, and had ordered that each new resident would finance their own construction and consultation with the mason.

In the early days, the poorer district endured numerous collapses and the lowest residents charged extortionate rents for their rooftops. Murder rates in the city soared as developers vied to buy the best base properties, but a millennium had quieted these troubles, and the construction had finally reached its zenith. At the centre of it all lay the castle – a construction not unlike a giant, black urchin that had become embedded within the emerald rock of the houses. Only its spine-like towers were lofty enough to soar beyond the roofs of the other buildings.

Inside the castle lay several gardens filled with shade, and these were accompanied by two open-air courtyards. In one of those, a grand fountain flourished amidst the stones

– a point of fluidity amongst the rigidity. Cool, white water spouted from the crown and tumbled past ireful sea creatures to the marble pool below. The yellow sunlight of the afternoon skittered off the white lip, across the water, to where Morghiad and Silar stood mocking each other over the events of the previous night.

Lord-Lieutenant Silar Forllan was one of *those* men – the kind who were often seen with beautiful women and usually in some state of nalka or other. Morghiad had never understood the point of that manner of lifestyle, and had always sought to do his best to socialise with women as little as possible. Of course, his approach generated just as much gossip as behaving like Silar might have done, but he hardly cared. His father, King Acher, had repeatedly insisted that he should take a sort of concubine – a benay-gosa – in order to prove his masculinity. In truth, Morghiad had as much desire to take one of those to his bed as he did a poison viper.

And the noblewomen he had met - all of them were either vacant and stupid, or manipulative and cruel. Oh, it may well have been fun for a few nights, but when that part was over he would have to endure the horrors of separation. Too many men depended upon him now that he was captain of the army. He could not afford to crawl about on his hands and knees, weak and in the throes of nalka while his soldiers died. A good army and a good captain could not sleep around, though such ideals did not appear to hinder many of their number.

There were more reasons Morghiad preferred to keep his bed to himself, and one of those reasons was his cast-offs would automatically become the property of his father. And King Acher's cast-offs usually ended up without a head.

Morghiad peeled off his sweat-soaked shirt as he thought. His practice session that morning had been lung-searing and tough, and they had worked through every move in the Fighters' Manual. It had proved to be much harder to lead the formations than follow them. Even though the leader repeated them fewer times, he still had to walk between the men checking, correcting, shouting and instructing. Some soldiers had been fighting for Calidell for more than a hundred years, and yet they still made foolish mistakes. There were left-arm sweeps that were too extended and down-slices that were far too heavy.

Some had become exhausted after only half the session was done, which was not at all acceptable for an army designed for battle readiness. The men needed more discipline, less wine and fewer casual women. They needed to believe they were capable of something better. He intended to see at least some of these changes made while he was captain, assuming he survived for long enough to implement them.

Morghiad suppressed a frown. His sword tutor had repeated to him often that one could only become a master of the blade if all emotion was dispensed with. Anger was a dangerous thing; fear was only valuable before a battle and love was a severe distraction. Recreation was quite acceptable, and even necessary, but had to be pursued in moderation.

Yet this very same tutor had captained what Morghiad was fast learning was an operation consisting of contradictions. Outwardly, and when they were not at the bar or headed for the cellars, the men appeared ordered and smart in their black uniforms. Their true fighting ability was questionable.

That particular tutor and captain had lost his life in the months before at a skirmish on the northern borders of Calidell, and the discussions over who should take command had been extended. Morghiad, with his expensive training and unusual dedication, was the best swordsman and a kahr to boot, but he was hugely inexperienced and did not particularly want the post. He also knew that he would have to win the hearts of the disgruntled men who had been better-qualified to take captaincy, but his father had intervened as always. Now he had the responsibility, and there was no shifting it.

He fought off another frown, though it felt like it might turn into more of a grimace this time. A good duel would sort him right out, or perhaps a flat-out gallop across the grasslands to clear his head. He looked to his left, where Silar was happily chatting about a brunette he had met in the city – another girl who could quite possibly be the love of his life. Of course, she had not met him in the bar the previous night as she had promised.

“So you decided to bury your sorrows in the bosom of Lady Allain?” Morghiad asked.

Silar was really very smooth-featured for a man, but he managed to form those features into a passable impression of incredulity. His voice became muffled as he removed his shirt. “Morghiad, Lady Allain is very good company. You’d know that if you spoke to her privately.”

“And if I removed her robes too, no doubt?” He reached for the wooden bucket at the side of the pool and dunked it in the water.

“I just think you shouldn’t knock women until you’ve tried them. Some can be quite agreeable, really.”

Morghiad turned the bucket upside-down over his head, and relished the cold water that fell from it. He scraped his hair back, set the bucket down and wiped the remaining water from his face with both hands. “And what am I supposed to do if the King of Hirrah invades in two weeks’ time? Shall I ask him if he wouldn’t mind waiting, only my best swordsman isn’t feeling very well?”

“Second-best,” Silar said with a grin, “Besides, you can’t just avoid women while you wait around for a war to come along. What sort of life is that? And nalka only happens if you stop sleeping with them anyway!” He lifted up the bucket and commenced his own ablutions, turning his blond hair brown with the water.

Morghiad decided to scan the courtyard instead of providing argument. The sun had brought with it representatives of most sections of the castle’s population. In the northern corner, a group of linen washers scrubbed at clothing with such effort that their arms had become scarlet. Each of them wore the blue of the serving classes. To the left of

them there was a cook who manoeuvred a large, dead animal – likely a boar – onto its back and began gutting it.

In the western corner, six of the castle soldiers stood with smirks and sneers upon their faces as they regarded the three benay-gosa immediately in front of them. The women wore the standard scarves - red strips that darted about their bodies like crimson paint, and not much else. All the parts that were covered up were those that the king had reserved for himself, and each woman was very pretty indeed. Morghiad tried not to linger too long on them. He did not want to earn himself a reputation for leering.

At the southern end of the courtyard was a small gathering of noblemen and women, who chatted noisily and who had already made a start on their glasses of tanno wine. Two of the women appeared to be regarding him, or perhaps Silar. They always gazed at Silar. Morghiad wondered if he would get more attention as a blond, blue-eyed man – not that he wanted it – he could not be doing with women who fell about him everywhere he went.

He continued his visual tour of the court, and his eyes landed upon a messenger who was examining the condition of his grey-white horse. It looked to have thrown a shoe and was playing lame. Further round, at the eastern end, a group of children chased stones between the cobbles, and watching them were two, shadow-eyed waiters with red-leaf cigars in their mouths. They also wore the blue of the servants' order. Grey wisps grew from the ends of their cigars, and these meandered toward the linen washers upon invisible feet of air.

A girl rose from among those linen washers, and she possessed a mane of dark red hair that plunged down one shoulder. As she moved from the shadow of the wall and into the sunlight, that hair came ablaze to a fiery gold. The breeze whipped the hair flames across to her shoulder, and her bored expression conflicted utterly with the drama of it.

She cradled a large pile of roughly folded sheets in her arms, while her feet kicked at the blue skirt of her servant's dress as she walked. At the opposite side of the pond, she stopped and set down her washing. There was something familiar about her face, something Morghiad had seen before somewhere. He scrambled through his thoughts to find what it was, but could not settle on any explanation. He traced his eyes down her neck and to the line of her bodice. It curved in a very pleasing way before it cinched in at a narrow waist.

"*That*, I would like to see with fewer clothes on." Silar whispered. His lower jaw appeared to have lost all connection to the rest of his head.

Morghiad tried hard not to glower. "Get a hold of yourself. I thought you were deeply in love with the brunette."

"I prefer red heads. Haven't I always said that? Watch this." Silar drew himself up and folded his arms. "Excuse me, my lady?"

The girl continued with her task of soaking the linen in the pond's water, and seemed not to be aware of his voice.

Silar's mouth tightened at the corners. "GIRL!"

She jumped, eyes wide, but quickly regained her composure, if a little stiffly. "Sir... ah... my lord?"

Silar appeared to be quite pleased with her stumbling response, and himself. Though that was not unusual. "I don't think I've seen you before. What is your name, girl?"

Morghiad was unable to suppress a small, exasperated sigh.

"Artemi," the girl replied. "I have only been working here a few months, mostly in the washrooms. So yes, it is unlikely you have seen me before."

A grin spread across Silar's mouth, and he pretended to speak in private to Morghiad, though his voice was much too loud. "Named after the warrior, eh? I think we have a wit here, Kahr Morghiad." He turned his eyes back to the girl. "How would you like to dance with a real swordsman of Calidell's army this evening?"

She blinked at the mention of the kahr's name, and her eyes moved from Silar to Morghiad. She did not look away as she spat, "I would rather put my head in the jaws of a Tegrans tiger!" She gathered up the soaked sheets in haste and uttered a, "Thank you, my Lord!" before turning and stamping back to her coterie. A trail of pond water followed her there.

Silar unfolded his arms and turned to his friend. "I don't think she... can you tear your eyes off her for a moment?"

Morghiad watched her hair return to the shade before he met Silar's accusatory stare. A small smile touched Morghiad's mouth, and it soon grew into a quiet laugh.

Creases propagated along Silar's brow, which was something unusual to observe in one of his encounters with a woman, but his forehead rapidly smoothed out again. He smiled. "You like her. I can see it."

Morghiad snapped his features back into their old positions. "No."

"Yes. You've gone all watery-eyed and soft on the inside. You never smile for anyone or any thing."

"I can't *like* anyone. We've discussed this. Whichever way you look at it, someone ends up losing their life."

"How can you possibly know that? Did a seer predict it? I doubt it."

The kahr ran his hand along the smooth marble lip of the pond, and watched as the water trickled over his fingers, full of life, and fell to the ground in a dead puddle. "The minute I grow tired of a woman, she becomes part of my father's collection - then she dies. If I take a wife, she must produce an heir. We have a boy - she will die. We have a girl - the girl will be executed. I see no way around it." He could feel his temper mounting and immediately set about containing it.

Silar's voice softened slightly. "You don't know the children will be... like you. And all that is years off, besides."

"There has been no kanaala as strong in generations. I think I can be sure. Forget about her, Silar."

Silar huffed loudly and turned his eyes to the benay-gosa group. It was hard to believe that he was a lieutenant of Calidell and twenty-three, let alone a full year older than Morghiad. His views always seemed to lack any consideration for the consequences of... well... *anything*.

Morghiad collected his shirt and strode to the southern exit of the court. Several of the nobles there acknowledged him with nods or murmurs of his title, the rest simply stared. He really was in need of a good fight. He had endured enough of Silar's goading for the day, and would be forced to settle for a lesser swordsman, which meant less of a challenge. Perhaps a ride in the wilderness of Cadra's plains was called for. Tyshar could probably do with the exercise. Yes, a good ride would clear his mind of everything and remove that fire-head woman from the insides of his skull.

Silar would fall in love with every pretty girl he met. He would probably fall in love with a mop if it had breasts and a nice handle. Well, Morghiad was not at liberty to allow himself such stupidity.



Lady Aval di Certa watched the two men closely while they stripped to their waists at the fountain pond. She allowed herself a moment to appreciate their broad shoulders and hard, muscled arms. It had always been her intention to marry a diplomat or politician, as army officers had an unfortunate tendency to die before they'd reached their hundredth year. But they *were* a delight to the eyes.

The blond one was pretty, and her cousin had tasted him, according to the gossips of the town. The black-haired one, however – the kahr – *he* was exquisite, and far more so than he ought to have been.

There had to be something wrong with him somewhere - a man should not look that way unless there was something deeply wrong inside him. It was simply the balance of the world. Perhaps his occupation would give him scars in time, and roughen his crisp edges like a well-thumbed, inviting book. Both men had already collected some small scratches upon their backs and arms, but nothing was worthy of tavern banter.

Aval focussed on the water that dripped from Morghiad's hair. It trailed down his spine and to his backside. The man had an excellent backside – firm like a pair of kefruits. A woman could squeeze that all night, if she wished.

She caught herself blushing and put a hand to her hair in an effort to hide her face from the other nobles. Lady Tala was beside her, and was looking on at the same spectacle.

“What do you know about the young kahr?” Aval asked. Gossip about him had been surprisingly sparse in the time she had spent at the castle.

“Difficult to talk to. Interested in swords. Kanaala.” Tala sniffed. “Not worth chasing unless you want a short-lived decoration for a husband and a nine-year sentence.”

“Kanaala?” That was unexpected, though perhaps it did explain why few women chased him. It meant that he could manipulate Blaze Energy. He could not create it like the female witches, but he could bend it and twist it to his will. Kanaala could unpick any nasty webs left by wielders, and better still, they could neuter wielders altogether. Very useful.

She examined Tala's golden ringlets as she thought. They were always so neatly arranged; like rows of shimmering, rolling soldiers in plate. *How did she engineer them to take such shapes?*

Tala took another sip of her wine and eyed the tower guards. “Yes. The mother is well and truly dead. Boy's quite powerful – graded twelve, I understand.”

Tala did get to the point, which was an admirable quality that many lacked.

“How... entertaining,” Aval replied. *Sometimes the deadliest things were the most fun, were they not?*

Tala nodded sagely, understanding her completely, and finished her glass.



Artemi dropped the bundle of wet sheets into the drying pallet with a huff. It did seem ridiculous that she had spent hours scrubbing them with soap and hot water, only to rinse them in the same pond that sweaty men washed in. Perhaps the sweat of a nobleman was considered less polluting than that of a commoner here. Both smelled just as bad to her. *Arrogant men!*

She sighed heavily to herself; she knew very well that she had erred today. Caala had warned her to stay out of sight of the army soldiers, as they would visit the new female servants in the cellars as a form of sport. That said, they seemed to like the old servants just as well. Besides, the noblewomen behaved equally as badly. Everyone in this castle seemed to be preoccupied with sex.

Whatever happened to reading a nice book or playing a game of kernels? Of course, not many *were* able to read. She had spent two very long and very tiresome weeks teaching

Caala the basic letters and sounds. Caala was over two hundred years old and she had only just read her first word. So many imaginary worlds, together with aspects of this one, were lost to her without the ability. It was a sad thing indeed.

It was not likely the blond lord at the fountain could read more than his own name. He probably spent more of his time waving his sword about in hopes of arousing silly women. The green-eyed man, on the other hand - he had given the impression of some meagre intelligence through his reticence. That, or he was too stupid to string a sentence together. He was the kahr, after all.

The next bundle of sheets lay in front of her, menacing with their grey, beige and black threads that wove in impossible patterns. Artemi caught them up in her arms and trudged to a free washing bowl. The duties she had been charged with had to be the most boring ever created! Even so, she grit her teeth together and began scrubbing in as ill-tempered a manner as she could get away with. At least the sheets would not try to charm her with a big, shiny weapon.

Artemi worked her way through the rest of the washing allotted to her, and only finished when the sun descended behind the walls of the courtyard. The stones of the walls did glitter at her as if trying to be attractive in the wake of the sun, but there was such a great mass of them that their darkness held little hope of being anything other than oppressive. She ignored them and made to stretch her arms out above her head until the tightness within them evaporated.

The area about her was now devoid of people, bar a single guard who paced the perimeter. Everyone else had departed in search of food or other entertainments, including that blond-haired lord. He had joined his group of pointy-nosed nobles for a while, quite bare-chested, and had then moved indoors with them. Did the politics of those people affect her? The thought of it did make her shiver, and she remembered well a quote from her father's favourite book on leadership.

Power is rarely in the hands of those capable of deserving, a line in the first paragraph had declared.

She twisted her mouth at the thought of it, and made her way to the servants' chamber.

The stairs that led her there were protracted, twisted and carved from the bedrock upon which Cadra was built. Each ancient step had been worn to a dip in the middle by the many centuries of footfalls that had met with them, and in a few more decades it might have been possible to slide all the way to the bottom. The ceiling above, however, had not been so well carved, and in places it was low enough to force Artemi to stoop. Even the soldiers who visited the servants for their pleasures would have to crawl through here to reach their quarry, which did conjure amusing images.

Her hand ran along the wall as she descended, and it felt as cold and smooth as glass. The air chilled too, enough to cloak the heat that came from the stand lamps that hid

between the stones. Artemi folded her arms and thought of her father's house. Well, it was less of a house, really, and more of a glorified room. At least it had been cosier and more inviting than this *dungeon* she was expected to endure.

A feeble whiff of smoke touched her nose as she approached the main chamber. Firewood and other things that made good burning material were rare down here, and so smoke was a remarkable phenomenon. In the exceptional instances when there *were* objects to immolate, the entire population of the cellars would crowd around them as if they were a roast boar stuffed with chickens. Such bonfires also created social occasions gossipy enough to rival any noble banquet.

The tunnel opened out and widened into the main hollow of the servants' dwellings. From that long, cavernous and uneven chamber led the smaller cavities, and each of these were interconnected in a manner too complex to navigate in a single day. Each miniature chamber was a lodging of sorts, and was divided from its neighbour with smooth, mud walls and curving pillars. The network extended for a good mile underground, which Artemi had become lost in several times since her arrival.

Privacy was afforded by hanging strips of cloth over one's chamber, but if yours was poorly situated enough to be part of a main thoroughfare, there was not much point in it. There had already been a number of embarrassing situations into which Artemi had stumbled, but that was not the worst aspect of this place.

The greatest assault to the senses, and the most memorable part of it, was the noise. It was not chatter, movement, snoring, building or laughter. It was the sound of distress, of howling, whimpering, crying and moaning. At any one time, a large proportion of the servants were suffering from nalka, and it had taken Artemi days to grow tolerant of the sound. On some nights, she would be awoken by a particularly vocal casualty. Few places so barbaric could possibly have existed elsewhere in the world.

She ventured into the centre of the main chamber, where a crowd had gathered in a tight circle. There would be something entertaining burning at the centre of it - perhaps that blond man's shoes, or his smug head, if she was lucky!

Artemi was presented with just enough space to squeeze and jostle her way to the front of the group, and in the centre, enveloped in hot orange flames, was a pitch-soaked log. She had never seen anyone bring back such a treat to this place before, but the flames from it *were* wonderful. She savoured their warmth for a while, inhaled as much of the perfumed smoke as she dared, and then wove her way free of the group before she became ensnared by the mindless prattle about her.

Her hollow was deeply embedded in the network, and it would take her several minutes to reach it in the absence of obstructions. A few rays of light spilled from the chambers that were occupied, though their illumination was confusing, and they lifted the pits in the floor as if they were peaks. To the right, the toilet block had only recently been

sealed with doors, which now served to contain the worst of the smell. Artemi doubted that this work had been completed at the request of a servant.

She cut through the intervening chambers, and kept her eyes firmly on the course she intended to follow. Hand-sized holes in the ceiling brought their cold air to her, but few dared block them, as these would act as light wells in the day time. She upped her pace, and the sound of her feet scraping upon the ground set a rhythm to the curiously songful wails.

A final turn to the left brought her to her home. Its location made it marginally more private than some of the other cells, and Artemi drew a curtain across the two entrances so that she could settle into the red blanket that formed her bed. In one corner sat a foot-high, moulded fireplace, though its grating was dusty and had not seen use in any memorable time. Caala had said that the chimneys were blocked off long ago, and their openings now served simply as reminders of better days when servants had been appreciated.

Artemi's room had been occupied by a linen maid before, but she had been forced to leave when the king had placed his red scarves upon her. Benay-gosa accommodation was probably far better-appointed, though one rarely enjoyed it for long. Not if the reports about the king were true.

She loosened the lacing at the back of her blue dress and slipped it off, before diving beneath the soft wool of her red blanket. Her eyelids dropped shut, and she drifted in semi-consciousness with dreams full of scarves and tall men who smirked at her.

"Wake up!"

Was that in her head, or beyond it?

"Artemi, love. Open your bloody eyes!" Caala was standing over her with hands upon broad hips.

She pulled a grimace she hoped her friend could see. This was the night time, when people were supposed to be given the opportunity to sleep! "What is it?" she mumbled.

"What've you got yourself into, young lady? Didn't I tell you to stay out of sight of those men? You know very well what will bloody-well happen. I thought you would behave differently, but no, instead you paraded yourself around the main courtyard and decided to be *sharp* to one of them." Caala sat grumpily against the wall and drew her knees up to her chin. Her eyes were difficult to discern in the low light, and that made her age impossible to judge. Of course, she would have much the same appearance as she had at twenty-five or thirty, if perhaps a little wider.

Artemi rose and attempted to remove her hair from her cheeks where it had become stuck. "I just sai-"

"I overheard him talking about you – Lord Forllan, of all people! He said this pretty, red-headed girl had come up to him and shamed him for not doing his own washing."

"All the washing was to be done outside today. I simply... bumped into him." She tried to feign as innocent an expression as she could.

Caala took a deep breath. “Well, now you have to be on your guard. You may talk better than us, but it won’t help. He knows your blazed name and he thinks you are *spirited*.” Her mouth twisted with the last word. “What if he takes you in front of the king and he takes a shine to you? That’ll be the end of you, my girl! Bloody… bloody blazes!”

Artemi reached across to put an arm around her friend. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be careful, I promise.” She tried to smile in an encouraging manner. “Can we talk of something other than men? Do you want to do a little more reading tonight?”

Caala brightened at that, and pulled a candle out from one of her infinite pockets before going to the next chamber to collect a flame for it.

Artemi reached over to the two volumes she owned and placed her hands upon their wrinkly covers. “I think we should tackle a bit of *Achellon* tonight, don’t you? After all, it’s supposed to be where ‘The Bloody Blazes’ came from.”



Chapter 2

Silar flung open the casement of his bedroom window and peered down to the gardens below. They were not gardens designed to impress or bowl one over with colour, and very little light ever reached them in any case. They followed the same ethic as the rest of the castle - grey, dull simplicity intended to bore one into submission.

He exhaled noisily through his nose and pulled his mouth tight. At least there were women here, and they were the few flashes of beauty inside this cave of ugly darkness. Silar turned to gaze back into his rooms, and regarded the large bed that filled much of it. Four tapered spears prodded at the air above from each corner, and in the sleeping area lay a pile of rumpled sheets and pillows. He assumed his finest lazy smile as he went to one of the corner lances and leaned against it.

His eyes traced the sinuous curves and folds of the linen, and he reached out a hand to run its fingers gently between the ridges. The sheets immediately reworked their creases, and they stirred before a mess of brown curls emerged from the far end. The mess turned groggily and flopped to the pillow beneath it with a grunt.

Silar stepped softly to the side of the bed and settled himself upon the edge, then pulled some of the dark curls away from Lady Allain's face so that he could kiss her cheek. A smile touched her lips as she rose to greet him.

"Are you on duty today?" Her voice was husky and dry.

"No, but I do have many meetings, starting with King Acher. I'll be late if I don't leave soon." He moved his fingers along her collar bone and down the angled arc of her shoulder. Shoulders truly were a most satisfactory area on a woman.

"I suppose I had better get out of your bed then, and put some clothes on."

"There's really no need for clothes." Silar grinned to emphasise the point.

She pushed off the covers and swept both of her legs across his, so that he could put an arm about her and lift her to her feet. "I ought to dance with you at the next feast day," she said once he had set her down.

"I'll hold you to that, my lady."

While she sought out her clothing, he examined her backside, and then the arch of her back that led to it. He found himself swallowing air when she bent down to collect her slip, which was a terribly childish for someone as experienced as he at twenty-three years.

She was teasing him, and there was no time for any of it! He clenched his jaw, but kept his eyes right where they were.

“Do you need some help with those?” he ventured.

She said nothing, but turned halfway toward him and allowed herself a small smile. She was dark skinned, and sleek, and just about as womanly as any woman ought to be. He quite liked her bosoms, which were peculiar things the more he thought about them. Really, what purpose did they have, other than to please men? He snorted as he recalled Beetan’s short and somewhat earthy word for them: ‘norks’. *Wherever had that come from?*

She glanced at him quizzically for the noise, but soon returned to dressing herself. When she was ready, Silar went to aid her with the buttons of her yellow silk gown. He was becoming rather practised at such things now that he had bedded so many women. Some may not have approved, but they could not be expected to understand the value of what he did.

Once the lady was ready, Silar found himself a clean shirt, which smelled heavily of Cadra’s laundry soap, and saw to properly clothing himself. Within minutes, the pair of them looked almost respectable.

“Have you ever considered becoming a red head, my lady?” Silar asked, encircling his finger with a strand from her black tresses.

She frowned lightly. “Not really. Do you think it would suit me?”

He answered with a lengthy kiss, and then said, “Perhaps. Shall I see you this evening?”

“Perhaps.” She smiled and departed the room, and the only noise that followed her was the swishing of her skirt.

Silar studied his reflection in the mirror and tried very hard not to admire himself. He had not shaved, but there was not enough time to correct that now, and perhaps the king would not notice.

He buckled his sword to his waist, hauled on a pair of well-worn boots and grabbed the green and black army coat. The bedroom door slid shut in silence behind him, and his feet made almost as little noise as he strode into the hall beyond.

His coat was an item of considerable importance in spite of its unfashionability, since it denoted the rank he held in Calidell’s army, which was lieutenant. Four green stripes had been slashed across the plain black of the chest and shoulders, and it was tightly fitted enough to impress women who watched him wear it.

There were nine more lieutenants in the army, and every one was in charge of a battalion that neared a thousand men. These battalions would take daily shifts guarding the castle and city, with half of each guarding during the day and the other half at night. The responsibility of it was sometimes a burden when counted alongside his duties with women, but he was not about to cry about it.

His rank had also been a generous gift from Morghiad, who would not be best-pleased with Silar's impending delay.

When Silar reached the main doors of the Malachite Hall, he encountered two soldiers who flanked each side in their Calidellian finery, and both men raised their eyebrows at him. *How rude*, Silar thought at them.

He gave them a brief nod out of politeness, and pushed the giant doors of green stone open. The hall beyond was immense, glittering, and by Silar's reckoning, just as dimly lit as the rest of the damned pile.

His quiet steps echoed noisily as he made his way across the floor, and tried to occupy his thoughts by gazing at the chunks of polished green limestone that jutted from the walls. Their corners had been cut to simulate gemstones, though only a giant lankier than the city walls could ever hope to wear that scale of jewellery.

The cool stone beneath his boots was of black marble, interspersed with streaks of grey and flecks of white. Square, malachite-edged mirrors clung to the lower perimeter of the hall with snake-like stand lamps before them, and though these remained lit during the day, the only true light came from three glazed slits in the ceiling.

Nine men stood at one end of the hall, each of them garbed in the black and green of the army. Eight were lieutenants, and the ninth, who was taller than the others and wore a black cloak that touched the floor, was Morghiad.

Excellent! Only eight! One man was later to arrive than Silar, and by the fires, that was something of a relief!

He jogged to the group with his hand upon his hilt, and offered each man a terribly polite nod once he was close enough to smell the soap upon their clothes. Before them, and seated upon a low dais, was King Acher.

Silar offered him a special bow, and for the hundredth time, compared the man's features with those of his son. The resemblance was very slight indeed. Not only was the king shorter, brown-eyed, lump-nosed and lighter-haired, he was also much more animate. There might have been an angle both men shared in their jaw line, but Morghiad really ought to have been thankful that he took his looks from elsewhere. The women at court had long written notes between themselves about Morghiad's eyes, or his hair, or his bottom, or some such.

On one occasion, Silar had taken a fine, bright-eyed dressmaker back to his chambers, only to have her ask if she could meet 'the handsome and broody kahr'. Silar had obliged as he was, after all, an honourable friend and polite to a fault, and had then left Morghiad alone to deal with his adoring devotee. *How Morghiad had hated that! Hah!*

Riling the kahr created endless hours of entertainment, because Morghiad worked so very hard to rein in emotion keep his face free of movement you could almost see his muscles straining from the effort of it. Silar could spend days, and often did, thinking of ways to break him. Women made the man uncomfortable – that much was obvious, but Silar hoped that his kahr-captain would not think that being late for duty was another ruse.

And now, here, Morghiad's face and relaxed shoulders revealed nothing to ignorant eyes, but the whiteness of his knuckles upon his sword hilt betrayed his mood all too clearly to Silar.

Beetan was the missing lieutenant of the group. He was most likely recovering from the previous night's excesses in a ditch beyond the city.

"Women keeping you busy, eh, Lord Forllan?" bellowed the king. The sound of it echoed against the stones of the hall, and his smirk was as dirty as his thoughts.

"Er... yes. Well..." Silar drew himself straight. "Ladies are as they will do, sire." He was not sure if that made much sense, or why he had thought to say it.

"That they are indeed! Hah!" The king flicked his squint to his son. "Why don't you take the lead of your young friend here, Morghiad? Or aren't you man-enough?" Acher leaned forward, narrowing his eyes until they were no longer visible between his puffy lids. Evidently he enjoyed baiting Morghiad as much as Silar did, but Acher's jibes lacked the planning and care that Silar's held.

With measured calm, Morghiad released the hilt of his sword and clasped his hands at his back so that they were beyond sight, before he took an unnecessarily long breath. "What arrangements do we need to make for the Gialdin Feast Day?"

Gialdin Day was a celebration held to commemorate the destruction and subsequent acquisition of the small country of Gialdin eighteen years ago. It had been a wealthy place, full of charitable people who would pay for the welfare of others. Orphaned children would be housed, out-of-work men and women were given apprenticeships so that they could develop new skills, and injured nationals were given work until they recovered.

Its capital shared the country's name, and had been crowned by an ivory palace that was forged from Blaze Energy. For thousands of years it had stood, and many believed that it was indestructible, but King Acher's army had found a weakness in those walls. They had levelled it in the most ruthless of battles, and its rulers, the Jade'an family, were each dispatched by Acher's own hand at the conclusion.

Even Gialdin's most distant neighbours had reacted with horror and disgust at Acher's act, and some believed that he had destroyed a very sacred site, even if they did not care for the Jade'ans. To the king, however, it was one of his greatest accomplishments.

Acher twitched when he heard Morghiad's response, and said with an increasingly pink face, "Boy, I am going to find you a little whore if it's the last thing I do. Maybe a pretty, noble one. I don't know what it is you're so afraid of, eh?"

Morghiad allowed his shoulders to tense for a moment, but they soon loosened. "We can discuss the matter later. I am here to talk about security." His voice remained level, though the words came out slowly.

The other lieutenants shuffled their feet and fiddled with their coat buckles whilst trying to look elsewhere.

“This is security, boy – the security of our succession! It’s going to take nine years to generate an heir so you need to get started now! Now, now, NOW!” Acher punctuated each ‘now’ with a slam of his fist upon the throne’s arm. His face had darkened in those few heartbeats to a shade of plum.

“Well, it took you more than three-hundred years to procure me, so I rather think you are becoming overly anxious about the situation,” Morghiad replied.

Silar had not noticed before quite how perfectly the kahr blended in with the colour scheme of the Hall. The uniform was an intentional match, but the hair and eyes… *curious*.

Acher emitted a growl. “The women were not… suitable.” He uttered the word with a hiss. “It took me a long while to find your mother.”

“Perhaps you would have had better luck if you hadn’t persisted in executing them.” Morghiad shut his mouth before he spoke any further. It was no secret that the benay-gosa frequently rejected the king, but even alluding to it would have resulted in a headless existence for most men.

Silar re-adjusted his sword belt, fingered the buckle, tapped the hilt and chewed upon his lip. The air was growing heavy enough to make his shoulders ache.

King Acher leaned carefully back into his throne and sneered as if thinking of his next subject of execution. His eyes did not move from Morghiad throughout, then his mood brightened suddenly, and he forced a chuckle before he said, “You think their superficial lives are worth something. Don’t want the woman to die, eh? It’s inevitable, boy. And don’t forget, *you* killed your own mother. Hah! I’ll wager you’ll be avoiding battles next to try and save one of these *precious women’s* blasted husbands!”

Morghiad blinked away his fury and clenched his teeth together. “We have fought some… unnecessary battles in the last year, father.”

“Unnecessary? Unnecessary?!” Acher exclaimed with his eyes wide. “This is something all of you lads must realise.” He settled more deeply into his throne. “Have you ever noticed the difference between us and the other living things? The birds, the deer, the wolves and even the mighty plains tigers? Come on, men. No? Shoot any of them with an arrow, remove it, and they bleed and die. Chop a leg off - it doesn’t grow back. If they become diseased, they die. They are engineered to expire. Yet *they* are the superior beings. Our world is cursed. We need battles because there are too many of us, and we are crammed into our tiny countries.” Acher’s eyes became distant, unfocussed. “Death. Is. Necessary.”

Silar could not help but feel his lungs struggling to inhale the thick air about him. Perhaps someone had closed the vents. *Yes, that was it. It was just the vents.*

“If it is population that concerns you then perhaps breeding ought not to be such a high priority,” Morghiad stated matter-of-factly. “As for the Gialdin Day arrangements, I trust you will want extra men on the main gates and at the palace doors?”

Acher pressed his lips together and sighed. “Fine, fine. Which battalion will be on duty?”

“Beodrin’s. I will join him, and—”

“You will not,” Acher said. “You will be at those celebrations, meeting the people you need to meet. And bring Lord Forllan too. He is a good influence.”

Silar smiled feebly. A thin veil of guilt settled over him, and he was sure that he had woven it for himself. Had Acher always spoken to his son this way? Silar had not been party to many of their discussions, and he knew that Morghiad had been almost entirely raised by army captains, historians and strategists, so how much time father and son spent in each other’s company was a mystery to him.

Morghiad nodded with affected interest and went on to list the provisions required by the army in order to see the feast day made safe. His father nodded absently, occasionally questioning the number of arrowheads or amount of pinch poison required.

Beetan, complete with orange hair and gangly legs, turned up halfway through the meeting, and reeked very much of yesterday’s wine. Nothing was made of his less-than-salubrious entrance, and the meeting pressed on at its lethargic pace. After that, a rough schedule was drawn up and handed between the men, but was not set and signed for another three, possibly four long hours. At that point, King Acher caught himself and doubled over in pain.

“Damn nalka! Such a bloody inconvenience,” he coughed. “Still, a new lover should lessen the effect, eh lads?” The king took another deep breath. “Meeting dismissed.”

After the king had shambled away to be *treated* by his concubines, Silar caught up with Morghiad in the hallway beyond. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I hadn’t meant to be late. All that… it was my fault, I’m sorry, Morghiad.” He placed a hand tentatively on his friend’s shoulder.

“Don’t be late to anything again,” Morghiad replied. His green eyes were cold in spite of their youth. “If I am to stay captain, I’ll need your help to do it.”

“You’re right. You do need my help. You need someone to see that your father doesn’t marry you off to some lizard, or chop your head off for remaining unwed.”

Morghiad nodded, and Silar was sure he had seen a smile very nearly touch the man’s lips.

“In all seriousness, I will do everything I can to assist you, my friend,” Silar added squeezing his shoulder a little more firmly.

But Morghiad showed no more signs of gratitude, and instead they paced to the practice hall in silence. It was a chamber equally as large as the Malachite Hall, perhaps wider, and required six entrances through which to funnel nine-thousand men. Each soldier of Cadra’s army had just enough room to swing a sword, but not much more than that, and accidents were common. Especially if the men had not been attending to their own sleep.

The hall was of the same heavy-set basalt stone as the main castle, rough to the touch and dark enough to consume all warmth that might have come through the high windows. Its curved roof, gently sloping floor and walls had been acoustically engineered to channel sound from the aft to the rear, so that Morghiad barely had to raise his voice to be heard there.

The practice courtyard was an infinitely more pleasant place in Silar's opinion, but he enjoyed the daylight - apparently an opinion at odds with everyone else's in this blasted place.

Through the door, he could just make out the tables that held the blunted daggers and wooden swords for practice, and the entrance beyond that led to the changing rooms and showers. Those rooms were always inadequate, and could only ever hold two hundred men at a time. Like many of the other fighters, Silar preferred to bathe in his own rooms afterward.

Morghiad caught his arm by the sleeve before he had walked more than three paces into the hall. "Silar, I need your advice. I want to make a... considerable change to the way things are done here."

"What manner?"

"No more pinh on our blades, arrows, or any weapon for that matter." Morghiad had a determined set to his jaw, not that such an expression was unusual for him. Though his features moved little, when they did, they often gave the impression of a hammer about to strike an anvil.

In truth, it was a pointless exercise offering advice to Morghiad, even when it was asked of him. All Morghiad had done was make Silar's stomach turn. "Do you want to see your entire army annihilated? Why in blazes have you got this bullock-brained idea in your head?"

"Some of the greatest battles in history were won by legions that did not use it. Lobesia was one of those."

Silar winced. His great-grandparents had fought in that battle.

Morghiad continued, "If we all become better fighters, we won't need it. Poison causes unnecessary suffering. I think it is dishonourable. Worse, I think it reeks of a last resort made by a weak army."

He had a point, but Cadra's army had suffered its many problems for an era or more, and it had survived in spite of them. Morghiad's hopes might have held merit for storybooks, but the chances of them coming to reality were small. "These are all very noble reasons, Morghiad, but you have to look at it from the point of view of those men. How are you going to get them to believe that this is in their best interest?"

"They will see what is right." Morghiad's grass-green eyes glinted.

Silar gave a quiet grunt. "I've heard... Some of the men.... they aren't sure of you yet. Win them over first. Then maybe you can try something like this."

Morghiad's hand dropped from Silar's arm. He looked thoughtful, or as thoughtful as he ever did. "Very well." He folded his arms and pursed his lips, before he began nodding to himself as if another man had whispered in his ear. "I'll work on that first."

Silar's mouth almost fell to the floor out of astonishment. That stubborn, stone-faced kahr had listened to him? Morghiad *never* listened! He believed himself to be too serious and important for that. Something odd *was* going on with the man.

Morghiad walked on toward the front of the hall, and his bold strides ate up the floor beneath him. His cloak flowed behind in silence, with fibres that caught the light and devoured it whole. Silar was glad for the attention his friend took from the other soldiers, as it permitted him an opportunity to stroll behind and measure the reactions to their kahr-captain. And they *were* wary of him.

When Morghiad's walk was complete, he swept darkly onto a raised platform and began speaking. "The city of Cadra is suffering from a sickness and this army has played a major part in it."

That was how he intended to win them over, by telling them they were the source of all evil?! Silar felt as if he had drunk a cup of pinh with his breakfast.

Morghiad continued, "The old captain was a fool. He preached discipline, but practised none of it. He has allowed you to lose hope in your own abilities. He allowed you to lose direction. He allowed you to lose discipline."

Never mind a cup, Silar thought. A whole, blazed barrel of pinh was in his stomach!

The room had taken on the silence of a funeral march, and Silar gripped his sword hilt, ready to prevent that funeral from becoming Morghiad's.

"I do not want you to lose hope," his friend continued, "I do not want you to lose your lives. This country needs each of you to survive every battle you face. It needs you to conquer every opponent. It needs you to return to your wives and families with enough strength left to fight a dozen more battles."

Silar loosened his grip just a touch, but remained ready. It was ridiculous really. To believe he could fend off an entire army bent on murdering a kahr, but he would have attempted it. Morghiad probably had a few other supporters. Probably.

"At our last battle we suffered losses of over three-hundred men," Morghiad went on. "Forty-seven men lost limbs. Each life was valuable. Each man was someone's father, son, brother, husband or friend. The work you do in guarding Cadra and Calidell is vital. It is the single most important role anyone can play in the lives of strangers and family alike - that of protector. Calidell's people depend upon each of you for their freedom. Most are unable to defend themselves. Do not presume that each of your lives rest easily on my conscience. I do not want to lose another man in battle again."

Silar took in a measured breath, and examined the faces of the men around him. All had hard eyes that focussed only on their kahr-captain. Even in their hungover, addled and

carefree state, they listened intently. Perhaps Morghiad had a better plan than Silar had anticipated.

“You were all chosen for your ability,” Morghiad said. “You have the potential to be an excellent army, perhaps a legendary army, but there must be more discipline. Calidell needs you to be strong. There must be no drinking the night before duty. There must be no drinking before a practice session. Any man found to be flouting this rule will be discharged. There must be no more casual love. If you do intend to take a lover, then you must do so with the intention of keeping them.”

There were a few stifled chuckles across the hall, and the hard stares softened or broke.

“Any man taking more than ten days in a year from duty in order to recover from *nalka* will be discharged. If you follow these rules - if you do the right thing - in recognition of your devotion to the sword I will make you a promise. I will give you my word…” He paused for dramatic effect rather than hesitation. “…I give you my word that I will only take you to battles that you deem, by vote, to be worthy and honourable, regardless of what my father demands.”

Silar’s hand fell from the hilt of his sword. He had never heard of such an outlandish promise being made. Not only was this a direct challenge on his father’s power, but he sounded as if he were trying to turn a weapon of war into a sort of democracy. That could never work. They would think him an idiot for it!

Then again, if the army liked it… if they thought Morghiad was young enough – inexperienced enough to give them whatever they wanted, none of that would matter and he would be safe. *If* he had them…

There was noisy chatter across the hall for some time, but Silar could hear a novel tone in their voices. It was something he had not heard before, and it sounded excited.

Morghiad had not moved a hair’s breadth while the men spoke. It gave the impression that he was made of stone – steady, immovable and unfailing stone. *They would know it was an act, wouldn’t they?* “Will you follow me?” he asked.

There was a moment of silence, and then three of the officers shouted in unison, “Aye!” then more joined, and more until the sound grew into an enormous roar that rocked the floor. He had done it. *That’s it*, Silar thought, *everything is about to change*.

A half-day later, Silar found himself trudging along the perimeter of the castle gardens. The paths were formed of a pale grey gravel that crunched noisily beneath his boots, in the steady rhythm of his walking. It reminded him of a song about a lady from a Jarhoan tribe, but he cast the music out of his thoughts before it had a chance to take hold.

Silar clasped his hands tightly at his back, and ruminated while the wispy ferns brushed at his legs. This was nothing like the lush, green gardens of his home - a place that

was full of wildlife and sunlight. He missed it terribly, though he was hardly a prisoner here. He had very nearly returned home near the Southern Falls three years ago, but his abilities in planning had tied him to the city instead. Perhaps his vision had stemmed from his friendship, or the women... but it was owed predominantly to his mother.

He could not help but feel as if he had seen something of that vision that morning, though it was only a half-formed feeling. It was too much of a cliché to believe that his friend would become some sort of legendary, blazed king. Acher had already been a successful king by many measures, and it was likely that historians would one day describe the man as *great*. He had added more land to Calidell's borders in the last three centuries than any previous king had done in lengthier reigns. He had performed the impossible in razing the white walls of Gialdin, he had overseen the exile of dangerous wielders and had saved the lives of hundreds, possibly thousands of men. What could Morghiad do to top that?

No, it was far more likely that Morghiad would become a tool of the lieutenants and their soldiers, bending this way and that to please them. Perhaps he would make some steps forward, and perhaps he would open up this blasted castle to some damned light and paint it a colour other than follocking grey!

Silar kicked at the gravel path in frustration, then realised he had halted before a small rose bush that still clung to the last of its white blooms.

Morghiad really ought to have told his lieutenants what he was planning to say in that... *controversial* speech. Silar hated being left out of such matters - hated it utterly - but then, Morghiad *had* stopped to listen to his advice. Silar did have a role to play in this somewhere, but he needed to know what it would be. Perhaps the kahr-captain had been cooking up plans with him inside them - plans that he might disagree with if he knew of their nature.

Morghiad *was* ridiculously young for a captain of the capital's army, but he was not stupid by any measure. And it would not be foolish to think King Acher had placed the rank upon his son in order to cause Morghiad pain. Their meeting that morning had demonstrated Acher's quick moods, his displeasure with Morghiad's manner, and Acher *did* enjoy executions. He would never kill his own son, but Acher would not be above setting him up for embarrassment.

It left Silar with no option; he would have to interrogate his friend. *A good spymaster has to do some of the dirty work too. You must never rely solely on your network.* That was a useful gem among his mother's teachings.

Silar plucked the finest bloom from the bush and seated himself upon one of the granite benches to appraise it. Morghiad's decree would have to be followed, especially by Silar. His relationship with Lady Allain would have to be ended, and though the loss of her did not sadden him particularly, the idea of a future without the regular company of women did.

There were two options available to him now: he could either finish their affair tonight, or enjoy a final, delightful evening with her. The trouble was, if every man in the army dropped their squeeze this evening, there would be no one fighting in two weeks' time.

Morghiad had advised each lieutenant to ask their men to stagger their leave-taking to avoid this problem, but the men had been so excited at his promise that it seemed improbably probable many would demonstrate their devotion to Calidell as soon as they could. Silar could not help but find himself similarly swept along by this curious current of mock enthusiasm.

The rose felt soft in his hands, like the skin of a woman. *One more night with her.* That would be it, then he would be married to his sword like a proper warrior of the story books. He smiled at his last thought and stood to leave the gardens. The flowers' scent was far sweeter than it had been when he had arrived, the colours of the cherry blossom appeared more vivid, the grass more vibrant, and the sunlight brighter. He marched to one of the exits, and made his way rapidly toward the guest quarters.

These rooms were not much smaller than his own, with walls that were decorated with monochrome weavings of geometric patterns. There was nothing here of depictions of plants, nor animals, as if the whole castle held an aversion to living things.

A four-spear bed lounged messily in the centre of Lady Allain's chamber, and was swathed in black sheets like an overgrown soldier who had passed out on the floor. There were large windows with views of the garden, and sweeping white veils to cover them. A garderobe was situated to the right of the main door, and it contained a marble bath, a sink of similar grey and a rather stately throne of convenience.

Silar seated himself in a leather chair that had been placed next to the fireplace of onyx, and swung a leg over one of the arms. The fireplace remained empty, as the last vestiges of summer had maintained enough warmth in the chambers to preclude the need for a fire. Silar prodded idly at the empty grate with a poker while he waited, knowing that Lady Allain would soon return.

He glanced down at the white rose he had collected, and considered it while he put aside thoughts of soldiers and cunning kings. The flower was quite perfect, and he was sure that he could not find a single fault in it. Even the thorns on the stem appeared to have been stolen from an idealised painting of such a thing. Perfection taken into consideration, it would be a small token to please the lady in light of his decision.

Love making was not unlike his rose, he mused. It was sweet and perfect upon first impressions, but the pain of the thorns soon became apparent to both the gifter and the recipient. Whichever creator had thought to design lovers so that they would be punished on separation had a cruel sense of humour. Then again, it was highly probable that there was no creator, and that all the people who had been able to love freely, without fear of penalty, had died off before they were together long enough to breed.

He rubbed at the stubble on his top lip. It was beginning to itch with all of this musing.

The door swept open soundlessly to admit Lady Allain to the room. She had changed to pale green silks since the morning, and they complemented her dark skin admirably. She did not appear to be surprised at his presence in her chambers, but that was probably because he had cultivated a habit of turning up uninvited.

“My Lady Allain, you look very fine this evening,” he said. And she did. Her features were perhaps a touch bold to be feminine, but her large eyes and lips held them well. Her chin was high and her gaze piercing enough to quicken a sensible man’s heart.

A smile blossomed right through her – so strong it was evident in the reddening of her fingertips. “It’s good that you have come to visit me. I have some important business to discuss with you.” She lowered herself smoothly to the rug at his feet.

“Oh?” Silar drew the rose along the line of her jaw. He hoped to blazes she wasn’t going to talk to him about marriage.

“I wanted to speak to you about marriage.”

Follocks. This was not good, and he struggled in vain to conceal his discomfort. “I see.”

“You don’t want this. I know. I didn’t walk into this *arrangement* ignorant of your intentions.”

“Then why-?”

“I need your help. I’ll be a hundred next year and my parents are becoming anxious over my future. If they see me married to a good name like yours, they will be happy. Otherwise they’ll... *find* someone. I have no desire to own you; you would be free to take any lover you wished. Of course, I’d expect you to extend the same courtesy to me.” Her dark features had taken a downward path from their usual positions, and they appeared to lament the loss of the strength that had held them.

Silar hated seeing a woman like her upset, and he always felt as if it were somehow his fault. Usually it was. “And what if one of us wanted to marry elsewhere? Do you think such a pretence would be easy to keep from your parents? The gossip here is unmatched.”

“You? Marry for love? Hah! I’d like to meet a woman who could tame you. But you are right about gossip. Not all gossip is true though. Not all of it should be heeded. Will you at least consider my proposal?”

Silar was perfectly capable of marrying for love! But to marry now - well, this had muddled his plans considerably! “I will think on it, my lady.” He wouldn’t. “However, there is something else. Marriage discussions aside, I cannot visit you in leisure again after this evening. I have made a promise to my captain and I intend to honour it.”

She hesitated, the lines in her face deepening by the second. “Your captain? You will not lie with me because that *child* told you not to? Are you an idiot?” Her voice had risen considerably in pitch.

“I need to devote more time to my duties. I will still think about wedding you. But for now, it’s the right course.”

Lady Allain shot to her feet, hair snapping across her shoulders and eyes flashing. “Is that the best you can come up with to get out of a marriage?! Or do you have such a callous disregard for my welfare, thinking you can drop me whenever it pleases you? You shall have your wish. LEAVE!”

Silar stood slowly. “But tonight -”

“GO!” Lady Allain gesticulated wildly with a hand, and her eyes appeared to be quite ready to leave her head.

Silar slunk from the room, still holding his perfect, white rose. He had expected her to be angry about an enforced *nalka*, anyone would be angry about that, but he had not expected quite such an explosion from her. Surely she couldn’t have thought it a lie?

He hummed a quiet tune to himself to lift his mood. There was nothing more he could do now, and he had to accept that she was lost to him. A long sigh escaped him, he tucked the rose into his belt, and he tried to think of things that would remove the issue from his conscience. The grey hallways became his mood once more, and their darknesses sucked all warmth from him.

A flash of pale blue caught the corner of his eye. It was most probably another servant that had proceeded down that corridor before him on some errand or other. Though, now he thought on it, he had not seen or heard a single person cross the path in front of him when he had left Allain’s room. Silar had good ears and eyes, and there was no other way into this corridor, which either meant this servant was a ghost, or it was one who had approached from the other direction, but did not want to be seen. How very suspicious.

His forehead creased as he turned at the next junction. The tail of a blue skirt vanished behind another corner ahead of him, and he followed it with a hastening of his pace. At the next corner, he could hear the hurried steps of a woman running. No one ran here unless they had something to hide, or were in the business of stealing. He withdrew his sword and looped into a run.

It took another four turns before he caught up with the girl, who had managed to trap herself at the end of a narrow passage. She was breathing hard and her eyes were wide enough to form near-perfect circles. Silar sheathed his sword the moment he recognised the pale face and red hair that framed it, and set aside his suspicions. Pretty girls like her did not steal. Not ever. Besides, there was no golden candelabra or silver dish in her hand, only washing.

Ah, pretty girl... his mind began to think at him, but Silar put his best effort into stuffing his excitements into obscurity. He had to be on his best behaviour now he was a dedicated member of Calidell’s army.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Artemi, so will you tell me - why did you run from me? Are you afraid I’ll make you do my washing?” He permitted himself a small smile.

She glanced to the left and right, and was evidently still searching for an exit. “I… Please… Leave me alone. I’m just here to do my work. Please.” The last word sounded more like a stern demand than a plea.

Her muscles twitched in a rhythm that resembled shivering, though she should have realised she had no reason to do so. Silar moved a foot closer to her, and tried not to think about her prettiness too much.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “You’re quite a fast runner, you know. Have you considered entering The Spring Games?” Silar’s chatter did not seem to raise much of a smile in her. He stepped a touch closer, which allowed him to better observe the detail in her hair. Fiery red strands wound around deep-gold ones, threatening to burn one’s fingers and caress them simultaneously. “Has someone hurt you?”

She clutched her washing tightly to her chest. “No, I just – stay away!”

Silar took a backwards step to stand a full yard away from her, and said, “You have nothing to fear from me, girl. Is something amiss?”

Her pose only seemed to stiffen more, if such a thing were possible.

The thought crossed his mind that perhaps he smelled particularly awful today. Women were reacting to him very oddly, and he doubted very much it was his charming conversation.

Artemi maintained her silence for several more uncomfortable breaths.

“Clearly I am not helping your situation, so I will leave,” Silar said at last. “If you need me then you must call on me. In the interim…” He reached to his belt. “…will you take this?” He held out the rose with hopeful fingers. “Its odour is more pleasant than mine, at least. It is not much use to me anymore, and a pretty girl ought to have it.”

Artemi’s shoulders relaxed slowly. “That’s it?”

“Well, I’m sorry it’s not a full bouquet, but I didn’t have much time to prepare more for you.”

Her face broke into a dazzling smile, and her cheeks dimpled with it as she took the rose from his hand. “Thank you,” she said carefully. “Lord Forllan, isn’t it?”

He nodded, readying his breath to puff out his chest.

“Lord Forllan,” she began, “the rose is lovely but kindly do not approach me again. I am a very busy woman.” With that, she moved past him, the blue of her dress and gold of her hair fading into the grey murk of the halls.

Silar clasped his hands at his back and endeavoured to retrace his steps through the dim circles of candlelight. Women could be so easily charmed at times, and at others impossible. For a while he pondered over her reactions, and her curious shivering. He could not ever recall a woman *shivering* before him. The servant girl did not think him some sort of predator, surely?

No, he thought, *she could not think that of* Silar Forllan.

He definitely needed to bathe, however; a short bath, a shave and then a venture to the bar was required. Baydie's secret stock of fine wines would sort him right out before the day was done.

In his rooms, two servant men hauled a great cauldron, filled with hot water, to the bath and began pouring its steaming contents out. He would have been grateful, except one of them added the soap – the same bloody soap used by every person in the entire castle – to it before he could tell them not to. The scent of it would make his skin smell no different from any other blasted man in that place! How was he to set himself apart from them now?

One of the servants proceeded to the grate that lined one side of the wall, and poured a smaller pot of water onto the glowing coals within it. The entire solar was filled with yet more soap-scented steam.

"Thank you," Silar said through a thin smile as the men in blue departed. He then unbuckled his black coat and hauled off his boots with the weakness of a man who had just run all the way from Hirrah. The day had been an exhausting one, and it had made his shirt smell quite unsavoury. He tore it off as fast as he could, then placed his sword against the bath edge. His trousers dropped to the floor with a satisfying clink of metal buckles, and he stepped into the water. It felt gloriously hot as it drifted over his thighs in its calescent embrace.

He lifted both of his feet so that they rested at the end of the bath, and sank the rest of his body beneath the rippling surface. Whilst under there, he emptied his mind of everything – every conversation, every image and every smell that had passed before him that day.

It was during these moments that his most pressing concerns would come to the fore. All he had to do was clear his mind, and be disciplined with the matters that *were* allowed in there. He relaxed his muscles, thought only of nothing, and conjured the rose in the midst of the darkness. It floated in the space, and the petals fell from it one by one. Beyond, Lady Allain emerged from the haze. She appeared tough, resolute, and that surely meant Silar would not have to be concerned about her.

Her image drifted past him, and the mists reformed into many disparate shapes. They twisted and resolved into a thousand men in black and green coats. Some fell to their knees in pain, while others ran forward as if to attack. *No surprises there*. A third or so had fallen, and that meant he could expect a similar proportion to be out of action within ten days. He swept aside their figures, turning them into a ripple of mist.

A new character emerged, and it was Morghiad. He stood firmly upon feet made of rock; a tempest of the most violent sea storms could not have dislodged those feet. But something... something was not right. There was a weakness there that Silar could detect.

Morghiad's apparition began the basic training moves that all swordsmen learned for duelling. Each sweep of the sword was precise and efficient, and each of his steps were perfectly timed. His movements were steady and correct, but there was visible uncertainty in his features. Before Silar had an opportunity to examine his friend's face more closely, the ground beneath him split into great fissures that were filled with horrible, piercing white light.

Morghiad continued to move smoothly between the fractures, but sweat now showed upon his brow. He was *afraid*.

In an instant, he ceased the moves and looked about himself as if he had heard something. He dropped his sword to the floor and then, almost as suddenly, he evaporated. Hot fire burst across the vacuum, filling every corner of Silar's mind and making him shudder from the intensity of it. From amidst the flames, a young woman materialised, and her hair formed part of the blazes themselves.

"Blazes!" Silar erupted from the bath water, spilling it over the sides and sending droplets onto the blade of his sword. He needed to get women *out* of his head, not into its deepest recesses! The meditation had not helped at all! He grabbed a rough sponge and commenced scrubbing at his body in haste. "Bloody blazes," he muttered again.



The ceiling curved in a beige hemisphere above Artemi's head, and it often gave her the impression that she was locked inside a giant eggshell. She eyed the tiny grooves in it, and wondered which craftsman had left each mark, or how many centuries ago they had done so. The candles burned in the wall hollows about her, which provided barely enough illumination to read.

Achellon was a favourite book of hers, describing the mythical lands that had given rise to their world – lands that were a physical embodiment of Blaze Energy. Achellon was a land supposedly bathed in bright light, where no one knew pain or suffering, and where no one was another's servant. The people there had the power to manipulate the environment of this world, and could decide when to make it rain or have the earth quake. It seemed a trivial set of powers, really, since wielders were able to instigate such phenomena without much more than a sneeze.

The book *was* a welcome escape from the horrors of the cellars, and Artemi could happily remain trapped within its pages for hours. She felt at the roughness of those pages. It was hardly a high-quality copy - some of the letters had been printed at odd angles, and there were a few typographical errors here and there, but none detracted from the overall

effect. The illustrations were beautiful, simple engravings that had been coloured by hand, and they more than made up for the book's other failings.

She marked her page and closed it, running her fingers over the embossed sections of the card cover. She longed for more books to add to her collection, wonderful though this one was, she *had* read it a great many times. She placed it atop her other text: *Ebb and Flow of Noble Warfare*. That particular tome claimed some battles were more legitimate than others, and that armies would enter fights at the whim of their commanders, whose decisions were frequently made upon the basis of hysteria and public perception.

No doubt Cadra's army for Calidell was so committed and so blind, given the soldiers' preoccupation with matters that were far from political. Cadra's two news pamphlets would report the number of casualties sustained following a battle, but neither would dare to publish accounts on deserters and malcontents. Doing so would have been decidedly un-Calidellian, and Acher would have beheaded the writers before the ink was dry.

The servants' cellars were unusually quiet this evening. Some event, unknown to her, or a chance effect had quelled a large proportion of the cries. That, and a large number of them had visitors to their chambers tonight. Artemi wondered at this new tranquillity - well, relative tranquillity, and might even have begun to enjoy it if it had not been for the other noises.

The white rose that Lord Forllan had given her lay not far from her books, and it prompted the very same thoughts to return that she had put aside when she had opened her book. *What would it be like to have a lover, be married and have children?* She supposed these things would happen to her one day, though not with a blond-haired, gurning swordsman and lord. Either way, she certainly did not intend to wash linen for the next thousand years.

The idea of sex did bring fearful thoughts as companions, as she was too young to be expected to endure *nalka*, and that would not be improved by any feelings she had for the man involved. She had heard tales of both men and women her age dying horribly after being separated from their lovers too soon, and once, she had even seen a dead body.

Still, she considered herself a little more educated than the average servant of eighteen years, and she understood the workings of *nalka*. By rote, she knew of the six levels of pleasure and the mating bond it produced. She knew that sensations during love-making were shared, and she knew that the bond had to be maintained for nine years before a child could be produced.

It was a wonder that any children were produced at all in this situation - however was a woman to put up with the same man clambering into her bed every fortnight for nine years? Her mother might have managed it once, but it had not ended well, in spite of best hopes. Then there was the matter of battle - how was it that a single battle had not wiped them all out by now?

A noise from the next chamber broke her flow of thought. Galabril evidently had a guest with her, and that usually meant Artemi would be forced to listen to them both all night. Wonderful. She pulled her red blanket over her head and wedged an arm over each ear, but the sound still seemed to work its way through. Soldiers of legend could supposedly fight after a month of going without sleep, but Artemi did not think she could bear a second night of it. She cursed, and squeezed her eyes shut in the hope that doing so would affect the noise. It did not.

Instead, she sat up and attempted to *embrace* the noises they were making, but that only made her feel unwell. It was too cold to go for a wander outside, and the candles about her seemed to wave in amusement at her predicament. She grabbed one and tried to distract herself with the melted wax by dripping it onto the floor until it made attractive shapes.

Another breathy gasp wafted in from the proximate chamber.

Artemi set the candle down in its slowly hardening puddle, and knelt before it. She had seen lovers writhing atop one another many times in the cellars, but she had never really studied them. She ought not to, really, since it was *their* business, after all, but then again, the sound was in *her* chamber and *her* ears. She had not asked them to do what they were doing, and it was not perverse to investigate sounds that invaded *her* space.

She blew out all of her candles, leaned forward, and placed her hands on the hard mud floor to crawl toward the edge of the ragged curtain. Once there, she lowered her chin to the ground and peered underneath the edge. A black bed roll was immediately visible, its surface pitted with age. The toes of a female foot flexed away on top of it, curling like the tendrils of red ivy as they clasped and unclasped at the surface beneath.

Artemi's eyes followed the top of the foot along its parent leg, until she reached the knee, which was too high behind the curtain to be visible. Below where it should have been, she could see the lower part of the thighs of a man, and his knees dug into the mat beneath as he moved.

She swallowed, knowing she was doing something quite unacceptable, but Artemi squashed her right cheek against the ground and adjusted her angle to gain a better view anyway.

She could see the man's hips now, insisting upon Galabril's, and the pair moved against one another with the slightest asynchronicity. Galabril's arms were gently wrapped about her partner, and the weight of his upper body rested upon her breasts, forcing them to swell outwards. The woman's face, and the expression it held, was hidden behind her lover's. All Artemi could make of his features was a mass of twisted, brown hair. From the muscles that twisted about his arms, he was probably a soldier.

She watched them for what seemed to be a few more minutes, but was probably another hour, and fell asleep halfway through.

The pair progressed through two levels as she watched, stopping to breathe through each moment of ecstasy. Finally, their movements were reduced to almost imperceptible displacements, and they appeared afraid to stir too far from the position they held. At the last moment, Galabril stifled a scream, sending Artemi reeling to the wall of her chamber at the suddenness of it. The squeal that escaped Galabril did not sound right, or sane, and surely women were not supposed to make that noise?

But Artemi took a deep breath, and resumed her spying posture to make sure nothing was amiss. The pair were still lying with legs intertwined, breathing hard, but relaxed. They would not part until their bond was complete.

Artemi shifted quietly to the bedroll and pulled the red blanket over her legs. Her cheeks had flushed, and the first bloom of guilt was swelling in her gut. She really should not have been watching, but the sight had made her skin prickle and her head hot. Artemi placed a hand at the top of her thigh, and tested the heat with her fingers, but she whipped them away in an instant. *She was not going to be a victim of lust, and she would not give in to things that would get her killed!*

Sleep eluded Artemi while she attempted to push her mind into behaving, but when slumber finally came to enfold her in darkness, she was so exhausted that nothing could have prevented it. A stampede of warhorses hammering through the caverns could not have disturbed her.



The fresh shirt supply was becoming dangerously, fatally short.

Silar slammed the wardrobe door with a growl, and shrugged into his clothing with a grimace and a grunt. It was the best he could hope for to do some light drinking, and perhaps end the day on a good note.

Boots on, he stamped out of the room and down a narrow corridor to the left. It branched off in several directions along the way, and undulated with steps that seemed to follow impossible directions. Finally, after descending a particularly pitched set of stairs, Silar arrived at the entrance to the castle's tavern. Much like the great halls, it was oversized, and designed to cater for more people than he dared to count. A polished, wooden bar ran down the centre of most of the length of the room, surrounded by swarms of serving women who hurried to and from the barrel taps without pause.

Few men attended the bar in their uniform, but Silar supposed that half were from the Cadran Army for Calidell. The other half was made up of noblemen and women, merchants, travellers and people of the city. His eyes scanned the throng for faces he

recognised. Beetan and Beodrin were there, of course, though they rarely missed an opportunity for drinking. Rahake and Tortrix were the only other lieutenants whom Silar could identify.

He recognised several of the soldiers in and around them, and could hear the tones of excitement in their voices. There could be no doubt they were talking of the events in the practice hall earlier.

Silar pushed gently through the crowd until he reached Rahake, who was ordering in the ales for his companions.

“One for you, Forllan?” the dark man asked.

“Aye, if you will.”

“Pint of your best for the young lad, here.” Rahake placed two bronze coins onto the bar.

The barmaid swept them away with practised ease, and hurried to the barrels without offering the men the smallest of smiles.

Rahake appraised Silar with obvious curiosity in his eyes. Those *were* dark eyes, dark enough to match the man’s ebony skin, and though his build was narrower than Silar’s, he still had the shape of a good swordsman. Silar often felt like an ignorant child around him, which was quite an unusual experience. None he had met truly knew how old Rahake was, but it was claimed he had seen over three-hundred battles in his time.

“Your friend made quite a bold move today,” Rahake said, his deep eyes unblinking.

Silar adjusted his sword belt, and put an elbow on the bar. “Yes. It was certainly bold. Don’t ask me about the ins and outs of it. I wasn’t given any warning. What do you think about his changes?”

Rahake looked down at the collection of drinks before him and frowned. “Some here may think him naïve; I think he has done a wonderful thing for us. I have fought enough futile battles to know that kings don’t always choose the right enemy. Acher will put a stop to it when he hears, of course, but Mor’s effort will be appreciated among the men. As for his ideas on discipline, I am glad I do not have practice or duty tomorrow.” He gave Silar a sly wink and took a deep swig of his ale.

The barmaid plopped a full tankard in front of Silar, and did it so roughly that some of the head spilled onto the bar. He muttered his thanks and took up the drink, glugging it greedily to cool his hot throat.

“Looks like you needed that, my lord.” Rahake nudged him playfully.

“Like you won’t believe.” Silar took another gulp. “You’re lucky you don’t have to deal with women. They offer you so much, tease you with their beauty and then beat you into the floor until you wish you were a squirrel.”

“A squirrel?” Rahake raised his eyebrows. “Makes sense, I suppose, if you like trees. Yes, women have never appealed to me all that much. Some are nice to look at, I’ll grant you. But I’d prefer a good set of broad shoulders any day.” He gave Silar another wink.

Silar found it quite odd to be admired by a man, but then he ought not to be surprised, given his own good looks. Rahake had always been openly interested in men, and he held a particular taste for the fair-haired ones. Silar rolled his eyes, as it was the best response he could conjure after such a tiring day, and invited Rahake to join him with the other lieutenants.

“Aaah, more beer! That’s what I like to see.” Beodrin clutched at the tankard he was given with unbridled glee.

Tortrix took his with a little more reverence; it was his battalion’s turn to guard the day after tomorrow, and now all sorts of good behaviours were expected of him. Tortrix was a quiet man and a brilliant fighter – lightning fast – he was not tall, but the shadow he cast made him appear a giant to everyone, especially the new recruits.

Beetan took his ale in turn, and then pulled a face, “Pfft! This head is far too big! You may be old and wise but you’ve been cheated again, Rahake.”

Rahake chuckled into his pint.

“Last drink before the big sober-up, lads,” Beodrin said solemnly.

“To the great, big sobering-up of Calidell’s army!” Rahake held up his tankard.

“I’ll drink to that!” Beodrin laughed and joined him. Beetan, Tortrix and Silar raised their mugs as well, making a satisfying chink as they hit each other. So it was true - they all thought it a joke. Morghiad, their child kahr-captain, had brought in his new rules and they planned to follow them only in jest. *Did he understand that was how they thought of him?*

Silar downed the remains of his pint, but soon realised that he needed another. The rest of the men would want a top-up too, so he scrabbled around in the bottom of his pockets and made his way back to the bar. The crowd seemed to have thickened in the few minutes since he had last passed through, which forced him to elbow the obstructing bodies from his path. As they cleared, a dark and solitary figure became apparent.

Morghiad.

He was standing at the bar, nursing a mug of wine and listening with some considerable disinterest to the proprietor.

Baydie thumped his fist on the wood and laughed aloud at something. Clearly he had not heard about Morghiad’s plan and its inevitable impact on beer sales. “...And then she fell on her arse!” Baydie finished with a flourish of his pudgy hands.

Morghiad retained his usual expression when the punch line came. It was a face of impassive stone that was simply unnecessary at times.

Baydie glanced away from his unappreciative audience to Silar. “Ah, Lord Forllan. Good to see you! One of these days my stories will bring a smile out in our kahr’s face. One bloody day.”

“Keep trying, and write it on a banner when you have succeeded,” Silar replied with a grin.

“Wine? I’ve got some filthy stuff from Hirrah. Top notch.” Baydie wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

“How could I refuse? A mug of your finest for me and four pints of ale for the others.” Silar leaned on the bar opposite Morghiad and gave him a long, hard stare before speaking. “How are you feeling after your big speech?”

Morghiad held his gaze for a moment, and then looked down at his wine. “I didn’t forewarn you. I’m sorry.”

Silar grunted. “How long had you been cooking this up for?”

“Not long. A couple of days.”

A band began playing their lively music at the opposite end of the bar.

Silar very nearly knocked over the drinks that Baydie was stacking up in front of him. “A couple of days?! Is that how you’re planning to govern your country? You just come up with an idea one minute and decide to execute it the next?” Perhaps Morghiad was not as clever, nor strategically minded as Silar had hoped.

“It felt right.” Morghiad took a sip of his wine.

Silar emptied his coins onto the bar surface and pushed them in Baydie’s direction. He kept his voice low. “I’m concerned for you. Is there something else wrong?”

“No.” Morghiad met his eyes.

“Not that you’d tell me if there was.” Silar picked up his own wine and took a deep draught. It *was* excellent stuff. Baydie could always be relied upon for under-the-counter fine wines, usually illicitly imported from Hirrah. That country made terrible people, but excellent grapes.

Morghiad seemed to hesitate before opening his mouth. There *was* something on his mind. “You have parted ways with Lady Allain?” he asked.

“How’d you guess?”

“That foul look on your face,” Morghiad said.

Silar laughed a little before letting his smile fade. Did he really appear to be that sullen? Blazes!

Morghiad pressed on, “...And of course you wouldn’t be here otherwise. I imagine you would have savoured what time you could with her.”

Damned man was trying to predict his actions. Silar was supposed to be the one extracting information! He had a small clue at least. Morghiad had deflected his question with one about Lady Allain, and that meant a chain of thought in the kahr’s mind had made the connection with the answer. What were the options?

The Allain family could be making trouble, or perhaps Acher’s pressure over his lack of a female companion had become too burdensome. That could be it, though his father’s demands had never worried Morghiad before. Silar could try women as a general subject - that would be a good opening gambit. “Women can be a thorn in one’s side, can they not?”

Morghiad set his mug down. “Stop trying to probe me. I know your methods.”

Beetan chimed in at that moment, grabbing Silar’s shoulder, “Rahake’ll give you a good probing if you ask him nicely! Thanks for the ale, my lord.” The orange-haired man appeared more than pleased with himself. “And an excellent speech today, lord-captain.”

Morghiad responded with a nod as Beetan took up the four beers and transported them back to his group, swaying a little as he went.

“Morghiad. I think about a third of your army is going to be out of action in ten days’ time.”

The kahr’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “Then we had better be prepared. I had not expected so many of them to take it seriously.”

“That is the…” But Silar decided not to finish. He would tell Morghiad that his soldiers all mocked him behind his back another time. “I will be one of those off-duty,” Silar added.

Morghiad returned to his drink. “I need that brain of yours, Silar. Make sure you’re not out for too long.”

So Morghiad *did* have plans which involved him after all! He knew it! His elation was short-lived, however. A headache was beginning to form from all this puzzling and strangeness, and now not even the drink was helping it.



Chapter 3

Rain slicked the deep green stone of the city, and further darkened the spine-towers of the castle. It hammered down upon the rooftops, it cascaded from the grooves in the tiling, and it trickled down the sides of the light wells. It pelted the glass of Morghiad's window, and it gave his eyes no choice but to focus on the gloom of the low-hanging clouds outside.

He had become so easily distracted in the last few days. Focussing on a particular task had been a struggle of will, and maintaining any sort of control over his emotions had been... *challenging*. The environment around him felt disrupted somehow, as if there were a break in the air or earth that he could not see.

He closed his eyes and tried to feel for all the streams that were derived from the vast, central torrent of Blaze Energy. His senses found thousands of them, and he knew that each stream represented a wielder somewhere in the world. Some were small rivulets, and those women would barely draw anything from The Blazes, but most were brooks that trickled steadily.

There were, however, three very large courses that emanated from the main. Morghiad was confident he was powerful enough to handle the fire of each of the women they represented, but one particular river gave him cause for concern. It was the fourth-largest now, but he had observed it during his time training as kanaala, and had noted the speed of its growth with each month that passed. It was a hard thing to admit, but he feared how much stronger the current of that river might become.

Cadra and its nation of Calidell were safe from these women of course, as Acher had long ago banned wielders from entering the country. Any that were born locally were destroyed before they could cause harm to their families, or more typically their lovers, but the most dangerous were those that were not even aware of what they could do.

As kanaala, Morghiad was part of a team that regularly swept Cadra in search of wielders who may have slipped through previous searches. They were easily detectable within a few tens of yards to him, farther if they were particularly powerful. He did not relish taking the children, however, and there had been some difficult situations involving the youngest ones and their families.

He had not sensed any in the city for months now, and perhaps it meant the efforts of the last few-hundred years were finally paying off. The blazed women and their bloodlines were probably dying out - not counting himself, of course.

Morghiad scanned along the bookshelf to his right for some entertainment to lighten his mood. He had collected many on battles - not terribly exciting to read but quite important, given his new role. He enjoyed the political histories more, and especially those that described the impossible decisions made by former kings. Frequently, the outcome was down to luck or situation rather than their skilful brand of leadership, or at least that was how he interpreted it.

His favourites by far were the stories and poems of legendary warriors. He had amassed quite a trove of those over the years. Some were utter fiction, of course, but some, he believed, had a true root in history. A red, leather-bound tome with a dull shine drew his gaze. It was perhaps a thousand years old, the pages were flaking at the edges, and the whole thing was considerably foxed.

Once he had dragged it off the shelf, he settled into his armchair and spread the book across his lap. The title read, "Chronicles of the Warrior, Artemi," in heavily stylised and embossed gold lettering.

It was a classic that Morghiad imagined most people had read during their childhoods. A great deal of it was poetry about the red-haired swordswoman and her exploits, and the tale had made the name popular amongst parents of lookalike offspring. That pretty, young servant girl was yet another named after her in the romantic fashion. Morghiad pushed the image of *that flaming hair girl*, as he had come to call her, from his mind again. It was becoming troublesome in the midst of enough distractions.

He let out a heavy breath through his nose and allowed the book to fall open on a page by chance.

*"...And taking up the blade from her thrice-made enemy,
The lady cast Blaze upon the brown-haired head,
Blue and white and blistering as ice,
It curled, tapered and began the air to splice,
The fires of Achellon had never wrought such heresy,
Yet still her foe re-stood, and staggered, called and bled,
'You shall not defeat me out of jealousy!'
Still moving, Mirel caged up the fires and said:
'Come here and die today, my Artemi,
I bring to you your destiny...'"*

Morghiad had never quite been able to work out where jealousy came into it, or why a character such as Mirel would have believed anyone to be envious of her. He flicked through a few more pages, but examined little more than the pictures. Cadra was in one of them, appearing a bit smaller and flatter. Grey, defensive walls still prodded the clouds in an accusatory manner with their great height, but there was far less mess within them.

He snapped the book shut, and winced as soon as he remembered its age. *That red-haired girl in blue...* He wondered what she would look like in full battle garb, sitting astride a warhorse and shouting threats at her enemies.

No.

Morghiad stood and placed the text back in its gap, and did his level best to think very hard about other things. A practice session was scheduled for the day and he ought to get ready for it, though there was a good chance the session would be unattended. He would just have to grit his teeth together and work through it, even if he was alone in that vast place.

His clothing was only a simple white shirt and fitted trousers, which was not the standard uniform of the army, but his had become lost somewhere in the laundries. He buckled his sword to his waist, added a short sword to the belt and placed a dagger in the tops of each of his boots.

Morghiad departed the cool airs of his solar and stepped into the icy airs of the broad hallway beyond. The door whined as it shut behind him, and he had to admit that he appreciated the sound. Such things would give him warning if an assassin came for him in the night, which would not be at all unexpected for a kahr, and especially not a captain of the army.

The gallery that gave access to his rooms was broad, equally as high as the Malachite Hall and simply decorated. He remembered the day he had arrived here as a young boy, thinking everything had been constructed by a giant, for a giant. His father had seemed a giant then, when Morghiad had been no more than four.

It was not customary, or safe, for Calidellian kahrs to grow up in the castle, and so he had spent his first years secreted away on a farm in western Calidell. Morghiad often wished that he could remember his time there, as he had so often been told those were golden years.

When he reached the practice hall, it was evident that Silar's prediction was correct. The grand room truly *was* emptier by a full third, and Morghiad watched in contemplative silence as the lieutenants gathered roll calls from the sergeants. Silar was there too, seeming quite devoid of his usual grins or good humour. He was probably ten days into abstinence now, and clearly had begun to feel the first pains.

"How many present, Silar?" Morghiad asked as he drew closer.

"Six hundred and fifty-five, my kahr-captain." Silar barely squeezed the words out.

"Very good. Now you must leave."

Silar grimaced with disappointment. "I am still perfectly capable of swinging a sword -"

"You are no use to me like this. Go, and I'll see you in a few days." Morghiad took the papers from Silar's hand. "I'll look after your men."

There was a brief pout, but Silar nodded and withdrew to the rear of the hall. He sat on one of the tables for a moment, apparently examining the ceiling, and then staggered out of the room clutching his gut.

After that, Rahake, Beetan, Hunsar and Beodrin circled Morghiad to inform him of their counts, and then broke away to their men. Next, Tortrix, Pavon, Baculo, and Eupith handed their numbers to Morghiad. Five thousand, seven hundred and forty-six men had made it in. Another seven hundred and three made up Luna's battalion, which was defending the city today. Only two were suspected of taking time off to recover from a hangover, and that was not too bad a start. Exactly a third were suffering *nalka* as Silar had predicted. That man *did* have a knack of divining useful information from complicated situations.

Morghiad placed the rolls at the back of the platform for later filing, and called his army to attention.

"I am honoured that so many of you have chosen to devote yourselves fully to defending our city of Cadra and its nation of Calidell. As your absent brothers will be very much aware, becoming a world-renowned army does not come easily. It will be a tough haul to become what we must, but every one of you knows that the payoff will be worth it. I intend to work you hard today. Be strong. This country depends upon your strength." Morghiad always felt slightly ridiculous doing these speeches. He was never quite sure if he had been overdramatic with his choice of words, but it seemed to be the sort of thing men said in the histories he had read. Though his tutor and former captain had been wrong about so much, he *had* been right about the advantages of speaking with ostensible conviction.

"We'll begin with one-on-two duelling. I will lead Lord Forllan's battalion."

Morghiad went directly to Silar's men to begin directing the fight. He slid his sword from the scabbard, and signalled for the two soldiers closest to him to approach. They came toward him steadily, and unsheathed their shining, wheel-sharp weapons. Behind them, the rest of the battalion busily organised itself into groups of three.

"You will be our enemy." Morghiad nodded toward the taller man. He had a narrow face and beady eyes that would look shifty in most situations, while the smaller man had something of a paunch but looked to be well-muscled in his arms in spite of it. To add to the roundedness of his appearance, he had also shaved his head.

Morghiad threw his sword into his left hand as the smaller man took up the position on his right. "Begin."

Narrow-face came forward at Morghiad with a diagonal cut. Morghiad parried with ease, but did not attack, and instead left it to his new ally to do so. Bald-head moved like a snake, and made a bold strike across the neck of his opponent's blade. But Narrow-face re-directed it and began a bout of counter attacks, leaving Morghiad to interrupt them with a half feint and a series of down slices.

The three men whirled about each other, swords whipping through the air with the noise of singing steel and edges that scraped along one another. It rapidly became evident to Morghiad that he would have to fight a greater battle with his own frustration while this one went on, as there was little challenge in it for him. At least he was beginning to work up a good sweat from it, and such small achievements had to be appreciated.



There were drips of rain falling in Artemi's chamber that morning, and they were coming through the light well. They landed with a dull 'flup' sound as they hit the floor, though they did appear to be rather pretty as they descended through the light. She had never examined gemstones before, but she had been told that they glittered as rain would in the sun. She caught one before it hit the ground and examined it in her hand.

In truth, the water was terribly dirty, but perhaps that was to be expected when it had trickled several leagues from the surface to the cellars below. Rain would have been the only manner by which those wells were cleaned.

Artemi grimaced, shook the water from her hand, and continued to ready herself for the next round of duty. *Another day of scrubbing the sheets of ungrateful nobles.* She could hardly wait to begin.

She tightened the laces of her bodice and attempted to tie them off at the base of her spine, but just as she had entangled her own fingers for the second time, Caala came bustling in.

"Artemi, lass. I need you to cover my duties for today. Don't worry yourself about your usual work – everyone in the laundry will be working their stockings off making up for everyone else's absence, so you will be the least of their worries. Feodora has taken ill with another case of blazed *nalka* too, and I have to do her bloody shift for the king, so will you see to the kahr's bed linen for me?"

Artemi unhooked her hands from the loops at her back. "I thought you told me to stay away from his sort."

Caala smiled and began to adjust Artemi's lacing without so much as a warning. "Morghiad's a funny lad. Let us just say... I don't think he's a threat to you, though I daresay a pretty girl like you might turn him!" She punctuated her quip with a sharp tug on Artemi's lacing. "In any case, he'll be practicing killing people all day so you won't see him."

Artemi raised her eyebrows. "Alright then. I'll see to the 'funny lad' for you."

Caala went on, “Do you know where his rooms are? Just head to the guest apartments and turn left at that bloody big moth. You’ll enter an even bigger hallway with white marble floors. His room is on the left.”

A thought occurred to Artemi. “Are the king’s rooms nearby?”

“No. But watch out for him anyway.” Caala finished tying Artemi’s laces with a swift yank.

“I’ll be on the lookout for bearded monsters,” Artemi said with a grin.

The hallway outside Kahr Morghiad’s rooms was clean-aired and smooth-surfaced. Artemi examined the marble floor as she walked over reflections of herself in it. Blazes, but it appeared to have gemstones lodged inside it! And they did indeed look like glinting droplets of water, or jewels sewn into a noblewoman’s gown. If only she could have been permitted to cut a small section to take back to her chamber with her. She *did* like shining things.

Unfortunately for Artemi, there was work to do, and a woman could not spend all day looking at floors. Bloody light, just how many sheets did this man *have*? Was it really a job that would take up her entire day and preclude her from completing any other duties?

She knocked once upon his door, then pushed against the heavy wood until it gave way with a squeak.

His chambers were sparse, and in keeping with the rest of the castle, too grey to carry much of colour or excitement. Three ivory veils had been draped across the windows, though Caala had not mentioned if Artemi was expected to wash those as well.

Beyond the solar, a wide bed dominated one end of the bedchamber, and its black, wooden spears almost brushed the ceiling. With no one watching her, Artemi allowed herself to stroke the wood. It was so dense, so cold to the touch and so highly polished that it felt almost as if it were made of stone. A grand fireplace stood opposite, apparently carved from a single piece of silvery-grey granite.

She approached it and ran her fingers along its fierce angles. The stripes of quartz in it tugged at her fingertips, while the rest felt gloriously smooth. Its height reached well above her head, and she could easily have stood inside it as she could stand in her own room.

The fireplace was matched by the one in the solar, and to one side of it was a brown leather chair, but the worn nature of its arms and back made it jar with the rest of the scene. Her attention was soon stolen from it when she saw the objects that lay behind: *books. Hundreds of them!*

They rested upon broad shelves that spanned the entire width of the solar – from door to window, and she was sure that she had never seen so many of them in a single person’s room before.

Artemi stepped toward them, and sniffed at them carefully to test their expensive scents. Their aged spines teased her with promises of their forbidden content while she

inhaled. All of the texts were bound in leather or hide, and *all* were good quality. Some must have been older even than the Era of Floods - what a treat it would be to be allowed to touch them - to read the stories from their pages!

She sighed and pulled her fingers through her hair to prevent them from touching Kahr Idiot's library. A few stories would not be worth losing her employment or pay over.

Artemi made her reluctant way back to the fine bed and gazed over the pure, white sheets. They looked like soft clouds, loosely held atop a floating shelf. This was no cellar bedroll and red blanket, and she closed her eyes to listen. She could not hear a sound, only perfect and uninterrupted silence. What wonderful tranquillity the nobles could enjoy! Artemi stamped down on the growing feelings of envy, or tried to, and began to strip the sheets.



His shirt was slashed-through and dripping with sweat, and the hilt had begun to slip in his grip. His eyes stung, and his breath came rapidly. Finally, Morghiad felt as if he had enjoyed an excellent session. He had left the other men practising the basic forms some time ago, and had chosen ten good fighters to take on. The battle had begun fluidly, he had met each assault with very little difficulty, but some of the other soldiers had taken it upon themselves to join without invitation.

At first, they had entered in jest, hoping their growing numbers would overwhelm him and provide amusement for everyone there, but their faces had quickly become earnest. The space around him was limited, and only so many could ever attack at once, which was an aspect of the situation that Morghiad had fully exploited.

The speed and intensity of the fight had the blood thundering through his veins and his heart punching at his ribs to keep up with it all, but he felt *alive*. Morghiad leapt past the shoulders of two fighters, and quite by chance caught sight of the men around. They had ceased practising the forms without his order. Perhaps his fears were beginning to manifest, and perhaps now they would show him how little respect they truly held for him and his new rules. Morghiad steeled himself for a difficult situation. He had some words prepared, and a stern tone to add to his voice, but not much else.

"Enough!" He sheathed his sword and made sure that his eyes moved across everyone in the immediate vicinity. "I see that practice has ended for the day. We'll finish early then." He would give before they took. "Be off with you." They stood around gawping at him. Had he grown horns? "What?"

Tortrix marched to him, red-faced and perspiring heavily. “No one,” he breathed, “Has done THAT before.”

Morghiad shifted his shoulders, but tried not to shuffle his feet in his boots. “Just having a bit of fun, Tor. Let’s get this hall cleared out.” He did not want people goggling any longer than they should.

The older man blinked and flicked his eyes to the side while his lips formed a half smile. “A bit of fun. I see. Well, kahr-captain, it’s not often we observe the sort of ‘fun’ of one young man facing thirty experienced swords.” Tortrix shook his head and clambered onto the platform. “Home time! Shift your backsides! Now!”

The army began the slow process of draining from the practice hall, and Morghiad tried to wipe some of the sweat from his eyes, but only succeeded in further suffusing them. The shirt was irrecoverable, but at least it was not covered in his blood this time. There had been some embarrassing walks back to his room in the past.

The six thousand soldiers took an age to disperse while they gossiped like court ladies, but once they had vanished through the great doors, Morghiad was free to make his way directly to the dark arches of the lower castle. The day’s rain had seeped into the very rock of the building, and it had wetted the walls and ceilings until they glistened in places.

There were scents of moist earth and burning lamp oil down here, and the chill of the lower hallways began to dig into his damp skin, which only made him quicken his pace. The gardens were close, and he fully intended to take advantage of air that did not smell of sweat or caves. Besides, the gardens could look rather attractive at this time of the year with their perfect lines and sensible colours.

Morghiad stepped into the cloisters that lined one edge of the Square Garden, and inhaled its fresh air deeply. It was sweet, warm, and sharp from the tang of the wet vegetation around him. He watched on as the rain began to thicken, until it beat down faster and harder upon the buckling plants beneath, and then he stepped out into the cascades.

He closed his eyes and raised his face to the clouds. As if reacting to his presence, the rain thundered down at an even wilder rate. It washed through his shirt and over his body, and it carried some of the warmth of summer along with it. Morghiad allowed the downpour to soak through every bit of clothing he had on, until he noticed his boots were filling up like buckets round his calves. That was *not* such a pleasant sensation, and so he lingered for only a heartbeat longer in the warmth of the shower, then returned to the shelter of the cloisters and removed each item of footwear to upend it.

In boots that squelched noisily with each step, he went directly to his rooms. With luck, the trail of water he left behind him would evaporate before some unfortunate servant would have to trouble themselves over it. There were really too many servants in this castle, always fussing over this and that. They had fussed a great deal over him at one

time, and the female ones had been the worst at it, believing him to be in need of a mother. Thankfully, they had soon learned he was perfectly capable of looking after himself.

Leonor had been the closest to a true mother for him, though he often wondered if female servants liked to mother every motherless child they happened upon, and it was simply a part of their nature rather than any particular need he had shown. Leonor and Ilena. Both mothers to him. Both gone, both missed.

Morghiad had not been told much about his real mother, other than that he had inherited her hair and eyes. Her name had been Tylena, and asking his father about her tended to make the king angry.

His boots were squelching more quietly now, which made him feel a touch less self-conscious. There were soldiers and servants everywhere, and all of them would hold an opinion on it.

Morghiad arrived at his chamber door and pushed it open. A red-haired woman stood before him, and her deep brown eyes were wide, blinking.

“Oh,” was all he managed to say to her.

Artemi didn’t move, though perhaps it was because of her servant’s dress. It appeared to be significantly tighter than it had been the last time they met, though that was truly not a matter he should have been considering.

Morghiad remained in front of the closing door like a sack of tanno fruit, and a drenched sack at that, with no idea of what to do next.

But Artemi was the first to form a full sentence. “I was just... er... your bed sheets. They... um... Caala had to do someone else’s so I... I’ll be done shortly, my lord - kahr.” She made an awkward curtsy and began folding one of the sheets she had stripped from his bed in the chamber. It was peculiar, he thought, that she had chosen to fold it in his solar, rather than at the bed.

Morghiad continued watching her to make sure she was not up to mischief, though he soon realised he was staring in a very impolite manner. Had he stared for long enough for it to be considered rude? He regarded the floor in front of her for a moment, just in case.

But Artemi had ceased folding and was eyeing him carefully. “Forgive me, would I find your... er... my kahr’s bed sheets in the wardrobe?”

Morghiad felt his cheeks redden before he could prevent it. And why did people have to call him ‘my lord’ or ‘my kahr’ all the time? They may have been titles used for him since he had been small, but they still sounded ridiculous when he had done so little to earn them. “Yes, of course,” he said, before he unbelted his swords, seated himself in the armchair and tried to relax into it. Only then did he recognise he must have looked like one of Cadra’s transients with his cut shirt and dripping clothing.

Artemi walked to the wardrobe and opened it in a single, elegant movement. Her waist was really very small, and would probably fit into the crook of one his arms if he tried to place it there.

Morghiad moved his gaze hastily to the windows, knowing that he was staring again. She might have been up to no good before he had arrived, but what if she were innocent? What would she think of his lingering eyes?

Perhaps he ought to leaf through a book, he thought, and he yanked the closest one from the shelf behind him to balance upon the arm of the chair.

“That manner of reading is why the arms are so worn?” Artemi smiled as she unfolded the new sheet to take to the chamber. *She was smiling. At him.*

Morghiad glanced down at the leather under the book, and decided that it was faded and smoothed from the way he liked to sit on it, with one or both legs swung over. Not the way to sit before a lady, of course. *Was a servant a lady?*

“Do you read at all?” He asked as he swung his legs back into a more sensible position, then immediately came to regret the question. It would have been precisely the sort of question a nobleman would use to embarrass a servant.

“I love to. I only wish I could do more.”

Morghiad hid his relief as best he could and closed the book he had not even pretended to read. Either she was an oddity, or she was a spy. “Permit me to help you with that.” He stood and squelched behind her as she made her way to his bed, before making his best attempt at tucking in the bottom layers of linen.

She hesitated for a moment, confusion in her features, and then worked her way down the other side of the mattress. Artemi was somewhat more efficient, and soon approached the corner closest to the kahr. He reached it first, clumsily folded the pointed edge and stuffed it into a gap between the slats. It would probably do if no one looked too closely.

Artemi let out the beginnings of a laugh, then hurriedly drew her face straight. “I’ll get into trouble if I leave it like that. Here…” She un-tucked the corner and held it out to Morghiad, which he quickly took, and moved her hands towards his. “It has to be pulled straight and then fold-”

A raging torrent of fire ripped violently down Morghiad’s arm, searing with its white-hot tumult of anger. It very nearly rendered his limb numb as it burned and twisted upward toward his shoulder. Though no flames were visible, the sensation was unmistakable.

Artemi fell back against the bed post, seeming terrified enough to bolt from the room like a hunted deer.

The floor beneath Morghiad’s feet still shook, though he tried to ignore it as he examined his hands. *It couldn’t be.* He gathered his thoughts as rapidly as he was able,

and blurted a, “How is this POSSIBLE?!” knowing now that he should have trusted his suspicions before he trusted her face.

Her eyes only widened further in fear, and she tried to sink away from him. Her arms rose up to protect her head, and she turned her face away from him with her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Her presence was peculiar, but her behaviour even more so.

Morghiad kept better control of his voice this time. “What are you?”

She opened her eyes carefully, and looked around for an escape; her chest rose and fell sharply. “I don’t... what *was* that?”

He permitted his brow to furrow, and he reached forward to touch her cheek. Hot fire pushed through his hand and along the length of his arm. His whole body was alight.

A tear rolled down Artemi’s face as she tensed. “What are you doing to me?” she asked in a whisper.

Morghiad explored the sensation further. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks. Please, I don’t underst -” She was shaking visibly.

He examined her eyes closely. Long, dark lashes curved around them, but they *were* young eyes, and unless she was a better actress than his father’s revellers, her reaction was not one of guilt. He said softly, “You don’t know, do you? How is this even possible?” He withdrew his hand from her and flopped onto the edge of his bed to think.

“What *was* that?” Her voice was gaining strength, though it still wavered. “It felt like I... like I’d stepped inside the sun. Or the sun had stepped inside me. What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he said darkly.

She drew herself up and straightened her dress. “Then I should leave.”

“No!” Morghiad rose to pace between the windows, regulating his breathing as best he was able. “What you felt was your own recognition that I am kanaala. You are a wielder. Not mature enough to use your power, but a wielder nonetheless.”

Artemi blinked at him, but then she smiled, if a little nervously. “But that’s impossible. I’ve already been tested. I can’t be... *that*.”

“Did they touch your skin?” He held her gaze.

“I don’t know. I was just an infant. You see, my mother...” Her voice trailed off.

“She didn’t survive,” he finished. And no surprise, with a daughter that strong.

Artemi shook her head and sank to the floor while the rain continued to pelt the windows and amplified the silence they endured. Morghiad paused to gaze at his books while his mind worked. *It was possible...*

“Most are killed as children. If this is true, and I am still not sure I believe it, how is it I have escaped?”

“Your power is hidden. I don’t understand quite how, but it is invisible - it has been masked to any kanaala remote from you. Likely from other wielders, too.” He looked at her closely. She was huddled on the marble tiles, as if crouching like a scared mouse would give her more protection.

“I’ll be executed then.” She said it as a statement, as if it were on her list of duties after finishing the washing.

Ilena. Blazes, all he could see in his mind now was Ilena. In her last few years, the woman’s hair had been cropped closely to her head to mark her for what she was, and her iron-wrought chastity belt had clinked as she walked. But she had been kind and patient, and she had taught him everything about Blaze Energy she was able, even though her own ability had been minimal. She could barely have lifted a blade of grass with it.

Ilena had been no threat to Calidell. No man would have slept with her, and yet his father had seen fit to have her killed once she had served her purpose as tutor. All of Artemi’s golden fire hair would be cut from her head if she was discovered, and worse would happen to her besides.

Morghiad knelt down and brushed the waves of hair from her face. It buzzed with her power, though less fiercely than her skin had. It was as if the fibres held a memory of The Blazes from which they had grown rather than carrying the true source of it. He allowed his hand to fall away before his touch became improper. “Your secret is safe with me. But you must make me a promise.”

Artemi regarded him in silence. Ilena didn’t have to happen again.

“You must swear that you will use your power only to protect Calidell and its people.”

“All of its people? Even the bad ones?”

Morghiad allowed some surprise to filter into his voice. “It is not for you to decide who is good or bad. Even I cannot decide that.”

“You do each time you go to war.”

“I consider the impact of what I do, Artemi. I fight to prevent further injustice. Calidell and its city of Cadra are just, and they should be protected. It is not a sacrifice you can understand yet, child.” *Child*. He was only four years older than she!

Artemi bit her lip, frustration evident on her brow. “What choice do I have?” she said, “You would banish me otherwise.” Another tear fell from her lashes. “I will only use *it* to protect Calidell.”

“And its people,” Morghiad prompted.

“...And its people.” she echoed quietly. She was... *divine* to regard, like a finely crafted, golden filigree sword, or perhaps a sweet, red apple. Somewhere between the two, he decided.

“Artemi, you must not take a lover either.”

Her eyes narrowed, her muscles tensed considerably. “I see. No lover except, of course, a kanaala? Is that what all this is about? Some ruse to bed me?” She stamped her feet as she rose from the floor, and clenched her fists. “You made me feel that, didn’t you? You put your fire into my hand.”

Morghiad stood with her, and he towered over her while she attempted to keep her chin high, regarding him as levelly as she could. He folded his arms to prevent his hands from wandering to her hair again. "In a few months your ability will outgrow my own. I doubt there will be a kanaala on this earth strong enough for you, myself included. I am sorry. There shall be no lovers for you."

Artemi permitted her eyes to fall to the floor, and turned away from him. The momentary strength and indignation she had held seemed to drain from her stance, and she walked to the stone wall to lean a shoulder against it.

Silence sat thick and heavy between them like the impenetrable autumn mists of Wilrea's mountains, though Morghiad was far from the right man to find a good way to break it. Silar was far more skilled at that.

Artemi's hand started to move over the smoothness of the blocks, as if she could somehow draw strength from them, and she began, "I'd always thought I would have that one day. I thought I would find someone, maybe have a few babies... As everyone does. There must be stronger kanaala out there..." Her voice faded before she finished the sentence.

Morghiad unfolded his arms again, not really knowing what to do with them. "I have been told not. That life - it is not a luxury we can all expect. Sometimes these things are decided for us. I understand your situation - a part of it, anyway."

The focus seemed to return to her eyes once more. "You do not need to worry. I have no desire to wake up next to a dead man in my bed."

Morghiad nodded and went to the corner of the bed again, examining the loose sheets. "I can teach you how to wield for good," he said, "but first you must show me how to fold in the corner of this bed."

Artemi stood motionless for a moment, then a smile, bright enough to dazzle creatures of the desert, broke through her gloom. She stepped towards the sheet he held and raised the edge of it. "Like this." She pulled it taut and placed it in Morghiad's hand. The fire sensation burned through his fingers once more as she brushed them, but there was something else present in her touch. "And then you pull it down the side of the bed." Artemi guided his arms down. "Fold it over to the right, keep that bit tucked in." She pushed his hands to the correct place and smoothed over the fold he had made. "Now push it under."

When Morghiad finished the task, Artemi straightened and admired his work. "Very good. We'll make a maid of you yet...ah, my kahr."

He suppressed a smile. He was becoming far too emotional these days.

"Is wielding as easy to learn?" she asked.

"Sometimes. I suppose. I've never taught anyone before."

Artemi moved quickly towards him and wrapped herself around him, so that her head lay against his damp chest. "Thank you... for allowing me to live," she said meekly.

Morghiad kept his position fixed, and it was clear to him that his first lesson would be teaching her not to be so impulsive. He unhooked her arms as gently as he could, though it became apparent that her dress was damp where it had touched his rain-soaked clothes.

“I will see to it that my room becomes part of your duties. You are under my protection now; you are my concern. I will show you who the other kanaala are, but in the meantime you must avoid all physical contact. And stay out of view of my father.” She was far too pretty to escape the fervour the king.

She looked at him for a while, then dropped her head in acquiescence. Artemi moved gracefully to the pile of laundry she had folded, and gathered it into her arms. The way she held those sheets made her resemble a queen who had been gifted with flowers, but she shattered the illusion with a small curtsy and a shuffle toward the door. “I will see you again soon, my kahr.”

Morghiad opened the door for her, and watched her dissolve into the misty gloom of the halls. He would have to work hard to keep her hidden, and even harder to keep her alive, he realised. But it was important, and it surely was necessary.

He stamped back into his chambers and pulled off his sodden boots before he did anything else. He had wanted to remove them throughout the entire encounter, but had feared it would be a rude gesture to carry out before a woman. Feet free, he went to his book shelves. He *had* seen her face before, and that meant she had to be...

He pulled out the red leather book again, then another green one next to it, a black one, a fragile brown tome, a pile of green fabric-bound ones, and more until they made a disorganised pile on the floor. *It was in one of these.* He opened the most fragile - the oldest - first. The yellowed book must have been thousands of years old, and several of the edges of the pages crumbled in his fingers where he was too hurried with them. Its text described the history of a group known as the Kusuru Assassins, but it did not contain the information he sought. He would have to come back to that one later.

Morghiad flicked through a few of the more modern books, knowing that what he sought was somewhere within one of them. There was a broad-spined book, still nestled on a high shelf above him, and something tickled his memory about it as his eyes touched it. Now that he thought on it, he recalled that it detailed a collection of old battles and victories some fifteen-hundred years previously. It was a stretch to reach it, and when he brought it down, the binding collapsed on itself and scattered the pages across the floor.

Morghiad cursed and began sifting through them carefully, but none of them seemed to have what he was looking for. It was only after his second rifle through them that a page caught his eye from where it had drifted across the room. The corners of a rogue sheaf peeked out from under the old armchair, teasing him for having missed them.

Morghiad crawled forward on his hands and knees to bring them out, then fumbled through the delicate pages with frenetic hands... and found it. He slumped in the armchair

and examined the engraving closely. That *was* Artemi - her dark eyes, even features, the stubborn set to her jaw and cascading gold-red hair. A little older perhaps, but the picture was an accurate depiction that matched her entirely.

There could be no doubt about her identity to anyone who saw this and understood its significance. The Artemi in the engraving stood upon an outcrop with the reins of her horse in one hand and two crossed swords strapped to her back. A dagger was hitched on her right thigh and Morghiad could just make out the hilt of a second in her left boot. Her outfit of bodice and breeches was an entirely black affair that clung to the lines of her body admirably. Below the image was the caption, “The woman warrior, Artemi, prepares for the Battle of Harend.”

He wondered at the picture for a moment. The colours were still startlingly vibrant to behold, which made little enough sense. But how was it that a hero of legend now changed his bed sheets? She had told the truth about her age; he knew that from delving into her power, and she had certainly been ignorant of it.

There could only be one explanation for both her presence here *and* her ignorance. *Chronicles* made mention of her being *vanha-sielu* in its pages, which was an old term that meant ‘repeated life.’

One had to be careful around *vanha-sielu* if they were not aware of their true identity, and Morghiad had been told by Ilena that it had something to do with their minds not being ready for the onslaught of memories. People with fewer than twenty-five years were not even supposed to know about the phenomenon, but he and Silar had eavesdropped many conversations in their youth, and had gone to Ilena with more questions.

His mind ground through more questions now. Artemi had no idea what she was, but a warrior with her experience, her power and her skill ought to be a very useful addition to his army. *If she could be persuaded, and if she felt she owed a debt...*

Morghiad gathered together the fallen pages and replaced them in their binding. He hid the split book upon the highest shelf so that curious hands would not find it. Then, for the next several hours he pored over *Chronicles*. By the time he had found what he was searching for, the skies outside had blackened and the rain had long subsided.

He had learned that stories of Artemi went back over four-thousand years, that she had been a queen, an assassin, a soldier and vigilante, amongst other things. She had accumulated admirers and proposals from kings and warriors alike, and typically there would be a fight with her long-term enemy, Mirel, once a century.

Mirel was also a former assassin - possibly one of the Kusurus too. If Mirel had been as good a fighter as Artemi, *vanha-sielu* and a wielder, it was possible the two could have exchanged identities through history. Morghiad knew well enough that one historian’s account of an event could utterly contradict that of another.

How was he to know that Artemi was the ‘good’ one? She was always depicted and described as the red-haired one, and a quick moment of research using another book demonstrated that vanha-sielu always had the same name and the same appearance in each life. Names were something that could not be avoided when their parents came to decide upon them, and others would have trouble calling such individuals anything else.

The important information - the piece he was looking for, was on a well-thumbed page that described a life she’d lived in a long-forgotten province of Hirrah.

*“...Week by week, came the pains in her head,
The memories of a thousand lives lived once before,
The echoes of a thousand deaths felt once more,
Rent apart and then rebuilt our hero’s mind,
Till one day - twenty-three years, months four,
And seventy-two hours following her retour,
The lady lost all consciousness.*

*No efforts made by friend or family,
Could serve to awaken poor Artemi,
They feared her death was nigh until,
Following another three days still,
The woman awoke: she’d come ashore,
No longer sister, lover or daughter for,
The red-haired Artemi was now, ever more,
The great and fearless warrior.”*

Twenty-three. That meant he had just over five years before she reclaimed her identity - the point at which she would be ready for her memories, and the moment when she would be most likely to move her allegiances. If she survived that long.

He recalled the victims of his eavesdropping mentioning something about madness or worse if a vanha-sielu was forced to remember sooner than nature had intended. Morghiad examined the illustrations in *Chronicles* for a second time, and observed that they all depicted a red-haired, dark eyed woman in various costumes who could be interpreted as his Artemi. The resemblance was vague, however, as if the picture had been copied from a copy or had simply been drawn from the words.

Unlike the engraving he had examined before, the facial features on these depictions could have been anyone’s. Perhaps such vagueness was beneficial if a young Artemi happened upon such stories of herself.

She would have some incredible tales to tell once she remembered, he thought. Morghiad could not help but feel a tingle of excitement at his discovery. This morning he had been in an ordinary castle with ordinary problems to solve. But now... *now* he knew Artemi was the fourth Blaze stream, and she was a real, *living* legend.



Artemi huddled in her red blanket, and rubbed her feet against the mud floor in an effort to scrape away the cold of her chamber. Her whole life had changed course in a matter of moments, and it seemed beyond belief that she could be one of those women so reviled in Cadra, and all of Calidell, for that matter. She had not asked to be hated - she was sure she had not done anything worthy of execution quite yet.

She had considered escaping to another country, but if she left, her father would be alone in the city with no other family to call upon. He had often said how he treasured her as a gift from her mother, and how he needed her. And now Artemi knew that she truly had been responsible for her mother's death. It was possible that this new duty to both Cadra and Calidell could be her payment for that particular crime, though it was not a duty she had asked for or wanted.

Artemi allowed herself to weep in silence. It was a disaster. Her father would never forgive her for it!

"Are you alright, child?" came a hearty voice from her left. Caala was leaning into her chamber with a candle held aloft. Her wide hips almost filled the entrance, and there was something about her breadth that gave the impression of invincibility. She would never have cried if she had discovered she was a wielder.

Artemi forced a smile. "I'm fine. Thank you, Caala."

"You bloody well are not, lass!" The woman bustled in, skirts brushing against the walls as she knelt next to Artemi and held the candle to her face.

Artemi tried to push it away. "It's nothing to worry about. Please." She knew she could not hide the tracks of the tears on her cheeks, but hoped that Caala might stop fussing anyway.

Caala clenched her jaw tightly, before she cursed. "Oh follocks! This is my doing. He did something to you, didn't he? That blasted kahr, thinking he can take whatever he likes. I'd always thought he was different. If I get my hands on him..." Caala's face darkened visibly as she mumbled the rest.

"He hasn't *done* anything to me, Caala. Honestly." Artemi held Caala's gaze and huddled tighter, pulling her knees closer to her chin.

Caala grunted and shifted to make herself more comfortable, then set the candle upon the floor. "Don't think to protect him. You cannot be in love with the lad already. He may be very pretty and handsome and the rest of it, but he's still a man and I can promise you he's not in love with you, no matter what he says."

Artemi furrowed her brow a little. "He hasn't misbehaved with me. He certainly never said he cared for me. I met him and he was polite. That is all. Besides, I don't think you can call a man with a stone for a face handsome. There is barely any life in it!" Lord Forllan could smile at least - he had a very nice smile indeed.

Caala searched her face for a moment, confusion evident in her knotted brow. "If it is not him then what? You're usually made of tougher stuff than this. Tougher than the rest of us. Hah!"

Artemi thought hard about her response. She could not tell Caala what she was, not with the reputation wielders had in this city. It would be too much of a burden to place on her friend's shoulders, and an unfair one at that. "Why must you always assume it's a man?" she began, "I'm only finding it hard to adjust to this new way of life – in this cave. I miss home. That's all." This could serve a solution to her next problem... "In fact, the kahr took pity at my mood. He's offered to lend me a book if I return to do his sheets again." The lie was small, though it still left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Caala narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure you haven't taken a shine to bloody Kahr Morghiad? I mean, if I were a few years younger I'd probably... well... Not that he'd be interested." She put her hand in her pale brown curls. "Anyway, I suppose you'll be wanting to take over my duties in his chambers?"

"He is much too grim for me." Artemi smiled at Caala's blushes. "But yes, if I may swap a few of those days with you, I should be most grateful."

"As you wish, lass." Caala rose. "But I expect to be given a look at those books as payment." She offered a cheeky smile and left to catch some sleep of her own.

Artemi was forced to consider her situation once more in her solitude. The rain had begun to drip from the light well again, and it had soaked the floor beneath. It was conceivable, perhaps, that the caverns here could fill with water like the tales of the Great Floods from several millennia ago. In those times, houses had turned to aquariums and palaces to submerged networks, while the weakest civilisations had simply been washed away by waves that were several-hundred feet high.

She hoped that it would not happen again, and not in her tiny cell, at least until she had the ability to blast it to vapour with fire. A wielder could do that, couldn't she? Perhaps this horrid discovery could be turned into a positive boon, after all. Artemi lay on her side and closed her eyes slowly, and it was only then that she noticed the wails sounded particularly loud again.



Chapter 4

Great, red flowers of light exploded in the dark skies above Cadra, momentarily illuminating the faces of the onlookers with flushes of crimson and orange. Citizens of all ages and every class stood atop the highest levels of the city, and they watched the fire show that hailed the beginning of the feast day celebrations. Gialdin Day had arrived, and the place had come alive with the colours of costumes, wreaths, flags and ribbons. Earlier, there had been a grand procession of the army, led by King Acher and his son. The train had seemed to run forever, winding up and around the sloping streets of Cadra, and it had brought with it a regular *thud, thud, thud* that rang through the stones.

Artemi had felt the rhythm from her father's house on the other side of the city, and over the noise, she had tried to tell him of her discovery, but had failed miserably. He had seemed so delighted at seeing her that she could not bear to break his heart with it.

And so they had left the house and had watched the parade in apparent contentment - all men in black and green atop glossy horses. She had spotted Morghiad at the front, dressed in a black satin coat with red embroidery that traced down the sleeves. His jet warhorse was an intimidating thing beneath him, full of muscle and power and might. Artemi had been careful to keep out of sight of the kahr and the king, of course, but now she gazed up at the fireworks and inhaled the smoky mist that was fast descending from their antecedents.

"You know, you were conceived the night they took Gialdin," her father said wistfully. He was a wise-looking man of just less than six foot, with close-cropped hair in a colour not dissimilar to his daughter's. His clothes betrayed his poverty, but his posture was that of a proud man who had once held better rank.

"That is not something I wished to know. Thank you, father." Artemi twisted her mouth in disgust.

He chuckled quietly, but once the smiles were gone, he regarded his daughter thoughtfully and then said, "Artemi, your mind has been elsewhere all day. Whatever is troubling you?"

"Nothing." She continued to stare intently at the eruptions in the sky.

But he persisted, "Is it a man? I'll not have some wretch mess with my girl. Tell me who it is and I'll straighten him out for you."

Artemi met his eyes, laughing. "There's no man -"

"It's not a woman, is it?" His eyes widened.

“Father, no! I have a lot of new things to learn in that castle. That’s all.”

“Oh. Your mother used to have that look on her face when I’d done something to upset her. I suppose you’re growing up. A man will take you from me eventually. Just make sure you give me some grandchildren to keep me entertained.” He started fiddling with one of his coat buttons.

Artemi suppressed another grimace, and realised she needed to do or say something before he became too suspicious. “I’ll always be here for you. No idiot boy is going to take me from you. Now, I have to get to the castle. I’m expected to help with the first service.”

Her father’s smile dropped as if someone had attached strings to the corners of his mouth and pulled. She disliked leaving him to return to that old house alone even when he was happy, so she made sure to give him a hug that was both fierce and warm to make up for his lost grin. “I’ll come and see you again soon.”

“See that you do. Beware of that lecherous old king.”

Artemi laughed and nodded, before pushing her way through the crowds to a gently sloping road, which she followed to the level below. The lamps burned with their warm, orange glow as she walked toward the black of the castle, whose malevolent walls loomed through gaps in the green of the buildings and streets. These sub-roads were unusually quiet with everyone assembled above, and it was a sense of isolation she now appreciated. She pulled her old, brown cloak tightly about her to ward off the autumn chill that had already set into the stones of the city.

As she drew closer to the castle, the houses became grander and the incline of the roads lessened. Artemi ambled down a long, winding street, and ran her hand along the rail until she reached the very bottom. A huge mouth, filled with iron teeth, bulged from the castle wall and a broad drawbridge protruded like a tongue. She traversed the wooden bridge slowly and raised one of her sleeves. Marked on her arm beneath, in dark green ink, was an image of a sword upon feathers, the symbol of Cadra. Once the guard at the entrance had seen it, he motioned for her to pass.

The gateway led to a huge courtyard, big enough for most of Cadra’s army to fit inside. It was only here that you could appreciate the size of the castle proper that surrounded it, because every coping, stair and lintel was on such a vast and improbable scale that the effect of each together became deceptive and claustrophobic.

Above her, some brave fool of a climber had managed to hang gold streamers between the high windows, and more wreaths were strung from the poles that were set into the courtyard’s cobbles. Artemi marvelled at the decorations for several breaths, before she walked to one of the twenty exits that dotted the walls. One of the other doorways might have brought her to her destination more rapidly, but she had never used them before, and would probably have become lost in any case.

The cool darkness of the tunnels enveloped her and deepened her chill as she redrew her cloak. Artemi followed twists, slopes and worn step after gritty step to reach the kitchens. These vast sculleries lay beneath the Malachite Hall, lit only by the rows of fires that were used to cook for the inhabitants of the castle. The noise that came from there was loud enough to shake the very innards of Artemi's skull.

Hundreds of voices yelled between hisses of steam and thumps of knives, while cooks sweated heavily over roiling pots and heaved large, skinned carcasses of animals onto braziers. Great, vaulted arches supported the ceiling and runner pipes swung between them, pouring water wherever it was needed. Helpers ran busily along the galleys, looking flustered and red whilst carrying trays of drinks or meat.

Artemi inhaled deeply, and ventured into the fray to seek out a woman with white hair. Sindra, as she was known, was in charge of directing the linen girls to wait upon the hall above.

Sindra was a willowy woman with high cheekbones and the bearing of the most graceful of statues. Her hair was so pale and her skin tanned that it looked as if she had lain all day in the sun and never worked a single day of her long life, but of course Artemi and the servants of Cadra knew otherwise.

From the wildness in Sindra's eyes, she was barely keeping abreast of all her duties. "Ah," she said as Artemi approached. "You've come to help us serve. Good! Drop your cloak over there and get your hands dirty. Well, not too dirty, we don't want to put the nobles off their food!" Sindra turned to another, youthful-eyed servant and started waving her hands frantically, pointing in all manner of directions.

Artemi unlaced her cloak and made her way to the burgeoning clothing racks as Sindra had instructed. She folded her mantle up neatly, stowed it next to the others in vain hope that she might find it again, then followed the powerful smell of stewed beef to find her way back. The scent of something burning prodded at her nose, but she tried not to dwell upon it. Wielders burned things, after all. How hard would it be for her to think of burning something, then have it accidentally happen?

Sindra spoke before Artemi could follow the thought further. "Your job this evening is to keep taking trays from here..." She pointed. "...up to the hall. Do not serve the food directly to the guests. You must place the tray neatly on the tables and leave, taking any empties back here with you. Used trays go on this shelf here." Sindra jabbed at a pile of pewter. "There are a lot of tables up there so mind they're kept tidy. Olivin will direct you as to which food should go where."

Artemi nodded and went to collect the nearest tray whilst Sindra bustled away to shout more orders. The tray was heavy, not to mention searing hot upon her fingers, much like the fire she could probably make. *Would that burn her skin too?* She gritted her teeth and shifted her hands as close to the edges as was possible, quietly cursing herself for being a wimp.

The steps that led to the back of the Malachite Hall were unnecessarily steep, and busy with servants who scurried up and down them. Artemi struggled to keep the tray level as a male servant with arms like cuts of ham nudged her into the wall to sprint past.

At last, light began to pour into the stairway above, and a great swell of string music wrapped around her as she stepped into the glow of the paraffin lamps. The sound was just as vigorous and strong as any athlete in the Spring Games, if not as enjoyable to look at.

A solo player drew the bow across his instrument with such speed and force that the strings seemed close to rupture, and Artemi felt her skin tingle at the fullness of the sound. But her attention was reluctantly torn away to the task she had been charged with. A line of tables extended from the stairwell to the other side of the hall, which was so far away that it dissolved into a mist of people and steaming animal carcasses.

The food appeared to be organised in terms of meats, pastries, fruit and sweets. Artemi raised the tray above her head and made her way carefully to the appropriate section of the table, though she permitted her feet to touch the ground in time with the music. A portly, brown-haired man, Olivin, was marching proudly up and down the table rows, directing waiters to distribute smaller trays of food to the revellers. He eyed Artemi as she placed her tray timidly onto the surface.

“Girl, I want you to wipe down the top of these four tables. You’ll have to work around the trays as they’re removed and set. Quickly, now!”

Artemi curtsied, and soon spied a collection of cleaning equipment against the back wall. She took a cloth and dipped it in the soapy water of a half barrel. The table surface was well-worn, and food appeared to have worked its way deep into the grain, but Artemi gave it a hard scrub in the time she had available. She was strong enough to have a noticeable effect, but not quite fast enough to complete the work to her usual standard.

The music quietened suddenly, and such a silence fell that Artemi felt as if her scrubbing might attract attention. She ceased just as all the guests in the hall arrested their chatter, and the servants slowed their bustling around the trays to maintain the quiet.

Artemi possessed an excellent view of most of the hall from her position behind the table. She could see a man seated upon a dais, and he held a stringed instrument almost as large as his body. He began to draw deep, rich sounds from it that echoed around the chamber. Then, the great stone doors at the opposite end swept open and gave issue to a colourful procession.

A bearded man at the head wore a silver crown and deep blue, velvet robes. His beautiful benay-gosa pooled around him in an assortment of red dresses, most of which were scandalously cut, and behind them strode Kahr Morghiad.

Morghiad was accompanied only by four male guards, though he had evidently decided it was necessary to change for the evening. He wore a green coat this time, emblazoned with the sword and plumes of Cadra in white embroidery. His polished brown

boots reached over his knees before giving way to some rather tightly fitted, black leather trousers, and his face bore its usual dearth of emotion.

Aside from the rustle of fabric as some fell to their knees or bowed, the crowd maintained total silence, and the musician brought his piece to a gentle close when King Acher took the hand of a blonde benay-gosa. He drew himself away from the group, and the string players at the other end of the hall shuffled about to re-tune their instruments and prepare for the next theme.

Then, a dark-haired lady stepped out from amidst the crowd. Artemi knew little of noble protocol, but it was obvious even to her that this was not expected behaviour at Gialdin Day. The lady strode directly to the kahr, whispered something in his ear and bowed deeply. She was by far the most beautiful woman Artemi had ever seen.

Thick, chestnut curls of hair framed her face and flowed down the centre of her back. Her features were dark, punctuated by full, red lips while her gown of gold silk had been made specifically to highlight her impossible waist.

Morghiad maintained his stony posture for a moment and then nodded, his face displaying neither pleasure nor disdain. He took her hand and led her to stand opposite his father. The king boomed, "My son will dance with the Lady di Certa!" And he motioned to the band to begin, whereupon soft notes rose from their instruments, which obliged both men to draw their partners close.

Artemi's eyes remained locked upon Morghiad and Lady di Certa as they stepped about the floor. For all the man looked like a pile of immovable rocks, he could move gracefully as a river.

The music flowed between slow waves and fast torrents, and with each quickening of pace the pair would draw near until Morghiad pulled the woman's waist against his hips. When the strings slowed again, she would stalk around him like a tiger circling its prey, and would arch her back while she leaned from his hand.

Lady di Certa matched his steps well, though she did not quite have the same discipline as he. Though their dance was comparatively modest, it still managed to exude equally as much passion as any of Galabril's antics. What a skill to possess such dancing would be, and how foolish she would appear as a servant trying it beside them!

When the music came to a close, both couples bowed and the crowd around began their rapturous applause. Lady di Certa appeared to be breathing quite heavily following her exertion. Morghiad, as usual, was wholly unreadable.

The band struck up again and most in the hall resumed their chatter. A few of the bolder nobles began to dance themselves, which only served to obscure Artemi's view of the two royal men. She glanced along the table, and noted that her cloth had made a small pool of water where she had held it aloft for so long. She wiped it up, hoping that no one else had noticed, and another servant immediately slapped a tray down, which very nearly crushed Artemi's hands in the process.

It was time to move onto the next table, and that appeared to be even grubbier than the first. Artemi got stuck into its surface with renewed vigour.

“Follocking apples! Why would I want a bloody apple?” came from the nearby crowd. A waiter carrying a tray of fruit stood aghast, while before him an orange-haired soldier swayed and gesticulated.

“Where’s the booze, man?” He leaned toward the servant. “Too much fruit gives me the fear! I demand to have some wine. There must be some here...” The soldier staggered to a table covered in perfectly-arranged glasses of tanno wine. He knocked several over as he reached for his desired vessel, and Artemi swallowed, realising his coat bore the four green slashes of a lieutenant.

Was such behaviour acceptable for such a highly ranked officer of Calidell? The lieutenant downed his glass with gusto and then eyed the servants lining the tables, but it was not long before his eyes came to rest upon Artemi.

A slow sneer worked its way across his ruddy face, and he stumbled to her, wavering upon unsteady feet. “Well, hello there. Did it burn when you rose from the fires of Achellon?” He belched horrifically, and then winked.

Artemi withdrew towards the wall, unsure of how she should respond.

He continued to slur, “My name is Beetan. You’re the sweetest thing I’ve seen all week. Not that I’m allowed to have you.”

Artemi stiffened – surely he couldn’t know the truth about her yet!

The orange-haired man went on, “The kahr-captain says we’re not allowed casual women anymore. Not that there’s anything casual about you. Arf!”

Artemi smiled weakly and curtsied with such relief that her legs almost gave way beneath her. *He did not know*. “Thank you, Lord Beetan. You are too kind, but I’m afraid I must continue with my... less-than-casual duties here.”

The man swayed for a heartbeat or two, then staggered toward her, hands hitting the table in front of him. “Oh you do, do you?”

Just then, another black-coated guard caught his arm. “I think we’ve had enough, don’t you? Let’s leave this sweet girl alone, eh?” It was Lord Forllan, and Artemi could hardly believe that she was glad for the sight of him.

Beetan screwed his face up, took a final, appreciative leer at Artemi, and then drifted off into the cloud of guests.

Lord-lieutenant Silar offered her a neat bow while he gripped the hilt of the sword at his waist. “Good to see you again, Artemi,” he said. “I hope my friend has not offended you. He can be a little... coarse, but he is well-meaning once you get to know him.” Silar displayed one of his winning smiles, which made Artemi’s stomach feel light, but before it could float out of her body, Olivin grabbed her arm.

She pulled it away instinctively, sharply even, and his mood did not improve with her reaction. “Stop idling, girl, and get back to work. You’ve been standing here like a bowl of melon soup for nigh on five minutes! Don’t think I haven’t noticed!”

Silar coughed softly. “As a matter of fact, I was just engaging the young lady in conversation. I see these tables are well-attended. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind if I borrowed her from you for a short while?”

Olivin’s round face reddened considerably, and his voice turned to smooth silk. “Of course not, my lord. Forgive me for not observing you there sooner.” He bowed profusely and backed away from Artemi as if she were a heavily armed foe, and promptly resumed his frantic orders at those beneath him.

“Will you step out from behind there for a moment? I should like to speak with you, if I may.” Silar’s deep blue eyes seemed to burn holes into her skull.

Artemi’s light stomach rapidly began to fill with lead. She knew that he was not kanaala, but she also knew that whatever conversation they were about to have could not end well. Not even his rather devastatingly good looks or obvious arrogance would make up for it.

But he was a lord of all things, and he had invited her, so little other option was available to her than to do his bidding. “I’ll meet you at the end, there.” She gestured to the last table with a thin smile.

Silar inclined his head and began to walk, level with her, to the other side of the room. There were numerous obstacles to navigate on both sides - he encountered large clumps of somewhat inebriated guests, while she had to dodge wild servants and blazing hot trays. By the commencement of the next tune, they had met at the far wall.

“You moved round those people with much grace, my lady. I am most impressed with your agility.” He bent his left elbow so that it stuck out sideways from his trunk, though his hand remained at his back. “Will you take my arm, Artemi?”

He wanted her to cut it off? “I’m not sure I understand...”

His brow furrowed a little, then he nodded to a couple standing a few yards from them.

“Oh,” she said, feeling her cheeks grow scarlet at her own ignorance. Artemi placed her right hand in the crook of his arm, and they began to walk along the back of the hall.

He examined her as they meandered between the gaps in the crowd. “You have never been inside the Malachite Hall before?”

She realised she must have been gawping and wide-eyed at the surroundings, and remembered to close her mouth. It was incredible, so vast and so... weighty. Artemi met his stare. “No. I have not. My father’s rooms are, of course, closely appointed in terms of grandeur but I’m afraid the decor is not nearly so... green.”

Silar laughed. “Nor so poorly lit, either, I’d wager.” He brought them both to a standstill next to a grey mirror that was lined with a striped, bright green stone.

“This place is rather like a cave, don’t you think?”

Silar’s eyes *were* very blue, even in this dull light. It was not a shade Artemi had seen in a man’s eyes before. “I fear great beasts will rise from its bowels, some days,” Silar said.

“Did I not just meet one, Lord Forllan?”

He smiled again, and it *was* a very fine smile. “My name is Silar. I call you by your first name, so it is only fair that you should do the same to me.”

“As you wish, Silar.” When she uttered his name, the strings started up again, and this time they played a much livelier tune. A great harp plucked in time to the theme, and three men now stood on the dais, dressed in grey satin coats. One of the men was considerably larger than the other two in terms of width, and Artemi could just make out that he sported a neatly trimmed, dark beard. The other two looked so much like him that they must have been brothers, or at the very least from the same nation. Each man grinned at the other before the largest opened his mouth to sing.

The quality of the sound that came from him was velvet - smooth and rich, deep and soft. He hit each note with perfection for one verse, then gestured to his companions to follow. The smallest one reprised the song, and the power of his voice could have shattered the earth. Next, the tallest one sang a verse, and his voice was playful rather than loud. The three sustained a rising note together, with winks and grins at their audience, and the band filled with an echo of their previous chorus.

At this point, Artemi remembered that she needed to breathe. How was it possible for a man to *do* that with their voice? And was the larger one chewing tree sap while he sang?

The singers commenced the second verse, teasing each other with their skill. The bearded man drew admiring glances from his colleagues as he sustained a range of notes on a single breath – a breath that seemed to last for an eternity to Artemi, and the assembled guests went wild with such applause that it only died when the singers began the final verse. At the end, they took the last notes in unison, and fought to see who could sustain for the longest, at the greatest volume. The hall erupted in cheers and clapping once they had finished, and Artemi joined the applause with enthusiasm. It did not matter, however, as the singers commenced their next piece as if they had not heard it. The new song was just as lively and jovial, so much so that their audience clapped along to the music. They needn’t have bothered doing that either, as the crowd of nobles proved to have the most terrible rhythm Artemi had ever witnessed.



Silar settled his gaze on Artemi while she closed her eyes and drank in the music. She truly *was* something to behold, *and* she could offer him witticisms too. He wished deeply that he could touch that hair of hers, but before he could dwell further upon the thought, her eyes flicked open and looked to him – eyes that were almost as dark as the night, but filled with fire. A man could light his pipe in them.

“I see that you like *The Three Cathenas*. They are very talented. There used to be four but one left to join the Calidellian army and become a lieutenant. Apparently he’s very good-looking.” Silar raised his eyebrows and grinned with all of his neat teeth on show. Women liked a man with tidy teeth, or so he had been told.

Her cheeks dimpled again with her smile. “They are a wonder to listen to. Tell me, can you sing as well as you charm women?”

“Alas, my charming and singing days are over. I am speaking to you purely as a man would speak to a woman who was forced, on a daily basis, to wash his linen.”

“Are you suggesting that I do my work under duress?”

“Is there any other reason you’d wish to remove my clothing?” Silar felt very bad about letting that one escape. That was very naughty of him indeed, and now Artemi was blushing furiously. She swiftly looked to the floor to hide it, but Silar only found the excitement in his gut growing. From here he could smell the Cadran soap upon her clothing, and he inhaled it as subtly as he could. It smelled so different upon a woman – so much cleaner and more sophisticated than it did upon a man.

“Forgive me, Artemi. I have overstepped my bounds.”

She flicked her eyes back to him and then gazed out at the room as if to examine it.

He continued, “Something puzzles me. Can you tell me what it is that the laundresses flavour their soap with? I’ve never been able to work it out.”

“Purple wisp-root,” she said without hesitation, “It grows only on the plains surrounding this city - nowhere else in the world. Or so I’ve read.” A servant who read books – well now, that was highly unusual.

“I see,” he said. “Thank you for enlightening me.”

Artemi’s gaze trailed a couple who stood close to the king. Silar recognised Morghiad as one of them, but did not know the lady who clung to his arm. Poor Morghiad, he would not be enjoying this manner of event at all. “You find him attractive?” Silar ventured, not truly desiring to hear her reply.

“No. He doesn’t appear to have any humour in him at all. I was looking at the woman.” Artemi smoothed down her skirt unconsciously.

Silar briefly enjoyed his victory and reappraised Morghiad's latest admirer. "I do not know her very well. What is it that fascinates you about her?"

"Is she not the most stunning woman you've ever seen? She is... perfect."

"No. She is not," he responded, "Remove the paint from her face and the pretty gown from her body and she's as ordinary as the rest of them."

Artemi shook her head in disagreement, as if she believed she possessed the face of a troll. Silar appreciated confident women who knew they were beautiful, but modest ones had their sweetnesses too. Most especially modest ones without the faces of trolls.

"Artemi," he began, "would you see me again? I'm not out to seduce you. Well, not yet. I mean... it wouldn't have to be... like that. It would be nice if we could talk again. Like this." Silar tried to conceal his fumbling words and a desire to chew upon his own lip, though he was not sure if he had succeeded.

The smile left her face as if harried away by a monster, and her eyes lost focus. "I can't, please forgive me."

"Have I been too forward? I realise you're still very young. I'm sorry about the clothes comment, I can't help myself somet-"

She cut in, "No, it's not that."

"You already have a young man. Of course you do. I should have guessed as much." Silar failed to keep the disappointment from his voice this time.

Her expression was pained. "No. There's no lover. I simply cannot meet with you like that. I fear I have done too much already. I must go." She released his arm and walked briskly back through the throng.

Silar followed her, calling for her to wait before he caught her arm. "Has someone hurt you? Let me help you." He would be very angry if someone had laid so much as a finger on her!

"No. I am fine. I do not need your help. Thank you all the same." She gave him a small bow, and he watched her stride quite purposefully to the other side of the hall. What a puzzle this woman was! Most were complicated in one manner, of course, but she was a completely different flavour and several times as infuriating. Perhaps discussion with the 'humourless' kahr would help in working out what was wrong with his technique this evening. Bouncing an unknown off a known could sometimes produce an answer.

It may have been that Artemi simply found him ugly, and though possible, it was still rather unlikely as her sight was not defective. He was confident he could charm a woman into not running away from him when he had bothered to bathe and don a handsome uniform, both of which he had done today, so where had he gone wrong?

Silar approached Morghiad and his lady, who was gazing up at the kahr like a lost child who had found a new parent. Morghiad, on the other hand, seemed to be transfixed by a stone in the ceiling, and demonstrated little interest in anything else.

The lady was as Silar had expected now that he was close to her. She could easily be described as pretty, since her lips were good and her waist was a nice size. Her breasts weren't too bad, but quite unfortunately, much of her looks appeared to have been drawn on with a brush.

"My kahr-captain." Silar bowed elegantly.

Morghiad's green eyes snapped onto him with surprising fierceness. "Silar, I hope you are enjoying yourself." Morghiad somehow managed to convey his displeasure through his monotone voice and expressionless face. He was the only man Silar knew capable of the feat.

He smiled in response. "And who is this beautiful lady accompanying you tonight?" Silar bowed to kiss her free hand.

"My name is Aval di Certa," she purred, "I understand you are Lord Forllan. Is it true that you once fought an *eisiel*?"

Eisiels were horrible creatures - soulless men sent to assassinate their targets and then kill themselves. They had no care for pain, honour or how their goal was achieved. It was whispered that they were ordinary men who had slept with a wielder, had not quite died from the fires, but had lost their minds as a result.

Silar grimaced. "I fear many reports of that incident are somewhat... exaggerated. He was mostly dead already. I merely finished him off."

Aval pursed her lips in thought, but said no more, and it was left to Morghiad to break the silence. "*It* was already confused - lost, perhaps. But though it might have provided a more considerable challenge for any other swordsman, it was very quickly dispatched by our lieutenant here."

Surely Morghiad was not trying to play *that* sort of game? He was not going to get away with displacing the lady's attentions that easily! Silar cleared his throat and brought the subject to other matters. *Was Aval staring at his thighs?*

"Morghiad, I need to discuss a matter of security with you. Would you mind terribly if I drew you away for a short while?"

Morghiad looked to Aval for approval, which truly showed how pathetic he could be around women for all his captaincy and sword-wielding and serious faces. Silar would have to give him some instruction on the subject soon.

Aval released her prize with reluctance and melted into the crowd behind, and Silar could almost smell the relief on his friend. Morghiad eyed Silar for a heartbeat, then said, "What is it? I can tell from the grin you're trying so desperately to hide that it's not bandits or guards."

"There's this woman—" Silar began

Morghiad rolled his eyes, though nothing else on his face moved.

"Don't look at me like that. She's different."

“Really? They’ve all been different. Silar, it’s only been three weeks since you did away with the last one! I can’t afford to have you lose your position in the army. I need you to keep your promise, of all people.” Morghiad’s eyes had become hard like glass, and it was possible that he looked a little angry, though no one else would have been able to see it.

“And I shall. This woman - it’s not the same... Every other woman appears ugly in my eyes now. I didn’t even know what true beauty was until her arrival. More than that - she’s witty and intelligent and we have a real accord.” Silar felt his legs weaken as he spoke. “I want to be with her. I could... well, marry her.”

“Are you sure you’re not become carried away with this?” Morghiad’s stony gaze softened ever so slightly.

“I think I’m in love with her.” The words tumbled out of Silar’s mouth before he could prevent them.

Morghiad remained quiet for a moment, examining his friend’s eyes closely. “I see. And you need my permission?”

“No. I need your advice.”

“I’m hardly the most knowledgeable in this area.” He regarded the ‘hordes’ - as he had once described them - of noblewomen.

Silar followed his gaze, and he was sure that there were more here than was usual. “You’re better at understanding people than I am. She is warm toward me but... she is afraid of something. She won’t tell me what it is.”

“Perhaps she is afraid of becoming involved with a well-known womaniser?” Morghiad almost showed a smirk. Almost.

Silar pulled the sort of face he hoped would sufficiently convey his displeasure and innocence, though he was not sure if it had worked. “No. She had a look of fear in her eyes. And sadness. I asked to see her again and she couldn’t get away fast enough, saying she’d gone too far already and needed to get back to cleaning tables or something. What does that mean?”

“She is a servant?”

“She looks like a queen among these pale imitations of women. You and I both met her a few weeks ago. Red-gold hair. Her name—”

Before Silar could finish, Morghiad had grabbed his arm and was dragging him out of the hall. Silar knew to stay quiet rather than scrabble and fight. When his friend behaved in this manner, there was usually good reason for keeping one’s tones hushed, and such rebellion would have harmed his position as kahr-captain, besides.

Morghiad drew Silar to a halt in a narrow hallway beyond the doors. “Not *her*,” he ordered, “You can’t have Artemi.”

“Why? Have you decided to keep her for yourself? You could have warned me.” Silar felt his heart sink inside his chest. He had always been ready to give his ladies to Morghiad if he had wanted them, but Morghiad had never shown interest. And now...

“No. She cannot be anyone’s.” Morghiad kept his voice low.

Silar shifted his feet a little. “Has the king chosen her, then?”

But instead of answering, Morghiad was scanning the area around him subtly, looking for hidden ears. “No. But you must not pursue her,” he said eventually.

“She’s not secretly a man, is she?” Silar felt his half-smile slip from his face almost as soon as he had formed it.

Morghiad compressed his lips and ushered his friend deeper into the corner. “She’s a wielder.”

The contents of Silar’s stomach threatened to scramble right out of him. *That pretty thing was a witch?* She had placed her hand on his arm! She could have melted it into nothing before he knew what was happening! He would have happily jumped into bed with her, enjoyed the pleasures of a lifetime and then... then he would not have woken up. He could have ended up like the eisiel, wandering the earth looking for more hapless, idiot men to kill.

“If you knew this,” Silar said with a tight throat, “Then why is she still out there, free?”

“Her power is hidden. No other kanaala has detected her. I only discovered this a few days ago, as did she. She had no idea what she was.” A tall waiter walked by, looking at them out of the corner of his eye.

Silar whispered, “Doesn’t she blow things up just by thinking about it? How can she be unaware of it?”

“She’s still too young to wield without someone like me. And since no one detected her, there is no reason to believe anyone could have told her what she was. I believe she was truly innocent of that knowledge.”

Silar felt nervous. “Then why haven’t you imprisoned her? What if she... accidentally kills someone?”

Morghiad folded his arms. “She gave me a promise that she would not unless they were a threat to Calidell. Besides, any prison sentence would be a brief prelude to death and I cannot justify submitting her to execution as an innocent adult. Could you send her to her death? Have them cut her hair? This woman you claim to love?”

Silar considered her fine eyes and red-gold waves for a moment. “No.” Her smile tugged at him. “You could have sent her to Hirrah. She’d be safe and so would we.”

Morghiad shook his head. “There is something else.”

“You’re going to tell me she’s from Achellon next, or that she can grow arms out of her head, or that she drinks pinh for breakfast.”

“I believe she is more than a wielder. I believe she is... *The* Artemi. The Fireblade.” Did Morghiad’s eyes widen when he said that?

“Impossible. A small thing like her, a warrior? She probably weighs less than half of either of us! She doesn’t exactly walk like an assassin either. You could hear her stomping about forty miles away.”

“She may well have the strength and speed necessary. Some women do – you know that. She’s not yet twenty, but she is vanha-sielu. She won’t remember any of her training or any of her famous battles yet, but I think we can use her. It should not take long for her to learn to use a sword if she has that innate ability.” Morghiad’s grass-green eyes followed a serving maid some yards beyond.

Silar had observed the way she moved around the table waiters, and it *had* been rather elegant. “A woman? In our army? And a woman legendary for being a wildcard, at that! How do you propose to keep this a secret? How do you propose to keep her under control?” Silar almost spat the words out, though he still tried to keep quiet. A real life vanha-sielu! Blazed fires alight! *Just how old was she?!*

“I am considering some of the finer points, but I believe she will keep her promise. Do you think she will keep her word?”

Silar considered her manner for a moment. “Yes, I do.”

“Will you help me protect her?” It sounded more like an order from his captain.

Silar examined the hilt of his sword – his grandfather’s sword. Silver stags decorated the handle where it was not covered by green ribbon, and it bore some scars from its previous adventures. He had made the same promise with it as Artemi had, and he had promised to uphold the laws of the country. Harboursing a wielder was most definitely against the law.

Morghiad truly was engaging in the sorts of activities that could get him beheaded.

“Yes,” Silar said solemnly. Artemi was rather lovely, after all, and he did not want King Acher getting his grubby hands on her, or his executioner’s axe.

Morghiad’s shoulders relaxed visibly. “Good. How many armies do you suppose have a legend like her on their side? It will be worth taking care of her. We do not want her as our enemy, in this life or the next.”

Silar had not considered the possibilities of that. “I suppose she’s one way to get into the history books.” He felt bitterly disappointed that she had turned out to be this thing. It was such a terrible waste of her fine body and face! What was the point of having such an excellent figure and delicate collar bones if no man could appreciate them without fear of being blasted to oblivion?

Perhaps, Silar thought, he ought to find Beetan and join him in the revelries so that he could forget this disaster. “Morghiad, how about a few drinks with the men? I can’t imagine you’d want to spend much longer around the viper di Certa.”

Morghiad nodded in a manner that was almost eager. “I was wondering when you’d ask.”



King Acher, Ruler of Calidell and Wearer of the Crown of Vines, looked out at his guests, ungrateful parasites as they were. Every one of them ate all his food and drank all his wine as if compensating for years of famine. Unfortunately, one had to maintain appearances when one was king and a grand, extravagant feast day was just the thing. What better day to enjoy such a feast than this? Gialdin had been his finest victory, and was worthy of all celebrations in the centuries to come.

Benay-gosa were pleasures singular to him, however. Only he could enjoy these beautiful women, which was some small comfort amidst the gluttony of the attendees. Perhaps he would take two of his women to his chambers tonight, and Tara, in particular, was quite a succulent fruit to behold in her vivid, red silk dress. It touched the floor but appeared to be split entirely up the back of her left leg, and it pleased him to observe that much of her bosom was on display too.

He could not decide on the second woman. Maybe Suhla or Rhionin.

Suhla had been with him for longer than any of the others: four full years, and he hoped that she might continue to entertain him and provide an heir in the years to come. But one could never be sure when a woman’s temperament could change, or when she could so easily become bothersome.

Heirs. His thoughts turned to Morghiad. Acher had not expected the boy to look as much like his mother as he did, and it had been a very great shame to lose Tylenea when he had. But she had been a necessary casualty in a difficult battle, even though he had loved her more than any woman. Yes, it was true that at one point she had rejected him, but she had learned the price of doing so. His benay-gosa knew that price too, which was why they were such good little rabbits now.

It amused him how often they had tried to refuse his advances in the past, even in light of this knowledge, though they did not resist for long. He was stronger and they could be made to comply with a little pressure. It was only right that the king should exploit what was rightfully his.

Morghiad, however, seemed to have no knowledge of his entitlement at all. Or perhaps he had shunned it as a foolish sort of rebellion that had come with his age. There was certainly something off with the boy that rankled Acher more than he cared to admit,

and he needed to learn what women were. Morghiad needed to know that they were a necessary curse that had to be controlled and ruled. If only he could get his son to sample a single woman - just one - the problem might be solved.

Acher still recalled how Morghiad had shown a vastly exploitable of weakness when his pet witch had been put down. Servants had spoken of how he had wept for her, as if she were something more than an animal! Acher had been forced to go to a great deal of trouble to smother that particular rumour so that their family could save face, and so that blackmail could never be used against his feeble son.

At fifteen, the lad should have taken it like a grown man ought. He was pathetic like the blood in him, and he needed to grow a backbone if he was ever to do his duty by the city and its country. Perhaps if, and it was a large *if*, Morghiad proved himself able to sire an heir, he could be banished to some remote corner of the country where he would be of greater use. He would never make much of a ruler.

Acher scanned the room for Morghiad, who was usually distinguishable by his height, but cursed when he discovered he could not see him. Morghiad must have scurried away from taking part in the necessary social discourse like the coward he was, probably drinking in some dark corner in the company of his toy soldiers. *Damn boy!*

Acher turned his attentions to Lady Aval di Certa before his passions ran away with him. She *had* shown some interest in his son, and it may have been an indication that it was time to pursue such interests on Morghiad's behalf. Acher asked his footman to seek out the chestnut-haired beauty, and thought further on the problem. If matters did not proceed for her and Morghiad, Acher could always make her one of his own benay-gosa.

Lady di Certa approached in the company of the footman and bowed quite adequately. A draught of wine and a good beard scratch were necessary operations while Acher appraised her.

Aval had been at court some years before, but she was young and had made no great impact. She was attractive in a predatory sort of way, and far too assertive to be a good wife, but that did not mean that she could not be made benay-gosa to Morghiad. Anything more and it was entirely possible that she would try to control the feeble boy. "Tell me of your House, Lady di Certa. Is it of any import?"

The lady's eyes bulged before she answered. "The di Certa's own three-hundred square-miles of the best land in western Calidell, sire."

"Not the best land!" Acher snorted. "And what is your position in this House?"

"I am the eldest granddaughter of its head, sire." She kept her chin raised.

Acher stood from his throne and drew near to inspect her more closely. Her breasts were quite magnificent, now that he could examine them in detail. "Are you interested in my son?"

Aval kept her eyes fixed on the throne. "I find Morghiad very handsome, my king." He circled her, assessing all angles. "Yes, but what is it you want from him?"

“What any woman desires from a handsome man. Perhaps more.” Aval would be good enough for breeding - that much could be said of her.

“So you desire him for sex. Should I make you his benay-gosa?”

The woman coughed - a rather inappropriate response, given her position. “I hope to marry well someday, sire.”

“Out of the question! Marriage is for the children of kings only.”

Lady di Certa bit her lip, making it clear she wished to say more. She *was* far too assertive for a woman, and far too forthright for a noblewoman. “Of course,” she said following some breaths, “I should only wish to be with your son if he wishes the same of me.”

Acher merely responded with a grunt. He had heard quite enough, and so he took his seat upon his throne and beckoned Suhla over, so that he could run a hand appreciatively up her thigh and pull her onto the arm. She was not terribly intelligent, but she was very well-trained indeed.

“Lady di Certa, if you or my son request that you don the scarves of a benay-gosa, I will accede. I will not grant you anything more. Enjoy the ball, my lady.” He waved his hand in dismissal, and Lady di Certa curtsied before she withdrew to the mass of silks and lace.

Suhla giggled as Acher twirled his fingers in her long, dark blonde hair. He had grown rather tired of the celebrations, and watching the vultures fill their already-stuffed crops had become repetitive. King Acher rose and held out both hands to signify that he was about to leave.

The band roused the hall with a vigorous fanfare and the crowd parted, creating an avenue to the great doors. He caught Suhla and Tara by their waists and pulled them close to himself, declaring, “Tonight I shall feast on some of the finest women of Calidell. May you all feast with such abandon and pleasure as I. I bid you good night, my honoured guests.”

The crowd applauded graciously, and Acher sashayed along the channel of people with his benay-gosa in tow. The smell of the women beside him was an intoxicating perfume after the stench of so many scheming nobles had sullied his nose.

Acher took note of some of the prettier faces among the surrounding bodies as he passed, though none were quite the quality he was looking for, and it brought his mind back to other matters. *Blasted Morghiad was still absent from the gathering!* They would have words about this transgression tomorrow.

The green doors parted before him, and he passed through in a silence his coterie were trained to emulate. Once they had reached the bottom of the steps, Acher released the two women and turned to address the rest. “Tara and Suhla will accompany me this evening, please run along to your beds, my pretty whores.” It amused him highly that two of these ‘whores’ had once been high-born nobles, higher even than Aval.

The women in red curtsied like bobbing roses, and drifted away through the arched corridors that led to the benay-gosa quadrant. They truly were exquisite creatures to watch.

Acher took the hands of the remaining females and placed them together. "Will you walk in front of me, ladies? I would like to admire you from behind."

The two women inclined their heads in acquiescence and turned from him, though Tara had developed a tendency to a sullen expression recently. Such a face was quite unbecoming of a handsome woman, and once, Acher recalled, she had stood out from the other linen girls like a jewel amongst a pile of coal with those violently blue eyes of hers. But this sour-facedness made her tan skin wan and her eyes dull. He would have to correct that particular problem as soon as possible, but such were the responsibilities of being king.

Acher's apartments were a short distance from the Malachite Hall, and they took up three levels and an entire aspect of the fountain courtyard. Every floor and wall in the rooms was swathed in polished granite or marble in shades of white and grey, as the only colour the king wanted to see in there was upon himself or his women.

He followed them past the unlit antechamber and into the solar, which was high-ceilinged and broad, and filled with black velvet chaises for each woman. Beyond that lay his bed chamber, and he led his ladies through the two, heavily worked silver doors that opened onto it. A vast expanse of cream satin sheets had been set out before them.

The women's first duty was to remove their clothing slowly, and so Acher went to seat himself upon the chaise that had been placed before the window. The autumn breeze filled the voiles behind him, causing them to brush at his shoulders gently. After the heat of the hall, he welcomed the coolness that came with those soft winds.

Suhla, the shorter of the two women, arched her back sinuously as her dress dropped to the floor. *She* knew how to entertain a man, whereas the darker, taller girl was stiffer in her movements and awkward as if she had only just been accepted into his harem.

She faced away from him, which led him to suspect she still had sourness painted across her features. Both were a pleasure to admire in spite of this, but Acher had responsibilities. He rose and strode to Tara to grab her roughly by the arm, and he forced a hard kiss onto her lips. She *would* learn to behave!

Tara struggled against him, twisting her arms in an attempt to escape his grip. Her complaints were muffled against his lips, and they only served to heighten his passion for her. He released her and she stumbled backwards, dark honey hair falling over her shoulders.

"Undress me," he demanded. Suhla obeyed immediately, and began undoing the buckles on his coat with delicate fingers. Tara remained where she was for a moment, her

expression bitter and ugly. Acher made sure his displeasure was obvious. “You know what the punishment is for disobeying me,” he said.

Tara bit her lip in the midst of her grimace, moved toward him, and helped Suhla lift his coat from his shoulders. It gave him tremendous satisfaction to see her tamed, to see her obey.

Still pouting, Tara pulled his shirt out from behind his breeches, uncrossed it and tugged it from his arms while Suhla got to work on his belt. She was doing it much too slowly for Acher’s patience, and so he pushed her away, which sent her reeling to the floor, and undid the fastening himself.

But Tara was going to be the one to learn her lesson first. He indicated for her to get on the bed, and she obliged, again with a grim look upon her pretty face, and lay face-down upon the sheets.

Acher kicked off the last of his trousers, along with his heavy boots, and walked steadily to the prostrate woman. Her face was buried so that her expression was hidden, which was a very good thing, now that he thought on it. Sour faces offended him.

At the very least, he could enjoy her fine backside and the curve of her spine without her mood spoiling it, and once he had done so, he leaned forward so that he could place a fist either side of her shoulders and his knees between her thighs. She remained perfectly still. *Good girl.*

Suhla approached to perform her duties as the second woman, making sure that he was suitably aroused. Of course, this engagement would benefit Tara too, as any pleasure he felt, she would get to share in. He often wondered why women were not more grateful for that, and that puzzling thought, he lifted his right hand to run it down to her bottom, pulling one firm cheek away from its companion. The skin felt wonderfully soft beneath his fingers.

Just then, Tara thrust herself upward faster than he could react, and she thumped his face squarely with her back. In surprise, Acher fell backward from the bed before he could catch himself, and the ground came to greet him rapidly. An aghast Suhla watched on with hands that covered her mouth, but she did nothing – *nothing* - to intervene.

While Acher lay flat on his back in shock, Tara leapt to her feet and ran to the opposite edge of the bed. She slipped, fell onto a pile of clothes and then re-adjusted herself, grabbing at a robe once she had found her feet again. She made for the doors, but pushed over a crowd of glass vases as she hauled on the gown. Each vase shattered into thousands of shards as they hit the hard, marble floor. *Burn her!*

Acher seethed, for he was no weakling. He rolled onto his side and clambered onto all fours, yelling after her as he recovered his balance, then launched into the air with arms outstretched. He caught her around the legs, and they both fell to the cold, polished floor with considerable force – such force that Acher’s left elbow gave out a loud snap. It sent

waves of shrieking pain through his body, but he gripped Tara's ankle firmly with his good arm before she could escape.

"Suhla! Fix me so I can deal with her!"

His grip was too strong for Tara's squirming, but he did not know how long that would last.

Suhla approached the pair tentatively and knelt before them.

"Take the hand and hold it tightly," he instructed. He could feel that one of the bones in his lower arm had rotated out of the socket and was now caught or snapped in an outward manner, and he knew what would be necessary.

Suhla gripped his palm and he heaved his weight against it, still clutching a writhing Tara in his other fist. He gave his left arm a sharp, inward twist, and the resulting pop made Suhla jump back in surprise, but Acher knew it had worked. The pain immediately subsided as he felt the bones knit back together again. He turned to Tara. She would pay very dearly for injuring the king - very dearly indeed!

He grabbed her other ankle and dragged her back into his bedchamber. She was kicking and screaming at him now, yelling something about his being vile or wretched or some other insult. But Acher gritted his teeth and hauled her into the broken glass, revelling in her screams as he did so. He roughly flipped her body over, and seated her back deeply into the crushed shards so that they would penetrate the robe. Her front was speckled with glittering lumps of glass and drops of blood.

A few of the larger cuts were already sealing themselves closed and extruding pieces of vase like eyes squeezing out their tears.

Tara was weeping freely. Her body could undergo far more injury before it lost its ability to self-heal quickly. She knew that he could make her suffer, that he *would* make her suffer.

"Do what you will, *King* Acher," she spat at him, "I will be your whore no longer. I'd rather die than share your foetid, barren bed again!"

Acher braced her against the floor using one knee and wrapped her hair around his fist with a calmness that impressed himself. He began to pull her up by it. She kicked out in reflex, and the boniest part of her knee made contact with his crotch. He buckled instantly, eyes shutting hard against the light. He could do nothing to prevent his hand from releasing her hair, and she was free.

Tara sprinted past Suhla to the apartment doors, and threw her weight against them. They parted lethargically at first, but then they began to slide more rapidly upon their bearings. She glanced behind her, observing Acher was not close, and ran through.

He lay on the floor amidst the sparkling pieces of vase for a score of breaths, and considered his own anger at her foolish decision until it made his blood boil. At least Suhla had remained. *Loyal little Suhla.*

She was trying to soothe him, though he was beginning to find it rather irritating and unnecessary. In a few more heartbeats he would be recovered and able to resume his planned activity with her. Just a few more moments of agony. No, when the pain was gone, he would call the guards and have them track down Tara. It wouldn't take them very long to find her. Then, he thought, it would be time to make an example of her.



Chapter 5

Fold upon fold of blue cotton fabric descended from her broad hips to the grey marble floor, swaying as she moved about the bed. A simple tune purred along her lips in time with her movements, and though she was too plain to be classically beautiful, and too wide for Morghiad's taste, her dark yellow curls were rather glossy and fluid. Caala arranged the bed sheets with her usual forceful vigour, and something about her reminded him of stories of Queen Garhel of Orta, an indestructible woman of robust proportions who fought off twelve invasions in a single century.

Morghiad suppressed a grin, closed his book and rose to peer out of the nearest window. The clouds still hung heavily in the sky. "I've asked another servant girl to assume your duties. Her name is Artemi. Has she mentioned this to you?"

The broad woman jumped as soon as he spoke, but then it was not often that more than a nod passed between them during her visits. Morghiad kept his position with his hands clasped at his back, and waited for her to turn slowly. Her face was plump and a little pink from her exertion, and Morghiad could see from her eyes that she was old, though quite how old was not an aspect he was willing to gamble upon.

Caala cleared her throat and smoothed down her skirts. "I have spoken to her about it. Unfortunately she has a backlog of cleaning to do from the blood- er, the feast day. She will be along when she has completed it, my kahr."

That really was not good enough. Artemi needed to learn as much as possible about her power in a very short time, and it was far more important than scrubbing ball dresses! He had no option but to speak to her directly. "Where can I find her at this hour?"

Caala's eyes bulged, which might have meant Morghiad's inquisition was giving her entirely the wrong impression, but he did not attempt to correct himself.

"Er, my kahr?" she began. "Does my work not please you?" Immediately she realised the impudent manner of her question and bowed awkwardly, reddening further. "You may find her in the servants' cellars at this time of day, I believe. If not, she may still be in the linen rooms."

Morghiad nodded and glanced back at the clouds. He had never been down to the cellars before, though it was a trip many of his men had made. "I have no problem with your work."

He heard her sniff in response, and he ignored it purposefully. The sky appeared to be darkening by the minute. “I hear the cellars are something of a maze. Will you help me find her?” He had little time to waste wandering around those caverns. Perhaps he could ask Artemi about Silar, since such affairs were his business, in a way. He had to keep everyone safe from her, and he had to protect that flaming-hair woman too.

“Of course, my kahr.” Caala curtsied with surprising elegance. “Will you allow me to complete my duties here before we depart?”

Morghiad grunted in agreement and collected his sword, before drawing it partially from its scabbard and examining the engravings at the top of the blade. Artemi might have had the skill to use it in her past lives, but she would need something better-suited to her height and hands while she learned. Having a woman’s sword made would be a difficult secret to keep, though it would be a conundrum for a time in the future. For now she could train with a cadet’s wooden practice sword.

He slid the blade back into its casing and hooked it onto his belt. Caala was still hurrying around the fog of pure, white sheeting when he strode into his bathing room and thrust his face into a bowl of water. It could probably do with a wash.

After a minute or two, Caala presented herself at the doorway and announced that she was ready to leave. Morghiad roughly scrubbed the water from his features with a towel, and proceeded from his rooms with the servant at his side.

The pair wandered down the wide galleries, hallways and, eventually, tunnels of the castle without urgency, Morghiad eating the ground with easy strides and Caala swaying at her measured rate. She maintained her silence until she reached the entrance to the cellar steps, where she rounded on him like a mother would upon an errant child.

Her tone did not quite match the image, however. “Excuse me, my kahr, but... I’d always thought you were a better man than this. Better than the rest of them.” Her shoulders remained stiff. “Artemi’s a good girl, my kahr, but her looks can get her into trouble. She doesn’t deserve—”

Morghiad felt his eyebrows demand that they should rise a full three inches up his forehead and immediately set about arresting them. “I am not here for that.” He compressed his lips a little. “Could we please continue?”

Caala harrumphed but said nothing more, turned and continued down the steps.

The chill of the underground caverns worked deeper into his clothes with each yard he descended, and the tunnel seemed to become more enclosed. Some of the lamps had either been extinguished to save fuel or had been left to burn out altogether, which left the steps perilously dark in places. This would have to be fixed.

The gritty treads wound round another full circle before the light of the main cellars filtered in, and Morghiad was glad for his cloak as he observed his breath misting in the biting air.

The servants' vaults were quiet presently, and the only noise was the low chatter of some distant inhabitants. *That was odd.* He was sure he had been told by one of the sergeants that this was an unbearably noisy place to visit.

Two blue-clad, male servants squatted to the side of the main chamber, eyeing him closely as he moved past. Royalty ought to be something of a rare occurrence down here, and it would probably remain so as long as his father lived.

Caala rolled ahead of Morghiad, leading him through a curved arch in the sculpted mud walls. He found he had to stoop considerably to avoid hitting his head, as the chambers had been carved by a species of incredibly short people. Conditions inside the rooms soon curtailed his idle thoughts, however.

Every fireplace sat empty or full of dust, many of the floors were damp, few candles illuminated the darkness and scant, tatty belongings lay in each tiny cell. At least the people in the poor quarter of the city had some privacy. There was none of that here, and he could not help but feel as if his heart had sunk even deeper into the earth.

Morghiad kept his silence and his eyes to the ground as he followed Caala, twisting through the rooms of sleeping maids and dozing waiters. Finally, Caala slowed her pace and motioned for him to wait. His tarrying place seemed to be someone else's chamber, which made his feet itch and his shoulders tense. From the next chamber came the sound of Artemi's voice and the rustling of skirts as Caala made some quiet explanations.

The serving woman moved aside, and Morghiad was permitted a view of the room beyond. Inexplicably, he had expected it to be different from the others, but it was the same: cramped, cold and bare. Artemi stood before a rumpled red blanket and curtsied gracefully. The soft glow of the chamber's two candles illuminated her features enough to demonstrate her dark eyes and fine cheekbones, or at least enough of her to make him swallow hard.

He prayed neither of the women had noticed his reaction, and stepped forward, nodding to Caala as she made her departure. Morghiad moved to assume a seat on the floor of the hollow, and beckoned for Artemi to join him when he observed that she was hovering uncomfortably.

"I was not aware that the servants lived like this," Morghiad said, examining the compacted floor and the two battered books that lay upon it. A wilted rose lay just beyond.

"I'm sorry I could not provide you with a more impressive reception, my kahr."

Morghiad was unable to fathom if she was making jokes or simply lambasting his ignorance. He suppressed his confusion as much as he could, and proceeded to make his more pressing thoughts clear. "There is no need for this 'my kahr' business. 'Captain' is the rank I work for, if you really must use a title. Ranking officers in the army call each other by their first names. Perhaps you will be a part of that one day."

Her eyes widened a little, but of course, she would not yet know that she greatly outranked him in terms of experience and birth, and many times over. It seemed utterly

ridiculous to have a hero of legend call him 'my kahr,' though he would have to be cautious that he did not treat her in a manner outwardly different from the others. Morghiad continued, "Why are all the fireplaces empty when it is so cold here?"

Artemi regarded her own grating with longing. "No one can afford to buy firewood, and even if they could, the chimneys were filled many years ago."

Morghiad nodded and considered the problem. Firewood was cheap enough for him to obtain, but unblocking the chimneys would be more of a challenge. The flues from a network like this could extend for mile upon mile. There had to be a more inventive solution to this... inhuman situation, and he rubbed at the stubble that had formed under his chin while he pondered. It was then that he recalled he had not shaved before coming to see her.

"I have come here to ask that you commence your duties with me as soon as possible. You must come to my chambers tomorrow. I have an afternoon to dedicate to your training."

Artemi's brows twitched and her eyeballs bulged from her head. She struggled to keep her speech to a whisper, "Do you want everyone here to think that we are lovers? Either keep your voice down or choose your language more wisely. Captain." She chewed her lip for a moment. "And as for visiting the cellars like this, it is something your men stopped doing very recently. I haven't slept so well in months! Do you think this is a good example to set them?"

Her outburst had been restrained, but it made his muscles want to twitch from discomfort. He had not considered any of this, but then he was always terrible at social situations with women, and Silar had often reminded him of it. Such outcomes had not occurred to him at all. "It may serve you better if they think you are... if we..." He cleared his throat. "I'd rather they thought I was... with you."

She folded her arms in frustration. "And how this reflects upon me - did you consider that? I suppose I don't have the right to any self-respect after your... *discovery*."

Morghiad kept his voice low. "I'm sorry, Artemi. I was concerned about your absence and marched down here without a second thought. There is no reason for my concern, I trust?"

Her face softened visibly, though she kept her arms folded. "I made a commitment to help clear through the laundry from Gialdin Day. It has taken longer than expected. It was not a commitment I could easily escape from. No one has... troubled me."

"And what of Silar?" Morghiad felt a touch of guilt asking such a question behind his friend's back, but it had to be investigated

Artemi blinked in surprise, and it was possible her cheeks reddened slightly. It was tricky to be sure in the low light. "He approached me at the feast day. I spoke to him for a minute or two. There was nothing more."

“There must not be anything more. He is a good friend and otherwise intelligent, but he is an utter fool around women.” Especially pretty ones, Morghiad thought. If she tied her hair back, it would be less noticeable and draw less attention, though now that he thought on it, it would probably only reveal more of her blasted, handsome face. Morghiad stayed as calm as he could, and pushed his internal conflict aside. “You will find other passions in your life. I am sure of that, Artemi.” He hoped that sounded reassuring; it was what he had promised himself, after all.

She gave him a weak smile and huddled against the wall.

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head. “I fear what is to come, and I am ashamed of it.” She *was* shivering.

“That is a feeling I know well. Here.” He unhooked his black cloak and put it around her shoulders. “You can give it back to me when the cellars have heating once more.”

“You believe you can mend *this*?” Artemi pulled the thick fabric around her, savouring its warmth.

The cold air of the underground rapidly seeped through the thin material of Morghiad’s summer coat, and he knew he ought to head back to his chambers before he regretted giving away such valuable items of his clothing. “I will do what I can, my lady. It may take some time. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She gave him a nod and a sweet smile in agreement. *Artemi Fireblade. Blazes!*

Morghiad rose, bowed and made his goodbyes. He was fairly sure he had memorised the route through the cellars accurately, though perhaps Artemi would come and rescue him if he wasn’t in his chambers tomorrow. Or perhaps not.



Artemi’s eyes flickered open, burned by the dim sunlight that oozed from the ceiling well. She gazed down at the cloak that covered her shoulders. It was surprisingly warm, and had clearly been made to fend off the winters at the highest Kemeni mountaintops. The captain had shown appreciable kindness for a man carved from the very masonry of the castle, and she ran her fingers through the soft fur lining and over the rich, green embroidery at the edge.

She could not quite establish what the outer fabric was, though it was light as silk, it appeared to be tough as chain mail. Artemi fought off the urge to remain wrapped in its warmth for the full day, and sat up on the bedroll. She folded the cloak inside her red

blanket in the hope that it would be concealed from covetous eyes, and began to dress herself.

It was probable that her neighbours were gossiping about her, and that Caala suspected she had gone against her word. Wielding was something she would have to lie about, but then... how was she supposed to explain their relationship? *Friends* might suffice, and a shared interest in reading could easily have brought them together. Given the kahr-captain's manner and complete absence of interest in women, it was believable enough, was it not?

She was improving her skill at lacing her own bodice when Caala was not there, and it was almost as tight as the other woman could tie it once she was done. One just needed to hold one's breath for a little longer than usual. Artemi knotted the cords at the base of her spine, perhaps too many times, and ran a comb roughly through her hair.

Her walk through the cellars came with only half the chagrin she had imagined. A couple of the other linen girls gave her a sly wink, but most kept their eyes and thoughts to themselves. He had not been in her chamber long enough for them to assume much had happened, she supposed, and perhaps it meant the gossip would not be as troublesome as she had feared. Artemi laughed inside her own head. What if they thought he had undressed her, been disgusted with what he had found, and had rejected her?! Hah! What a reputation she would have!

There was some time left to tackle the remains of Gialdin Day washing before her impending appointment, and she intended to do her best with it while she was still employable. Besides, she needed to bathe, and jumping into a spent washing barrel would be just the thing.

A day of washing had passed, Artemi's arms had turned pink from the sting of the soap, and though the skin would recover within a few seconds, it was irritating nonetheless. The darkening light wells in the linen room told her that the sun had passed its zenith at least an hour ago, which meant it was time to attend to Kahr-Captain Morghiad.

She shook the fine silk underskirt, still soaking from the water, and placed it on the drying rack. Some very fine clothing had passed through her hands today, and a not-insignificant part of her enjoyed handling the silks or gossamer dresses, imagining how it would be if she could wear them. Earlier, she had shared her dreams with the other girls while they bathed in the soapy vat, and her hair was just about dry from that now.

Caala had given her stern looks all day, though no words had passed between them, which *had* been difficult to bear. Caala very nearly glared at Artemi as she made her leave taking, which was more than a little uncalled-for.

She stepped out of the steam-filled room, and the cavernous tunnels echoed with her footsteps as she marched toward the captain's chambers. It was not just the servants' cellars - the whole castle had taken on a much quieter nature of late, which was an atmosphere she relished now that it was present.

She stopped short of the giant moth sculpture in one of the larger corridors. It was a truly hideous thing, and its artist had even gone to the trouble of depicting the hairs upon its back. The granite statue stood at least as tall as she did, and its wings were spread only partially so as to distinguish it from the beauty of a butterfly. Millennia of servants rushing past had seen the carving sustain a few chips here and there, but it still retained its imposing character.

Artemi moved on quickly, and soon she reached Morghiad's door. She raised her hand to knock, only to have it open before she could complete the action.

"You walk like a newly shod horse," was the welcome from the kahr-captain, "You ought to learn to walk like a Tegrar tiger. It would serve you better." He stood back from the entrance and waited as she proceeded past him.

Whatever was wrong with her walk? It was how she had always walked. How many different ways of putting one's foot in front of the other could there be? She decided it would be wise to keep her silence rather than balk at his comment. He had allowed her to live, after all.

Morghiad pushed the door shut and seated himself upon a plain wooden stool that he had positioned before the worn armchair. Artemi hoped he had moved it there with some subtlety, since he did not strike her as the sort of man to entertain visitors.

He motioned for her to sit before him, and studied her for several uncomfortable breaths. "There are a few items I must explain to you before we begin training. Some of these matters you will have heard from hearsay; some you may have read about. Some of it will be true, and some of it will be nonsense."

Artemi nodded.

"What you wield is not a part of you. It does not come from you, but through you. It will, however, take a considerable amount of your energy in controlling it. You will require a great deal of discipline given the amount of Blaze you have the potential to wield. Until you are twenty, or thereabouts, you will not be able to do this yourself. You will need me to wield it for you. When we do use Blaze, it must be kept within the confines of this room, it must be a small amount and a partition must be set up. The partition will veil your wielding from the senses of any nearby kanaala. Blaze Energy is controlled by means of manipulating its shape, intensity, speed and vibration..."

Morghiad continued with his list of instructions for some time, but the lack of emotion or emphasis in his voice made it intensely difficult for Artemi to concentrate. She hoped that she had picked up the most important pieces of information from his preamble as she permitted her mind to drift.

“...And that is why wielders can only bed kanaala and why women generally do not survive the birth of a kanaala,” Morghiad finished.

What had that been? She had missed the last explanation completely, and found herself staring instead at a band tied around the upper of his arm. She hoped that a nod and smile would suffice for her response. If he were not such an inanimate lump of rock, it would have been so much easier to concentrate. No wonder he had never taken a lover - the man appeared utterly incapable of sentiment!

Perhaps that would be something she could teach him in return for his lessons.

“Do you have any questions, Artemi?”

She searched the insides of her mind, hoping that what she was about to drag out of it had not already been explained. His green eyes burned into her, and they appeared to have turned from their usual grass colour to moss in the low light. She could not recall him talking of Achellon, and decided that, yes, that would do. “And what do you think of Achellon?” she asked brightly. “Do you think The Blazes were really born from there?”

“Achellon may once have existed. Who can say if it still exists? As for Blaze Energy, I can sense elements of it in everything that surrounds us. It is an integral part of this world and you are a portal through which it will flow. If The Blazes came from Achellon, then so did the rest of this land.”

Artemi shifted uncomfortably at the thought of being some sort of gateway. The name ‘wielder’ had implied a far more active role than the one he had described.

Morghiad leaned forward and took her hand, instantly sending fire up her arm, through her body and down toward the ground. The sensation was so powerful that she could not prevent an involuntary intake of breath. How *did* Morghiad suppress it?

The sensation did not lessen with time either, but she found she could be carried with it, even enjoy it after a time. She closed her eyes, breathed slowly through the torrent and tried to understand it more completely. When she opened her eyes again, Morghiad was studying her face closely. The sky outside had darkened, which meant she must have shifted time. *Or* she had sat here like a blazed kefruit for the last several hours.

Morghiad spoke gently. “You tried to wield your own power through me. Were you aware that you were doing that?”

“I what? I... no. I was trying to work out where I ended and you began. And trying not to get burned like a feast day’s charred carcass at the same time.”

Morghiad’s face did not alter in the slightest. “You have not done anything wrong.”

Of course she had not! She did not need him to tell her that. Wait, could he read her mind when they were doing this?

He continued, "But you are very... closed off. You must not fear me or your abilities. In your current state of mind, I cannot guide your power. You must trust me, relax and give in to the storm blowing through your veins."

"Give in to it? Are you mad? It feels like it's about to incinerate me... and you!" And the rest of the city along with it.

"You are safe here. Trust me."

Surely he was an idiot. An *idiot* kanaala. Artemi took a deep breath and began relaxing each of her muscles from the neck down, even though nothing had ever struck such fear in her before. The torrent of fire in her body felt as if it were building to a great inferno that wanted to rip her limbs from her torso and throw them out of the window like bits of burning paper. She gripped Morghiad's hand tightly and allowed the flames to consume her.

Just as she thought she was about to combust into a billion tiny pieces, she felt him *do* something. He had a sort of hold over her that she could not quite explain. It was a feeling of being simultaneously held in place and let loose across a vast desert, or a mountain... or perhaps the oceans.

Artemi opened her eyes and glanced about the room hurriedly. She could sense the world's movements for miles around, or at least, that was how it felt. Servants hopped about everywhere within the massive warren of the castle, jumping here and lolloping there. Thousands of other people milled more slowly amongst the complex, cold stone of the city. Beyond, she could sense the grass waving in the breeze across the soft earth, and farther still was the hard, wooden rasp of the Cadran forests.

She could feel the same energy flowing through her, vibrating in the room around. It really *was* in everything. It was beautiful, and it was making her feel oddly appreciative of Morghiad's touch. She immediately shoved that feeling to the very furthest corners of her mind, since she was not about to allow herself to be aroused by a stone - not to mention the other ones in the walls!

Morghiad shifted his gaze to the perimeter of the room and let out a trickle of energy. The tiny waves wobbled in an eccentric manner and twisted into peculiar shapes when they hit the walls, floor and ceiling. He continued doing this until the entire room sparkled with hints of Blaze Energy. Finally, he released his hold on her power and her hand.

Artemi felt the bottom of the world drop from beneath her as he let go, and her lungs struggled to expand for breath. As she gasped like a fish taken from the water, Morghiad relaxed back into the thin backrest of his bench.

The man was impossible to decipher, and she was probably imagining it, but if she had not known better, she would have thought he appeared a little dazed.

Behind him, the evidence of the partition he had created was slowly fading from her view. "Will other kanaala be able to see that?" Artemi asked.

He shook his head. "You and I can see it when The Blazes are inside us. They will not unless they bring a wielder in here or unless they know what to look for." He crossed an ankle over the opposite knee. "Forgive me if I took rather more than I should have from you. I've never experienced anything quite like your power before. There's more of it, obviously, but it feels different. I cannot explain how, even to myself." He glanced at the floor in thought.

"Thank you."

Morghiad looked up. "Whatever for?"

"For that... sensation. I can die happy now that I have known it." She smiled as warmly as she could.

He looked blankly at her, evidently not understanding what a smile meant and most likely not sensing any of the amiability she was pushing his way. It was no different from trying to interact with a block of ice! Artemi let a small sigh pass her lips, and settled herself deeper into the armchair. There really was little point in her trying to befriend him, but the wielding - that *had* felt incredible.

Morghiad's eventual response was not what she had expected. "I'm going to teach you how to use a sword for self-defence. If you are to excel, you must gain better control of your emotions."

Artemi's jaw dropped before she could prevent it. "Me? Control my emotions? At least *I* have them. It's you who needs to get some bloody emotions!" For shame that she was speaking like Caala! "At least people can communicate with me!" First he had insulted her walking, and now he dared to... *infuriating!*

A frown briefly touched his forehead - if Artemi had blinked she would have missed it - and Morghiad began to speak in measured tones. "It is better not to feel if one is to learn true discipline. You must be able to control everything in your mind. Do you think it would be safe for you to wield enough power to burn a city without any grasp on your anger? It is the same for wielding a sword."

"But others will think you are made of stone, that you don't care about them or any of their feelings," she protested.

"My responsibilities demand that I be made of stone, Artemi. And now so do yours."

She did not want to turn into a lump of rock like him. She could not be so cold! Surely it was not the right path? And she had enough reason in her not to allow anger skew important judgements like killing innocent people. She had never been that... impassioned. "Surely it is worse to kill others and feel nothing?"

"Even the most disciplined of us feel something at the death of another. It is the emotion which precedes the killing that is important." He still sounded remarkably calm and measured, which only fuelled Artemi's fire more.

"I would not burn thousands of people because I was *emotional*," she retorted.

Morghiad gazed at her levelly. “You have a father, true? What if someone injured or killed your father? How rational would you be in that situation?”

“Do not bring him into this!” she snapped. Oh, he had caught her in his little trap. Blasted man! She calmed herself once more. “I’d punish only those responsible.”

He continued in the same tone, “And do you believe you could protect yourself adequately if you were overly emotional?”

Artemi stayed silent this time. He was intentionally winding her up, she was sure of it. She began to wonder if, beneath that mask of stone, the man actually felt just as much as she did. Perhaps he was simply better at hiding it than others were, and the more she thought upon it, the more she was convinced. He was probably enjoying a world of self-satisfied smugness at this very moment, and she stared intently at the fireplace so that he would have no more reasons to be pleased with himself.

Morghiad uncrossed his legs and stretched out. “You have learned the first lesson: self-awareness. The earlier you catch yourself spiralling out of control, the easier it will be to regain control.”

Artemi almost scowled back at him. Almost. Instead, she put on her best acting face and nodded politely. Bloody kahrs and their bloody superiority! It would be nice to chew on some rocks. “Morghiad?”

“Yes?”

She put on her most innocent voice. “Am I still allowed to laugh at jokes?”

“Yes.” Morghiad’s face remained entirely straight. If anything, his eyes seemed to burn even deeper into her skull. No. There was nothing going on in there, she decided. No humour whatsoever. *Waste of a good man.*

He stood and clasped his hands behind his back. “Our session is complete for today. I shall see you again tomorrow.”

Artemi rose from the armchair, offered a meagre curtsy and exited the room. It was not that she wanted to be rude to him, and he *was* aiding her. It was just that he needed to learn she wouldn’t be pushed about like one of his soldiers. She hissed through her teeth at the thought, and switched her mind to other matters.

Enough anger for now; it was time to return to that warm cloak. That, at least, was something to look forward to.



Artemi strode away from Morghiad before he shut the door behind her, and it was an easy, swaying walk she had, but far too noisy and attention-seeking to be sensible. He

leaned against the hard wood of the doorframe, and tried to sort through the whirling mess that now cluttered his mind. A small chortle at her final comment was permitted, once he was sure she was out of earshot.

For all his instruction on emotional control, he had barely been able to keep his sentiments in check during their meeting. It had been almost impossible not to laugh at her words, delivered with such a straight and child-like face. Her arguments had not been too tricky to counter, but he *had* almost raised his voice at her, which would never have been acceptable.

He was sure his responses had been correct in content at least, but the woman seemed to have a peculiar way of riling him almost as much as his father did. *No, equally as much.* Morghiad would have to learn to better contain his annoyance if he was going to spend time training her. No doubt she would offer him plenty of opportunities to practise.

He went to sit in the armchair she had occupied, and noted that the surface still held some of the warmth of her presence, and more importantly, the faint buzz of her power. He would have to be watchful of that in places where she wielded, especially where kanaala might be about. That imprint was something Ilena's abilities had never been sufficient to do.

He hoped that no one had felt The Blazes run through him, given that he had been so greedy with it, but it had felt like nothing else on this earth. Kanaala could become addicted to using power like that, some history books had said, and now he understood why. There had been a point when the fires had almost pulled him towards her, had invited him to inspect her skin and hair closely, to examine the arc of her back and curve of her breasts. He had not anticipated that part of it at all, and Ilena had never mentioned anything about that. But then, he had been so much younger. Perhaps she had not thought it appropriate talk for a young boy.

Morghiad spotted something glistening on the floor by the chair, and he reached down to pick it up, before holding it by the firelight. It was one of her gold-red hairs, and it still buzzed with the power of the woman from whom it had come. He wrapped it around one of his fingers to consider the ancient nature of it, and a dozen questions twisted round his mind too. How many other kanaala through history had enjoyed her power, and how many had abused it? How easy would it be for him to fall into the same trap?

Morghiad wondered if the Artemi who knew what she was - the Artemi he hoped one day to meet - trusted kanaala. A wielder who had lived as long as she had would almost certainly have known cruel ones in the past, and their behaviour could well cause him problems in the present. He would have to make it clear to her that he was not like them – that he thought little of such men.

There was also the business of introducing her to the faces of kanaala he knew in the city. He would have to show her in a manner that would not reveal her to them, but she was a noticeable face, and he had already been seen with her after that foolish trip to the

cellars. He would have to be more careful now, work harder at finding secret meeting places, and still permit her a good opportunity to view those men.

Three of the other kanaala in Cadra enjoyed their duties far too much, and their eyes would sparkle and mouths salivate when they spoke of exterminating wielder children. It was perverse, given that two of their own mothers had been wielders. Morghiad was not sure how he could re-join the sweeps now that he had befriended his quarry, though duty would surely demand it.

There were two more kanaala in Cadra whom he liked better, but only one of them might be amenable to protecting Artemi's secret. Of course, all five of them were in the Cadran army, and if he wanted Artemi in battle, he would have to find a way to solve that particular issue.

He uncurled the hair from his fingers and concealed it within a drawer, beneath his clothing. It would be useful for establishing how long her close-kept possessions retained a memory of her Blaze Energy, and then he would know precisely how long to keep kanaala away from items she had touched.

Morghiad opened his shirt and then the window, and waited for the cool autumn breeze to touch his chest. He looked down at the window sill, where his arms ought to be half inside the partition of Blaze he had created. It was something that could not be sensed unless he made a point of looking for it, but it was a creation that Ilena would have been proud of. He hoped so, anyway.

Looking after Artemi would not bring Ilena back, but he knew that it was the right course of action for the moment. The cellars were far from an ideal place for her to remain while she was defenceless, and far from him, but what else could be done about it? The cellars... now, *there* was something he could find a solution to - that problem with the chimneys...



Beodrin rounded the corner on another glittering wall of swords, and was glad to find that he was close to completing his inspection of the weapon rooms. He was also about to become a father for the second time, and had barely been able to contain his excitement all day. Kahr-Captain Morghiad had been generous enough to give him time off from his duties, but Beodrin had decided to work through the afternoon. Marynia was due late in the evening, and he knew that if he had fidgeted around the house all day, he would only have made her more anxious. And so instead he had inspected swords, cleaned

daggers, polished boots and completed a huge pile of time-consuming tasks that were normally reserved for cadets.

Now the sun had descended to its dark chamber of hiding, and it was time to return to his wife in the city. He loved his wife deeply, though what she had seen in a short, plain and unremarkable soldier, he had never been able to fathom. She was far too pretty for him and far too tolerant of his missions to distant countries - missions that she joined him on.

It was customary for a wife to travel with her soldier-husband so that their bond would not be broken, but Marynia had attended even the smallest of assignments. She had given him a wonderful son nine years earlier, and the boy was already proving himself intelligent enough to be something better than a warrior. With luck, he would not follow in his father's footsteps, and Beodrin hoped the same would be true of this next child.

He signed off the weapons itinerary, nodded to the guards and began his journey to the exit of the castle. And it *was* a journey - the damned tunnels would take minutes to navigate before he reached the open air beyond. He hummed a tavern tune quietly to himself, and thought of the food that waited for him at home. He thought about the size of his wife's belly and how it had grown from nothing in the last fortnight.

Nine years to know; two weeks to grow; an eternity to blow, went the old rhyme.

He chuckled to himself, interrupting his own music, but his mirth was also cut short when a black shape whipped past the corner of his eye.

Instinctively, Beodrin drew his sword and moved quietly toward the shadows. He could smell that something did not fit with the usual moulder and sweat of the castle; it was oily and smoky and sickly sweet – like a burned carcass.

The shape darted across the hall in front of him, much too swift to be an ordinary man.

"Guards!" he shouted.

The shadow leapt out, daggers spinning in the air and flashing in the low light.

Beodrin managed to swipe across the figure in front of him, and his blade made a soft thunk when it met something, but it was not enough. The shape continued its assault on him, pinned him to the floor and spoke in a broken voice that sounded like metal rasping on slate, "Where is the Kusuru whore?"

Horror spread through Beodrin's veins and bones as he realised what his assailant was - an eisiel! With sudden clarity, he understood that his chances of surviving this encounter would be very slim indeed. Worse, Marynia would not be able to birth the child without him there. *It would be the end of their family - the end of everything!*

The eisiel's teeth glistened with someone else's blood, and the droplets fell upon Beodrin's face. Beodrin emitted a low growl before he knew what he was doing, dragged his short sword from his belt, and shoved it hard into the side of the eisiel.

The thing screamed in pain, and reeled back into the corridor wall behind it.

Beodrin was not about to slow down yet. He grabbed one of the pinh-soaked daggers that the eisiel had thrown, and pitched it into the creature's ribs. It cried out again, and its twisted face contorted even further in agony.

The creature would rally soon; it was already pulling his short sword out from its trunk, and so Beodrin had to move hurriedly to find his sword. He spun to where he thought it had fallen, but found it absent. His eyes darted to the right, and they burned with the effort of seeking out his missing blade.

When they found it, it was glinting fully twenty yards away from him. It was too far for Beodrin to make a run before the eisiel would begin another attack, but there was no other option available to him. He sprinted to the sword, and felt something cold slam into his back before he reached it. But Beodrin did not stop.

He flew at the sword, caught it and turned, striking his blade straight down. The metal met the soft flesh of the eisiel's face, and split it fully into two halves. A terrible scream rose from the thing, and the stone walls of the hallway shook from the pitch of it.

Beodrin dropped to his knees in the pool of black blood, gasping for breath. He had survived, yet he feared what had happened to his back, and he feared it more because it did not hurt. Such numbness usually meant a nasty injury, which was the last thing he needed when Marynia could be in such danger without him.

Running footfalls grew louder, and he desperately hoped that they belonged to guards who knew enough to remove pinh blades, but he dared not move enough to turn and see them. If he had, the extra twisting and turning could send the poison deeper into his body and paralyse him for good.

Two young, recently recruited guards flopped down beside him, and the youngest, sporting a small amount of chin fluff, spoke first, "You've got a dagger in your back, lieutenant."

"I'm very well-aware of that, soldier. Now will you pull the bloody thing out for me?"

The older one exclaimed, "Blazes alight! You've gone and killed an eisiel! Only Lord-Lieutenant Forllan has done that before. He's an ugly sod, isn't he?"

Beodrin laughed. "I don't think Silar would appreciate you talking of him in that manner. But seriously you-" His speech was cut short as the dagger was yanked from his spine. It hurt now. A lot. "You need to alert everyone and check the surrounding halls. It looks like this one took a bite out of someone before he got to me."

The older recruit looked at Beodrin's back with poorly concealed suspicion. "I'll get some water to wash that out," he said, and trotted back down the corridor.

The chin-fluff guard simply stared at Beodrin, bloody dagger in hand.

"Well, boy? Are you going to warn everyone else or not? I don't need you minding me. Get on with you!"

The young soldier dropped the dagger and ran obediently down the hall, yelling something about eisiels and invaders, which ought to stir things up a bit.

A moment later, the other man had returned with a bucket of water, which he used to roughly wash out Beodrin's wound. "Sew it up now," he ordered.

"But it's not clean yet." The guard's protestations fell on deaf ears.

"I must get to my wife. Just fix it. Now." Beodrin only permitted himself to relax his shoulders when he realised the soldier would not argue further, and gritted his teeth as the stitches went in. Too much time may have passed already, but there was no striking bell this evening to tell him of it. *Please, let Marynia not feel the first movements just yet...*

The guard finished his handiwork and stood, proffering Beodrin's blood-stained coat. A deep breath was necessary before Beodrin could find his shaky feet, but he believed he could make the journey home without aid. The soldier did not help by flashing his doubtful expression at him, however.

More men began to approach, and Lord-Lieutenant Silar was among them. He was another young appointment who was barely free of his mothers' breast, but he did know his way around a sword, if not much else. "I see you're trying to equal my score, Lieutenant Beodrin," Silar said jovially, "Not bad work, not bad at all."

Beodrin mustered a small smile. "Excuse me, Silar – ah, Lord-Lieutenant - but I must get to my wife now. She is about to have a baby."

Silar's grin evaporated from his face. "Er. Right. Of course. Are you sure you're alright to...er? Well, I'll sort everything out here and tell Morghiad. You go and... do your duty."

Beodrin nodded politely and made his way out of the stronghold, where the cold air was a blessing upon on his sore back and flushed cheeks.

The house was not much of a stumble away, and fortunately it lay on the top level of the city, where the crescent moon would be visible. Beodrin pressed on along the green stone roads, suppressing thoughts of pain with thoughts of his new child. He would name it after Rahake if it was a boy and Marynia wanted to call it Selieni if it was a girl. *Both good names*. Presently, and quite before he had expected it, the white door of the house drew close.

His young son came running out of the door out as he neared, panic plain upon his small features. "Father, where have you been? Mummy says she needs you RIGHT NOW." The child did an excellent impression of his mother's angry voice.

Beodrin put an arm around the lad's shoulder and forced a grimace of a smile. "I was caught up in a small tussle. Here now. It's time for you to go and stay with your aunt. She's here, isn't she?"

"Yes. She says you're an *imbecile*. What's an imbecile?"

Beodrin couldn't help but crack a smile. Everything would be well; that was all that mattered now. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

They stepped into the warm glow of their home, only to be greeted by the stern face of Marynia's sister. She gave a single glance to Beodrin's blood-stained coat and sniffed. "Come on, kid. Let's leave them to it."

Beodrin gave his son a tight hug, but did not stay to watch them leave. Instead, he ran up the stairs, two at a time, to his wife's bedroom and threw open the door. Marynia was sitting on the bed, with an expression that was less than content. Her face was pink and she was evidently in considerable discomfort.

"I'm sorry, my love. I tried to get here as quickly as I could." It was a futile apology, but would have to do in the circumstances, and he waited for the barrage of angry abuse.

Instead his wife began with a steady, "Sorry? You'd better have a bloody good excuse! I thought you'd gone and got yourself killed. Or worse, forgotten! You've left it bloody close, this time, bloody close!" She snorted, and then grimaced.

"Small matter of an assailant. All fixed now." He kissed his wife and set about removing her shift.

He knew she hated being larger than her usual self, but she was still beautiful to him. He admired her quietly.

"Stop grinning like an idiot and help me!"

Beodrin failed to remove his smile, but succeeded in removing his clothing. Marynia noticed the blood on his shirt and bit her lip, and he could see that she was cataloguing the questions she would ask about it later.

Soon, he had joined her on the bed and was holding her close, so that her back was pressed against his chest. It was a curious thing that women could not birth alone, he thought as he pulled her even closer. Other animals appeared to do it quite independently in the wild, but then, they did not heal instantly from an injury. Their bodies would change according to the environment and not immediately revert to their original state, but his wife was different. Her body had to be persuaded to change.

An hour later, Marynia's breathing slowed and she lifted the baby up to their eye level. They'd had a girl, a handsome daughter.

"Selieni," Beodrin said.

"Selieni," his wife replied.

The couple lay with their new child for several hours, marvelling at her presence. Beodrin found it equally marvellous how his wife's stomach diminished to its previous form almost instantly. He was more in love with her now than ever, and his new daughter made his heart feel as if it might break. No eisiel could ever tear him from them.



Chapter 6

Harsh winds battered the stones of the outer wall and whistled through the gaps in the windows, which rattled and shuddered noisily. The young kahr rolled up a scrap of parchment and jammed it into one of the casement gaps, momentarily silencing the clatter and whine. The army offices had gone without improvement for some time by the look of them, and similarly, the record keeping had been excellent up until the last century. Rows of folders lined the shelves, each dated and labelled with details of the battles that had been fought.

Unfortunately, Morghiad's predecessor had not understood the importance of ordering such records, and instead had left piles of documents strewn throughout the rooms. Some of it was intelligence, some comprised reports on loss of life, notes from other army captains and recruiters in Calidell. It had taken him two months to get as far as he had in re-organising the paperwork, and he resented having to do any of it. He was made for fighting, after all, not administrating. Paperwork was the dullest occupation ever created.

A knock came at the door.

"Come," he responded, hoping for some relief from his boredom. A tall, yellow-haired guard walked in, and behind him was the considerably shorter Lieutenant Beodrin. The tall guard bowed and departed, as Beodrin smiled and took a seat opposite the desk. His eyes were bright, given their grey hue, and it was obvious from the lines across his cheeks that he had spent most of the day grinning.

"What did you name your child?" Morghiad enquired.

"Selieni. Thank you for asking, kahr-captain." Beodrin beamed.

Morghiad was not envious of the man's happiness or his evident ability to safely sire children. He did, however, feel some sadness at the loss of what could have been. His battle with the enemies of Cadra and Calidell was far more important – that, and his responsibility to the army. *They* were his family. "Perhaps she will be as good a fighter as her father one day," Morghiad ventured.

Beodrin blinked at him, and hesitated before he said, "Surely, my captain, you don't mean to start recruiting women?"

“Why not? If they wish to fight and they are good, why should I not offer them the same opportunities?” Morghiad straightened the documents in front of him in the hope that his suggestion did not hold any obvious agenda behind it.

But Beodrin’s brow darkened. “I do not want my daughter in any of our battles. They are no place for her.”

Morghiad nodded slowly. He could understand why the man was protective, but someone as reasonable as Beodrin should have been able to see the logic of it. Reforms like this would take time to be accepted, though it was a pity there was not more time available. Morghiad glanced at the report before him, taking in the summary at the top of it, and then looked back to the stocky lieutenant. “Describe the entire eisiel incident to me.”

Beodrin looked resigned, but took a deep breath before he launched into his commentary. The eisiel had not made it far into the castle, and it had killed several of the guards on the way. Beodrin’s dispatch had been effective and even impressive, but he would require several weeks of leave on top of what he had already been promised in order to properly recover from his injury. There was no point in having him fight whilst riddled with pinh.

“... Lord-Lieutenant Forllan said he would inform you, and I left the rest to him,” Beodrin finished.

His account had not answered Morghiad’s most burning question. “And you have no idea who might have been its target?”

Beodrin thought for a moment. “It did say *something*. It didn’t seem to make much sense though.”

“Can you repeat it to me?”

Beodrin squinted with his grey eyes. “I can’t remember the exact words. It was something like: ‘Who is the whore,’ or, ‘Where is the whore?’ It used a word I hadn’t heard before. Something like kusru or kulu or-”

“Kusuru?” Morghiad finished.

Beodrin’s eyes opened wide. “Yes, that’s it. Kusuru. It said, ‘Where is the Kusuru whore?’” He mouthed the word to himself. “What is Kusuru?”

This was what Morghiad had least hoped to hear, and if his suspicions were right, this eisiel had come for Artemi. That was *if*, indeed, she had once been a Kusuru Assassin, which seemed likely from the collection of books he had studied. It would not be coincidence, either, that last night was the first time she had wielded, and perhaps eisiels could sense Blaze Energy, even as it wove through him.

The partition was there now, and surely nothing would sense small wiels though that. No, *nothing could*.

Morghiad suppressed a sigh, for he could not help but feel as if the hill he had planned to climb had turned to a mountain. “Kusuru is the name,” he began, “given to a

group of assassins who lived about four thousand years ago. They were deadly. They learned a method of fighting that could best any of our own skills in half a heartbeat.”

Beodrin’s shoulders tensed briefly. “I could have done with one of them last night. Do you think the eiesel had gone mad? I mean, all of those Kusuru people would be dead by now. I’ve never heard of anyone living past two thousand years.”

“They were each chosen because they were *vanha-sielu*. Their training regime was reputed to be so tough that they were killed over and over again before they reached adulthood. Their trainer simply located them when they had been re-born, and continued lessons with them before they regained their memories.” Morghiad tried not to think how that might scar a personality, or drive a person to insanity.

Beodrin shivered. “And the eiesel thought one of those was here? A female one? Perhaps you *will* get your woman fighter.”

Morghiad rolled up the report before he was tempted to speak on it any further. “I will look into this. There is no need to tell the other men just yet. *If* she is here, and doesn’t yet remember what she is, then she will be harmless and we’d risk killing an innocent woman. If she does, then it may be foolish to out her or even engage with her in any way. That is, *if* she is here.”

Beodrin nodded sagely. “Agreed.” Then he added, “You know, your new ‘rules’ probably saved my life last night.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I was planning to have a few drinks the night before but... what with agreeing to duty the following day I had to abstain. Probably made me a little more... accurate, if you get my meaning, *kahr-captain!*” Beodrin chuckled.

Morghiad nodded and waved that he may dismiss himself. As the door clicked shut, he sat back in the leather chair to consider his options. There were not many of them, in truth. He could not lie to his men, and simultaneously, he could not keep Artemi a secret forever.

There was now a chance that keeping her here could risk the lives of his men, but those losses could be cancelled out by the sheer number she could save. It was a gamble, but he did have her promise, and he was sure she would not renege on it. He had to continue along the path he had already set out upon.

It was high time to meet with her, and so he placed the day’s papers into a neat pile, before pulling on his black army coat. It was warm against the draughts of the castle, but not quite as dependable as his fur-lined cloak. It was fortunate that no one had yet noticed its absence from his wardrobe, though clothes were just the sort of thing Silar had a nose for.

Morghiad headed toward his rooms against the breeze that rattled down the corridors, stopped at a tiny, thick-walled room to pick an item up, and then jogged the rest of the way. Perhaps he moved more quickly out of boredom, or perhaps it was some

eagerness to get there. He would have to pick over his intentions and correct them later, he decided.

She was already waiting when he arrived, and had taken the desk stool for herself. Soft waves of auburn hair hung loose to her waist and glowed deep red in the light of the fire. It was clear that she possessed little in the way of self-awareness, and that probably extended to the way she looked. It was almost comical that a servant could sit upon his least comfortable chair, wear a grumpy expression, and still do a very good impression of an empress.

Morghiad opened his coat and placed the item he had brought onto the chest of drawers, then seated himself in the armchair opposite Artemi. She was not going to react well to his news, but he had to be honest with her from the outset if he hoped to gain her trust, and so he delivered it anyway. "I have reason to believe an eisiel came for you last night."

Her eyes widened. "What?" But her features rapidly came under better control, which meant she was learning quickly. "It must be dead or you'd be out looking for it. It would have no way of knowing I was here unless you'd told someone. Otherwise it must have felt..." Her expression changed. "How do you know it was looking for me?"

Morghiad turned his attention to the window behind her, where the peaks of the towers shivered in the winds. "One of the lieutenants stopped it before it reached the core of the castle. Silar is the only other man who knows of you and he would not whisper a word of it to anyone. I believe it must have felt a change in the balance of Blaze last night. I doubt it is a matter of coincidence."

Artemi features remained hard, as she said, "You haven't answered my question: how do you know it wanted me?"

"Because it asked for you," he said.

She looked away to the fire. If she felt fear, she did not show it. "But if an eisiel felt... what we were doing, then who is to say that one of your kanaala friends could not?"

"One of them would have contacted me today if they had. Or I would have heard from... other sources." A kahr's intelligence network was not the most subtle of beasts, and it did not always work the way he wanted it to, but it was trustworthy on matters of dangerous women, at least.

She continued to stare at the fire. "And what if more come?"

Morghiad rubbed at his jaw, and was pleasantly surprised to find it was smooth this time. "I am going to teach you how to use a sword and I'm going to see that you do it with skill. You will need to be able to defend yourself when I am not around."

Artemi laughed aloud at his suggestion, golden hair bouncing as she shook her head. "Me? I am about as well-coordinated as a damp log and weak with it. Do you really think an ordinary, *woman* sized the way I am sized could fight off a thing of nightmares?"

Swordsmen are supposed to look like you.” Her laughter began to subside. “I think all that Blaze has sent you mad, my captain.”

He suppressed a very strong urge to grab her and tell her precisely how mad she had made him, then blinked with surprise at his own thoughts. “I’ve seen smaller women than you haul entire trees up mountains, and besides, it is not just brute strength you need. Speed is key. Coordination can be learned. The eisiel’s most deadly feature is its speed. Beat that and you could defeat one. Never let anyone tell you what you cannot do – except me. You should listen to me.”

He stood and went to collect the item he had brought with him. With a deft flick of his hand, it was unwrapped from the plain fabric, and he held it in the air with his arm straight. The balance of it was good: no knocks, warping or scrapes. He spun it in his hand and held the hilt out to Artemi.

“A wooden sword? I’m honoured,” she said drily, and stepped towards it.

“You’ll get a proper one when you’re ready.” Fire rushed down his arm as she took it from him. “But it is less basic than it appears. Its core is made of iron so that the weight is similar to that of a true sword. The wood is of good enough quality to provide a sharp edge. And…” he rearranged her fingers on the hilt. “…it is the perfect size for someone with smaller hands.”

She smiled as she regarded her new acquisition, then shot him a bright smile. “Perhaps there is some sentiment in that pile of rocks you call a body, after all.”

Morghiad ignored her inflammatory comment and watched her walk to the middle of the room. She turned the sword over in her hand. “Are you going to show me how to use this or not?”

Her positioning was not quite right, and so he approached her to place a hand at her waist, the other at her jaw. “Your posture is good, but it could be better,” he said before he pulled her midriff back toward him, and raised her chin gently.

Next, he adjusted her shoulders, though they were not too bad. “You must learn the basic forms first. There are twenty-three of these. Practise them every day and your skill will progress much faster. The first is like cutting a veil from the top, straight down. You start with your blade up here, arm straight. Keep some flexibility in the wrist. This is always your leading edge. Then you cut down like this.” He guided her hand through the entirety of the form, while vibrations of Blaze tore through his body with every touch.

He struggled to push the sensations to the back of his mind in the same way he could with pain, though Artemi seemed to have adjusted to the shock of it immediately. Perhaps her several millennia alive had given her an advantage in that respect, even if she could not recall them.

They had worked through fifteen of the forms by the time the sun had set, and Artemi absorbed his instruction like a sponge taking up water. She never made the same

mistake twice, and though there could be no assumptions that it would be this easy all the way through, especially given her temperament, it was a promising start.

Morghiad ordered her to repeat all fifteen forms once more, threw off his coat and seated himself upon the armchair to observe her. First, second, third, fourth – her rhythm was good – fifth – he rose to re-adjust her elbow. “Continue.” The last forms were position-perfect.

Cadets simply did not learn that quickly, and it meant his suspicions had finally been confirmed. “Good. What do you feel when you do these forms?” he asked.

Her forehead knotted lightly as she thought. “Not much. A small desire to beat you across the head with the sword, but that is all.”

Morghiad gave her no reaction. She would have to try harder than that to rouse him, and learn to be less impertinent. “No emotion at all?”

“Not really. I am concentrating too hard on getting them right.”

Perhaps it was too early to establish if she needed to learn about proper methods of regulation during fighting, though her talk certainly needed it. It was evident she could tame her spirit if she made an effort, though perhaps that was from a distantly remembered habit. The Kusuru may have done things differently, but he could not base his teaching on guesses, and would have to teach her what he knew in any case.

Artemi made as if to holster her weapon at her waist. “This will not do,” she mused, “Don’t they make scabbards for dresses?”

He wanted to smile at her comment, but decided it was best not to. He would stay in control, he would remain ready to raise his sword at any moment, and he would keep his head clear. On a more practical note, he would have to find a way of affixing a weapon to her without it being obvious. Some of the noblewomen kept daggers under their skirts, or so Silar claimed, but that would not be substantial enough for Artemi.

And fiddling around under her skirt would probably lose her valuable time in the event of an attack. No, it would have to be something more ingenious.

She flopped onto the stool before him to study him levelly, and he could not help but feel as if she were able to read every emotion he managed to suppress. Her dark eyes seemed to look right through him at times.

“I think it is wise if we finish our lesson here,” he said. “Would you like to borrow one of these books?” Morghiad gestured in the direction of the shelves.

That illuminated her face like a Blaze orb had been thrust in front of it, and she sprang from the chair to peruse the volumes excitedly. Her eyes soon came to rest upon a small, black book about the history of Forda. “May I take this one?”

“Of course.” He pulled the book out for her, and set it carefully into her hands. She looked at it almost in wonderment, certainly with more respect than she had shown the sword. That seemed the wrong way around, somehow.

But her expression changed suddenly, much like she had just been stabbed in the side. “I must do something about your bed sheets before I go,” she said, and placed the book and the sword on top of the chest to begin stripping back his bed. Morghiad went to help her, though he soon realised he ought to have done this in advance of their lessons to make their time more productive. That said, it seemed to amuse her when he did domestic work.

“Will you meet me at the battlements in two days’ time?” he asked.

“If that is what you wish. May I ask what for?” she said without looking up.

“I must show you the faces of the other kanaala. Do you have a cloak of your own?”

She frowned at him. “Of course.”

“With a hood?”

“Not mine, but my mother’s old one has.”

“Good. Meet me at the eastern entrance to the city wall, three hours following sunset. Make sure your hood is up and your face well-hidden. Keep your hair covered as well.” It would be bad enough if he was seen about the town with a recognisable woman, but a great deal worse if the other kanaala caught sight of her.



Her mother’s cloak was rough at the edges, worn in the middle and stiff from years in storage. It was not as warm as her own cloak, and certainly nowhere near the luxury of Morghiad’s. She had felt a stab of guilt each time she went to sleep in that one, feeling as if she made it dirtier or less valuable when she used it.

Her hair was tied in a braid that fell down the back of her neck, and it tapped her waist with every step she took. To her, this was an odd way to wear one’s hair, and the feeling of cold air touching her neck and ears was not a pleasant one. Artemi kept the hood up to shade her face as Morghiad had instructed, and glanced quickly at the guards who manned the eastern gate. Evidently they had not noticed her waiting there yet, though she felt more than conspicuous out of servant’s clothing.

She caught sight of a tall, black-haired man striding through the crowds. His plain brown clothing did nothing to conceal the bearing he had, and he certainly did not blend in with the surrounding populace at all. Artemi supposed one could call him handsome when he moved, but when he was still, his grim face and stern manner prevented him entirely from being good-looking. If only she could work a smile onto his face, it would have been so much more agreeable. Well, *that*, or peculiar and unnatural.

Morghiad walked directly past her, and pressed something into her hand as he did. He proceeded through the gate, into a door that presumably led to steps inside the city wall, and Artemi ventured round the corner of a shop building to examine the contents of her hand. It was a rolled-up note, and inside, a key. His elegant script instructed her to proceed through the door he had just used, and told her that she must pretend that she was there to visit a relative, who was being kept in the cells.

There were cells in the walls?

She then had to make her way to the end of the second corridor on the fifth level, and use the key in the gate at the end. Artemi folded up the note and pushed it into the bodice of her dress, but tucked the key into the laces at the back.

She walked as confidently as she could to the door that was set into the great wall, and opened it. Well-oiled hinges swept silently as she stepped into the darkness beyond, and she waited for several breaths while her eyes adjusted to the low lamplight. Before her, a cobble-lined passage seemed to stretch into eternal blackness, and she proceeded down it, her footsteps echoing along the tunnel and back again.

The brickwork in there indicated it must have been equally as old as the walls themselves, perhaps several thousands of years, and the cobblestones were heavily worn by as many years of feet. After a hundred yards, she was forced to halt before the two broad-shouldered guards who manned the gate. They eyed her suspiciously while she forced a smile.

"I'm here to see my brother," she lied. Though lying was a skill she had never excelled at, she had always wanted an older brother.

"Hood down, miss," came the gruff reply of one man.

Artemi could scarcely argue with them over such matters, and decided she risked little if these two were the only ones who saw her face, so she took down her hood.

The second guard whistled appreciatively, "Lucky brother. Don't get many like you down here! Hold out your hands." He inspected them, and her sleeves for contraband and weapons. Upon finding them empty, he glanced down at her skirt. "Show me," he instructed, and his companion chuckled behind him.

"I am not sure I understand your meaning," Artemi said, understanding it completely.

"Legs," the guard said simply. "All of them, and we won't touch."

"I will show you," Artemi said, "but I warn you now, that I have been selected to become one of King Acher's benay-gosa in the new moon, and if he finds out you have touched me, you shall not have a head. It will be bad enough when I tell him that you looked."

The guard's smile dropped. "You're lying."

"Why do you think I have never visited my brother here before? Now is my last chance," she said, hoping her words were becoming more convincing.

"Leave her, Geralt. It's not worth the risk." his companion said.

The guard grumbled something rude beneath his breath, then said, "Which level?" "He's on the fifth."

His companion nodded to her right. "You'll need to take those stairs to the top. Must have been a naughty boy!" The two men looked to each other then, and their gloom was broken by a chuckle. She heard them re-lock the gate behind her as she ascended the steps.

Curious noises reached her ears as she rose, and Artemi decided it was best she pull the hood back over her head in case she met anyone else along the way.

The ancient stairs did indeed stop at the fifth level, but how was one to find a second corridor when there was only one to follow? She forged ahead until she reached a doorway to a block of cells. It was labelled, 'One,' and next to it was another door, also numerically labelled. So that was it - Artemi was going to have to walk through a block of cells! Wonderful. No doubt they were filled with violent, strong-armed murderers and thieves!

She pushed the second door open gently, but her efforts at subtlety were in vain. It swung with a loud groan, which instantly roused a chorus of howls and whistles. Artemi pulled the hood further over her face, fixed her eyes upon the floor and rushed down the corridor. Hands reached out for her through small holes in each prison door, though she suppressed her urge to run and kept her walk very much a walk, albeit a springy, dancing one. The gate at the end came into view when she dared to look up from the cobblestones, and she pressed ahead with fervour, reaching for the back of her bodice. Damn! The key was not there!

In a panic, she turned back to the cells she had just passed. The hands waved menacingly at her, and twenty steps away, an object glinted on the floor. *The key*. It had fallen just below one of the prison doors. The noise the prisoners had made must have masked its clangs and chinks as it had fallen.

She edged back down the hallway, taking care to stay right in the middle of it, and farthest from any hands. Once she had drawn level with the key, she knelt to reach for it, but it was much too far for her to stretch comfortably. Slowly, she inched toward the key with her arm outstretched, but the occupant of the cell must have seen her approach, for he immediately reached down from the hole in the door and grabbed her hood.

He pulled hard at it, and the force caused her shoulder hit the cell door with a heavy *thunk*. She cried out in pain but was tethered, and it was all she could do not to panic. Hurriedly, she untied the cloak from her neck, grabbed the key, and ran to the gate. There, she fumbled at the lock while the prisoner waved her mother's cloak around excitedly, but all Artemi desired was to be out of there as quickly as possible. At last, the lock turned and the gate opened. She stepped through and closed it with haste, before sprinting down the hall beyond.

There was a pool of light up ahead, and a pair of crossed, booted feet rested in it. Attached to them, Morghiad was leaning nonchalantly against the wall. He straightened at her entrance. "What is the matter? Where is your cloak? I told you to keep you face hidden."

"I dropped the key - one of the prisoners caught hold of it. I had to -"

Morghiad wore only that stern, implacable face, and Artemi could imagine that he thought her a pigeon-brained, pathetic idiot for failing to follow such a simple plan. His only response was a grunt. She regarded the floor, and hoped that he would not launch into some very emotionless criticism of her poor performance. It was irritating that she felt so subservient around the man; no one else made her act this way.

Instead, he strode past her and back along the way she had come. "Follow, but stay out of sight," he commanded. She did so tentatively, some thirty feet behind him, and yet her footfalls reverberated around the tunnel while his did not. How did such a tall man, probably twice the weight of her, step with no sound at all? There must be something special about his boots, she decided.

They reached the gate, where he took the key from her and told her again to remain out of sight. Since he had no key of his own, he must have found a different way into that passage, though she had observed no other doors or corridors leading from it.

When Morghiad's fingers brushed hers, there was a short, sharp flow of hot sparks and flame through her limbs. She still had not quite become accustomed to it, and was increasingly frustrated at Morghiad's total lack of reaction.

"Stay," he said beneath his breath, then proceeded through the gate as if he owned the prison and all of its convicts.

Artemi could just see round the corner and between the iron rails that Morghiad was making straight for the cloak, which now dangled limply from the cell door. The prisoner had not released it, but evidently it had proved too thick to pull between the bars.

Suddenly the cloak shuddered and waved as Morghiad approached, but with startling speed, Morghiad snatched the prisoner's arm and thrust it downward. A scream came from beyond the cell door, and the cloak was released. Morghiad caught it neatly, and ignored the pathetic whimpers as he returned to Artemi.

"Thank you," she murmured. "Did you break his arm?"

"Probably. You'd better hope they don't talk." He locked the gate, gave her the key and walked on. The man was inhuman! Did he have no sensibilities at all? What was to stop him from snapping her neck if she angered him? Artemi decided it would be wise to keep a little more distance behind him.

They followed the tunnel round a shallow arc, which by Artemi's rather obvious calculation, had to match the inner circumference of the city wall. Eventually, they came upon a small store room with a curiously solid door, nearly ten inches in thickness, and Morghiad opened it to motion her inside. The room was bare, save for a few empty flour

sacks, beer bottles and tankards. The stubs of a couple of red leaf cigars lay at the bottom of a tall, narrow slit in the wall, and through it Artemi could make out the lights of the city. Sounds drifted in, but they were distant and placid compared to the true bustle of the streets - horse traffic, hawkers and street musicians were all rendered soft by the remoteness.

Artemi kept her silence and her curiosity contained as Morghiad went to stand at the side of the narrow window. He reached inside his coat, and pulled a heavy, tubular-shaped object out, then shook it once. When he did, the object released a sequence of bronze-lined, gradually smaller tubes from its lower end.

Artemi moved closer to afford a better view of it, and observed that it was lined in embossed leather and strewn with engravings. Whatever it was, it looked expensive. Morghiad turned the narrow end to his eye, and pointed the wider end at the window. It might have been a manner of weapon, and perhaps he intended for her to wield through it, killing every commoner that displeased him. *Or* it was entirely possible that he would choose to beat her over the head with it instead. An expensive-looking bludgeon.

She could not prevent a small smile from surfacing on her lips, but it vanished when Morghiad dropped the instrument from his eye and signalled for her to stand next to him.

"Here." He pulled her by the arm and arranged her in a position in front of the wall's slit, which caused his chest to brush against her shoulder blades. He really was uncomfortably close, and Artemi did not appreciate being manhandled. The sword lessons had been bad enough, but now was hardly the time to use her as his puppet. He stooped to bring his head level with hers and pointed through the window. "Do you see the tall, thin building with the blue flag hanging out of the window?"

Artemi followed his indication to an expensive abode some distance away. "The flag has a golden symbol on it," she said.

"That's it," he said, "Now look at the window diagonally up and to the right. In a few minutes every kanaala in Cadra will convene there for a meeting which I have organised. I will have to join them later, but until then we can spy on them as they arrive."

She frowned. "How will I know their faces? My eyesight is good but not that good!"

"That is why we have this." He lifted the curious tube before her. "Put this to your eye and look through it." Morghiad handed her the object and straightened.

The instrument was heavy, surprisingly so given that it could concertina inside itself. She held it up to one eye as her kahr-captain had done, and aimed it out of the window. A face appeared not more than twenty yards from her, and it very nearly sent her hurtling backward into Morghiad.

She lowered the tube and stared at it with admiration. "It's a far-scope. I read about one once... never thought I'd actually get to use one."

They only waited for a handful of heartbeats before the first man arrived with a light to brighten their target window. Artemi raised the far-scope to her eye and assessed him.

“Describe him to me,” Morghiad ordered.

“Dark hair, grim face, broad-shouldered – like you!” She grinned. “Perhaps a little overweight though.”

He sniffed, but then he was useless at dealing with jokes. “That would be Master Corvid Hordreda. He will not think anything of killing you, and would probably delight in torturing you too. Corvid is one of the... less considerate of us.”

Artemi suppressed a shiver. Morghiad was colder than a blizzard in Kemen, but he claimed be a kitten in comparison to these men? She worked hard at memorising Corvid’s face, and shortly another man joined Corvid, this time walking past the window and into a neighbouring courtyard. “This one is taller, mousy-haired and wiry. He looks like he’s sneering...”

“Jarynd Farpike. His face is scarred from a battle two hundred years ago. The cut runs from his mouth to his right eye. He may be more sympathetic to you, but I wouldn’t depend upon it.”

Artemi knew that wounds tended to scar badly if they were inflicted with pinh-covered blades, and she wondered if any wielders had injured these men in the past whilst defending themselves, or if this Jarynd would want to attack her with a poison-dipped knife.

Three more men came to join the party and had their faces memorised by her. They chatted away about things that Artemi could only imagine were bawdy or frivolous, but they did not appear superficially different from any other man. All wore the green and black uniforms of the army, and all exhibited the usual range of expressions, unlike *Kahr Statue* behind her.

Three times he ordered her to name each man and describe them in turn, until she felt as if their names and faces had been burned into the very fabric of her soul. On completion of her task, Morghiad announced that he was content with her achievements. “You should stay here a while longer with the far-scope. I must depart and join them now. Will you meet me again in my chambers tomorrow morning?”

“Of course. I suppose you’ll want this back?” She waved the scope gently.

Morghiad nodded. He hesitated, drawing breath, and then said, “Have you ever played *will-die*?”

What peculiar manners this man had! “With my father, all the time.”

Morghiad simply nodded to himself and then made his exit. He *was* a very odd man indeed, but she soon pushed that thought aside, and waited in deep reflection before she returned to the window. Again she gawped at her would-be murderers, and again she considered leaving Cadra, and Calidell, altogether.

Morghiad was there by now, seeming to tower over the other men in his usual, bleak manner. He would have had to come up with a good reason for their meeting, and she sincerely hoped it was not the planned torture and execution of a rogue wielder.

After a time, she grew bored of staring at them and moved the far-scope across to a neighbouring building. Through one window she spied a family stuffing their faces with a delectable feast of meats upon silver platters, and they appeared very content with their evening, if not their lives. The next window revealed to her an empty reception room lined with marble and silver, but for a lonely looking woman. She was very pretty, dark-skinned and black-haired - probably a noblewoman. In a smaller building below, she caught sight of a naked couple kissing. Artemi chastised herself and then giggled, knowing she was getting into some very bad habits. She then moved the scope to study the streets.

Men and women still thronged along them noisily, taking in the best of the evening's air. In this area of the town, most were richly dressed nobles or smartly attired servants. Some hard-working merchants still trod the streets, attempting to sell leftover wares on foot or from their carts. A small coterie of Cadran guards paced down the centre of the main thoroughfare, most likely going to relieve members of their company. Artemi focussed on their faces, and somewhat mischievously, their bodies. They did have very excellent shoulders, all of them, and good arms too.

Well, if she wasn't allowed to have a man, at least she was allowed to think of it.

Artemi idly wondered which of them was the best at kissing, or would hold her the tightest - which man had known the most women and which the fewest? Her eyes came to rest on the man at the head of the group, and she immediately recognised him as Lord-Lieutenant Silar Forllan. His blond hair hadn't been cut in the time since she had seen him, and had taken on a somewhat wild appearance.

The early signs of beard growth were visible, but that did not detract from his well-proportioned head. It was a great shame she could not pursue him - not that she had wanted him to pursue her, or make her into one of the army's whores. No... it was only that with the choice now removed from her, she felt increasingly aware of what she had been forbidden. He would probably be disgusted at the thought of her now, anyway.

Silar snapped his head round suddenly, and gazed directly up at her. In fright, Artemi darted sideways from the window and pressed her back against the wall. How could he have seen her? She would barely have been a speck from where he was standing, but his eyes had seemed to meet hers with such intensity!

It was possible Morghiad had informed him that they would be there, but Silar's reaction had seemed more reflexive than that of a man checking upon something he knew was there. The end of the far-scope, she realised, was glass. It must have caught the light from one of the street lamps. Blazes! She had to get out of there before he discovered she had been spying on him.

She launched herself through the weighty door of the store room and sprinted back to the gate. She did not relish the thought of running the prisoners' gauntlet again, but there was not much choice available to her. Of course, the convicts began their chorus of chanting and whooping at the sound of her as soon as she ran through.

Artemi ignored it as best she could, and locked the gate behind her. Head down and hood raised, she ran between them until she hit the opposite exit.

The door opened easily, and she threw herself down the hallway and to the stairs. She waited a moment, listening for the footsteps of anyone approaching. When she was certain there was no sound, Artemi padded down the stairs as swiftly and as quietly as she could manage. She had no desire to alert the guards at the bottom gate to her presence more than was necessary.

The five floors seemed to stretch into eternity below her, steps never ending - until she turned what she hoped was the final switch in the staircase, and was met by the sound of men talking. One of the voices she recognised as the bluff guard, the other was Silar. There was nowhere she could go, certainly nowhere to hide. She pulled the hood as far over her head as it would go and dropped her chin.

The sound of keys jangling and the creak of metal hinges told Artemi the gate beyond was being opened, and her heart quickened while she half-forgot to breathe. Artemi fought back against her panic, relaxed her shoulders as much as she was able, and began to place one foot in front of the other. *She had just been to visit her brother. She was no one - just a visitor.* Silar would have no cause to examine her closely.

Artemi continued her steady walk to the exit gate and clenched the far-scope tightly in one hand, feeling the air move against her with his approach. Two dully polished boots stepped into her field of view, but they stopped there, directly in her path, and were clearly unwilling to budge. Artemi froze, and stayed silent.

"Show me your face, woman," barked the hitherto charming Silar.

She winced. This was going to be very awkward indeed. Slowly, she raised her eyes up his shins, to his thighs, past his sword belt, up to his chest, over his rigid mouth and finally to his big, deep, blue eyes. They widened on recognition of her face.

"What are *you* doing here?" he hissed in a low voice.

Artemi could not very well tell him the truth with the other guards nearby. She was almost property of the king, after all. "I was just here to visit... someone."

Silar's eyes narrowed as he examined her attire more closely. "Did Morghiad give you that?" He gestured at the far-scope.

She really ought to have done a better job at hiding it beneath her cloak. "Yes," she responded.

"Hmm." He frowned and studied her for a while longer, apparently intent on making her feel as uncomfortable as possible. At last he spoke. "Come with me." Silar

turned and strode back to the gate, before proceeding through it and into the chill air of the city. There were no invites for Artemi to take his arm this time.

They ventured a little way into the crowds together before Silar engaged her in conversation once more. "He really ought not to leave you unattended."

"Well, yes. I might very well blow this whole bloody place to smithereens with a yawn, after all." It fell from her mouth in jest, and only upon saying it did she realise that probably *had* been his concern. Why did she perform these pathetic attempts at wit around him?

Silar's brow knotted, but then he smiled to himself. "I understand he is teaching you swordskills."

"He's doing what he can. I fear I am a difficult student."

"And is he taking good care of you, Artemi?"

"Er... yes. I believe so. As good as a rogue... *you know* - can expect to be taken care of." She folded her arms in front of her.

Silar gave a faint smile, only vaguely reminiscent of the full ones she had seen at the feast day. "Many people find Morghiad cold or distant. Sometimes they're right. Though he has taken to some more risk-taking behaviour lately, including you. We may yet see a change in him. But my previous offer still stands - if there is anything I can do for you, you need only ask."

Artemi was glad for his outreach, and so she put her hand out to him, but he did not take it. "It's simply a hand, I can't *do* anything with it except the normal things that hands do."

He looked at it suspiciously.

"It won't harm you, I give you my word."

Silar compressed his lips and took her hand in both of his. His face appeared to relax once he found he was still alive, and he met her eyes. "There is always something dangerous about any part of *any* woman, believe me." He sighed. "Well, I should be off to organise the scrum that will make tonight's guard." There was a gentle squeeze from his hand. "No doubt I'll bump into you again. Oh, and stay away from the king." With that, he turned and marched back to the perimeter of the city.

Artemi stared after him for a little while. He had a more than acceptable bottom on him, but she clenched her jaw at the thought. Teasing herself with these thoughts was not going to help her situation at all!

She began to make her way back to her father's house to return the cloak, which thankfully had not suffered too badly from the prisoner's assault. Her mother had left few things behind, and her father would not appreciate the loss of any more. Artemi pulled the cloak more tightly around her, and thrust forward into the cold.



The spindle towers of the castle whirled with the winds that blew through them from the north. They were improbable constructions, given that no Blaze had ever been employed in strengthening them. A team of climbers would typically be re-pointing one of the towers at any time, but Morghiad could not see any from his vantage point in the central spire today. He leaned farther out of the window to examine the roof of the castle below, noting where the chimneys poked their finger-like funnels through. They were a few-hundred feet below him, but still big enough to be discernable from the tops of the light wells.

He turned back to Artemi, who stood calmly in her blue servant's garb, managing to wear it like a noblewoman's. It had been most peculiar to see her in brown commoner clothes yesterday, though the duller shades of brown somehow complemented her hair admirably. Like autumn leaves in ancient woodland, he thought, before he realised how poetic and silly he sounded, and thrust the words into a darker corner of his mind.

"Come here," he requested.

Artemi moved toward him with much quieter steps. It was a positive sign that she had adapted to this manner of walking naturally, but a touch more training would not go amiss. He guided her to the window and pointed out the chimneys. "We need to sense where the blockages are in order to clear them. It is best if we do that from here. We can then fix them from inside my chambers." He hoped she had the intelligence to ask the most pertinent question.

She looked out of the window. "It is not safe to wield from here though... and what about wielding through the entire network of flues? Will we partition the whole lot off?"

Yes, she had some intelligence, he admitted to himself. "Sensing with Blaze does not involve proper wielding. Remember how you could see the energy in everything, just when it was trapped inside you?"

She nodded. "So we'll be able to sense where the chimney fill meets the air. But when we come to clear that fill from your room, how will you and I remember where the blockages are?"

Morghiad was beginning to wonder how much of that intelligence was governed by hidden memories. "That is something wielders and kanaala have a particular ability for. And yes, we will have to partition the chimneys as well. That is why I've sent the other kanaala out of the city. They wouldn't feel it, but there's always a chance they could see it."

He picked up her hand and threw himself into the flames that poured into his body. Acting as a conduit for her power was similar to clutching at rays of hot light - at first they

strove to burn him in pure fire and were slippery to catch, but once he had made that initial connection, The Blazes would actively seek him out, and their heat turned into something far more benevolent.

Morghiad could absorb all of her power safely at that moment, but it would not be long before she outgrew him. Then, if he became greedy, it really would burn him to a cinder. For the moment he revelled in the beauty of it, imbibing more than he ever had before. “Can you feel the entire castle now?” he asked.

Artemi looked drunk... or perhaps sick, or both. “I can feel the whole city. And beyond.”

He reached into every chimney he could see from the spire with the hot, unruly fires he held. Their swirling mixture of warm and frozen air was confusing, but still markedly different from the stone that lined them. He dove further into the flues, and encountered a few live hearths along the way, until he reached something solid. Soon after, more blockages presented themselves. “Memorise each one,” he instructed.

Her eyes became distant, and it was a while before she replied. “There’s so much...”

“Stay focussed. We need to find every obstruction.” As soon as the words passed his lips, he felt her pulling at the power he held, and he had to grind his teeth and fight to fend her off. “Not that focussed!” Clearly, she thought paying attention meant using him as her personal wielding tool. She would have to learn what she was doing before her abilities surpassed his own.

They found hundreds of fills in the flues before the afternoon came, stretching down for several feet each. Whoever had done this had certainly gone at it with all swords brandished, and the search had revealed that all the chimneys from the cellars terminated in the central portion of the roof, which would make re-discovering the obstructions much easier.

It was time to fix them. With some regret, Morghiad released Artemi’s hand, and she blinked as a measure of lucidity returned to her eyes.

He soon found his voice to ask her, “Could you see them all?”

“Yes. I think it was concrete. And bones. Were there bones in there?”

Morghiad nodded, though he tried not to show her that he was surprised by her curiously rapid learning. It had taken him *months* to read the fabric of things through Blaze alone. “The person who ordered this didn’t like servants much.”

That drew a sour look from her.

“Let’s return to my rooms.” He opened the door and checked the stairway below, since he did not wish for anyone in that warren of gossip to see them together. Though he had specifically planned for the route to be clear of soldiers, he could not account for other servants or wandering nobles.

The spiral staircase was filled with cracked masonry and patched chunks of dark stone, studded by polished brass ties. It wound down and down through weak lamplight,

where even the arrow slits had been filled in. There was no one there, but he descended the steps with an assassin's walk anyway, and though Artemi's skirts rustled above, she was otherwise soundless too.

Morghiad checked the hallways at each junction, keeping Artemi an excusable distance behind him, and then began to relax. Though, she did not seem at all to appreciate his efforts to protect her, and when he was able to catch sight of it, her face appeared darker than ever.

Fine if the court thought he was bedding a servant in private; not appropriate if they thought he was walking about with her in public.

He supposed a commoner from the lower city would not understand such etiquettes, though she had demonstrated an understanding of reputation.

Morghiad stopped at the penultimate junction to his rooms, and signalled for her to wait. The corner was sharp, but no sound came from beyond, and so he strode through. He gestured for Artemi to follow him, but just as he reached the end, he heard the sound of rustling clothing. Lady di Certa emerged from the corner immediately ahead, but it was too late to turn back and stop Artemi. Aval was advancing on him with surprising urgency, and so he was forced to leave Artemi to think of her own plan of concealment.

"My kahr," Aval curtsied deeply. "I hope I find you in good spirits."

Morghiad laid his hand upon his sword hilt, and thought of how he might rid himself of her. "Very good. Thank you, my lady. Unfortunately I have some pressing business to attend to, and cannot stay to chat." Morghiad glanced back in Artemi's direction as subtly as he was able. She was on her hands and knees, pretending to scrub the floor.

Aval approached him slowly, until she was much too close. He could see every detail of her face, and smell every scent. "That is a shame," she purred. "I was hoping we might retire to your rooms for some... reading." Her bosom almost touched him. "I hear you like to read, my lord." The lady began toying with her hair seductively.

He cleared his throat, and muttered, "Apologies. I must decline your kind invitation. My duties cannot wait." He gave her as neat a bow as her proximity would allow, and walked around her toward his rooms. She did not smell as well as Artemi, he remarked to himself as he walked on.

Abruptly, the sound of Aval's angry voice caught up with his ears, followed by a dull thud and a noise that could have been Artemi crying out. Morghiad wheeled around, drew his sword and ran back to the women. Aval was nowhere to be seen, but Artemi was hunched over and holding her side.

"What happened? Are you injured?"

Artemi's face was twisted and flushed with anger. "She kicked me! That bloody woman... ugh!"

"Oh." He re-sheathed his sword and assessed her, but knew it was nothing serious.

“Oh?” She gritted her teeth. “I see that assaulting a servant is perfectly acceptable, especially if it comes from a beautiful lady with enormous breasts!”

Morghiad could not prevent it this time. A smile escaped. And then a laugh. He managed to temper it back to a smile, but Artemi looked stunned.

All of the anger had drained from her face and she was staring at him agog. It was peculiar to see her almost unreadable, but that very sight encouraged him to bring himself back under control. “I can’t very well avenge you. Let’s go.”

The pair made it back to his chambers without further event, where Artemi remained entirely silent. Occasionally she looked up at him as if he had become a mad man, or perhaps as if he had sprouted horse’s ears. He would have given his best sword to know what she was thinking, but dared not ask. Once they had the privacy of his door and several partitioned walls, Morghiad seated her on the armchair and took up the hard stool for himself.

He delved once more into The Blazes with her, savouring its energy like the most perfect of sword moves, and they commenced the exhausting work of lining the entirety of the servants’ chimney network with a partition. The reward soon came in blasting out the material that blocked them, and Artemi’s eyes came alight with the force of it. Morghiad had to admit it was somewhat enjoyable, vaporising blockage after blockage, sending dust and fragments rattling through the flues and into the air beyond.

Once done, they slowly peeled back the partition and, at last, Morghiad released his hold on her. She collapsed back into the armchair quite weary, and in truth, he felt like doing the same.

“I suppose you’ll want your cloak back now,” she breathed.

“You’ll need something to burn first.”

Her dark eyes locked onto him. “You’re not going to make me produce firewood out of the air, are you?”

“No. I’ll use more traditional means to obtain that.”

Artemi chose not to enquire further. She closed her eyes as if to sleep, and folded her hands atop her lap. Her face assumed a sort of peace that could transcend time, and wars.

Morghiad dragged his chair across the squeaking marble so that it was next to Artemi’s, feeling just an ounce of guilt that the noise roused her from her temporary slumber. After that, he went to his shelves and pulled out a flat, polished wooden box.

Artemi immediately recognised its contents, and curled her legs beneath her so that she was at a better angle to face him. He laid the box out on the arm of her chair and began to arrange the will-die pieces in their starting positions. “Now,” he said, “Do not make this too easy for me.”

She gave him a fiendish grin and named her first piece, “I name The Kahr. It’s always a good one to sacrifice first.”



Chapter 7

The cold marble piece slid thickly across the soft grain of the wood beneath Artemi's fingers, until it came to rest beside a darker stone. With an engineered flick of her wrist, she knocked over the king piece and took the throne. She decided not to wallow too long in her glory - there was the matter of maintaining one's honour in victory, after all.

Over the last six days, they had completed ten rather involved games of will-die, and Artemi had won seven of them. Of course, Morghiad had not reacted in any way to his defeats, or his triumphs. But on this occasion he gave her a frown. It was small and transient, but most definitely there, and mentally, she added it to her list of his expressions. The list was not long, since the only other entry was that smile he had unleashed a week previously.

That reaction had knocked her estimation of him a great deal. Her re-evaluation was not due to his peculiar sense of humour which, incidentally, seemed to involve her being injured, but rather the way his whole countenance had altered. The statue, for an instant, had become animated. Perhaps more disturbing, in its incongruity, it had been so striking and so warm that even Silar's best smiles would have paled beside it. That, she did not like.

"You are a challenge in many ways, Artemi," said the green-eyed kahr-captain. She was not entirely sure if she should have been flattered or offended by that, but chose to take it as flattery anyway.

He swept the pieces into the board, folded their fine box and replaced it on the shelf. There was something about his stance that caught her attention, something different. He was as straight-backed as ever, with the apparent relaxed ease of a confident man used to getting his way, but beneath that exterior were undercurrents of a swordsman's tension: always alert, always listening closely to his environment.

This time there was a new element to his movements that she could not quite identify, and it did not feel... positive. Had she worn him down? Perhaps he was used to people letting him win. "I find you a worthy opponent, my captain," she ventured. That much was true. No one else had ever made her work as hard to win as he had.

Morghiad gave his usual expressionless reaction and ambled to the window. Next to him lay his folded-up cloak, with the green symbol of Cadra emblazoned across the top. It had been a nightmarish thing to clean, and had required special clay earth for the fur.

She would miss wrapping herself in its embrace each night, she lamented, as much as she appreciated her own blanket.

When the firewood had first turned up in the cellars, everyone had thought it a cruel joke. She had been forced to convince the cavern inhabitants around her that the fuel was indeed for them, and that the chimneys could be used safely. Some had stubbornly refused to burn it, and had instead stashed it beneath blankets or piled it high in cold fireplaces. At least, they did so until more turned up the next day.

Artemi smiled to herself at her recent good fortune, and wondered just how Morghiad had managed to afford such an outlay. He had requested that his involvement remain secret, and she was happy to oblige him in that respect.

The week had been tiring for them both in spite of their gaming; it had also included much sword training and a great deal of wielding. She now knew all of the twenty-three sword forms, but failed to see the use of some. She now knew how light could be conjured from the air and how fire could be made without fuel. Morghiad frequently accused her of trying to steal control from him, though truly she did not intend to. She had only wanted to see how it was he held her power, and where he connected to it. There had to be a way of observing it more passively.

A knock came at the door. Morghiad spun and waved Artemi, now standing, to the bed. She moved swiftly but inaudibly to assume her occupation as chambermaid, and Morghiad called his visitor in. Artemi kept her head down while she pulled out the bed sheets, which were all still as clean as when she had changed them that morning.

From her limited view, she could see that a thin man had entered the solar. His boots were travel-worn, but his breeches and sword signified he was a member of the guard.

“Kahr-Captain,” came his gritty voice.

“Master Farpike. You have news of your mission?” Morghiad said.

Farpike? Artemi did her best not to break her flow or become tense, but fear found its way into her body and began spiralling up through her legs. She clenched her jaw against it.

The gritty voice spoke again. “Corvid and Muscica are dead.”

“How?” Morghiad did not sound upset by the news.

“A large group of bandits attacked us. We three were lucky to leave with our lives. Passerid lost an arm in the brawl. I reckon he’ll be out of action for a month at least.”

Morghiad turned to the window again, silent.

Jarynd continued, “We didn’t find any sign of a rogue wielder. The bandits won’t trouble anyone again, though. I’m exhausted, mind if I take a seat?” He plonked himself in the armchair without waiting for a response.

Artemi took a brief opportunity to regard Jarynd’s snarled face. Light brown, straggled hair framed a very curious expression as he gripped the leather of the seat. Out of

the corner of her eye, she saw Morghiad turn his head slightly, and immediately returned her attentions to the sheets she was removing.

A second of silence passed, whereupon, like a thunderbolt, Jarynd leapt from the armchair. Morghiad wheeled around, hand on sword hilt, and was met by the fearful sneer that Jarynd now wore upon his face. The two remained motionless for half a breath, eyes locked together. Slowly, Jarynd rotated his narrow, scarred visage to Artemi, and she froze, dropping the sheets from her hands.

Oh blazes. *He knew*. And now he was going to kill her!

The thin guard jumped towards her with terrifying speed. His advance was arrested, however, by Morghiad driving full into his side. Jarynd hit the edge of the bed with a grunt, but was rapidly pinned to the floor by his captain.

“Get out of here,” Morghiad hissed. Jarynd thrashed about beneath him, face contorted with anger.

Artemi could not move.

Jarynd cried out, “She’ll kill all of us. I’ve seen her-”

Morghiad clamped a fist over his captive’s mouth. “Listen. Go to Silar. Wait with him for me.”

Artemi permitted herself to breathe, but hesitated. What if this man killed Morghiad? It would be all her fault. “But...” she began.

“LEAVE!” Morghiad’s eyes had taken on a new light, and it was not one she dared challenge.

She fled. She ran through the huge, echoing hallway and across the polished stone floors. She pelted down shallow steps and along the vaulted corridors, feet making a terrible racket as she went. Silar’s door neared, and Artemi prayed that he would be in his chambers.

She hammered on the ancient wood, her entire body shivering with panic, then something made a noise inside. *Hurry up, and move!* The door swept open and Silar’s handsome form filled her view. His black coat hung open and his light hair was ruffled and unkempt, but he immediately recognised her distress and pulled her into his room by the arm. For a moment he stuck his head out of the door to check for witnesses, then he slammed it shut behind her. “What is it?”

“Morghiad needs your help. One of the other kanaala... he knows. I fear he will kill our captain.”

Silar’s face greyed, if that were possible. “Do the other ones know about you?”

“No. Jarynd Farpike. He came into Morghiad’s room and... detected me. Morghiad stopped him but I don’t know how long he can—”

“Morghiad can take care of himself,” Silar interrupted. “He wanted you here, didn’t he?”

Artemi felt desperation well up in her. “Yes but he needs—”

“He’s ordered me to look after you. That is what I must do. He will deal with Jarynd appropriately.”

Artemi shook her arm free and paced the circumference of the chambers in frustration. Why was he leaving his supposedly closest friend to fight alone? She hated that she was their pet: leashed, compliant and always several steps behind! She could mew or bark all she wanted, but doubted they would think her noises of any actual consequence.

Not for the first time, she wished she had been born a man - an ordinary, boring man with a farm. Farmers had to answer to no one except the weather, and they didn’t have sword-wielding soldiers after them.

Silar was watching her closely, she realised, and was probably still thinking she would blast his head off because it amused her. Artemi leaned against one of the bed spears, and then slid to the floor in resignation. There was a pause as Silar looked about at his room, and back to her, then he raised his eyes to the ceiling and cursed quietly, before coming to sit beside her. Gently, he placed an arm about her shoulders and leaned back against the bed in silence. There was nothing to do but wait.



The heavy door, made of oaks a thousand years old, whined noisily upon its rusted hinges as it shut. Morghiad lifted his hand from Jarynd’s mouth, whereupon Jarynd instantly issued forth a barrage of curses and threats, before tempering his anger only very slightly. Only then did he manage to say something slightly more lucid. “You have no idea what you’ve let loose! You are a stupid child with too many responsibilities. Kill her before it’s too late.”

Morghiad resisted the urge to hit Jarynd squarely in the face, and instead said, “If we kill her, she will only return in twenty-three years to seek her revenge. And then we shall all be dead.”

“I’d rather twenty more years of life than none! You cannot trust that... thing! I’ve seen that one before. I saw her take out one-hundred men with no effort at all. You think she will be our friend? You are a fool!” Jarynd continued to writhe.

“Were these Calidellian men?”

Jarynd’s mouth curled awkwardly. “No. Hirrahan mercenaries. It doesn’t matter. Her kind kill indiscriminately.”

Morghiad could not help but feel some relief. “In this life she has killed no one. She is still an innocent woman, unaware of her past. The Artemi you saw is the hero of legend.

She may have had a good reason for doing what she did. Think also of the advantages we have with her as our ally.”

Jarynd thought for a moment, and perhaps he had not recognised her identity before, but even now he spat, “We cannot control her. True, I would rather have her on my side than against, but she cannot be trusted!”

“She has promised to protect the people of Calidell, Farpike.”

Jarynd’s pale eyes widened. “You got her to swear it? All of Calidell’s people?”

“Yes. She will keep her word.” Morghiad relaxed his hold on Jarynd, and leaned back on his haunches.

Jarynd sprang from the floor like a freed rabbit. “I don’t like it,” he said.

“It is not ideal, I agree. But I can tell you that she is honourable. She does not have the heart of a mindless killer.”

“But don’t you see the problem this creates? If we allow her to live, then how can we justify getting rid of the others?”

“We can’t.”

“You propose to stop all investigations? Just let them run free? This is utter madness. Your father will find out and then have us executed, too.”

Morghiad pulled at the top of his boot. “I cannot see another one executed. I can no longer be a part of it. Can you not see how wrong it is, Jarynd? Muscica’s own mother and sister were wielders. No other country pursues this agenda, because they all see how stupid it is! Killing many hundreds of children is surely worse than one hundred armed mercenaries. As for my father, I will deal with him when the time comes. He will not dare to argue with the man who controls his army.” That was a bold statement for Morghiad, but Jarynd needed to know how committed he was.

A gust of wind rattled the windows, and Jarynd shook his head, but hesitated before speaking further. “You’re the most able of us,” he said after a pause. “She is your responsibility. Perhaps keeping her close will be for the better. I will keep her secret then, but if she steps out of line, Mor, I *swear* I’ll see her dead. And the other kanaala must be told - what few of us remain. You’re lucky Corvid met his demise when he did.” Jarynd eyed Morghiad closely. “Or perhaps it wasn’t luck?”

Morghiad gave no response.

“Passerid will not be an easy convert, I warn you. Better for Muscica to have survived.”

“I do not celebrate in the deaths of my men. And what of Beodrin – how do you think he will keep our secret?”

“He is grown soft with the arrival of his daughter. He won’t trouble you. You know, his daughter hasn’t been tested...” Jarynd rubbed his chin.

Morghiad nodded. Beodrin’s sympathies would be very useful indeed.

Jarynd got to his feet and brushed himself off. “Ever since you were a lad you’ve had a fast arm on you. Blazes burn me if you can’t out-manoeuvre a lightning bolt. Though, I’d sorely like to see you challenge that young woman if she’s some legend.” A twisted grin spread across Jarynd’s lop-sided face.

“She has no idea how to fight at the moment. I’m training her; she’ll learn fast.”

“Training her, too? I don’t doubt she’s fast.” He sighed. “Vanha-sielu, then? Met one once. Eyes as deep and as ancient as the oceans. Great body though.” He chuckled, but his smile faded into a frown. “Here. You haven’t... fallen for her, have you?”

Morghiad folded his arms. “She is pretty enough but I’d sooner tell my father of our... law-breaking than take her to my bed.”

Jarynd shrugged and re-arranged his sword belt, then regarded him beneath heavy brows. “Will you take me to assess her?”

“It’s the least I can do for your help, Jarynd.” Morghiad went to the cloak that he had recently reclaimed from Artemi, and noted it still held some of her scent, together with a not insignificant buzz of latent Blaze from its contact with her. He clasped it at his shoulders, and made to depart with the other kanaala.

Silar was wise to answer the door with caution, but upon seeing Morghiad and a subdued Jarynd, he brought Artemi from behind the door. The four of them convened in Silar’s rooms, looking as suspicious as Morghiad felt. Artemi would not look directly at Jarynd, and instead chose to switch between him and Silar. He could not help but feel as if he were being compared.

Silar had always been better-looking than he, and it was bad enough having to stand next to the man most of the time. No, he thought, a hero such as Artemi would not trifle with such idle musings. Silar watched Jarynd closely, as evidently the kanaala’s calm entrance had not been enough to elicit his trust. He had taken to his role of protecting Artemi very quickly, and it was possible he still felt something for her, which would serve well. Morghiad quietly pushed away the shame he felt at using his friend’s emotions for his own purposes.

Jarynd stepped toward Artemi and looked her over - well, less looked than leered. She scowled back at him.

“Give me your hand, woman,” Jarynd said.

Artemi looked to Morghiad for permission, and he nodded, but then he would have Jarynd’s head on a plate if he tried anything dangerous. She held out a delicate hand, causing Silar to step back in apprehension.

Jarynd clasped her fingers in his bony grip, and his reaction was immediate enough to make Silar jump. “Blazes alight! What level is she? I can’t even see the end of it!”

Artemi sniffed. “I am present in the room with you, complete with ears that hear sound and a mouth that speaks.”

Silar grinned inanely. Fool man.

Jarynd's reaction was not so warm. "You ought to show some respect to the men who have allowed you to live, girl. Not forgetting every one of us here is your superior."

Morghiad cringed internally, but did not comment on the reprimand. Instead he said, "Grade eleven, almost twelve."

Jarynd nodded to himself. "Nearly your level, then."

He did not need to know she would be graded thirteen before a year had passed, if a thirteen existed. Best to let everyone think he could manage her.

Artemi jumped and breathed. "Bloody Achellon! You could at least be a little more gentle!"

Silar's face darkened with concern, but he could not see the dancing points of light that now surrounded the pair, or that Jarynd was holding as much as his ability would permit. From the glazing of his eyes and the trembling of his hands, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

After one too many breaths of it, Morghiad lost patience and pulled their hands apart. "That is enough."

Jarynd's shoulders slumped visibly as the light drained from his eyes, though he folded his arms to disguise his loss. "At least she's not able to wield herself yet. That'll give her time to learn her place."

Artemi looked ready to gnaw through his leg.

"Did you detect anything else while you held The Blazes?" Morghiad asked.

Jarynd's lips thinned and his brow creased. "No, should I have?"

"I'm not sure. I may have imagined it."

The four remained in silence for a while longer, and Jarynd only broke it by offering his leave-takings. He had seen enough, though Morghiad suspected he would want to taste her again in the days to come. Once the he had departed, Morghiad invited Artemi to return with him.

He nodded to Silar in thanks, and they walked from the room together, though Artemi dropped back to her usual distance. Morghiad felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Passerid may have been an imminent battle, but Artemi was safe for the time being. All of them would want to touch her, to feel that much Blaze coursing through them after decades of starvation, and watching Jarynd exploit a woman of her merit with so little respect had been difficult. Morghiad did not relish the prospect of seeing it again.

The hallways were quiet, and shortly they returned to his chambers without incident. When the door shut, Artemi rushed to him, touched his chest and asked, "Are you hurt?" She began checking along his side for injuries, or rather, cuts to his clothing.

He caught her arm to cease her fussing. "There were no swords drawn, Artemi." He could smell Silar on her dress, and blazes, *could the man not keep his hands from anything female?*

“That is good,” she said. “I didn’t like the way he felt when he was... in here.” She flicked her eyes upwards. “And you were right. I didn’t want to say it in front of him, but there is something else there. I can sense it in you but not in him.”

“It is best we do not explore it until we know what it is,” Morghiad said. “I fear he will want to hold your power again. And he’ll try to do it in my absence. You must be watchful.”

She studied him, a tenseness still in her features. “You think he’ll try to wield?”

“No. He’ll try to use you for his own pleasure.”

Her face lost any obvious expression.

Morghiad went to the wardrobe and pulled out a bulky, folded item - his army blanket. “Take this. It’s not quite as warm as the cloak, but it will serve you well.”

Her eyebrows rose, and her mouth opened a little. “Do you mean for me to keep it?”

“Of course.”

She gave him one of her smiles. “Thank you.”

He could not be sure why she was so impressed with something as basic as a blanket. Even the most deprived citizens had blankets. Perhaps her head would explode if he gave her money. “You are dismissed, Artemi.”

She grinned broadly, curtsied and left with streams of red-gold hair flourishing behind her. Morghiad slumped onto his bed, fully dressed, and fell into a deep, dark sleep full of troubled dreams.



Silar awoke with a jolt. He still had dreams about the night Artemi had run to him, eyes full of fear, even though a good three months had passed since then. He hoped never to see that look in her face, or any other woman’s, ever again. It had been difficult accepting that he still cared for her, or that he still desired a witch, *and bloody fires blast her for being the prettiest witch in history!*

He gritted his teeth and threw off the covers in anger. The low winter sun filtered through the casements of his windows, leaving pools of hard yellow light upon the stone floors. A fierce frost had left miniature fingers of ice clinging to the outside of the glass, and their cold airs tried to force their way in.

Silar dragged on some clothes and ran a hand through his hair to tidy it. Sword practice was repetitive, and often dull, but it was an excellent way to work through one’s frustrations. He trotted down to the halls with vigour, sword at his side, and hoped they

would be doing some really exhausting, tough, sweat-inducing exercises. The anger was there for it, and so was his energy.

The hall was already mostly full when he arrived, but all of his men were there, and few took time off for *nalka* these days. It did make things easier, though he had not wished to admit it, or even believe so many would adhere to the rule. Passerid nodded to him, glad to be back in action again. Apparently there had been quite a fight between he and Morghiad over Artemi two weeks gone.

At first learning of the wielder's presence, Passerid had tried to chop Morghiad's limbs off, which was unwise given that the sergeant only had one hand at the time. Then he had done his best to drown Artemi in a bucket of poison, and she had only escaped thanks to the training she had been provided with. Morghiad had been forced to chase him through the castle halls, fight him, and then lock him in one of the cells until he saw reason.

Passerid was still undergoing some limited punishment, which had been kept private, but he seemed a well-pacified little bird these days.

Silar walked between his men, assessing their numbers and posture. He found they were in excellent order - a band of men to be proud of, and he approached Morghiad who was standing, arms folded, gazing out of one of the vast windows. There was an air of darkness about him today that was... unsettling in its presence, but the last month had changed his friend subtly on the exterior. He had smiled four times, perhaps laughed twice, frowned on numerous occasions and even glowered. Silar wondered what that meant for the man inside - *likely that his whole personality was breaking apart!*

Meditation revealed nothing more to Silar than what he had already seen, and it probably had something to do with Artemi. Trust a woman to destroy a man from the inside.

"I cannot believe winter is already here," he said to the kahr-captain.

"Hmm." Morghiad did not move or avert his attention from the window.

"Well, you'll be happy to hear only three men are absent from my lot today."

Morghiad compressed his lips in response, but said nothing.

Silar tried another tack. "Is she alright?"

He snapped his head round to Silar, but kept whatever he was about to say to himself. He stalked off toward the front of the hall instead.

Silar was not sure how to proceed when his friend was in this sort of mood. It was uncharted territory, so instead of pursuing the matter further, he went back to stand with his men.

The session was just as Silar had hoped - tough, gruelling even, and he pushed his men as hard as he pushed himself. After three hours of it, the entire room sang with the heat and sweat of nine thousand exhausted bodies. When Silar felt as if his muscles were about to snap from exhaustion, a furious roar bellowed through the masses around him.

“...not good ENOUGH! GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!”

Silar pushed through the now-motionless soldiers toward the source of the voice, and saw that Morghiad stood in a clearing, covered in sweat, but with sword still in hand. His eyes had taken on a rage that Silar had only seen in the most battle-crazed of men, never mind someone so expressionless. Morghiad had never raised his voice in anger, *not once* in the decade Silar had known him. Had he finally succumbed to some sort of madness?

The recipient of his outburst had already made his exit, probably afraid for his life, and only after shufflings began amongst the men did a measure of awareness return to Morghiad's eyes. He sheathed his sword smoothly, then to them all he said, “Leave. Today's session has finished.” With that, he stomped out of the hall, crowd parting easily before him.

Everyone there remained as agog as Silar, and Passerid caught him by the shoulder before he moved. Though he did not say anything, Passerid's expression conveyed clearly what he was thinking.

“I'll speak to him,” Silar said.

Silar made sure any practice swords were properly stored before he departed the hall, and not because of tidiness, but because he wanted to give Morghiad a good chance to cool his mood to something less frightening. Once he had completed every superficial task he could see, Silar made his way towards his friend's rooms. He tried to think where he might start with mining Morghiad's problems, since he was difficult to delve at the best of times, but now he would be more of an impenetrable brick than ever.

There was no point in waiting for a man like Morghiad to speak his mind openly - one could wait an eternity for that to happen! Perhaps the best approach would be to talk of something else, and somehow lead the bull to water along a more circuitous path. Silar did not really want to know what Morghiad's problems were, but he wanted the man to sort himself out.

He reached the giant marble hallway and spotted a blue-clad figure waiting before Morghiad's door. She turned at his approach.

“Silar.” Artemi smiled thinly as he neared. “He threw me out of his rooms. He won't even let me speak to him.”

Silar nodded. “There was... an upset during practice today. Perhaps you should retire to your room until tomorrow.”

She blinked. “What happened? Have I caused this?”

He compressed his lips. “I don't know exactly. He lost his temper.”

“What? He was angry? What did he do?” Curiously, she looked excited by the news, even happy.

“He unleashed his wrath on some poor fool - gave him the chiding of his life. Now get yourself somewhere safe, and don't come back to his chambers until tomorrow.”

She gave him a sour look, but then, she did not like being told what to do at all. She really needed to learn some discipline, and manners. Silar thought briefly about putting her over his knee, but quickly scrubbed the image from his mind.

After a momentary deliberation, she stalked off down the hall in a rather impressive silence. Definitely the walk of an assassin, he thought to himself.

Silar pushed open the heavy door without knocking, and stepped inside. His friend was leaning against the window, shirt cast to the floor, and the mark of the Sete'an royal family was plain on his right shoulder blade. He did not react to Silar's entrance in any way, and Silar leaned against one of the bed posts to view the fireplace. The enormous grating was quite empty, but then again, the room would have been chilly even with a fire.

"I would rather be alone. Please leave, Silar."

But Silar stayed rooted to his spot. "I've never noticed how plain it is in here," he said.

Morghiad whipped around like a snake. "Go."

"I will not," Silar said.

Morghiad paced with stiff strides across the room and back. His brow conveyed his frustration. "I stand at the pivot, Silar. I must do what is right and yet I fear that doing so will cause terrible wrongs."

"Your men will still follow you if you are honest with them. You have proven that much with Passerid and Jarynd."

Morghiad met his eyes. "Those two are right to fear her. You should fear her. I should fear her."

"But we know she is trustworthy," he stated.

"Yes. Though, she is wilful. And sharp. She should be caged. Yet, I cannot imprison her. And I cannot allow harm to come to her. You understand this?" The struggle in his words touched his eyes.

"I understand, Morghiad."

They remained in silence for some time, and Morghiad resumed his stance at the window. It was then that Silar realised he was not going to get much more out of Morghiad, and it struck him that Artemi might have better luck. That said, she had become fiercely loyal to Morghiad following his numerous moves to protect her, and probably would not be eager to share his secrets. The least Silar could do, however, would be to ask her how Morghiad reported the incident. Sometimes a simple, direct question was all that was needed, as his mother liked telling him.

"Did you tell her to come back tomorrow?" Morghiad asked.

Silar grunted in the affirmative and made his way to the door. He noted the cadet's sword lying upon the dark chest of drawers, and that it was now full of dents and chips, one of which indicated a blow of considerable force against a sharp object. "It'll be time to get her a proper one soon," he remarked.

Morghiad approached and pulled open a drawer. He lifted a pile of folded clothing and drew out a long, thin object wrapped in red fabric. The fabric unravelled from it under gravity, revealing a black polished scabbard with an almost undetectable curve. The thin sword within withdrew like silk upon the wind, and Morghiad handed it to Silar.

The handle was far too small for his hands, but he could tell that it was beautifully weighted, and carefully made. Silar had not seen a blade of this style before - much narrower even than the Kemeni fought with. It did not have space for a tang. "This steel is very fine," was his only comment.

Morghiad nodded. "It is how her weapon is most frequently described in the histories, or as close as I could get. The blacksmith almost fell off his chair when I told him what was needed."

Silar gave it a couple of loose swings. It seemed to fly on the air. "Have you given it to her yet?"

"No. But I will soon."

"That girl has learned a lot in very little time."

"She has mastered in three months what most take years to achieve." Morghiad re-sheathed the sword and placed it back in its hiding place. As Silar watched, he wondered who was better to know - the Artemi of the past, or that of the present? They were supposed to be the same woman, but she had already learned so much, it seemed impossible that this identity could survive such a change. This truly was dangerous ground, and Morghiad knew only some of the implications of it. Silar bade a good afternoon to his friend and sought his own chambers. Now was the perfect time for a deep, hot bath. And a drink. Or both.



Artemi paced the perimeter of the main cavern in the cellars. It was delightfully warm in there now that they had heat and light to depend upon. But she had never seen Morghiad act in such a dark manner before, and though it was wonderful she could now expect the occasional smile from him, it was surely wrong she was excited by his frowns. He was much more pleasurable to look at when his face wasn't all cliffs and rocks, but this anger was something else altogether, and it was a concern.

She was doubly upset that he had pushed her away so easily, for she had thought he considered her a friend. Artemi certainly saw him as one of her few friends, albeit a slightly odd one, and he could probably have done with her help. Now she had a vague idea of the

sorts of things that amused him, pleased him, and yes, she would just go and check on him.

That did not count as going against Silar's orders - simply walking past Morghiad's rooms and checking was permissible, expected even, for a laundress. Biting her lip and keeping her pace measured, she ascended the steps from the cellar.

Morghiad opened the door before her knuckles hit it a second time. His face was as grim as ever, but betrayed less emotion than it had done earlier. He had clearly been bathing recently, as his hair still dripped with warm water. He appeared calm enough.

"Good," Artemi said simply, and walked back down the hallway.

"Where are you going?" he called after her, leaning from the doorway.

Artemi turned and kept her smile suppressed. "Lord Forllan instructed me not to return to your room until tomorrow. I wanted to make sure your sheets did not need replacing."

Morghiad laughed. "You are a very headstrong woman. Come."

She smiled in response to his laughter, which made him quite handsome for a stone. Artemi entered his chambers and seated herself on the bed, which might have been a bold move a few weeks ago, but this place felt much more like a part of her home now. Morghiad rubbed his hair through with a towel and regarded her for a moment. He seemed to do that more as the weeks had passed, and at first she had found it rather unnerving. But now it seemed reassuringly normal to be stared at like a curiosity in an antiquarian's case.

"Come here," he demanded.

And like the pet she was, she obeyed. At least she had control over what she could say. "What happened this morning?"

He held her eyes for a moment before he said, "I allowed my anger to get the better of me. I'm beginning to think you are a bad influence."

Artemi's mouth dropped. "Me? You have been surrounded by emotional people your entire life. Why is it *my* fault?" She folded her arms in defiance.

"Because you-" He hesitated. "Because it is." He started to grin. It could have been a cheeky grin on any other man, but Artemi was not quite sure how to categorise it on him. Men were impossible, even when they did communicate! He turned to the corner and picked up a long, thin, black object. It looked like -

"I have a gift for you, Artemi. I hope you like it." He handed her the sword.

She turned it over in her hands. The casing was impossibly smooth, and polished so highly she could see her face in it. With her right hand, she gripped the velvet-swathed hilt, and with her left she removed the scabbard. It slid out with precision resistance, revealing a solid, but thin, blade of black-silver.

Morghiad took the scabbard from her, and placed it in the corner of the room while she examined the edge closely. It had been made from layers and layers of the thinnest

steel, their striation making a vivid pattern of stripes one could only see up close. She ran her thumb along it, which immediately drew blood.

“It should stay sharp for a few years before it needs re-whetting,” he said.

Artemi nodded absently, and spun it in the air. It held its position perfectly.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked.

She frowned. “Nowhere. It felt like the right thing to do.”

Morghiad crossed his arms at his chest, and resumed his odd, intent stare.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “No one has ever...” It was difficult to get the rest of the words out. “Thank you, Morghiad.”

He gave her a single nod, and then went to pick up his own sword.

“Now let’s see how you use it.” He spun his blade in his hand with practised ease, then came at her with a powerful downward strike. She swept him sideways with little difficulty and made a quick diagonal swipe in riposte. He avoided it, and recovered with two more attacks, but Artemi fought off each one without trouble, her sword seeming to lead the way for each of her moves.

“Faster,” he demanded, and the speed of their actions increased considerably. It was a challenge to keep up with him - the man always appeared to have fireworks and warhorses powering his muscles. She found herself on the defensive, being pushed backward, but she jumped toward the bed, hoping the higher ground would help. Then she made a bold strike at him, but the blade missed him, swept sideways and cut clean through one of the bed posts. It fell to the floor with a solid *thunk*. Artemi grimaced with embarrassment.

“Try to be a little more aware of your environment,” he said with some resignation. He lunged at her once more and she parried quickly. They continued their battle over the bed, Artemi still on the defensive, until eventually she grew tired of following the basic rules, and swung around the post as if to make a strike. When Morghiad blocked it, she kicked one of his feet out from under him. As he stumbled back she swept at him again, he blocked it partially, but her sword still proceeded to gouge deeply into his shoulder.

In dismay, Artemi dropped her sword with a clatter. “I’m so sorry. Are you alright?” She pulled his shirt from the area to check it was healing well. A small amount of blood seeped out from the swiftly closing wound.

He pushed her away. “Mistake. I’m still standing and still holding my sword. I could have easily struck back with an injury like that. Never. Ever. Drop yours.”

She nodded and stood with shame on two counts.

“Artemi,” he said softly.

She gazed up at his dark, emerald eyes.

“You have performed brilliantly this evening. I would like you to start training with the rest of the army.”

She didn’t know what to think... or say, for that matter. The idea... it was insane!

“I will have to tell them you are a wielder,” he said calmly.

Her eyes widened as far as they would go. “Are you mad? Then I won’t just have two men who want me dead, I’ll have several thousand!”

Morghiad went to locate his scabbard and put his sword away. “I have to tell them the truth, Artemi. They have put their lives in my hands. Some may try to harm you.” He seemed rather accepting of that. “But you have my word that I will do everything to protect you. Besides, I know that most will want you on their side. In fact, you may end up with more who would support you.”

That’s it, Artemi thought, he’d gone utterly deranged from all the Blaze he had held. “It is bad enough that I am a woman. There must be tens, hundreds among them who have seen their sisters and even their daughters executed for being wielders. How will they feel about me? And how long before the king discovers it?”

Morghiad rubbed at his chin. “Army business is army business. Every man is trained in keeping the secrets that need to be kept. They each swear an oath to do so. What good would it do us if our methods were leaked to an enemy? It is in our interest to stay silent on such matters. The army is not the city, or even the country. And betrayal carries a very heavy punishment. If I say you are a soldier among them, then they have a duty to you as you do to them.”

It still made her uneasy. “You really trust them?”

“With my life.”

She compressed her lips. “You’d better not lose your temper at them then. Fine. I’ll make sure you keep your emotions in check, and you can make sure they don’t cut me into little pieces.”

Morghiad smiled. “Are you giving me an order?”

“Consider it an honourable contract between a captain and his soldier,” she said.

He went blank once more, entering his staring mode. *What she would have given to know what he was thinking when he did that!* Finally, he nodded. “We’ll need to get you a uniform. And you must be sworn in. And a guard always carries his- ah- her sword, so we must have some changes made to that servant’s outfit of yours.”

Artemi looked down at her blue dress. How did he intend for her to hide that sword in there? She could not contain her blushing.

“What are your measurements?” He went to his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper.

But Artemi’s eyes bulged before she could get a word out. Surely he knew how improper a question that was to ask a woman? “I...” She cleared her throat quietly.

“Don’t you know them?”

To be truthful, her bosoms filled her bodice more appreciably of late, and parts of her body that ought to have finished growing seemed still to be making up their minds about it.

But Morghiad appeared undeterred. “Fine, “ he said, “You’re to go to the tailors on Zhavil Road tomorrow morning and be measured.”

She shook her head. “There’s not a chance in Achellon they’d let me in there.”

Morghiad blew a sigh through his nose. “I’ll get Silar to meet you there. Unfortunately I have some apologies to make... and an army to convince.”

Artemi stepped closer and put what she hoped would be a comforting hand on his arm. He did not shrug it off, instead choosing to stare at it like he had never seen one before. She squeezed his arm before releasing it, and it felt as hard as it looked. Perhaps he *was* made of stone, or parts of him, anyway.

Morghiad kept his silence, and went to the fallen bed spear, nudging it with his foot. He lifted the solid thing with the slightest effort and returned it to the broken stump. “Artemi?”

She drew close once she had guessed at his intentions, placed her hands atop his, and opened her mind to both him and the sensation of fire from his skin. Taking Blaze Energy through her, he began to form it into shapes she had not seen before. She now understood the relative tenderness with which he approached the task. It became evident every time she, Jarynd and Passerid crossed paths, whereupon Blaze would be duly ripped from her like the skin from a dead carcass.

Beodrin had been kind, though, and Morghiad had said he had good reason to show compassion.

Morghiad lifted her hands from the post while she continued to think, revealing the healed timber beneath. It was quite a marvellous piece of work, and the pair of them maintained their contact for a few moments longer, both unwilling to relinquish the tumultuous fires of The Blazes.



Silar paced around the entrance of the tailor’s shop, thinking of how inappropriate it would appear to accompany an unmarried servant into such an establishment. Still, he had his orders and so did the tailors. Morghiad had sworn them to secrecy over this... singular... uniform creation and had threatened to cancel their army contract if they spoke of it. But Artemi was fast becoming the worst-kept secret in Cadra.

He glanced at the window and noted some good-looking silks, and thought that he could probably do with a new coat or two to properly bring out his eyes.

A tap on the shoulder caught him unawares, and he spun to its owner. She smiled at him broadly, hair glowing red in the winter sunlight. Her lips bore the softness of roses, and bloody light, did they look warm in spite of the cold! “You walk like an experienced assassin, my lady.”

“No longer a herd of wildebeest? I’m disappointed.”

He gave her a wink, and opened the shop door for her, praying that nobody would be watching. At least she had possessed the good sense to change into her city clothing for the day.

The inside of the shop was an eye-watering melange of colours, all piled together in luxurious heaps or draped from wall hooks. It really did not appear to be the sort of place one would find uniforms, but this truly was where they were designed and fitted.

A pretty, golden-haired woman came forward to serve them, but when she noticed Artemi’s attire, she recognised their purpose. “This way, miss,” she said with an appreciable level of respect. The shopkeeper waved at a bench for Silar to take a seat, and he did so, before picking up one of the books for distraction. Evidently male partners were dragged in here often, and quite coincidentally, the book in his hand was an abridged version of *Chronicles of the Warrior*. He chuckled to himself quietly.

Just when he had reached an interesting part about her leading a revolt against a tyrannical ruler who had fallen in love with her, she stepped out from the changing rooms. His eyes had not nearly expected what they came to rest upon, but rest upon it they did. For some curious reason, the tailor had chosen to put her in an ivory gown, scattered with hundreds, possibly thousands of mirrored shards. It clung to every perfect curve of her body, and her red hair cascaded down one shoulder in waves of uncontrolled flame. She looked like a queen, or possibly how he had imagined a mythical creature from deep inside the woods – not that he believed in such things.

Silar got to his feet quickly and shut his gaping mouth. “..Um,” was all he could get out. He looked questioningly at the shopkeeper.

The tailor smiled a little. “Well, we took her measurements and found they perfectly matched this dress. It was made some time ago but we’ve never found the right girl for it. Until now.”

Artemi looked somewhat displeased at the other woman’s comment. “It’s very lovely. But you can’t polish a- ... I mean, to put a commoner like me into a dress like this. It’s a little absurd, don’t you think?”

Silar took another appreciative look at the dress on her, and he knew exactly what the bloody, blasted knobble-headed demon of a shopkeeper was doing. She had probably sized him up, pun excluded, the minute he had walked in with his fine lady friend. He sighed in exasperation. “Alright then. How much is it?”

Artemi’s face paled.

The tailor went to fetch a piece of paper, and wrote a few numerals on it. She handed it to Silar, but his throat caught when he read it.

Artemi pulled it from under his nose, scrunched the paper in her fist and locked eyes with him. “No. This is ridiculous. Where am I ever going to wear such a thing? Will I parade around the wash rooms in it? Or take it to... *outdoors* with me? I don’t even have anywhere to keep it! I forbid you from completing such a transaction.”

Silar chewed his lip for a moment, irritated at her forthright manner. “You will wear it to dinner with me.” Then to the shopkeeper, “Let’s settle a price and payment, madam.” They went to the well-worn counter to begin their haggling, where he could feel Artemi’s eyes burning furiously into his back. She did not know what it was to be a man, he thought, when women could rule you just by looking a certain way, and she did need to learn to accept that he would not be told what to do! It did not matter if he could not have her; it was his right to admire her.

Artemi stepped out of the shop in complete silence. She truly appeared to be angry with him for buying her a present. “I buy things like this for women all the time, Artemi,” he lied.

“Oh?” Her shoulders relaxed a touch.

He tucked the folded dress beneath his arm. “Well, I like to see them smile. And there is not much beauty in Cadra, so one might as well highlight the few stars in it.” He put on a good grin.

Perhaps it was working on her, as she blushed very slightly and gave him a, “Hmm.”

“Will you dine with me tonight? I know an excellent chef in the castle...”

She gave him a pained expression. “I don’t know if this is a good idea...”

“I’m hardly going to try to sleep with you, am I?”

She clamped her mouth shut and shook her head.

“Then it is set. Come to my rooms an hour after sunset. I’ll keep your dress there.” He waited for her to acknowledge his request, and then bade his goodbyes. He wanted to catch the end of Morghiad’s explanations to the army and possibly save him from a stabbing, if necessary.



The men were shaken enough to fall silent. Some had even dropped their swords, and slumped upon the ground. Rahake glanced about to seek some of the more lucid ones, but even they had looks of deep internal reflection. No one could believe it - Artemi was

real, and she was here, about to start fighting alongside them. *A free wielder*. Fires on a toadstool!

Worse, Morghiad seemed to think she was one of the deadly Kusuru Assassins from the horror stories he had read as a boy – the ones who came for you in the night. Though Morghiad had made an excellent argument for her case, and Rahake agreed with much of it, there was still too much uncertainty. They would indeed be better off with her on their side, and they would be wise to take care of her in this life, but the idea of a woman fighter becoming one of their brother fighters, or perhaps sister in this case, was difficult to accept.

He rubbed at his temple with a large, scarred finger.

Morghiad held the front of the hall in silence, and he could not have known what reaction he would receive, but he had chosen to tell them the truth of the matter. For the second time, Rahake wondered if their kahr-captain was too painfully honest for his own good, a naïve child, or perhaps a combination of the two. The honesty, at least, might have been worthy of some respect.

“Kahr-Captain Morghiad,” Rahake shouted out. “You have honoured us with your honesty. A lesser man would not have chosen such a perilous path. But it is exactly that. How shall we know we can trust her, or that you can handle her?” He sensed the men nodding in agreement around him.

Morghiad did not pause before answering, “Because I would trust her with my life. She has sworn an oath to protect this country and she will swear the oaths of the army, just as you have. If you still have fears, then know that I and the other kanaala will work to ensure that her power is correctly used.”

Rahake might have been satisfied with the response, if he had believed Morghiad was old enough to know what he was doing. There had been the years before Acher’s rule, when wielders had roamed free, and when kanaala training had been so much more intense than this current crop could have conceived. Morghiad may have been reputedly strong enough to contain the fires of any wielder, but that did not make up for his youth. “And you truly intend to allow wielders to return to the city?” he asked.

Morghiad nodded. “I will no longer pursue a strategy of executing or imprisoning them unjustly. Of course, we would continue to deal with any... untoward wielding. Passerid, Jarynd and Beodrin have agreed with me on this.”

To Rahake’s right, Beodrin shifted a little, and he wondered if this had anything to do with the kanaala’s young daughter. Abilities with Blaze could be passed down, after all. Well, if all the kanaala had agreed upon it, then what choice did they have? Only kanaala could quench wielders, and only kanaala could detect them.

“And you think she can remain a secret from the king?” came a shout from one of the younger sergeants.

“Each of you has proven yourself capable of keeping such a secret, you have all demonstrated unsurpassed dedication. I must trust you all with this as I trust you with the care of the city and of the country. I must also trust you with her life. She cannot know of her past until she is ready.” Morghiad stood firmly, foolishly, by Rahake’s measure. He had surely gone too far this time!

The soldiers had taken Morghiad’s instruction on women in jest, but in time, had found they rather liked being good at fighting again. And then they had started to believe… believe that perhaps their kahr-captain knew something they did not. But this… this was too much!

The hall fell once more into silence, until a soldier shouted, “With respect, are you doing her, kahr-captain?” Quite a few titters erupted, and they were loudest among Beetan’s men. Now, *there* was a surprise!

Morghiad waited for the giggles to die down, and answered with a simple, “No.”

Blazes, it seemed unlikely Morghiad was ever going to please his father by taking a woman to his bed, since he appeared to be doing everything else he could to get under the skin of King Acher. Crown and sword had traditionally had a degree of separation in Cadra, and many believed that Acher had made Morghiad captain in order to unify the two. But Morghiad had made his position clear enough thus far - he was a soldier before he was the king’s son. The soldiers had discussed this enough between themselves, and it had made them grow to like him more than any other captain Rahake recalled, even if Mor *was* a foolish boy.

Morghiad spoke again, “All those who are in agreement with this plan, stand to the right of the hall; all those who disagree, on the left.”

There was some chatter and general milling around, but at length, the entire right side of the hall was filled with men, and Rahake, against his better judgement, was among them. It was not that he wanted wielders back, or wished to have this Artemi creature at his back. It was that he liked Morghiad, and he liked the army more than he ever had. He had to side with the majority, and so did many others beside him.

The left side still held roughly two hundred men, and one of them shouted out, “You took my daughter.” Another said, “And my sister. I believed I was doing the right thing in letting her go, but now you say she should have lived! *My sister!* If this is right, then someone should pay for her death.” A third man said, “Why should this one woman be allowed to live when ours were not?”

Morghiad inhaled deeply, and allowed a look of sadness to filter onto his face, which was a peculiar thing to witness. “That is something I have wrestled with for some time. I greatly regret what has gone before, but now we have a chance to change things. Today we can stop it and prevent more death. My father is the one who ordered all wielders killed, and we were complicit in it. I believe he is… mistaken. I will not be

complicit in this any longer. Give this woman a chance to prove her worth – to save all of you in battle, as she has the power to do it.”

The men tarried for ten minutes or so, unsure if their favourite kahr-captain had been manipulated and brainwashed by a witch.

“Is this the decision you wish to stand by?” Morghiad pressed.

Several of them moved to the opposite side. Then another twenty joined, and at last, in silence, all men walked to the right side of the hall. Morghiad relaxed visibly, and jumped down from the platform. “She’ll swear in tomorrow with the other new recruits,” he said as he strode down the empty side of the hall. “Dismissed, men!”



Chapter 8

Dark, twisted torrents of black liquid seeped beneath a thin veil in the lowest layers of his mind. Morghiad thought of it as all the anger, the fury, the fear and the horrors he had seen in his life. All of it flowed there, well-contained for the moment, but there was so much of it. Sometimes it was like trying to control forty foot waves in a tempest with nothing more than a stick.

He cleared his mind by focussing on the feminine-shaped items in front of him. There was a warm, black short-coat sat atop a black bodice, slashed with a single green stripe, and there was also a small shirt, black breeches, a sword belt and some long, leather boots. The clothing followed the style of the army, but had been designed to imitate the outfits the warrior was depicted in or described as wearing in books. And, of course, they had to meet the particular needs of a woman's body, which Morghiad tried not to think of too much. They did appear small to his eyes - was there truly that little of her?

He leaned back against the grey stone of the changing room screen and lifted her sword. She had taken to it with frightening speed as soon as she had picked it up. He was glad, of course, since it would be much healthier for them both if she spent more time training with the other men – and now that she was good enough to be sworn in. It also meant she would be better able to defend herself in his absence, and he could spend less time worrying about her.

That was a lie, a little voice whispered inside his head. Calidellians were known across the lands for their ability to keep secrets, but expecting ten thousand men to keep their mouths shut about a woman warrior, and a wielder too, was madness! It was delusion! His lieutenants had said as much.

True, Silar was reassuring in his confidence to pick out those with the largest of mouths before they opened them, and he had claimed those were ones Morghiad would want rid of anyway, but still... someone would talk. Really, Silar couldn't possibly be that good at predicting what every single man alive would do. There would have to be bribes offered, and threats made. It was only a matter of time, and all Morghiad could hope was that Artemi would be strong enough and frightening enough when her secret was revealed. Few with a brain would want to anger a vanha-sielu warrior, surely?

Abruptly he felt the air move about him. She was standing in the changing room doorway, hair pulled into a braid which decorated one shoulder. He lowered the sword to the bench and invited her in. "This is your uniform, Artemi. You will have some spare items

made shortly, but see how these work for you first. I'll keep them in my rooms since you do not appear to have much in the way of... private storage space. And you are not to wear it anywhere but this hall and in battle."

She nodded quietly, but kept staring at the clothing.

"Well, are you going to put it on?"

Artemi looked nervously at the changing quarters, and he quickly realised how open they must have appeared to her. Of course, when there were only men in there, that was hardly an issue.

"There's no one here but me. If anyone else turns up early I'll kick them out. Will that suffice?" They had a full thirty minutes before the first lot would start pouring in.

"Alright," she said quietly, and it was a very subdued 'alright' indeed.

Morghiad went to stand at the doorway, back turned to her, and folded his arms. He could hear the rustling of fabric behind him in the near distance. It was a cold day today, he thought -*bracingly cold*. He could just about see the sky at the top of the enormous windows, and by the look of the dark grey clouds, there would be a thin layer of snow on the castle roof soon. It had become colder a little earlier than usual this year, which was curious.

He felt a hand at his shoulder, and the rest of her walked before him before he could turn.

"What do you think?" she asked with a smile.

His mind seemed to empty of all conversation. He tried to open his mouth, or move, but could not. She looked exactly as she had in the illustration, with every inch of material clinging to her body flawlessly. Artemi turned on the spot slowly, affording him a look at her back and legs. The breeches were scandalous from the rear, but he hoped his men wouldn't be too distracted by that particular view.

She completed her rotation as Morghiad cleared his throat to sound more proper. "Good," he said. "No, wait a minute." He set about readjusting two of the buckles on her bodice. "These need to be flat against the fabric, or they'll make excellent hooks for swords."

She gave him a confused blink and a grimace when he touched her. Well, perhaps that had been a little inappropriate, but her sword belt was crossed over in the wrong direction, too. He undid the clasp and re-wound it around her, pulling it tight at her hips.

"As you are right-handed, this must be crossed over at your right side. Otherwise you'll hit the belt every time you try to re-sheathe."

If a man was to die, then dying with her as his final sight would surely have been the most agreeable of deaths. He was probably staring at her again, which was something he needed to stop doing, certainly in public. At least he had not fallen in love with her like some overgrown puppy, which would have been the end of his reputation. It was quite

acceptable to find her beautiful, however. A dedicated fighter was still allowed to appreciate exquisiteness when it occurred in the world.

Morghiad led her to the front of the hall while he thought on his problem. “Do you know what you are to do today?”

“Swear to follow the orders of my superiors, fight for my country, defend my sword-brothers and generally do everything you tell me to,” she said with an air of affected boredom.

He grunted. “Speak to your superiors like that and you’ll be in line for a punishment. I’ve let you run too free with your mouth, Artemi. Here you must show respect. These men have made quite a concession in accepting you.”

She frowned and dropped her head. “I know, captain.”

Morghiad changed the subject. “While we wait, why don’t we see how you move now you’re more suitably attired?”

They both withdrew their swords and began a steady duel. Artemi’s moves were smooth and precise, almost always correct responses to his own. She was unexpectedly strong at times, but still too tentative to really commit to beating him. Out of her dress, the woman was much better at evading his most extended of lunges. “Work faster!” he instructed, and immediately she responded, which made the fight far more interesting for him.

It was not long before they had drawn a small audience of soldiers, and when Artemi almost shouldered into one of them, he decided to end the engagement. He hoped they were impressed with her ability, since she was certainly better than the average new recruit. She could probably give some of the sergeants a run for their money if she really pushed herself, and that was after only a few weeks of training. How long before she bested him? Another month?

He pulled her to stand beside him, and waited while the rest of the men filtered in. They certainly did not hold back from staring at her, and Artemi appeared to study the floor closely while they did, unsure of where to look. Four new recruits were accompanied to the front by the sergeants who had been training them. They were young men, but all would have picked up the sword aged seven or eight, and some may even have attended a battle or two as runners.

“You must meet all of these soldiers, one way or another,” Morghiad whispered to her. “The greatest danger to you is their fear. If they learn not to fear you, if they see you and touch you, they can learn to care for you – share a bond with you.”

With the room filled, Morghiad jumped onto the platform and bade silence. He always felt slightly embarrassed at this part of his role, but speaking had to be done, and he was starting to wonder if he was quite good at it. “Today we have five new soldiers who will join in the fight for Cadra and its nation of Calidell. Come.” He motioned for them all to

join him, and the five hopped up with the fluid movements of athletes to stand in a line next to him. “Kneel.”

Artemi and the four men dropped to their knees, holding their swords out behind them. The grey hall took on a deathly silence. Artemi was closest, so he started with her. “Name?”

“Artemi D’Avrohan,” she announced.

He took both her hands in his, feeling the echoes of Blaze wash through his fingers. “Artemi D’Avrohan, you must abide by the rules of this army. Do you accept?”

“Yes.”

“Do you swear to fight on behalf of the people of Calidell?”

“I swear it.”

“Do you swear to recognise all men in this army as your brothers, and swear to defend each of them should they require it?”

“I swear it.”

“Do you swear to obey the orders of your commanding officers, to question only when you have good cause, and never to defy?”

“I swear it.”

“Do you swear to keep all secrets of the army within the army, and not to speak of them, even to your kin?”

“I swear it.”

“Do you understand that breaking any of these oaths will result in punishment, dismissal, imprisonment or even execution?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are a soldier of Calidell. Find your place with Beodrin’s men.” He released her hands and watched as she rose. She kept her eyes firmly fixed to the floor as she stepped down and made her way toward the stocky lieutenant. Morghiad could have put her with Silar, but the man had grown far too attached to her already, and jealousy had a tendency to create problems. Having Passerid in the same battalion would not have been beneficial to anyone, besides.

With Beodrin as her commanding officer, the other men would be appeased, and she would be kept safe at the same time.

Morghiad moved onto the next recruit. “Name?”

“Godedrin Murani,” the boy said hesitantly.

Morghiad held his hands between his palms. They felt like clumsy lumps of meat after Artemi’s delicate fingers. “Godedrin Murani, you must abide by the rules of this army. Do you accept?”

The boy looked nervous. “Yes.”

“Do you swear to fight on behalf of the people of Calidell?”

“I swear it.”

“Do you swear to recognise all men in this army as your brothers... and all its women as your sisters, and swear to defend each of them should they require it?” That would have drawn a few smirks.

“I swear it.”

The swearing-in ceremony continued for a few more minutes, in which time he gave Silar the best of the men in the hope of settling his loss of Artemi, and though Silar stood some way off, Morghiad could tell that he was scowling. After the last of the men had joined Luna’s company, he called for sword practice to begin. He commenced line inspection, but it wasn’t long before Silar caught him.

“Captain,” he said with some anger in his eyes, “would you speak to me a moment?”

He nodded, leading the way to a quiet corner. “What is it?”

Silar vented as much as he could with his voice low, “Why didn’t you give her to me? You *know* I am the best man here to watch over her!”

“And I’d wager you’d be the most dedicated too. But I cannot have you punching your own men in the face every time one of them looks at her in a manner you do not like.”

“I would not... I...”

Morghiad continued, “And it is not just a matter of her safety. I need to make sure the other men have the reassurance of a kanaala commanding her.”

Silar blurted, “But Passerid -”

“Passerid’s the last man I’d want giving her orders,” Morghiad finished. He hoped Silar would sort himself out sharpish, otherwise this was going to become a not-insignificant problem.



Artemi stood and dusted herself off a second time. These men had clearly decided to throw their worst at her as some sort of test, and perhaps because they were afraid, or did not trust her. Why they had to be so underhand about it, she did not know. Her fighting partner would assail as fast as he could, she would meet his strikes, and then some blasted soldier nearby would stick a foot out or jab her in the ribs with an elbow.

She clenched her jaw, but said nothing. All she could do was continue fighting on as if these men were nought but annoying flies. Beodrin had watched for a while, assessing her skill, and had complained that Morghiad had pushed her too hard, too fast. Apparently

she lacked the balance that *took years to establish*. Well, now her balance was being well and truly tested by men who clearly hated her presence!

Through the crowd of tall, broad shoulders she occasionally made out Morghiad and Silar at the far side of the hall. They appeared to be discussing something rather serious, and kept glancing in her direction. Looking at Silar made her feel even more miserable than she already felt, if not for their previous evening's dinner. He had been quite respectful, only laughing once when she had picked up the wrong fork for vegetables.

What was the point in having numerous separate forks for one meal, anyway? She'd had to navigate through four of the blazed things! It was utterly absurd. At least he hadn't come into his washroom to spy on her changing into that dress, which was something.

It was the finest dress she had ever seen, but he did not seem to realise the awkward contract it had established between them. Now she'd have to consider his *feelings* every time she spoke to another man or accepted gifts. And she was beholden to him with it, since it could only ever be worn in his sight. *Bloody men!*

She took a powerful swipe at her opponent. Fine, she thought to herself, if they wanted a challenge, then that is what they would get. She sped up her attacks, spinning and thrusting and parrying as hard as she could. Within seconds, the other man was lying on the floor, swordless and shocked. She had to admit she felt a surge of satisfaction at seeing him there, but offered a hand to help him up. He looked at it warily, but she did not move it. At last, and with trepidation, he took the hand, surprised that she was not pulled over by his weight, and went to reclaim his weapon.

"She's so... *small!*" whispered one of the men about her, but she ignored it. She was NOT. SMALL.

"Time for you to fight someone a little more difficult?" said one of the other soldiers. When she turned to him, she noted that three green strips marked his chest and shoulders. "I'm Orwin," he said. "Good to meet you, Artemi. I've heard a lot about you." He smiled warmly, quite prettily, in truth. Not so much as Silar or Morghiad, when he was in one of his better moods, but there was something pleasing about this man's curved mouth and hazel eyes.

"Well met, sergeant." She smiled back.

They sparred for some time, with Artemi typically ending up on the defensive, but she managed to touch him with the blade a few times. It was not enough to throw him from his stride, but by the end of the session, she had dispensed with the short-coat and had worked up quite a sweat. Every part of her body felt as if it were dripping water onto the floor, and she was in no fit state to meet a single other soldier.

Orwin gave her a cheeky wink as he departed, and she was glad to have made a single friend. She *longed* to bathe.

Morghiad dismissed the assembled men, looking somewhat well-worn himself. Of course she could not leave the hall dressed as she was, and she could not get undressed

until the changing rooms emptied. And so she went to sit, still dripping, on one of the wooden tables. Silar walked over to her, muttered a brief, “Are you alright?” and then left when she nodded.

Artemi thought she must have smelled quite pungent at that moment, but she was not the only one watching Silar, as she observed Morghiad’s eyes followed him as he exited the huge doors.

“Beodrin tells me you did well today,” Morghiad said.

“I didn’t get my new uniform cut to pieces, at least.” She thought she detected the beginnings of a smile on his face, but could have imagined it.

“Do you think you will be happy with us?” His emerald-like eyes burned into her with the question, which was a very odd one. She was a weapon - what did he care for a weapon’s happiness? Then she realised, he wanted to make sure she would not turn and kill them all.

“It is early in my career yet, captain, but I have met some excellent and kind soldiers among you.”

“Good.” His eyes darted back toward the huge doors.

They waited in silence while the men in the changing rooms bantered and sang, their vocalisations occasionally tempered by the sound of showering. Artemi tried not to think about a room full of soapy, naked, muscular men, and at length, they began to depart.

Just as she was about to enter the rooms, she spotted that one of the men was wearing a pale blue dress.

“Oh... no,” was all she could say, and think.

The man turned round to her and grinned mischievously. The dress was stretched tightly around him, unfastened at the back and dampened everywhere by sweat. His sweat.

“You... you... ball bag! Give that back!”

The man and his friends burst into giggles. “You’re going to have to do better than that!”

Artemi clenched her fists at her sides. “Turd!” She paused while she thought of something better, then, “Nipple!”

With each insult she threw at them, their laughs only seemed to deepen, and more of their teeth to flash through wider grins. When she looked to Morghiad for help, he did nothing more than arch a black eyebrow.

“Fires!” Artemi exclaimed, pointing a sharp finger at the man in her dress. “Now, you give that back to me, you shaving of a rat dropping, or I’ll stuff this sword up your hairy, inbred, barnacled, stinking arse!”

“Oh?” the man said in mock surprise. “A better effort, though I’ll expect worse next time.” He pulled the dress off with a great deal of difficulty, dropped it onto the floor in front of him and then grabbed his manhood in one hand. With the briefest of grunts, he

proceeded to urinate over the fabric, waving the stream around as if he were decorating a cake with sugar syrup.

“Aah!” he said with a smile of satisfaction, gave everything a final shake, and then sauntered back to his soldier friends.

Morghiad turned to Artemi. “Consider yourself initiated. It is good that they treat you as a man. You did well.”

“Am I… what… how *dare* he?”

“When more recruits come in the future, it’s up to you whether you do the same to them. Now, shower while there is still time.”

Was this really how the national army operated? It was disgusting! And the pissing soldier had said, “Next time,” *hadn’t he?* Her dress… Artemi picked up the dripping thing between her thumb and forefinger, trying desperately not to inhale the smell that came from it, and stepped lightly toward a pipe-head that would offer her the most privacy.

The last of the men completed his exit through the great archway, still giggling, while Morghiad took up his guard of the room. If he hadn’t been there, oh, Artemi could think of lots of knives and daggers she would have liked to jab in that soldier’s back! And twist! Instead she ground her teeth, threw the dress of… of *piss* to the floor and tried to remember that working with these idiot fools was her oath-bound duty.

As she peeled off her battle clothing, she considered what she would do about the new set of laundry she had been given. *There was no escape from laundry, not ever and not for her! Not even for a warrior!*

Artemi slowly gathered her thoughts into something more sensible. She could wash her things here and wear her sullied dress damp about the castle until she located a dry one, or she could pretend their insult meant nothing, and for once avoid her duties as linen maid. Yes, that had to be the only way to walk out of this with any pride.

The cool air was a welcome change against her skin, and one thing in this place to be grateful for. Checking that Morghiad was still facing away, she stepped under one of the high shower taps and pulled the brass lever. Hot water cascaded down on her body, rapidly sluicing the sweat from her.

Someone had once told her the water was heated in the kitchens and then pumped round the castle. However it was done, it was a marvel to Artemi.

Washing complete, she knocked the handle back and scraped the hair from her face. Morghiad was still facing toward the great hall, which was good. She towelled the water off and pulled on her slip and dress, the stink of them almost unbearable. But Artemi would be a queen today, and no true queen would lower her eyes or pull a frown, even if a whole bucket of urine were thrown over her. A queen had servants to do her laundry.

Once she was sure her countenance and posture showed no evidence of shame, she began her stride toward Morghiad. Her lacing was still in disarray where the soldier had loosened it to get his fat head through the hole, and Artemi needed help putting that right. *Well, she thought, if Morghiad considered it acceptable to adjust a woman’s battle*

clothing, then he could bloody-well do up her bodice ties! She stepped before him, pulled her sodden hair over one shoulder, presented her back, and waited.



The stables filled one side of the entrance courtyard of the castle, and stretched right through to the fountain courtyard. Covering three levels, it was mostly home to the nobles' animals and a few of the higher-ranking officers'. The rest of the army's horses were kept in and around the grasslands that surrounded Cadra. Familiar smells of straw and horse dung filled Morghiad's head as he neared Tyshar's box.

It poked its black velvet nose over the door and snorted at him in excitement, so the kahr gave it a greeting of a rub along the length of its snout. Aside from his obvious size and strength, Tyshar was a very special warhorse indeed. He had been a gift from Morghiad's tactics instructor, Lord Caollowin - now gone thanks to his father's dismissal of the entire advisory council.

Tyshar was a blood horse, which meant that he had drunk the blood of a man while still a foal. It conferred a host of advantages, which included quick healing and a long life. It also brought some disadvantages. This was most often done to the finest horses, and the resulting sterility would mean their bloodline ended with them. In addition, Tyshar had taken on some of Morghiad's less-agreeable personality traits upon taking his blood, and he frequently snapped or kicked at anyone who was not him.

This probably was not the most ideal horse for Artemi to learn on. Tyshar was too big for her to start with, but Morghiad riding out on any other mount would have aroused suspicions, and he had already heard enough from his father that week.

Was there a woman in the army? Was there a wielder in the city?

Morghiad, of course, had denied it all as nonsense, and had set Silar to quieting the voices that had spoken.

Tyshar could do with the exercise, and he the release. Morghiad had sent Artemi to the woods a few minutes earlier on a postal carriage, and with luck, she would have alighted at the right place.

He slung the smooth leather saddle onto Tyshar's back, tied the girths and then moved to ease the bit into the horse's mouth. It chewed vigorously at the metal, eager to go. Morghiad sprung into the saddle and kicked the beast out of the stable, keeping his head low, but Tyshar very nearly leapt through the opening. He cantered powerfully down the ramp, sending one or two stray bales of hay into the air, and Morghiad was forced to

channel the raging horse carefully between the milling people of the castle. He did not want to decapitate anyone today.

Outside the castle, he was forced to pull Tyshar into a contained trot around a group of tradesman and their customers, but soon let the horse loose again once the road ahead cleared. As he headed for the northern gate, several passers-by stopped to bow or curtsy. It was really all very unnecessary for them to do that, especially since many of them would only recognise that he was a lord of some kind.

Thankfully not many commoners would put his face to the First Heir to the Marble Throne, Kahr-Captain of the Army of Calidell, Son of House Sete'an, or whatever other ridiculous title they wished to use. And he wished to keep it that way.

The darkness of the city walls consumed him as he cantered through the exit tunnel, hoof falls clattering between the stones. He still recalled how confused Tyshar had become when they had felted his feet for a surveillance operation, but his horse liked very much to announce its presence.

Morghiad needed only to give a light touch on Tyshar's sides once they re-entered daylight, and the two of them galloped across the frozen grassland. The horse was fast for its size on the flat, and Morghiad smiled inwardly at the rush he felt with the speed. Any other animal, he would have given a gentle warm-up before the run, but Tyshar never behaved quite like that.

The iced plants crunched satisfyingly beneath each hoof as Morghiad reined to the left. A vast forest lay two miles distant. It wouldn't afford a huge amount of cover at this time of year, but Morghiad knew of a secluded clearing off the main road which few other people ever visited.

The hard-packed road became churned and rough as it met the borders of the woods, and Morghiad slowed his mount over the uneven ground to commence his search for the young woman. Frosted orange, red and brown leaves littered the woodland floor, providing a perfect match for her and her hair, should she wish to lie down in it.

Morghiad drew his horse to a halt and dismounted, as he could smell the familiar scent of wisp-root upwind of him. A flurry of red hair blew around the side of a broad tree trunk, framing a pale profile that smiled at him as it turned. She had improved the control of her more extreme emotions, but still smiled too freely for his liking. Not that he didn't like her smiles. There were just too many of them, and they had become difficult to deal with.

Morghiad vaulted back on the horse and held his gloved hand out for Artemi. "Give me your left hand and place your left foot in the stirrup here." He turned the left side of the horse to face her.

"I'm supposed to get my foot all the way up there?"

"No one's looking, Artemi," he reassured her.

She did as she was told, hitching up her skirts awkwardly.

“Now jump so that your right leg swings over the rump of the horse, and grab the back of the saddle with the other hand.”

She appeared a little apprehensive, but pushed off the ground and landed behind him with surprising grace.

“Now hold on,” he said.

“To what?”

“Me.”

Artemi slid her arms around his waist and pressed herself into his back. The sensation was oddly... pleasant.

“Looks like snow,” Morghiad announced, glancing at the sky.

“Ah... yes. So it does,” came her muffled reply.

Morghiad booted Tyshar into a fast-paced walk and reined the animal into the bare undergrowth. He could feel her leaning to one side to inspect the ground beneath them. They were leaving quite an obvious trail, but would re-join another track soon, so that didn’t matter too much. The two of them rode in silence for a few minutes, listening to the occasional panicked calls of the native birds or the rustling of some hidden predator. Eventually they reached an old track, and Morghiad turned the horse to follow it deeper into the trees.

“Shall we go a little faster?” he asked.

Her arms stiffened. “Is that safe?”

Morghiad allowed himself a small smile, not that she would have seen it anyway, and then he heeled Tyshar into a soft canter that caused Artemi’s grip to tighten considerably. The weather really was unusually cold for this time of year.

After half an hour of riding, they arrived at the clearing he sought, where lichen-covered stone blocks lay scattered about the edges. Some of them appeared to have the form of hands, arms or legs from an ancient statue, fragmented long ago. Perhaps it had depicted a relative of his. With Tyshar halted, Morghiad instructed Artemi to dismount, which she did with elegance. She appeared a little shaken after her ride, and kept her arms tightly folded.

Morghiad dismounted beside her, and began winding the stirrup straps around the metal several times to shorten them. “Take the reins in your left hand,” he instructed, “Can you reach the opposite side of the saddle with your right?”

She stretched toward it, but the horse was clearly too tall.

Morghiad scratched his chin and walked over to one of the fallen stones. “Take the bridle near his mouth and bring him here, left side facing me.” This would be an opportunity to see how she could deal with Tyshar’s moods.

Artemi stepped towards the animal’s head and reached up to the ends of the reins. The horse eyed her suspiciously while she took hold of the soft leather, and rubbed Tyshar’s nose. Amazingly, the horse nuzzled her face as if they were old friends. Artemi

grimaced at being brushed against, unaware that she should have been bitten and hooved to the floor by now.

She pushed the soft nose away, and stepped toward Morghiad, warhorse following in content submission. Perhaps Tyshar could sense she was a wielder as he could. *That flaming hair woman* wasn't going to learn anything if she never had a challenge from a horse! He clenched his jaw and took the reins from her when she drew near.

"Climb onto this stone," he said.

She looked at it carefully. "Don't you feel strange when you look at things like this? Objects from a past, long-forgotten? Who will be around to speak of their meaning now?" *She didn't remember yet. She couldn't.*

"All things become like this eventually, do they not?" he said.

She nodded and stepped onto the weathered masonry.

"Now take the reins in this hand again and place your left foot in the stirrup. Mount as you did before."

She did so with grace, though it afforded him a rather generous view of her sleek legs.

"Feet in the stirrups. Keep the metal beneath the ball of your foot and drop the heel. Good. That will help you keep your balance."

He instructed her for several hours round the clearing, watching her with some amusement when she bounced awkwardly upon Tyshar's back. As with all things he taught her, she showed unusually speedy progress. After she had bounced to her sixth canter, he raised his eyes skyward. The clouds were beginning to darken, and tendrils of the afternoon's icy winds had begun to reach into the tree tops. It was time to close the lesson. "Foot out of the near stirrup, please."

He climbed onto the horse, behind her this time, and took the reins from her hands. They trotted and cantered back to the main road, Morghiad offering tutelage the whole way. She felt warm against him, and he was glad Artemi was a woman, since it probably would have been awkward riding so close to another man.

He chuckled inwardly at the image.

Darkness filled the woods by the time he had reached the edge of them, and though he did not want to leave her alone in the cold, he had no choice.

"Stay hidden," he said, re-adjusting the stirrups. "Bandits tend to roam these woods. I'll send someone for you the minute I get back to the city." Morghiad eyed her briefly, her hair tumbling over her breasts, big brown eyes looking up at him, pale skin shining in the darkness. He wheeled the horse around to face Cadra, walked forward a few paces and stopped. A sharp wind roused the dead leaves from the ground.

He couldn't leave her there, no matter how fast he made it back. He was going to regret this. "Get up here," he said with a sigh.

She stepped up to the side of the horse. "But if people see -"

Morghiad grabbed her around the waist and hauled her up, placing her across his knees. "Can you pretend to have an injury?"

"Would a badly broken ankle do?" The city's poor frequently walked about with injuries their bodies were slow to heal.

"Perfectly."

Artemi untied a scarf from her narrow midriff and wound it carefully around the top of one foot. It revealed a tear in her commoner's dress. He really ought to find a way of paying her now that she was a soldier, though it would have to be kept off the books. Giving her coin would be awkward... but he could have some new dresses made for her in private.

False injury bandaged, Morghiad held her by the waist with one hand, and neck-reined the horse with the other. They galloped back to the city at speed, her hair whipping by his jaw with its purr of Blaze echoes.

At the perimeter gates, Morghiad was pleased to find that only the guards paid any attention to his saddle-mate, and they would understand the situation in any case. He rode into the city with her at a more relaxed pace and offered, as any nobleman would, to see her back to her home. Artemi asked to be taken back to her father's house in the poor district of Cadra, and they worked their way through the orange stand-lamp-lit streets, with only a few pedestrians stopping to gawp or fumble a bow. At least, by heading towards the commoner area, he would avoid meeting any lords or ladies who would undoubtedly ask difficult questions.

The sloping streets narrowed rapidly, and became more thickly stacked atop one another as they approached the smaller houses. Skewed buildings were piled here like a collection of sodden card boxes that had fallen from a great height. The area was lively though, and many people thronged outside the doors of their abodes, chatting noisily about the day that had gone. Warm yellow light spilled from the entrances and windows of most rooms, heating the green stone pathways. The area was clean of litter, but had a worn feeling about it.

Many of the bronze railings were broken or missing and much of the stonework was chipped or crumbling. There hadn't been any collapses in the last century, but it was only a matter of time before this lot gave way.

He drew Tyshar to a halt outside one aged-looking property. It was singular from the others in the plant life that had been cultivated around it. Purple sprays of tiny flowers poked out of the single window, a holly bush grew along the front, and several unidentifiable shrubs hung from the walls, which were otherwise covered in ivy. Artemi slid from his lap and pretended to land awkwardly on one foot. The cold air rushed in to fill the space where she had sat.

Giving her a courteous nod, Morghiad turned his mount to the castle and tried not to notice as an auburn-haired man stepped out from the house. Instead, he booted Tyshar into a canter and headed toward the blackened, basalt heart of the city.



“Are you alright? What happened? And what are you doing hanging around with the Kahr-of-bloody-Calidell, young lady?” Her father put an arm around her and helped her into the warmth of his house. Artemi was faced with a difficult choice - either she could lie completely to the only family she had, or she could tell the truth and risk him finding out that she was this terrible thing - a wielder.

And that she had killed her mother.

She looked at his worried blue eyes as he sat her in a familiar wooden chair, and fussed over her. “My ankle is fine,” she said. “It was a ruse so that I could get back to the city in safety.” Artemi could not bring herself to lie, for it would have been too much for her to bear.

Her father straightened, suspicion filling his eyes. “You were outside the city, with him?”

“Yes. He was teaching me to ride, father.”

His face turned pink as anger took over his voice. “I bet he was! Has he touched you? Because if he has I’ll...” His mouth worked.

She stood and held his shoulders, hoping to calm him down. “No. It’s not like that. He wouldn’t do that.”

Her father shook his head. “Oh, Artemi. Fool girl. Don’t you realise he’s a man? That’s all they ever want. And he’s a bloody noble as well. Royalty are even worse - what else could he want from a pretty girl like you, with no money or expectations to speak of? You’re not to take any more ‘riding lessons’ with him again, do you hear me?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t have a choice.”

“What has this man gotten you into, girl? Should’ve known he’d turn out as bad as the king,” he spat.

Artemi tried not to clench her fists at his unwillingness to believe her. “Just - be quiet while I explain it. Morghiad doesn’t have any interest in women. I’m sure of it.”

Her father folded his arms and raised an eyebrow, but stayed silent.

She went on, “I’ve joined the army. I can use a sword moderately well, but I can’t ride a horse, and for obvious reasons it’s not something I can learn in public with him...”

and he can't trust anyone outside the army to teach me... and he'd be discovered if he paid for lessons for some commoner. A woman isn't supposed to fight. The king wouldn't allow it, but the whole army have promised to keep it a secret, for me."

Her father's mouth had dropped. "Damn right a woman isn't supposed to fight! And even if you were a lad I'd not have allowed it! Why has he got you fighting - is he really that desperate for sword hands? Blazes, Artemi! I didn't name you that to live up to the bloody stories! And think about it, why didn't he get one of your sworn-to-secrecy soldiers to teach you to ride, instead of personally escorting you to who-knows-where?"

"Because he is trying to protect his honour and my own. I cannot be seen departing the city with a different man each day, whilst simultaneously visiting his rooms."

He frowned. "You visit his rooms, too? I should never have let you go to work in that castle, never." Her father slumped into the only other chair.

Artemi took his big hands and squeezed them tightly. "I am being looked after. I have Kahr Morghiad's own protection."

"And yet you'll march to war and get yourself killed for him, and the blasted king," he sighed. "And visiting him. You are far too young to go through *nalka* yet."

"For the last time, father, I am not sleeping with him!"

He gritted his teeth, but seemed to accept she was speaking the truth. "Temi, there's something I've never told you. I... didn't want you to be disappointed in me. I always thought it would be better if you grew up the daughter of a boring old blacksmith's hand. But it seems we've both fallen into the same stupid trap." He looked pained. "I used to be in that army - used to wear the black and green and march for my country. I saw so many of my friends lose their lives for nothing, for battles over pieces of land that no one but petty kings could care for. It was so utterly futile."

He took a deep breath. "I went to siege Gialdin all those years ago, but it was wrong. It was the most horrific thing I have ever witnessed. We killed innocent citizens to get to the city - men and women who'd picked up farming tools to defend themselves. And then we started destroying it. Gialdin was surely the most beautiful place ever built. I wish you could have seen it before... And I was one of those who helped turn the brilliant white walls to rubble. Temi, I wept for it. It was terrible. I deserted that day; I couldn't stay there and be part of *that*. So I came home with your mother instead." He smiled. "And then we made you."

Artemi was less surprised than she ought to have been. He was built like a soldier, and had often talked of faraway places that only a merchant or gypsy could have known of. Her father had nothing to worry about, of course. Morghiad would not let her near a battle until she could incinerate her enemies with a single thought. But she wanted to keep the wielding from her father a while longer. "I thought desertion carried a penalty of imprisonment."

“It does. I was thrown into the cells as soon as the rest returned, what few of them survived. But your mother had fallen pregnant and the sergeant showed some leniency. And when she died... well, they decided to punish me instead by making me a runner for the farrier.”

She nodded slowly. “You mustn’t worry for me, father. I do not think the captain would allow such a battle to occur under his administration.”

Her father grunted. “Unfortunately the king makes those decisions.”

Artemi stayed silent. She had already stretched one of the oaths in telling him of her involvement with the army, but that was her secret – not just the army’s. “I will be alright. Please trust me, and trust him.”

Her father sighed and hugged her tightly. “When did you grow up? Though you’re not exactly big, are you? Not my little girl any more. You’ll understand when you have kids.”

Artemi winced.

Her father stood back and pushed the chairs to the wall, before removing a plank from the floor. He pulled out a long, thin, dusty object, and his expression bore only resignation. A well-polished sword emerged from the gritty wrappings. He threw it to her. “Now,” he said, taking up the fire poker. “Show me what that bastard kahr has taught you.”



Chapter 9

Brave fingers of green pushed through a spray of snow, hailing the first hints of a verdant spring. A fresh, damp wind brushed at the crumpled yellow soil of the Great North Road while nine-tenths of the Cadran army poured down it. Many of the men had horses, also garbed in the black and green of Calidell. At the back of the column rolled a collection of covered wagons, their brass fixings shining brightly in the brief sun, and with them rode the many wives and children of the soldiers.

Silar rubbed the neck of his blue dun gelding to reassure it against the wind. The animal could get quite flighty over stupid things, and yet have no problem with swords or shouting soldiers.

He rode at the front of his battalion which, happily for him, was at the back of the column. Every so often he would turn to catch a glimpse of the gold-red hair of Artemi's braid, waving about between the wagons. Dressed plainly, she was chatting away merrily to several of the drivers who, like the men of her company, seemed to have grown rather fond of her in a short time. The soldiers treated her as a beloved sister, but that was the effect her presence had, even if she was a wielder. Even blazed Passerid spoke well of her these days!

Artemi had worked hard at it, and had made it her business to meet with every one of the nine thousand men in turn, sometimes taking the hands of a hundred of them in a single day. But her scheme had worked, and they no longer saw her as a terrible threat, but a small little thing with red hair and an air of mischief.

He was somewhat annoyed that his affection for her had not dissipated, and still more annoyed that he had been charged with protecting her, but was prevented from being her lieutenant. Morghiad had made some odd decisions regarding her, but even he was not immune to her draw. Silar had observed him staring at her, unblinkingly, for a full ten minutes during one practice session.

Worse, he had even seen the hint of a smile touch Morghiad's lips while he mooned over her, and then there had been the matter of the dresses. Two new cotton things had arrived for Artemi one day. Of course, she had accused Lord Forllan of being overly generous, but the accusation was directed at the wrong man. Morghiad was the only other one with access to her measurements.

Silar relaxed the frown that was fast growing upon his face. If anyone was going to take Artemi, he would rather it was Morghiad. It was probably inevitable, the two of them

being kanaala and wielder together. *Just typical*. She was the one woman he seriously cared for, and bloody Morghiad would likely sweep in there and make her his own. He clenched his teeth together and steadied the horse, which was clearly sensing his emotions.

At least Morghiad had been wise enough to keep her as a runner in the coming battle. She was more than good enough to fight now, and had outperformed the recruits who had joined with her, but there was no point in putting her in harm's way before she had peaked. She was still very young and *very* inexperienced. Even the best fighters needed to watch a proper war happen before they took part in one.

His mind turned to the battle itself. No convincing had been required in getting the men to agree to fight Hirrah, for there had been a long-standing disagreement with that country, and justly so. Hirrahan raiders regularly torched the borders, looting and pillaging as they wished. They frequently boycotted Calidellian traders or blockaded their own. And now they had thought it wise to place a claim on the western province of Gorena.

The army was headed for Torfens, where another nine-thousand nonprofessional fighters would be waiting to further expand their ranks. Silar had not led quite so many men before, so this would be quite a learning experience for him, or so the other lieutenants had said.

It was another six hours before they reached the open city of Torfens, which held no defensive walls or towers to speak of, and only a wide ditch protected its circumference. The hired men had gathered in a rambling camp on the outskirts, some tents waving the green and black hawk banner of Calidell above them.

Silar ordered his men to set about making their own camping lines, but organised ones. Badly aligned tents were a poor show, and they tended to have guy ropes that tripped everyone up or caused injury before the fighting had even begun. He also made sure his camp would be next to Beodrin's. Artemi could not reveal her role in front of the wives and children, but she would be spending a great deal of time around Beodrin's camp, picking up orders and learning of tactics.

It was not enough, Silar thought - she was not guarded well at all. Yes, there was an entire army around her, and she was not bad at fighting either, but if another eisiel came for her... Silar bit off a chunk of bread from the supply he'd brought.

He felt the presence of someone tall behind him, and turned. "Morghiad." He gave a nod to the man.

Morghiad grunted, but lost no time in getting to the point. "I can't find Artemi and my time is limited. Will you locate her and bring her to the meeting later?"

Silar nodded, concealing his enthusiasm.

"Good. I'll see you there." He strode off to complete his many other duties, looking as dark and brooding as he ever did.

Silar threw on his cloak, stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth, and made his way to where the wives and children were settling themselves. One of his soldiers would finish setting up his tent before he returned, which was one of the nicer things about rank.

When he walked through the first group of women, he immediately, and unusually, felt inadequate. He did like their attentions, but the coy smiles were nothing in comparison to the crowds Morghiad had drawn two days before. He had only been bathing in a lake as a man ought, and half the females in bloody Calidell had turned out to watch the spectacle. He tended to keep to his tent now, which was far wiser, and more charitable to every other man there.

Silar's eyes scanned the multi-coloured tents for a flash of red hair, and did not find one. A few children ran around the beginnings of a camp fire, pretending to invoke some wielder flames, and he could not help but smile to himself. The soldiers had not been able to tell their own families about Artemi, but already their changing attitudes had affected their children.

When King Acher was gone, perhaps in another few centuries, Morghiad would almost certainly invite wielders back to the country. If he lived long enough, that was. Captains of the Calidellian army could usually expect a hundred years of life if they were sensible, and Morghiad had proved he was not always sensible.

A glint of fast-moving purple caught the corner of his eye, and he recalled that Artemi had been wearing one of her new riding dresses that was violet. He followed it behind a large tent. She was there, hair covered in a grey shawl and looking somewhat sheepish.

"Avoiding me again, Artemi?" he said.

She compressed her lips and looked to the side. She was quite unaware of her effect upon him.

Silar folded his arms. "Well, you'll be happy to hear I'm not pursuing you for sport. Morghiad has asked that you attend tonight's meeting, though what role he intends you to perform I do not know."

She appeared to relax a little, and dropped the shawl, revealing the golden-red hair beneath, and the evening sun brought it aflame. He longed to touch her hair when it did that, and often wondered if he would feel any heat from it. "Alright then," was all she said. She followed him back into the melee of women, children and noise.

They walked without words to Silar's tent, where he collected some important maps and rosters. When he re-emerged from inside, she tried to say something, but faltered. He gave her an encouraging smile, but it didn't work with the desired effect. Instead, she clamped her mouth shut and looked away.

"What is wrong with you, girl?"

She kicked gently at the ground with one foot before returning her gaze to him. "You know we can't be... you know," she whispered.

This was not something he wanted to discuss. At all. “Yes, Artemi.”

“Then why do you keep...” She sighed before continuing, “Perhaps I am imagining it. Tell me if I am. Why do I feel as if you look at me? A lot.”

“Because I do. And because you are beautiful. Fool woman.”

Her eyes widened at that. And then she blushed and looked to the ground.

Silar pulled his documents together and frowned. “There’s nothing to be done about it. Now come with me and we can see what the kahr-captain has to say.”

The pair made their way to the largest tent in the centre of the camp, with its hawk flag waving above and guards scattered about. Morghiad was pacing outside, with a reassuringly expressionless face. He looked up when they arrived, but continued his pacing in earnest.

When Beodrin, Beetan and Luna joined the group, Morghiad motioned them inside. Four men in black and green already sat on cushions along one wall. They were the new kanaala recruits Morghiad had found in the Calidellian countryside, brought in to replace the two who had died some months earlier.

Silar was not entirely sure what their attitude was to Artemi, but Morghiad appeared comfortable with their proximity to her. As far as Silar could tell, all but one of the men were under forty. He seated himself next to Artemi, who was carefully arranging her skirts and not looking at anyone. Rahake, Tortrix, and Baculo stamped into the tent with Jarynd and Passerid. Finally the last of the lieutenants, Hunsar and Eupith, strode in with jolly smiles. Pavon had been left to mind Cadra, though he sorely would have wished to be there with them.

Morghiad announced the meeting had opened by unravelling several of the maps Silar had brought with him. He added a few of his own to the increasingly large composite, and said, “As you are well-aware, we will enter the province of Gorena tomorrow. Reports are that the Hirrahan force remains in a single unit, located somewhere near here.” He pointed to the hilly region, north of the provincial capital. “It should take us another day to reach them, so I propose doing two things: one, following tonight’s camp, we do not stop before we reach them; and two, we leave the families in the safety of this region.”

He pointed to some valley woodland, just off the main road. “As usual, we will take half of the supply wagons with us and they, along with the runners...” He looked at Artemi. “...will be located half a mile from any battle that occurs.” The other men nodded in agreement. Pressing straight for the Hirrahans would prevent them from having as much time to prepare. It would also mean his men would get their fight before the tension grew tiring.

Their captain continued, “As for the specifics, I understand that they number fifteen thousand. A third of these will be hired sword hands or new recruits from the locality. We do outnumber them slightly, but it is not something that will guarantee our victory. We must assume that they have situated themselves on higher ground and that

they will have with them a number of wielders. With the exception of Beodrin and myself, I would like all kanaala to remain at the back of our advances and devote their attentions primarily to thwarting any wielder attack. Artemi, you are to stay out of this battle. I will only call you into it if we get into some serious trouble.”

She hardly looked content with his decision, but nodded her head in acceptance anyway. Morghiad didn’t want to lose his secret weapon any more than Silar, and there would be no gain in scarring that pretty face of hers.

“Good,” Morghiad said. “Upon reaching them, I want us to break into three divisions, three battalions in each. Of course, if the terrain prevents it, we may have to limit ourselves to two divisions. Luna, you know this area well, do you not?”

An average-build man with hair so pale it was nearly white, Luna had a pink face that conveyed almost as little emotion as Morghiad’s did. “Aye. Grew up there, I did. I believe they will have headed for the Hill of Monuments. It’s the broadest and highest of that area. And it has some good roads to the towns. If they are there however, you should know that one side of that hill is sheer cliffs.”

Morghiad rubbed at his stubble. “How high and how wide. Which side?”

Luna lowered his light brown eyes to the maps. “North side, I recall. They are too high to scale. Probably a hundred feet. As for width, I’m not sure. Probably a good quarter of the hill’s circumference.”

“Very well then. If they are there then I propose we stick to two divisions. When we advance they will likely try to run through the gap between our divisions. Both battalions either side of this gap must be ready to close in on them. Silar and Eupith, I want you both to direct the clinch. Do any of you have any questions so far?”

Luna jumped in first. “I’ve just remembered something else. The ground on the west is rocky and tough to traverse with horses. It can only be crossed on foot, and slowly at that.”

Morghiad remained unfazed. “We’ll have to assess when we get there, but they will have just as much trouble crossing it as we will. Perhaps we could set up a line of guards along our side of it. With bowmen.”

Eupith chimed in with his happy, sing-song like voice. “That lot like to launch hails of arrow fire before they fight up close. They’re not so good as we are with their swords, but they’ll try to pick us off before we’ve reached them.”

“I already have a plan for that. Artemi and I will create a shield against them before we advance. Their kanaala will pick it apart eventually, but it should serve to protect us for a while.” Morghiad leaned back on his hands.

Tortrix was next to speak. “How many bows do we have, kahr-captain?”

“Five hundred of our own men, one thousand among the hired.” Morghiad looked around at the group. “Any more questions?” His eyes settled on Artemi. “I can see you want to say something. What is it?”

She looked around nervously and then cleared her throat. "I was just wondering..." She fiddled with the hem of her skirt. "...would it not be better for the men at the back of your divisions to fan round and fill the end of the gap? Then it'll look like a temptingly weak point, but be stronger in truth. It happened at Lobesia, or so I read."

Rahake scoffed and Baculo, hitherto silent, guffawed loudly. Morghiad gave them a fierce look. "Get over your pride, men. You are jealous because you did not think of it first." He turned back to Artemi. "You may be right. We shall make our decision when the scouts return tomorrow."

Silar watched Artemi out of the corner of his eye for the rest of the meeting. She remained entirely silent and moved very little. He also noted that Morghiad glanced at her from time to time, no doubt drinking her beauty in like the milk of Achellon. None of the other attendees appeared to notice it; even Artemi was oblivious to the attention she received. Nor did they register that Morghiad had defended her completely unnecessarily. Of course he had thought of it, and Silar had discussed the possibility with him at length. Artemi's suggestion was not original, and not without its flaws, but for some reason Morghiad wanted to believe she was wiser than they.

Once they all had a chance to speak and a glass or two of tanno wine had been shared, Morghiad brought the meeting to a close. Silar remained seated upon his cushion as the others departed, but when the tent was empty, he stood and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I have known you for longer than most, Morghiad. Tell me honestly, are you in love with Artemi?"

Morghiad seemed surprised by his question initially, but brought his features under control. "I can see why you might think that. I find her beautiful, as many men seem to. And I enjoy her company. I have no feelings for her beyond that." He began fiddling with the maps.

Was the man utterly deluded? Or had he pushed his emotions so far into a corner of his brain that even he couldn't see them anymore? "Are you sure?"

"Well / don't forget what it is I'm supposed to be doing or where I am every time I see her, and nor do I stare after her as you do. Just because I am kanaala doesn't mean I have to sleep with every wielder I meet." Morghiad set about rolling up the rest of the maps on the floor.

Silar watched on for a moment, then said, "My admiration for her is no secret. Just... make sure she is safe." He picked up his own papers and left the tent, feeling equally as irritated as he had earlier.



The cool evening sun had favoured their side, illuminating the Hill of Monuments from the south with sharp outlines. Artemi watched in silence as thousands of men lined up in two trapezium-shaped formations, their sparse plates of black armour glinting softly in the daylight. At the top of the hill, she could make out the dark cloud of people that comprised the Hirrahans. Already they had sent a few volleys of wielder fireballs across, but Morghiad and the others had unravelled each of them before they had come close.

He sat next to her now, on his massive warhorse and looking as grim as he ever did. She was delighted, and somewhat embarrassed, at his gift of the bay mare she now rode. He said he had chosen it because it was a good runner and well-trained for close-fighting, but she could not help feeling it was a touch flashy. At least she had finally been allowed to dress in her uniform and ride with the other men, but she had missed their company on the journey.

Artemi turned to face the supply wagons, now entirely manned by medics and the less-experienced soldiers. She would soon be among them, fetching things and helping the casualties.

Morghiad moved his horse closer to hers. "It is time." Nervousness trickled down her spine - it was his responsibility to get the shield right, but the two of them would glow like the sun to any enemy wielders on the hill.

Morghiad nodded to the other kanaala to let them know he was about to begin, and took her hand. The routine was so familiar to her now, and she could have closed her eyes and identified each kanaala by a single touch. Morghiad was very different from the others, of course, strength aside. And the quality of his control felt different, too. She felt less like she was having her organs forcibly pulled out, and more like she was being given a warm embrace by the stony man. She had tried to hug him for real twice: once when she had first met him, and again upon receiving the horse. Both times he had pushed her away as if she smelled utterly terrible. He was a peculiar man, indeed.

She patted Glacier, named after her benefactor's character, on the neck as The Blazes filled her body. Horses seemed to be able to feel it quite keenly, and the mare stamped her hooves to prove it.

Artemi looked to man who held her power. Two sword hilts jutted above his shoulders and innumerable other blades were strapped at his waist, thighs and calves. He was only lightly armoured with the filigree shoulder and breast plates, which were embossed with black and green vine-like patterns. He appeared to be drawing in half as much as either of them could hold, and the light in his eyes intensified considerably.

Each time the fires coursed through her veins, Artemi felt as if she might melt into the ground; kahr, swords, horses and all! There was also the matter of the curious attraction she experienced when wielding with him... Other than the pleasure Blaze Energy gave her, there was really no reason why she should find herself appreciating him in... *that* way.

As for the other women in the camp who professed to admire him, how could they care for a stone of a man whose personality was unknown to them and unnerving to her?!

Her captain began to work the Energy into a broad, flat sheet of pure power. It pulsed at a steady rate, seeming to glitter from a hidden light source. The sheet grew outward over the heads of the soldiers and upward, into the sky. A rain of fire headed their way, but she could sense that the kanaala were doing *something* that she could not see directly. The fire rain dissolved to nothing above their heads, and Morghiad twisted the shield energy round the edges of the two divisions, added several layers of complexity, and then released her hand.

"Are you sure you don't want to give them a taste of their own medicine?" Artemi breathed, confident that she could blast the lot of them to ash.

Morghiad did not look at her. "You must save your energy... and mine. Now get back to the wagons. I'll find you after the battle is finished." He kicked Tyshar off to a gallop, and tore down the slope to the front of his men. Artemi longed to join them. It was ridiculous that she had been held back here, and already her heart ached with concern for her friends' lives. "Blazes protect you all," she whispered, and turned to the supply carts.

The battle raged into the night, wielder fire lighting up the dark sky in waves and plumes of smoke filling the air. Artemi could hear the battle cries from where she was, and often the sound of steel swords singing against more steel. There were many casualties, and each was brought to her and the medics. They cleaned the poison from the soldiers' wounds as best they could, but sometimes there was too much, and several of the men took on the grey skin of *pinhatar* - the poison death.

One man died as she spoke to him, his yellow eyes wide and clouded. She hoped the Hirrahans were suffering far worse than these men, good men, were.

Artemi glanced up from her latest patient to find Aglos, the head medic soldier, was muttering something to her about getting more water. "I'll go and get some from the brook at the bottom of the hill," she said.

He glowered. "Fine. But don't get too close to the action. Though I imagine most of it will be done by now."

She grabbed a bucket and ran from the tent. Glacier was tethered up to a nearby tree, probably asleep, but was rapidly untied. Artemi vaulted onto the mare's back, which had the immediate effect of waking the horse up. Glacier raised her snout, snorted once and galloped into the darkness toward the brook, toward the battle.

The horse was lightning fast, and within a matter of seconds they had reached the sound of running water. Artemi slipped out of the saddle with the bucket, and picked her way carefully over the rocky ground. When her toes hit water, she knelt to scoop some up, but a fizzing in the air around her drew her attention away. There was a large group of men fighting several-hundred yards ahead, though how those Hirrahans had made it this close was a mystery. The fizzing intensified.

Then she understood.

It was Blaze Energy, being used to scout for targets beyond the wielder's natural sensing range. With horror, she realised that there were no kanaala in the group, or even nearby. In a matter of moments the lot of them would be burned to grey silt!

She dropped the bucket and leapt into Glacier's saddle, pulling her sword from her back. Artemi heeled the mare over the brook and up the opposite slope.

Once she was within shouting distance, she started yelling as loud as she could, "MOVE! WIELDER STRIKE!" None of the men looked around. They were too caught up in their fighting to notice her. She jumped off the horse and ran the rest of the way.

Perhaps an extra blade could tip the balance for them. Artemi headed for a tall, Hirrahan warrior with his back to her. Too busy thrashing one of her brothers, he hadn't heard her coming. She dove forward and swept her sword across his neck with all her might. His head fell to the ground with a strange torpidity, and she was left with a strong desire to vomit.

A Calidellian soldier beyond offered her a weary nod of thanks. Almost as soon as he had, however, a Hirrahan warrior to her left bore down on her, and she parried with a quick up-slash. She jabbed her sword into his side as he fell back, while her compatriot finished him off. Artemi placed her foot against the body to remove her blade, but felt something hit her other leg. Sword reclaimed, she looked down and saw a pinh-coated edge sticking out of her right thigh. Its sweaty owner grinned at her menacingly. "Little girls shouldn't fight."

The air fizzed intensely against her skin. They had to get out of there, they had to run! Artemi swung the sword round as fast as she could. It caught the grizzled man by surprise and knocked him to the ground. The Calidellian soldier she had aided was too exhausted and bloody to help her further. Without hesitation, she beheaded their foe herself.

Her kills had tipped the balance, and the last of the Hirrahans fell to the earth. "We have to move, now! There will be a storm of fire right here in a matter of seconds!"

The men in green and black lost no time in departing the scene. She made to run with them, but instead fell to the ground as her right leg collapsed. Artemi rolled onto her back and pulled at the short sword. It would not budge. She took a deep breath and heaved on it as much as she dared. Slowly, and with searing pain, it came free. Black liquid oozed from the wound; the limb did not look useful at all. *Blazes!*

A pair of arms grabbed hold of her and lifted her into the air. The man she had helped threw her onto his shoulder and ran to her now skittish horse. *He had come back!* He flung Artemi across the saddle, leapt onto Glacier and kicked the mare into a gallop. A vast fireball exploded into the earth behind them, launching burning shards of rock across their bodies. They galloped back toward the medics' tent in justified alarm, though Artemi had to writhe and yell for the soldier to stop and pick up water on the way. At least she could complete one of her duties, she thought, though her leg was beginning to hurt rather more than she wanted to admit.



Morghiad drew the second of his swords, dismounted, and cut his way through to the wielder ahead of him. The moon illuminated her thin face clearly, and he pulled another red-coated soldier down to the ground to cut his head from its neck. It had been a bloody battle, far bloodier than he had expected, but they had to yield soon. He reached forward and took hold of the brunette wielder's neck. Her eyes grew wide as soon as she sensed what he was, and that he surpassed her considerably in ability. The woman was tired, but he drew every reserve she had left into himself, and she fought back only feebly.

His experience with Artemi had taught him much about controlling the more headstrong wielders, and it was not long before he felt something snap - the tie that linked her to the Blazes. She would never wield again, and if he delved further, he could have killed her, but she was harmless now.

He released her neck and she fell to the ground in a heap. Morghiad left her there and clambered back onto Tyshar's back. The end of the battle came soon enough, since the loss of the wielder had been enough to finally dishearten the Hirrahans. A trumpet sounded, and all the men in red laid down their swords. Some were crying, but it had been horrific for them, certainly the bitterest fight he had experienced yet.

Morghiad feared hearing the number of losses his army had sustained, but knew it was a necessary burden he would have to endure. He sheathed both swords, and cantered into the centre of the enemy camp. Beetan fell in behind him, revelling in the glory of his kills.

Out of the corner of one eye, Morghiad caught sight of him picking up a brown piece of fabric. "All your baize are belong to us!" Beetan laughed to himself. Whatever did that even mean?

Morghiad heeled Tyshar on, and soon reached the Hirrahan leader's tent.

A blonde woman in a silk gown stood at the entrance, framed by two flame torches. A small gold crown sat atop her head, and though Morghiad had thought the Hirrahans brave, he had not expected them to send their queen to take a province. She was quite even-featured, perhaps pretty, though she had nothing on Artemi's beauty.

He dismounted and made a bow to his defeated enemy, but she eyed him longer than would usually be acceptable, and only then gave a curtsy. After that, she ushered both him and Beetan into her tent.

"Your men fought well today, my lady."

She assessed him from top to bottom. "Men fight hard if they have a queen to protect. Tell me, Kahr-Captain Morghiad, are you married yet?"

Was this really to be their topic of discussion? "No, I fear I am wed to the sword and my army. But I believe we should press on with business."

"Why, it can be business if you wish. How would you like one of my daughters to... ameliorate the disruption that has gone on today?" She smiled sweetly.

Morghiad felt anger well up inside him. He very nearly exploded with it. Instead he settled his innards, and seethed. "Do you think, lady, that the offer of your daughter will make amends for the lives of the men lost today? If you do, then you underestimate me most gravely." He heard Beetan growl behind him.

"Then tell me what you desire, Kahr-Captain Sete'an, and I shall endeavour to meet your requests." She seated herself upon a cushioned chair, and pulled out a parchment.

"You are in no position to accept or deny *requests*. You must be gone from here by midday tomorrow. You will release any of my men you hold captive. I will have four battalions accompany you to the border. You are not to stop for supplies and you must not return here again. In addition, if you wish for peace in your own country then I suggest you cease all border raids. And you must lift your blockades and embargoes. Those are my terms." He turned and walked out. There had probably never been such a short post-battle reconciliation, but Morghiad had to leave before he tore her head from her shoulders.

He mounted Tyshar and rode him back down the hill. There were a few bodies in green and black lying upon the ground. Thankfully, far more wore red.

At the bottom of the hill, Jarynd trotted into his path. His narrow face was knotted up with worry. "Kahr-Captain," he breathed, "Artemi. She's been injured."

Morghiad felt his fatigue then. *He could not afford to lose her for this!* He kicked Tyshar hard, and galloped the animal at full speed to the medical bay.



Aglos dabbed tentatively at her thigh, then winced.

“Blazes, man! Get in there and clean it properly! I thought you were the most experienced at this.” Artemi clenched her teeth against the pain she was anticipating, but it did not come. Aglos hesitated over her leg, looking nervous. “Fine, I’ll do it myself.” She grabbed the cloth, soaked it in water and doused the wound. Artemi then took the longest sarkha within reach and jammed it deeply into her thigh. It sent lightning bolts of pain shooting up her body, but it was more bearable than she had expected. Holding the base of the sarkha with one hand, she pressed down on the tube at the top. She could feel water filling the injury from the bottom, and after a moment, it started pouring out the top, coloured black.

Artemi pressed down harder to ensure she got it as clean as she could, and satisfied with her work, she pulled out the sarkha and threw it to one side. She would have sighed with relief, but Morghiad entered the bay in a cloud of gloom.

Muddied, wet and bloody, his coat had been slashed in several places across the arms, revealing shallow cuts to his skin. His green eyes still glittered brightly, but his face was dark. He looked... ireful, and Artemi had no doubt as to whom he was angry with. She swallowed in anticipation of the tirade she was about to endure.

He started off quietly. “You disobeyed my orders.”

Her stomach felt as if it might sink through the bench and into the floor. “I had to. I promised to protect them.”

“And you would be in better shape to do that if you had followed my instructions!” he growled.

“I couldn’t watch them die. I swore to defend my brothers!”

The man who had carried her to safety spoke up, “I believe she did save us, kahr-captain. Nine of our men would have fallen under that fireball.”

Morghiad gritted his teeth. “She broke an oath playing hero. I cannot have soldiers breaking their oaths.”

Artemi felt lost. “I’d have had to break an oath no matter what.”

His brow softened a touch, but only a touch. “You will not get any special treatment from me, Artemi D’Avrohan. We will decide on a punishment over the days to come.” He stepped closer to inspect the wound. “Why has this not been properly dealt with yet?”

Aglos wrung his hands. “Well, you see, my kahr-captain, it would not be proper for me to remove a woman’s -” he cleared his throat, “she- ah...” he became quite pink.

Morghiad appraised the curtains that had been erected for her privacy, and shook his head. “Alright, I’ll do it.” He whipped a dagger out from his waist. Aglos and the other man’s eyes bulged, and they both backed out of the bay in haste. Without hesitation or embarrassment, Morghiad tore through her breeches with the blade, revealing the skin around the stab-wound. Wavy grey striations grew from it, giving the odd impression of a star.

“Poison’s in your blood now,” he said, sounding grim. “It won’t heal like that. I have to remove some of the tissue from the sides of the injury if it is to close at all.” His gaze burned into her. “Bite on this.” He handed her the dagger, hilt first. It still dripped with her poisoned blood. “And it will help you deal with the pain if you watch what I do.”

Every one of her muscles had tensed, which would hardly help. She bit down on the dagger handle as bitterly as she could, and leaned back upon her hands. This time, Morghiad drew a knife and gave it a rudimentary rinse in a nearby bucket. He placed his hand firmly on the inner of her thigh to hold it steady. His touch sent an unexpectedly pleasurable burst of fire up her leg, almost making her forget the pain. *Odd.*

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

He started cutting a full half-inch from the edges of the wound. The first half of it was agony, but when he embarked on the second she began to feel dizzy. She dug her teeth deeper into the hilt of the dagger and tried to see through the grey, but it was no good. Her head felt hot, and the room was spinning. Artemi passed out.



He caught her round the shoulders before her head hit the bench, and lowered her gently onto the hard pillow. Morghiad removed his dagger from her mouth, and noted it had gained a few shallow teeth marks. He smiled to himself and resumed his operation, knowing that she should have blacked out sooner, but the woman was tougher than Tegrans cattle hide.

When he had finished, the muscle and skin knitted together almost instantaneously. There were a few gaps that had to be sewn back together, though Morghiad’s hand was not the best at it. He completed the stitches to an acceptable standard, ripped away the obstructive clothing that remained, and turned a bandage around her leg. She had been a very foolish woman indeed, but perhaps heroes were born headstrong and defiant.

She was lucky, very lucky, not to have been killed by the injury, he thought, since there was much less of her to fill with poison than a typical soldier. He assessed his handiwork while he pondered a little longer. Artemi had a very fine pair of legs, not that he had seen many women's to compare them to, but they gave his eyes pleasure nonetheless. Morghiad shook his head, removed his cloak, and covered her with it. It was a cold night.

He left the bay, and was greeted by a small crowd of men, no doubt with serious business for him to attend to. "Well?" Morghiad folded his arms.

"Is she alright?" asked Jarynd.

He suppressed a frown. "She'll be fine. She just needs to rest."

The men's stern expressions seemed to relax at that.

"Do we have a count for the losses yet?" Morghiad asked.

Aglos stepped forward. "Five died in here tonight; and there are two more whom I fear will not make it to the morning."

Then Eupith muscled in, "Latest count on the field is fifty-two. I'd add twenty to that at a guess."

"You're saying fewer than eighty of our men died today?" It had been far bloodier than that, surely?

"It was a rout, kahr-captain. Their strength is in bowmen. Once we'd passed through the arrow storm, they were on the back foot," said Eupith.

Of course, eighty men dead still meant he had presided over the loss of eighty lives. He could not rejoice in that, but it *was* several-hundred fewer than he had anticipated. Pulling that arrow shield along with the army had reaped immeasurable benefits, even if it had been tiring work. The aches of the day were beginning to seep into his bones, yet he still had some energy left. "I'll come and help you clear the bodies."

"Not necessary, kahr-captain. It is almost done. You should get some rest," Eupith said with a stern set to his jaw.

Aglos chimed in, "The Lady Artemi could probably do with someone watching her. Since my kahr... ah. Well, since..." He cleared his throat.

"Since what?" Morghiad couldn't help but allow frustration colour his voice.

"Er... well..." the medic stumbled.

Jarynd finished, "What he is trying to say is - given your special relationship with her, why don't you—"

"What relationship?" Morghiad demanded, unfolding his arms.

The men fell silent.

He was too tired to argue with them and their ridiculous ideas. "Fine," was all he said before he turned back to the bay.

He drew a chair alongside Artemi's bench, and unstrapped the swords from his back as he thought. The men liked to make rumours when there were none, like blazed fishwives!

Now, *Silar and Artemi* - *there* was something worth gossiping about. He pulled off his coat and shirt. Both would need replacing when he returned. He would give them a wash in a river tomorrow, if there was time.

A nick on his arm was giving him trouble, and he knew he would have to see to it if he wanted any sleep. True, he had gained much experience with cleaning up field wounds as a cadet, but it was incredibly tedious, fiddly work. Morghiad picked up a sarkha and seated himself to begin the washing. The gash was an easy one to tidy up, and minimal stitching was required.

The other, smaller cuts closed almost as soon as he bathed them. To his left, Artemi's breaths came slowly and quietly. She looked very serene in the low lamp light, and Morghiad reached over to brush a strand of hair from her face, sensing the delicate simmer of her power through it. If anything, she had become prettier over the last six months.

He relaxed back into his chair, folded his arms and drifted into a guardian sleep. It meant he was still sensitive to sounds, easily awoken, and his muscles would be quick to react. It was something he had yet to teach Artemi, but it was hardly appropriate to stay overnight in her bedroom or have her stay in his. She was still a little young to learn it, in any case.

He gazed into the Blazes, and searched for Artemi's stream inside it. She was already the second-strongest of all of them. Thankfully, the other kanaala had not made the association yet, but that could not last forever.

Morghiad allowed the energy to drift from his mind, but his guardian sleep did not prevent strange dreams from invading the blackness, and he saw the eyes of the wielder he had pacified - saw the spirit drain from them. In a way, it was worse than watching a soldier die.

He could have done that to Artemi if he had really wanted to - any kanaala of any ability could do that to her if she could not defend herself - if she had no one to protect her. In another dream, he was haunted by Ilena's panicked face, the last he saw of her before she was executed.

He twitched. Something had awoken him.

It was dark in the medical tent, but he could see that Artemi was still sleeping soundly under his cloak. He pulled the closest sword out of its sheath in silence, and followed the sound of a creature that moved outside - something that wanted to stay quiet. The men would have no call to disturb him, especially if they thought he had climbed under the cloak with her, so it could not have been one of them.

He readied every muscle to pounce on whatever was coming. Another eisiel? Morghiad did not relish the idea of facing one of those now.

A large shape entered the bay. With everything he had, he threw himself at the figure.

“Agh! Bloody Achellon, Morghiad, it’s me!” Silar spluttered, catching his balance on a wooden tent support.

“Oh. Thought you were a monster.”

Artemi stirred behind him. He turned back to check on her. She had moved to sleep on her good side, but was seemingly unaware of her company.

“I heard... was it bad?” Silar whispered.

Morghiad compressed his lips in the darkness. “She took a sword to the leg. It’ll heal in a few weeks though.”

His friend shuffled his feet. “The other men say you will punish her. Have you decided what it’ll be yet?”

He had not come close to deciding. He wanted to put that off for as long as possible. “No.”

“Don’t be too harsh on her. I know you want to prove to the others that she’s like them, but you and I both know she’s not.”

Morghiad did not reply. His head was too clouded to think properly.

Silar continued, “I’ll watch her for the rest of the night. Why don’t you get some proper sleep?”

Full sleep would be a good thing. He ached for it. But leave her with this overly affectionate limpet of a man? Surely that was not responsible. Then again, if anyone could be trusted to protect her, it was Silar. The idiot man would probably lay down own his life just to prove it.

“Don’t do anything... amorous.” Morghiad picked up his coat and swords, and left.



Chapter 10

Smooth water slopped over the edge of the wooden bucket and onto the polished stone beneath, causing Artemi to curse quietly. Her strength was waning and she still had another half-hour's worth of trips to make. This was her punishment for breaking an oath of obedience. Not only was it tiring, but worse, it was also humiliating. Guards lined the entire route she had to trudge buckets of water along: from a tap at one side of the castle, to a drain at the other. It was utterly pointless work. It benefitted no one at all, except perhaps in providing amusement to the other soldiers.

She'd had to do it every day from sunrise until sunset, or until her spirit was utterly broken. Even more soul-destroying, Silar would make a habit of posting himself on duty somewhere along the route, just so that he could gawp at her downfall. Even Morghiad felt the need to occasionally 'check' on her adherence to the sentence.

Her leg stung from the sweat that now coated her body in a thin sheen. Over three weeks had passed since the injury had been exacted, and it was being rather leisurely in healing itself up. She gritted her teeth and continued, passing by the now too-familiar portrait of King Acher. He was quite an ugly man.

Who had designed bucket handles to be so uncomfortable, anyway? At least the outdoor air was closer now, she thought wistfully. The chill of it touched her skin, and she was grateful for its cool caresses. She inhaled the new air deeply. It smelled of oak fires and roasted boar - someone would eat well tonight.

Artemi's stomach growled as she passed another guard in the black and green. They had all returned heroes of Cadra from the battle - huge crowds had turned out to welcome them home, and Artemi was bitterly disappointed she could not stand among her brothers to bathe in a little adoration. Perhaps it was fair. They, after all, had gone into battle while she had only potted around at the back and then gotten herself injured. Artemi walked faster as she approached the archway that led to the courtyard. *Could it be?*

She examined the dark skies coming into view. The sun had set! She had completed her suffering for another day! She set down her buckets and closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling as her muscles re-worked themselves into sensible positions once more.

Artemi opened her eyes, reprised the full buckets and emptied them into a drain in the courtyard. It was time to see her captain.

She very nearly bounded up the stairs that led to his rooms out of joy at reclaiming her freedom from those buckets. The scabbard of the sword clipped against her calves

beneath her skirts as she ran. The pocket designed for it was a feat of engineering, for only the tip of the hilt was visible, and even that had been covered with blue cloth.

So great was her elation, that she pushed open the door to Morghiad's rooms without knocking. Morghiad clearly had not expected her company, for the beautiful noblewoman who had kicked her had him pressed against the marble fireplace.

Artemi stared at them, dumbfounded.

"Impudent, obnoxious little girl!" the chestnut-haired lady cried, "Have you no manners? Leave us!"

Morghiad's expression betrayed nothing, and Artemi did not envy the woman who held him. Making love to a stone could not be much fun for anyone! She curtseyed and left the room swiftly, then flapped her hands in an attempt to cool her reddened cheeks as she leaned against the wall outside his rooms. At least they had still been dressed!

Abruptly, the lady stalked out of his solar and made her way down the hallway with her nose held high in the air. It was as if she could smell something terrible.

"Artemi," came Morghiad's voice from inside the chambers.

She trailed in slowly, afraid she would receive another tirade from him for her insolent behaviour, but he remained quiet. Her eye was drawn to his open shirt, which revealed a torso worthy of some appreciation.

But Morghiad caught her line of sight and quickly covered himself up, leaving Artemi unable to stifle a smirk at it. He did not react, but asked, "How is your leg today?"

"It is still not healed, but better than last week." Telling him it was no concern of his did nothing to satisfy his curiosity, less so if she said it was no trouble at all.

He nodded silently, looking at the floor. "I do not think we need to practise wielding today. Sit down and let's see if I can beat you at this blazed game." He had been improving with every match they played, making each game tougher than the last. One game had taken three entire days to complete.

Artemi withdrew her sword and lowered herself into the soft leather of the armchair. It felt far more comfortable than she remembered, and before long, Morghiad came to sit next to her in his usual way. He placed the board between them, and named the chancellor as his first piece, but Artemi did not remember anything beyond that.

Her first sensation was of lying upon a huge pile of feathers; it was so comfortable and so soft she could have lain there forever. She opened her eyes, and was confronted with a blank screen of white. Was she dead, or blinded?

Artemi raised her head above the whiteness to find her captain sat in a chair, staring at her. Blazes alight! She was in his bed! How had she ended up in the bed of the kahr? She checked quickly - her dress was still on. That was something.

"You fell asleep, Artemi."

She pushed herself up on her hands. "Forgive me-"

“Perhaps I have been pushing you too hard. You are still not quite recovered, after all. Today will be your last day carrying water.”

She looked to the window. The first rays of morning light were already peeking through. “I must get to it, then.” She almost flopped out of the bed, which truly must have been the most comfortable sleeping place in the world!

Morghiad stood to see her out once she had gathered her sword and straightened her appearance. He was always polite in certain aspects of his etiquette - very strange given that she was a servant, a soldier and especially given that he thought her such an annoyance!

The door closed behind her softly. It had a curious squeak that Morghiad seemed ignorant of, or at least unwilling to fix, but she strode into the enormous hallway without mentioning it and ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to tidy the strands. Her hand dropped - there was someone in the corridor ahead. The identity of the figure became plain when Artemi rounded the corner, and she curtseyed before the chestnut-haired noblewoman.

“You! You little whore!” The lady moved forward with surprising speed, and pushed Artemi into the wall. “I know you spent all night in his room. Do you think this is acceptable? Do you think he would love a barrel scraping like you?”

Artemi suppressed an urge to draw her hidden sword. “No, my lady.”

The noblewoman shoved her into the wall again. “I didn’t give you permission to speak, harlot! I will see to it that you are made to do the very worst duties that exist in this castle. See if he is so ardent when you smell of the latrines! What is your name? Speak!”

Artemi blurted out the first name that came to her head: “Mirel.”

“Mirel, eh? No... forget latrines. I know just the place for you, lass.” Lady di Certa took her roughly by the arm and pulled her down the hall.

Artemi did not know how to fight back. She could not just decapitate the woman for being jealous. Perhaps Morghiad or Silar would be able to sort out whatever difficulties this woman had in store for her. Artemi would just have to bear it out.

Aval led her through twisted corridor after shadowed corridor and up a broad flight of green marble steps, until they reached an area of the castle she had not visited before. A pair of large, bronze doors loomed. The two guards looked nervously at Artemi, and she was not sure what message they were trying to convey to her.

“I wish an audience with the king,” Aval said. “Is he here?”

Artemi’s heart raced. She had to escape before he saw her, she had to run – those were her orders! She twisted her arm from Lady di Certa’s grip.

“The king is out on an errand, my lady,” one of the guards said.

Artemi needed to get out of there anyway. “I cannot stay here. I have duties to attend to, and I must get to them right away.” She began trotting down the hall, leaving a dumbfounded Lady di Certa behind her. Artemi hastened down the hallway, at a run this

time. She turned a corner at the greenstone steps and was confronted by a broad, bearded man in a silk coat. A coterie of women dressed in red surrounded him. She immediately dropped her head and curtsied as low as she dared.

The king moved toward her and spoke. "Raise your head, child."

She did as requested, slowly lifting her chin, but her whole body began to shake. Cautiously, she met his light-brown eyes.

He reached to her jaw with a gloved hand and held it there for a moment, turning her head to each side to inspect it. "Have you ever seen such refinement, such symmetry in a woman?"

Artemi was not sure if she was supposed to answer him.

King Acher stood back to assess her figure. "You may raise yourself from that curtsy, girl."

She straightened, watching him as he rubbed at his beard.

"You are very young, yes? Nineteen I'd guess."

"Eighteen, sire."

He started to walk around her. "Eighteen. I don't even remember being in double digits anymore. So young. So pure."

Artemi felt sick with nerves. Rapid footsteps approached from behind her.

"...and if you think you can walk away from me, huss -" Lady di Certa had evidently seen the king.

Acher wheeled around to greet her. "Ah, Lady di Certa. Good to see you are still living under my roof. I was just admiring this young woman here. Isn't she divine?"

Aval mumbled a, "Yes, sire," from her bowed position.

The king removed his glove and ran a hand over Artemi's hair. "The Blazes have given you to me. What is your name, girl?"

"Artemi." She prayed Lady di Certa would not seek retribution for the lie about her name and she hoped to Achellon that he would let her go.

He smiled. "Artemi, of course. Well, Artemi, you are to be the principal rose among my blooms; the sapphire amongst my gold." He motioned for one of his accompanying guards to approach. "Lad, take this beauty down to the benay-gosa chambers. She is to be readied for the ceremony this afternoon -" He leaned closer to her and whispered, "and I will have you this evening."

Artemi felt sick, utterly sick.

Her guard was Orwin, and as soon as they were out of earshot of the king, he turned to her, worry creasing his face. "What are you going to do?"

She fought off the panic that was settling in her. "I can do nothing. Morghiad. Get the message to him. Perhaps he can talk his father round. Or..." She took a breath, "...or I will have to run from here and I will need some help."

Orwin nodded. "Once you're with the benay-gosa attendants, I'll go straight to him."

"There's something else." She withdrew her sword and scabbard. "Those benay-gosa scarves would do little to hide this and I can't be found with it."

Orwin placed it in his own sword belt and walked her to the chambers. By the time they had reached the apartments, Artemi was beginning to feel the pain in her thigh once more, but she would have far worse problems than that to contend with soon. Upon completing his escort, Orwin sprinted from the rooms, and Artemi was hugely grateful that he was a fast runner. Morghiad would get the message soon; it was in his own interest to prevent this from happening.

The benay-gosa chambers looked as if they had been imported from another country altogether, for they bore no resemblance to the stark grey of the rest of the castle. Swathes of red, gold and purple silk arced from the ceilings to the floors, masking whatever cold stone lay behind. The main entrance chamber seemed only to hold furniture for lounging on. There was no hint of work or hardship here; the king was all the hardship anyone needed.

The floors were made of polished black granite which glittered like a starry night., and from the main chamber, twenty wooden doors led to what appeared to be the benay-gosa's private accommodations. Three red-clad attendants approached her as soon as Orwin had left. One was short, blonde and had an air of affected superiority; another was tall and imposing with very dark red hair; the final woman was sweeter-looking, olive-skinned and with deep brown hair.

"A new woman to replace the latest one to fall from favour," the blonde attendant chanted.

"When is your admission ceremony to be, child?" asked the taller woman.

Artemi compressed her lips. "This afternoon."

The blonde one's pale eyebrows rose a little. "Well he doesn't lose much time these days, does he? Come. This will be your room." She gestured to the door on the far right.

Artemi followed the diminutive woman through the door and gazed, open-mouthed, at her new quarters. A huge bed took up most of the bedroom, made with cream-coloured sheets of some fabric she did not recognise. More swathes of pale silk decorated the walls and ceilings, golden lamp stands stood about the edges, and a chaise covered in silver fabric sat at the end of the bed. She went to the window. It looked out onto the fountain courtyard, and she could hear the calm sounds of its cascading water.

How it chimed incongruously with the fear she felt! A garderobe lay off to the right, and Artemi could see from the window that it contained a huge bath, big enough for several people to use at once. She cleared the image from her mind. This room would never be something she could enjoy.

“You must bathe now and be made ready for your admission to the king’s honoured women. Pray, what is your name, girl?” asked the olive-skinned lady.

“Artemi D’Avrohan.” She shivered at hearing her father’s name. What would become of him without her? Or if she did end up with the king... and became a murderess?

“Well met, Artemi. I am Carinnah. The other two are Myina and Tialain.”

She smiled at the three of them, though it probably was not a terribly convincing smile.

“We will run a bath for you. Myina will help you undress,” Carinnah said. The kindest-looking woman went to open one of the brass taps above the broad bath and her accomplice set about filling it with oils. Myina approached her, red hair like mahogany, and started pulling at the laces of her bodice. Artemi would have to think of a suitable explanation for her injury... but how often did an ordinary linen girl come into contact with pinh blades?

Myina lifted the blue dress over her head and placed it onto the chaise. Artemi was running out of time. She had to think of something. Myina walked round to her front and began to undo the ties at the front of her shift. *Think, Artemi!* At last she removed the well-worn slip, and the despair of the Cadran army for Calidell was stood in the middle of a benay-gosa room, naked but for a bandage around her right thigh.

The inevitable question came. “What happened?”

“I was cleaning one of the guard’s coats... and he had a short sword hidden in it. Only I didn’t realise. It fell out when I unpacked it from the laundry and it, well, fell into my leg here.” It was almost believable.

“Oh,” murmured Myina. “We’ll have to find a way of hiding it. Lucky for you it’s quite high up your leg. If you would sit here, I’ll remove the dressing.”

Myina was surprisingly gentle in spite of her severe looks. “My husband used to come back with injuries like that,” she said once she had finished. “Till he never came back at all.”

“You had a husband in the army?”

She smiled weakly. “Aye. A lieutenant. They’re all cut down in the end, those fighting men.” She went quiet for a moment, so Artemi squeezed her arm in reassurance.

Myina straightened. “It is in the past now. Time for you to bathe, child.”

Why did they have to keep calling her child? She was not *that* young! She followed Myina to the bath and climbed in gingerly, never having used a proper one before. The hot water was wonderful, *fires*, but it smelled incredible! “May I ask why you are supervising my ablutions?”

“Because, child, we must ensure you do not try to escape. That is, until we know we can trust you.”

Oh, wonderful. Was she allowed to use the toilet alone? Speaking of which... She ignored the urge and examined her captors. She could have taken all three of them on,

easily. Artemi began soaping herself and, at that point, the women had the courtesy to turn around.

With her washing complete, her new attendants led her to the large mirror in the corner of the room, where her reflection stared back at her inquisitively. She had never liked the way she looked - hair a ridiculous colour, eyes too dark, nose too long and pointy, jaw too wide. She could have continued to list her faults, but doing so only made her unhappy. The king must have been quite desperate for women.

Carinnah pulled out a collection of materials that looked like paint, and then took out a thin, black pencil and leaned towards Artemi. She held Artemi's eyelid in a curious manner to begin drawing on it like she was a page inside a book.

What in Blazes were they doing to her? And where was Morghiad? He should have been here by now! She hated having to be rescued at all, especially when she was perfectly capable of saving herself, but fighting off the king and running meant breaking her army oaths. And breaking her father's heart. *Calm.* She had to stay calm and plan her escape.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp pull on her hair. Just wonderful, now they were going to arrange it into some overly complicated knot-work all around her head. She would be teased relentlessly by the other men for this, if she wasn't executed first.

Primping and preening finished, she examined herself in the mirror. They hadn't done too bad a job on her hair, and it had turned out looking more natural than she had expected. The small star flowers in it looked acceptable... almost.

Carinnah had, quite thankfully, kept her paintwork to a minimum, which meant Artemi only looked a little bit like a doll. But the clothing, if you could call it that, did not please her nearly so much. She wore two white items and both were completely sheer. The first was a short, asymmetrical slip, edged in rough lace. Only the waist was opaque, where it cinched in snugly. The second item was a long sort of dressing gown, open at the front and with long sleeves. "Am I to walk through the castle like this?" There was no way she could run unnoticed with her entire body on show!

Tialain said, "No, child. You will wear a proper gown until you are in the ceremony room. The king would not have other men admiring what belongs to him."

Well, that was some form of relief.

Tialain continued, "You must learn the words for the admission now. And you must learn of your duties."

Artemi's stomach churned. Morghiad had to get here soon.



He opened the letter and read its contents again. Whatever did his father mean by, “...experiences that make a man, a man?” Morghiad did not wish to deliberate upon it, but when his king of a father ordered him to go somewhere at a certain time, he had to do as he was told. Army business was another matter altogether, and at least he was at liberty to keep secrets there. He hitched his sword belt, tightened it, and placed the letter inside the soft velvet of his coat.

He had rarely visited this section of the castle before; few people did, and for good reason. It was the very darkest heart of the citadel, buried at the epicentre of its winding tunnels. There were prison cells within this pit, and these were the ones reserved for the most hardened of criminals.

Morghiad entered one of the larger chambers that turned off from the corridor. There were empty pigeon holes and a half-collapsed cabinet in one dust-filled corner. It looked as if it had once been used for administrative purposes, but perhaps all paperwork had been moved elsewhere. Or dispensed with entirely.

He waited there for a hundred breaths, considering the dark corners and curious damp smells. Before he lost patience, a man wearing a black coat that swished the dirt about the floor entered the room. Morghiad did not know his name, but he recognised him as a prison guard. These men were not of the army, and therefore not under his control.

He had to admit he felt some suspicion of the castle’s interior prison guards; no one really knew what they got up to down here.

“If you will follow me, my lord?” The man smiled toothily and limped from the room.

Morghiad stepped after him, though the prison guard walked curiously quickly given his awkward gait, and even the kahr, blessed with long legs himself, had some trouble in keeping up without running. Eventually, they came to a room full of empty, barred cells. The guard motioned Morghiad in, and said, “If you will just wait here, my lord?”

Morghiad nodded. What *was* all this about?

He heard a key turn in the lock behind him. The guard had locked him in the blasted cell corridor! He ran to the door. “Why have you locked me in here? I demand to know.” He thumped on it for punctuation.

The prison guard’s rough tones came through, though they were somewhat muffled. “King Acher’s orders, my kahr. Don’t worry. It won’t be for long!”

Long? Locked down here? What had his father discovered? “How long? And why?”

“You’ll soon see...” the guard’s voice drifted away.

Morghiad kicked at the door. It was solid as a rock, and clearly nothing short of wielder fire would move that. Next, he went to assess the barred cells. Some of them had doors to other cell corridors on the other side, but all were locked. Morghiad checked the

bars for corrosion or weakness, but each one seemed perfectly strong. He was trapped like a rat!

What he would have given for Artemi at his side! Morghiad folded his arms and leaned against the wall to think. His men would come looking for him eventually, or Artemi would miss him, and she was headstrong enough to poke her nose into every door without permission.

A pair walked into the cell corridor parallel to his, but he straightened and assessed them before asking for help. As they came into the lamplight, he realised that one was a woman. She was being held by the other one - a man, clearly a prison guard. A second man followed them in, and the three of them stood in the cell before him.

“What is this?” Morghiad demanded.

Morghiad’s mind ached from a dim memory - he recognised the woman from somewhere, but could not quite place it. Her hair was muddied and looked to have been a dark shade of blonde at one time. Her eyes were a very bright blue. She struggled against her captor. “They’re going to kill me!” she shouted. “Stop them, please! I haven’t done anything wrong, please!”

Morghiad shifted his eyes to the second guard. Bedraggled hair dripped down his forehead, and he didn’t look as if he had washed recently.

“What is her crime?”

The guard smiled with menace in his narrow eyes. “This was one of the king’s prized benay-gosa. She committed a heinous act of treason. She rejected our beloved king, and caused him grievous harm in plotting her escape.”

The woman cried out, “He forced me! Every week he would hit me, every other night he would take me and...” she started to weep. “The king should face execution, not me. Please, I just want to leave here, please make them stop.”

Morghiad gripped onto the bars of the cell. “This woman does not deserve to die. Free her.”

But the prison guard only smiled. “The king’s orders supersede yours, my kahr, and she has just spoken treason. Her life is to be terminated, and you are to watch it happen. Now.”

So that was it. His father wanted him as audience to an execution. He wanted Morghiad to think of women as he did.

The benay-gosa’s captor shoved her to the ground and held her there with a booted foot.

“Stop this, now.” He knew they would not listen, but he could not prevent the words from leaving his mouth. “She doesn’t deserve this!” He shook at the bars in vain.

The first prison guard raised a curved blade above his head, and struck down at her neck. Her cries and pleas were quelled instantly.

When the two men departed, Morghiad sank to the floor, and the black blood began to pool before him. He stared at her body for a while, trying to make sense of what had been done. Death came to everyone eventually, and this one had been quick and clean.

Morghiad had seen a great many slow deaths in his brief career, so perhaps his father was right, in a manner, to do this. Perhaps Morghiad had been wrong in trying to protect Artemi... perhaps...

His head spun. He felt sick to the stomach. *Right or wrong?* He did not have to agree with his father on everything, but Acher had always had Morghiad's best interests at heart. He pulled out the letter again to read. Of course, it made complete sense now. His father thought he was weak - an embarrassment. Perhaps he had hoped his captaincy would toughen him up, but Morghiad became tougher in other ways. He crushed the letter tightly in his fist. He felt... anger.

It poured out of the undercurrents of his mind and dominated his features. He allowed it to fill his body with rage, allowed it to take over completely, and blazes, it felt almost as good as the fires coursing through him! Morghiad reached through the bars of the cell to the head of the benay-gosa.

He pulled it close and looked deeply into her still open, glazed blue eyes. They still spoke of fear, and they still cried injustice at him. He felt it keenly. "Never again," he whispered to her frozen face. He laid the head back upon the ground and stood, making for the door. "Alright," he said to the guards beyond, "You've shown me what I need to see. Now let me out of here." He hid his anger from his voice with impressive control.

A key turned in the lock, and Morghiad poised himself to attack them. He gripped the hilt of his sword tightly.

The faces of three men met him as the door swung open, and he surely could have slit each of their throats before they knew what was happening, but something stopped him... something quieted his anger. Morghiad later wondered if it was reason, or lessons learned from his time with Artemi, or perhaps an unconscious knowledge that he was needed elsewhere. Whatever it was, it lifted his bloodlust almost as quickly as it had come upon him.

He did not like leaving these men alive, but a voice in his head whispered to him that he had to. Morghiad turned instead and stalked free of the prison tunnels, anger still roiling blackly in his mind. He clamped his hands behind his back, and paced down the corridors of the castle toward the stables.

A ride on Tyshar would be the only thing to clear his mind now. He needed to leave everybody and everything that troubled him, then he could plan. He would find a way of preventing his father from re-capturing any women that escaped, and perhaps those prison guards could be used somehow... manipulated.

Morghiad climbed the last set of stairs that led to the main courtyard. It was as quiet as the castle tombs. That was odd. Where were all the guards? There should have been at least three pacing the perimeter.

He would be having words with Hunsar about misdirecting duties when the next opportunity came. He doubted his men would shirk their roles, since so many had displayed such fervent dedication, and few soldiers frequented the servants' cellars following his reforms now. And then there was Artemi's effect upon the men. He had never expected so many of them to adopt her, or so few to betray her.

Some had, of course, but they had been cast out, or killed... or worse. And of course, Morghiad's father simply could not believe in something so ridiculous as a woman in the army, much less a wielder who Morghiad protected.

He gazed up to the sky. It was past midday already, but time could vanish in an instant in those black tunnels. Morghiad approached the box that held Tyshar, and began readying his saddle. Where *was* everyone? Poor guard distribution would only weaken the castle's defences. He felt his anger surge again, but a young soldier in green and black came running toward him.

Morghiad tensed. "Finally! I was wondering where you all had got to!"

The young man appeared flustered. "Everyone in the castle has been looking for you, kahr-captain."

He had not been gone that long, had he?

The soldier took a breath. "The Lady Artemi - the king is to make her benay-gosa. This afternoon. Now!"

Morghiad dropped the saddle and ran. He had no idea how he was going to stop this from happening, but he had to do... something! Burn it, why did she attract so much trouble?

No, not now! He could not allow her to suffer the same fate as the woman in the cells. Ilena's fate.

He sprinted to the benay-gosa quarters, since she would have to be taken there first, and found the main door was open. He entered, and three women immediately appeared to greet him. One of them opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her short. "Where is Artemi?"

They looked at him wordlessly.

"Where is she?" he demanded again.

A short, blonde woman spoke, "She was taken to the admission ceremony half an hour ago, my kahr."

Morghiad turned and sprinted down the corridor again. Acher would undoubtedly have her undergo the ceremony in the Malachite Hall, and Morghiad prayed he was in time to stop it. His muscles started to complain at the speed he was pushing them to run at, but he forged on, and turned the penultimate corner, where he was met by a hallway full of guards.

“Get back to your posts, now! I will deal with this,” he barked at them.

They milled around nervously.

“Now!” Morghiad walked through to the great doors. Silar was sitting in front of them, admiring his sword.

He looked up at Morghiad. “I’m sorry, friend. You *are* my friend, but I’m afraid I’ll have to... *stop* your father when he walks out of here with her. That is, unless you sort this mess out.”

“I won’t let him take her, Silar, you have my word on that.”

Silar nodded and moved aside, but his lust for her had quite clearly driven him beyond any sense of reason.

Morghiad opened up his lungs, and pushed aside the great doors of the hall. A small crowd of people stood at the end and wide-eyed, nervous-looking guards manned each exit.

A pair knelt before the minister of the ceremony, surrounded by the existing benay-gosa in red. One of the pair stood and turned as he approached - his father.

“How *dare* you interrupt this ceremony?! It had better be serious business that has brought you here, lad,” the king bellowed.

Morghiad’s eyes came to rest on Artemi. She did not turn her face to him, but then, he could see rather a lot of her already. He suppressed his blushes and returned his gaze to his father. “I cannot allow you to take her as benay-gosa, father.” A plan started to form in his head from the words.

His father’s eyebrows formed into perfect arches. “This is not a matter for you and I to squabble over, son. I hope this has nothing to do with the... entertainments I offered you this morning?”

Morghiad bit his lip before he could prevent himself from doing so. “No, it is not that. You cannot have her because... I want her for myself.”

Artemi snapped round, eyes wide, and it felt as if all present had stopped to gawp at him. He avoided eye contact with her, though her looks tried to draw it.

His father took several breaths to think about the words, then said, “It’s good that you’ve finally shown an interest. But...agh! I cannot let this one go. You’ve seen her for yourself. No. She shall be mine. We’ll find you another red head.”

Morghiad felt his guts twist into a hundred knots. “I really must insist, father. I will have no other woman but her.”

Acher, sighed, frowned and folded his arms all at once. “Really? None at all? I doubt that.”

“In all the years I’ve been here she is the only one to have stirred my... appetite. And I have already shared my bed with her.” Blazes, but that was an awkward lie to tell!

Acher grimaced. “You have? Well, that is something. Picky. Always so picky!” He paced around the circle for a minute, rubbing his beard. “Alright then. But if you don’t

produce an heir after nine years I'll have her off you." He turned to the officiator. "Master Hawkser, would you kindly see that these two are lawfully united?"

The spindly man nodded vigorously.

Morghiad knelt down next to Artemi, and took her hand. He breathed quietly as fire sprung from the contact, and feared he would see anger in her eyes when she next turned to face him. Her face and hair had been adorned in the usual way for such a ceremony, and she looked really rather lovely with it. Artemi would have thrown all of the king's benay-gosa into the shade, even if she had been unwashed and dressed in rags. Her dark eyes looked intently at him, but were not ireful. Perhaps it was more... relief that he saw in them.

"...my kahr?"

Someone was talking to him. Morghiad snapped his head round to Master Hawkser.

"Concentrate, lad!" muttered his father.

"My Lord Kahr Morghiad of House Sete'an, First heir to the Marble Throne, do you accept that this woman is worthy of your bond?" asked the thin man.

"Yes, I do," he replied.

"And do you accept that any offspring she bears you will be legal heirs to The Marble Throne?"

He felt Artemi twitch her hand a little. "Yes."

The ceremony dragged on for a long time, full of seemingly endless questions about rank and permissions to marry or make alliances or dispose of one's benay-gosa. Morghiad began to plan how they would feign their relationship in public. At least this way, he would be able to walk with her at his side around the castle, but managing sleeping arrangements without arousing suspicions would be tricky. And then there was Silar. Silar would not be best pleased with this situation.

When the ceremony was finished, they were both made to stand before each other. Morghiad kept his eyes firmly fixed upon her face, as the sheer fabric she had been dressed in exhibited far too much, while the king seemed rather fond of leering at all of it.

To Morghiad's relief, she was finally dressed in a red silk gown, which ably covered her numerous female... parts.

Acher stepped in before the front of it was tied, however. "No, remove the gown. She is not one of my ladies and therefore should not wear the red of the king's benay-gosa."

The red gown was duly stripped, and Artemi huddled in an attempt to cover her modesty.

"Choose your colour for her and choose it wisely. All your other benay-gosa will have to wear the same," his father said to him.

Acher and his women in red then departed with the officiator, floating away in a majestic cloud of scarlet.

Morghiad quickly tore off his coat and set it about Artemi's shoulders. Luckily it was long enough to hide her from the otherwise inevitable embarrassment, and broad enough to swamp her top half. She pulled it around herself tightly.

"I'm sorry Artemi," he said, "To have tied you to me like this. It was the only way I could think of to keep you here and keep him happy."

She nodded slowly but said nothing.

"We will find a way of making them believe," he whispered.

She half-smiled at that. "And when there is no child?"

Morghiad compressed his lips. "I suppose we'll just have to find one."

Artemi laughed. It was a full and beautiful laugh that eased his concerns considerably, but it did not last long. She turned her head to the door, to where Silar's figure was silhouetted against the light as he watched them. He turned and stalked away as soon as Morghiad met his eyes, and how was he ever to set things straight with the man?

The truth would have to come out about his power difference with Artemi. At least then Silar would know he had no intention of bedding her, though such a truth risked making everyone else fear her. "What do we do now?"

"Well, I suppose it would be expected at this point that I come to your rooms." She raised an eyebrow.

Together they headed into the dull grey of the vaulted hallways. The soldiers had cleared it, and had since returned to their posts. A thought occurred to Morghiad. "How did the king discover you?"

Artemi sighed. "Your friend, Lady di Certa, caught me leaving your rooms this morning. She took me to him as punishment." She smiled. "I suppose she was right in the end, I *am* your whore now."

Of course, Artemi had lost honour in this. Morghiad had not wanted that to happen, though looking back, his attempts to preserve it seemed poorly considered at best.

Several of the nobles they passed gave them curious looks. He did not want to stop and explain what she was doing in his coat, however, and so he ignored them.

The castle being the hotbed of gossip it was, they would find out soon enough. He held the door open for her when they reached his rooms, and she glided through like a queen in spite of her dress. As soon as the door was shut, the apparent happiness dropped from her features. "I have caused you too much trouble, my captain."

She said this after her injury, a near-forcible union to the king, and now that she was tied to him?

"No," Morghiad said firmly, "I am guilty of doing that to you. I should have sent you away from here the minute I found you."

Confusion caused her bottom lip to pout. "Do you mean all this has been for nothing? The training, the wielding? You have turned an entire army of men to protect the

life of a wielder, of all future wielders. Are you telling me that was a mistake? The servants have enjoyed the warmest winter in centuries because you kept me here.”

Morghiad folded his arms. “But you could have enjoyed a happier life outside of here. And yes, my work with you has benefitted Cadra, but – then why do you think I have been caused trouble by you?”

She curled up in the armchair. “It’s not that. Lady di Certa - I have come between the two of you. Do you think she will still see you now that I am your benay-gosa? And what of Silar?”

Morghiad’s mouth nearly fell open. He was surprised she had thought anything of Aval’s advances upon him! That noblewoman was a blazed snake! “Whatever relationship you perceived exists in Lady di Certa’s mind only. I will not miss her attentions in the slightest. If anything, it would be a relief to be free of her. As for Silar, I’ll speak to him.”

Artemi rose from the chair and went to gaze at the bed. She still looked unhappy, and though Morghiad did not normally like any form of affection, he was disturbed by her apparent sadness. And out of guilt for the part he had played in it, he drew her into an embrace.



Artemi awoke for the third time that night. It was unbelievably hot in his chambers of goose feather and clean cotton and books. She just wanted to strip off and lie on top of the covers completely naked, but that would not be appropriate here. Not with him sleeping in the chair at the other end of the room.

The fool man had insisted that she take the bed each night she stayed, but it was ridiculous, given the size of the thing. Four people could easily have slept in it without even being aware of each other’s presence. Worse, Morghiad slept so lightly that every time she shifted he would wake, check on her and then take an age to settle himself. Also, he suffered nightmares. How he managed to get any sleep was an utter mystery to her.

Predictably, he left his chair and came to inspect her. “What is it?”

Why could he not stop *fussing*? At least he had spoken to her this time. In the last few weeks he had become very withdrawn, and even less conversational than he usually was. She hadn’t seen him smile for a very long time.

She pushed off the covers. “It’s rather hot up here.”

Morghiad glanced around the room. All of the windows were wide open and he seemed to be wearing several layers of clothing against the incoming breeze. “That leg wound is fully healed now?”

“Yes!” How many times would she have to tell him?

He sat on the edge of the bed and put a hand to her cheek. Hot, raging fire seemed to explode at the point where he touched her.

“Your power is maturing inside you - that’s why you feel hot. By tomorrow you will have exceeded me in ability.” He rose and went back to his armchair. That was about as amicable as Morghiad would be with her. She had no idea what it was she had done to upset him, and asking him directly about it got her nowhere. At least she had a friend in Caala and was able to see her when she came to change the bed sheets.

At first Caala had been angry at her, thinking she had lied about her relationship with Morghiad, and it had taken a lot of begging for forgiveness to bring her to an understanding, which itself was a lie. The only problem now was Caala’s irrepressible excitement at Artemi’s supposed impending motherhood. Though that was nine years off, it was still irksome that she had to discuss it at all.

Unlike Morghiad, Silar had warmed to her more in recent weeks. He regularly came to check upon her and Morghiad, even joining them for walks in the gardens. Artemi was glad for his company on those walks, as Morghiad would remain entirely silent and grim throughout. It had not taken Silar long to realise that the kahr was not taking advantage of his benay-gosa, and he had since remained quiet on the matter, instead choosing to enthuse over her forthcoming dancing lessons. And after all, it was expected that benay-gosa dance with their master at feast days.

Too bad for Morghiad he had chosen clumsy, treble-footed Artemi.

They had arranged to meet in the practice hall tomorrow, and she hoped to elicit at least a smile from Morghiad when they practised, even if it was a laugh at her falling on her backside. She knew how good he was at dancing, so he must have enjoyed it at some point in his bleak existence. Artemi rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. She still felt as if her skin were afire.

When she opened her eyes again, it was light. Full spring sunshine flooded in through the windows and glared off the white sheets of the bed. She could hear birdsong from the gardens and castle roof. The smell of spring was a wonderful thing, and she drank it in deeply, a broad grin spreading across her face.

Morghiad was watching her from the door of his garderobe. He was shirtless, as had become usual in her presence, and he rubbed a towel through his black hair.

Artemi tried to count all the thin scars that ran across his arms, but he turned his back under her gaze to replace the towel inside the washroom. The tattooed crest upon his shoulder blade caught her eye, for she had seen it before and knew of its significance, but this time she left her bed to examine it more closely.

Morghiad turned to face her and stared when she approached, but then waited patiently while she walked around to his back. He was quite a bit taller than she, and she had to stand on tiptoes to see it properly. Blazes burn him for being so tall!

The mark there seemed to depict a hawk perched upon sword and feathers. There was something... unusual about it though, and Artemi reached toward it with her fingers. When they made contact, Morghiad gave no reaction at all, but she could feel the difference in their ability now. There was something about the drawing of the hawk... “This has been made with Blaze Energy.”

“Anyone could have one made otherwise,” he said.

Artemi frowned. “But this is not Ilena’s work...”

Morghiad spun and snatched her hand out of the air. “You should bathe and get ready. Silar will be waiting.”

She knew she was right. Artemi had seen enough of Ilena’s work to know that was not her style. Which other wielders had been allowed in Calidell during Morghiad’s lifetime?

He had left a bowl full of clean, hot water for her in the bathing room, which was quite generous of him. That said, she did not understand why he did not use her power to make it hot. She pulled off her nightdress and ran a soaking sponge over her skin. The familiar scent of purple wisp root soap prodded at her nose as she washed, and she dunked her hair in the water to complete her ablutions. After that, she flicked it back over her head, sending a spray of water everywhere.

She grinned to herself. The mess probably would not wind Morghiad up at all, but it felt good to misbehave a little. She dried herself off with one of the patterned towels, then picked up the green scarves from the cabinet. It had been an appropriate choice of colour by Morghiad, matching his eyes perfectly. She wound the widest part of the silk strips around her breasts and waist, as she had been instructed on the first day, and pulled a third piece across her bottom, round the front of her hips and down her thighs.

The scarves fastened in an ingenious knot at the back of her waist, and though Artemi was hardly demure in this arrangement, it served to cover the most important areas. Of course, the outfit drew grins and winks from her army brothers whenever Morghiad’s back was turned, but at least she was able to wear her uniform during practice, and there they would treat her more like a man and less like a flank of beef on a market stall.

She stepped out of the washroom, pulling a comb through her knotted, wet hair. Morghiad’s eyes were intent upon her as she walked across the room to the bed, where she took a seat. His stares would have been more manageable if he at least took the time to communicate with her, so she thought of some conversation. “Who taught you to dance?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

How she hated that response! Why couldn't he just *talk* to her? "I would be happier if I knew whom I was up against."

He considered her words for a moment. "A woman called Jezaena. She is dead now."

The man was impossible! It wasn't as if every woman he'd known was dead. Not quite every one, anyway. She probed further; she needed the sport. "What was she like?"

"Why must you ask these questions? They are inane."

Artemi dropped her comb onto the bed as she stood. "I just want you to speak. You never talk. About anything. You don't even reprimand me over stupid things any more. It's infuriating!"

He remained blank. "What is there to talk about?"

"I don't care! Anything: the weather, books, will-die, fighting, wars, your father, the bloody price of soap. Anything at all!"

Morghiad continued in his demonstration of emotionless-ness, "I do not see the point of talking for talking's sake."

She went over to him and knelt in front of his chair, taking a hand. "It is not for that. I find you so difficult to read and it would give me great comfort to know if you are happy, unhappy, disappointed or proud. I know you feel those things somewhere in there. Even if you talk complete rubbish, I can use it to read something of your emotions."

He hesitated before speaking. "I am content. Will that do?"

Artemi nodded and released his hand. It was the best she could hope for. Perhaps she needed to try another tactic. They had not had a good duel since she had become benay-gosa, and she had advanced considerably in her battalion's rankings through the last month - nowhere near enough to best Morghiad or Silar or Beodrin, but enough to provide a challenge.

Soon they approached the practice hall, though the air between them remained wordless. Artemi had begun to wonder if most of her life would be spent in this curious state of soundlessness.

For sport she put a hand on Morghiad's arm. She knew he wanted to shake her off, but he was unable to do so in public. Perhaps it was a cruel trick to play on him when he had been so kind to her, but she always offered him a mischievous grin when she did it, so that he would know she meant it in good humour. He never once responded to it.

Burn him, but she wasn't about to give up on the brick!

They stepped inside the hall, and Artemi immediately spotted Silar leaning against the tables. He flashed a broad smile upon seeing them, and rubbed his hands together.

"I hope you've brought your dancing legs with you, girl," he called to her. She let go of Morghiad's arm and ran to Silar, wrapping her arms around his neck. He gave her a quick squeeze and released her.

"Morphiad," he offered a nod.

Morghiad merely nodded back in grave silence.

“Now. For once I get to give the orders to you two,” Silar said with glee. “If you would like to take your positions?”

Morghiad went to stand several yards from the tables, and waited.

Artemi, however, had no idea where she was supposed to be.

“Go and stand with him,” Silar said.

She approached him hesitantly, not sure of how near she should loiter.

“Closer,” came the indication from their friend.

Artemi moved a step toward Morghiad, who still seemed to be watching her intently. She heard a “tssk” come from her left, and Silar’s hands pushed her forward and *into* Morghiad.

He stood back while Morghiad put his arms around her waist. The room felt very hot again. When *were* these blazed powers going to settle down?

Silar came to place her hands variously on Morghiad’s upper arms and waist. “Didn’t you even show her the basic starting positions?”

Silar sighed, and let it pass to arrange her arms. “You must always keep your shoulders in this position. Do not let your elbows drop unless the move demands it. Now, this is the starting position for the *hadara* - this is the dance almost always performed on feast days. Morghiad, if you’d kindly show her the next move?”

Morghiad wrapped his leg around one of hers, pulled it back and released her waist on one side, causing her to fall sideways towards the floor. He held fast to her waist with the other hand and caught her shoulder, so that she was hanging only from his grasp.

“This is how you wish to show me?”

“He performed the move correctly. You displayed absolutely no trust in it,” Silar scolded. “And you have dropped your elbows. And your shoulders have tensed. Do it again.”

Morghiad lifted her up and dangled her above the floor once more. Artemi’s performance did not improve.

“Again!” Silar called.

They performed the move several times, then moved on to the more advanced ones. It rapidly became clear that this was not something she could pick up like sword fighting. And it was nowhere near as simple as the solo *gosara* dance she’d been taught by the other benay-gosa. She seemed to be absolutely dire at it too.

After a couple of hours of agony, Silar called a halt to their faltering steps. He had his hands on his hips. “I just don’t understand it, Artemi. You’re normally far more graceful than this. And it’s not that different to sword fighting.”

Morghiad released her, and she felt some of the tension lift. *Perhaps it would be over now!*

Silar rubbed at his chin. “Morghiad, would you mind if I... ?”

He gave a single nod for his friend to step in, and went to lean against a nearby wall, arms crossed.

Silar took up the first hadara position with her this time. His hold felt a little different - not more or less gentle... just different. She placed her hands in the correct positions for the thousandth time.

Silar examined them with raised eyebrows. “Good. Now, drop.” He let her fall to one side, and she leaned into the motion. He caught her smoothly. “Very good,” he said with a smile. They weaved through the next ten motions fluidly. “It would seem,” he said on releasing her, “that I have the magical touch.” A very cheeky grin spread across his face. “Wouldn’t you say, captain?”

Morghiad had straightened from his nonchalant position against the wall to watch them with such intensity that his eyes glittered as if they might burst into flame. “It appears you have.”

“Let’s run through that again,” Silar said. They danced the full sequence together and Artemi was astonished that she did not fall over his feet once. Yet Silar had admitted he was not as good a dancer as Morghiad. None of it made any sense.

Silar was studying her closely. “Hmm.”

“Hmm?” she said back at him.

“Why don’t you trust him?” His ultramarine eyes caught the light as he spoke.

Artemi was, quite unexpectedly, lost for words. “I...do. I...” She swallowed, trying to work out what he meant.

Morghiad stepped forward.

Silar pressed further: “Has something happened between you two?”

Artemi shook her head. “Nothing. Perhaps I find it easier to connect with someone who will talk to me.” She looked back at her captain.

He was gazing at the floor with an expression she didn’t recognise. What was wrong with the stone-faced idiot?



“You must tell him the truth, Artemi.” Morghiad replaced the cadet swords in their cabinet and locked it securely.

“I cannot. He will disown me. It would break his heart. It is bad enough that I killed my mother, but for it to have been caused by my ability to wield—” A tear tried to build at her eye.

He stood and took her by the arms. “Artemi, he already knows your birth was linked to your mother’s death. Whatever anger he may have felt about it will be gone. You are his

only daughter and I must explain to him why you are my benay-gosa. I should have done it much sooner.” He hated upsetting her, *hated* it.

She pushed her red-gold hair behind one ear and whispered, “Alright. But he already has taken a slight... dislike to you.”

“I’m sure he has.” Morghiad helped her put on her green silk coat. “You’ll ride with me to see him.”

“As you wish.” She touched the fastenings absently.

They strode down to the stables, where Morghiad saddled up Tyshar and examined his benay-gosa from the other side of the horse. It was strange that a hero of legend, the strongest wielder in the world, could appear so vulnerable and so... delicate. Green had been an excellent choice for her. It set off her hair and skin quite well.

He finished buckling Tyshar’s bridle as the horse pawed at the ground with eagerness, then led the mount out and jumped on his back, before helping Artemi up so that she was sat across his lap. Unfortunately, it was quite impossible for her to sit astride the saddle in benay-gosa scarves.

Of course, it had been difficult adjusting to having her around all the time, and worse when she had as much as admitted she did not trust him. He had reacted unwisely to the news that evening, choosing to find solace at the bar while she slept in his bed. And when he had returned, he found himself considering climbing into the bed with her, which certainly would have upset her beyond reparation. A soldier needed to trust their captain, and Morghiad felt as if every action he took pushed her farther away.

A long while had passed since she had last taken his arm when they walked about together.

He kicked the horse into a fast-paced walk, and they stepped into the noise of the city. People would often stop to look at her, to admire her, but she buried her head in his chest as if to hide. It was curious that she did not like the admiration she received, or perhaps she was embarrassed to be seen with him.

The gritty green roads became rougher and less even as he rode into the poor quarter, and when they reached the plant-covered house, Artemi dismounted from Tyshar and went to knock on the door. Morghiad dismounted too, and tethered his horse to a convenient post. No one would be successful in stealing the animal unless they had a body made of iron.

He took a deep, laboured breath. Facing her father was a duty he had put off for far too long, but he needed to ensure the man knew his intentions, and knew of an escape plan should anything happen to his daughter’s protector.

A square, sturdy man arrived at the door, rusty-coloured hair glinting in the sunlight. His pale blue eyes indicated that he had been around for a century or more, but Morghiad could not have guessed his age beyond that. The man embraced his daughter, but offered Morghiad a sour look. “Come in if you must, my *lord*.”

Morghiad stepped into the building, and was pleasantly surprised by the cosiness of the room. The hearth was well-used and warm, with a thick rug in front of it. Two small beds lay at either corner of the room, covered by monochrome geometric textiles of blue and creamy white. There were numerous drawings and paintings on the wall, some of them quite beautiful. Interspersed were some rather less-accomplished images, clearly drawn by a child. "Were these done by Artemi?"

"Yes," came the terse answer from her father. And then as an afterthought, "My *lord*." Not kahr, then.

Morghiad smiled in spite of himself. He could not remember being given much time to draw or play as a child, but it seemed Artemi had known a happy life with her father. He offered her father a hand and his name. "Morphiad."

He eyed the hand with suspicion for a moment, but took it and returned his own name. "Toryn."

That was as good a start as any. Toryn offered him one of the only two seats, but Morghiad declined. It was the other man's house, after all.

"So," Artemi's father began, "Have you come to ask permission to make my daughter your bed fellow or simply to keep her as your unpaid sword fodder?"

"Father!" Artemi exclaimed.

Morghiad remained calm, since this was closer to the sort of reception he had expected. "We are not bed fellows. And she is a soldier in the army, but she receives payment for it."

Artemi added, "I've told you before, father, he made me benay-gosa so that the king wouldn't."

Toryn eyed them both closely and folded his arms. "Well what's wrong with my daughter that you haven't tried to bed her then?"

Artemi almost dropped the cup she was holding.

Morghiad did not feel it was right for him to reveal her secret, though he would if she needed help doing it. "Tell him, Artemi."

Toryn looked questioningly at her.

She set the cup down and tidied the skirt of her coat. She looked at her father, then at Morghiad, and back again. "There's something I haven't..." she squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm a wielder." She looked at him in desperation, but did not cry.

Her father's eyes widened for a moment, but he appeared quite unsurprised by the news. He went to hug his daughter. "I always knew there was something about you, girl." He gave her a squeeze. "Your mother didn't bring you into this world to be ordinary, now, did she?" He stroked her hair. "Hush, I am not angry."

Morghiad felt a little uncomfortable around their strong display of emotion, and he felt as if it were not really his business. He appraised the floor closely. *Was that floorboard loose?*

Toryn brought Morghiad's attention back from the ground, when he said to his daughter, "How was this discovered? I had you tested when you were just born and they said you couldn't wield a drop."

Morghiad answered him, "Her ability is masked in a way I have not seen before. It is invisible to all kanaala that do not make contact with her."

Her father thought for a moment. "Morghiad. I suppose you were instrumental in keeping this a secret from your father."

He nodded.

"Then I must offer you my thanks in protecting her. However, it is now clear to me why you have added her to your army, and perhaps why you chose to keep her a secret. Clearly she is a useful weapon to you and, as any father would agree, I do not appreciate seeing my beautiful and innocent young daughter employed to kill and take part in your futile battles."

"I have not done it solely for my own gain, Toryn."

Toryn looked fiercely at him. "You will have to try harder than that to convince me, lad. How much of a choice did she have in this?"

Morghiad was unable to answer.

Artemi spoke for him instead. "He has taken excellent care of me. And I did make a choice to stay here and protect the people of Calidell. That is what I said I would do."

But Morghiad knew she was casting her situation in a far more positive light than it deserved. He could see now, from her relationship with her father, that she never could have left him. Morghiad had forced her into this decision, he had not given her the choice she deserved, and the guilt of his actions began to weigh heavily upon him.

Toryn was right to remain unconvinced, but he left the matter there. "Well then, I have no desire to look at your glum face all day, lad. Artemi, are you alright to go back with him? I'll walk you back to the castle if you prefer."

She looked to Morghiad for permission.

"Do as you wish," he said. "But before I go, I must speak to you alone, Toryn."

"You can tell me what you need to in front of her."

Morghiad shook his head. "I'm afraid that I cannot. Of course you may relate it to her yourself later, if you think it wise."

Artemi and her father looked puzzled at his explanation. But she gave him a final hug, stepped out of the door and went to pay her attentions to Tyshar.

"Well?" Toryn asked.

This would be the most difficult part of the meeting, and possibly the most damaging to the father and daughter's relationship, but Toryn had to know if she was to be kept safe. "I believe that your daughter is the warrior Artemi of legend. The Fireblade."

Her father smiled, and then laughed. “Has all that royal entitlement finally sent you mad? She is a capable girl but those are just stories. And of course she will *look* like the character, that’s why I named her so.”

Morghiad pressed on. “In six months of picking up her first sword, she learned what ought to have taken a lifetime. She wields like someone who has spent decades building the forms. Two weeks ago, she learned an entire dance in two days and could execute it perfectly. I can think of no other explanation for the masked nature of her power. How else do I explain these things?”

Toryn thought for a moment. “Can you not simply accept that she is an intelligent and able young woman?”

“She is one of the cleverest people I have known, and yes, I think she is singular in her abilities, even if one strips away her meteoric learning. But I found this in a very old book.” Morghiad took the rolled-up picture of her from his coat and handed it to her father.

He looked at it for a minute and then sat down slowly. “Is this genuine? She always hated it when I tried to read *Chronicles* to her when she was little.” He looked at the picture again. “Said it gave her a headache.” He smiled thinly. “Are you sure of this?”

Morghiad nodded.

Toryn fell silent in contemplation.

“Artemi cannot know of this until her memories return of their own accord,” Morghiad said.

“I have been around long enough to know about vanha-sielu, lad.” Toryn admonished. Then, “Why did you tell me of this?”

“Because there is a chance that, when she remembers, she will want to leave here and whatever ties she has to myself and the army will become insignificant. I am under no illusions that I can keep her here against her will. But I want to know that someone she cares very deeply for will be around to protect her. And I want you to be forewarned and prepared for when it happens.” He folded his arms.

Toryn looked confused. “You are asking a father to protect his daughter?”

Morghiad smiled. It was the response he had hoped for. “I wanted to know if you would still be her father when you heard the news.”

Toryn looked almost insulted at that, which was good.

“I have a plan in place for her escape, should she need it. The details are on this document.” He pulled out a folded note. “Memorise them and then burn it.”

Toryn examined him closely, as if he were a lump of something that had become stuck to his boot. “There’s more to you than your pretty face, lad. I’ll give you that. But don’t think of that as an invitation to bed my daughter. I’ve heard enough today to confirm that no man is good enough for her.”

Morghiad offered him a nod of agreement and made his goodbyes. He smiled at Artemi as he re-mounted Tyshar. Now he knew she would always have someone around who cared for her, and that was the most important thing.



Chapter 11

Strong, golden light pulsed out of the sun, suspended like a disc of pure Blaze Energy in the azure sky. Its light warmed Artemi's body deeply, and she bathed in it at the window for some time. She was bored today, unbelievably bored. She had read the latest borrowed book in a couple of hours and was now confined to her benay-gosa apartments, alone. All the other benay-gosa were entertaining the king at some sort of party, not that she missed them a great deal. They seemed to think she had gotten off lightly with her union to the kahr, and she was sure some of them suspected the truth about their relationship.

And Morghiad, well, he was off attending some business that did not concern her, or probably looking for an excuse not to see her. It was curious that she missed his company when it was absent, and yet detested it when he was present.

It was not as if she had grown fond of his expressionless, stony countenance and total lack of conversation. Artemi also missed her sword and her horse. But, naturally, she wasn't allowed to take either of those out without *his* permission. She went to lie upon her silky, soft bed. This truly was a gemstone-encrusted prison cell!

Artemi closed her eyes and dreamed she was riding Glacier across the grassy plains, feeling the breeze upon her face and in her hair. She wished she could wield a giant doorway into some faraway land, and gallop right through it, with nothing but her sword for company. That would be a wonderful freedom. Instead she opened her eyes to a silk-lined, stone wall.

She sat up.

Would anyone really miss her if she went out for a short ride? The men of the army trusted her well enough now to let her go, and she couldn't exactly be sneaky about it, in any case. The only issue would be slipping out without the attendants knowing. She amused herself with thoughts of knocking them out with her bare fists, and glanced out of the window again. It was not too much of a drop to the courtyard below, but it would be very obvious, and more than suspicious.

Artemi paced the room twice, listening for footfalls outside. It was silent. She fastened on her new, long and green satin coat. It had been made especially with riding in mind, split at the back and front, which meant she could sit astride whilst still looking respectable. Morghiad had hidden a long knife for her under the mattress.

She reached for it and stuffed it inside her coat. Next, she pulled on her calf-length, soft leather riding boots and listened at the door. There was no one there, so Artemi pushed the door open as if she were stepping out of it normally, and kept her footfalls silent. If they did see her, at least she would not *look* suspicious. The antechamber was empty. Artemi strode right out of the benay-gosa apartments.

Whilst moving through the halls, she kept her walk and posture relaxed. There was nothing unusual about her proceeding unaccompanied, she told herself, and Morghiad would be quick to approve of her walking in the corridors. It was only the king who was funny about that sort of thing, and she was not going to bump into him if he was partying with his mistresses.

She passed a few servants who looked at her but said nothing, and even nodded at a few of the soldiers she recognised. Some gave her curious looks, but did not stop her.

Artemi arrived at the stables in surprisingly little time, and began saddling Glacier.

A guard walked into the box. "What do you think you're doing?"

Artemi's heart sank like a stone in a pond. She had failed.

He stepped in and examined the tack. "That is no work for the captain's benay-gosa. Allow me." The man finished her preparations and then led the horse out for her.

She tried to keep her eyes from bulging, but forced as warm a smile as she could and offered thanks, mounting Glacier while he held her. She took the reins and trotted the animal out of the castle. The early summer breeze touched her cheeks as she entered the city, its smell mingled with that of fires, street food and perfumes. Glacier danced through the people, clearly as eager to escape as she was.

Upon reaching the city walls, a guard stepped into her path, his long, shoulder-length hair tied back in a leather band like that of a Sunidaran. It was the man who had carried her at the Battle of Gorena. "Why are you alone?" he asked.

"Morghiad has some pressing business to attend to, and is unable to accompany me at present," she responded.

He nodded but did not move. "Will you be alright? I have a couple of free men who could go with you."

Artemi compressed her lips. "I will be fine. I am quite capable of defending myself."

He thought for a moment. "Just be careful out there."

Artemi nodded. Why did they have to fuss so much? She could *feel* the open land calling to her beyond the gates. The soldier moved out of her way, and waved her past. Artemi kicked her bay mare into a canter through the tunnel and then out - out into the wide expanse of the Cadran grasslands.

It felt as good as she had imagined it would. Adrenaline and excitement surged through her veins at the freedom from her prison. She delighted in the sensation of the wind and the smell of new leaves, the power of the horse thundering at the ground beneath

her. The mount was the finest gift she had received from anyone, more valuable to her even than the sword!

Together they stormed up the slope to the woods, now a brilliant green with their fresh growth. It contrasted vibrantly with the blue of the sky, making Artemi's heart beat faster in appreciation for her world.

They had covered the distance to the woodland with blistering speed, and Artemi only slowed the horse a touch when they ran under the first branches. She found herself laughing like a mad woman at the experience, and was glad there was no one present to see it.

They trotted around the woodland for an hour or so, delighting at the way light played on the soil after its arduous journey through the canopy. The old leaves swirled in the breeze and the squirrels chattered to each other noisily with every step her horse took into their territory. The fine multitude of colours in the earth and the pale bark seemed a world away from the dark oppression of the stony keep. She gazed deeper into the singing woods, but the castle called to her instead, making her back itch. No, she would enjoy her freedom for a few moments longer.

Artemi let Glacier have a long rein so that she could lie back on the animal's rump while it walked. She gazed up at the sun. It glittered through the leaves as they moved, warming her heart. Artemi closed her eyes and breathed deeply, but her reverie was broken when she heard hoof falls approaching, and she sat up. A large, black stallion drew near. It was Morghiad's.

"What happened?" His expression could only be described as severe.

She realised her hair must have looked a wild mess from all the running around, and Glacier was somewhat muddy. He was going to be angry with her for this. "I wanted to go for a ride."

His brow darkened. "You can't traipse around here alone whenever the feeling takes you. What if something had happened to you? I had no idea where you were."

"I wanted to escape, just for a little while. That place... it's like a prison, and as for you - you are my bloody gatekeeper!"

Morghiad dismounted and hitched Tyshar to a nearby tree. "Come down, Artemi."

What was he going to do? Spank her? She obeyed and tied Glacier beside the warhorse.

His green eyes glittered in the light – almost the same colour as the leaves. He took a breath. "Are you unhappy here?"

Perhaps it was unwise, but she had to give him an honest answer. "Sometimes, yes. I am."

He looked... upset, and then he sighed heavily. "You are released of your promise to me. I cannot bear your sadness any longer, nor the part which I have played in it."

She hadn't expected that! "You're letting me go? Why?"

“You are right. I have kept you here as my prisoner and now my conscience demands that I allow you to leave. I have lied to those who trust me, my father, my friends, and I have done it for you. I have broken the laws which I am charged with upholding. I have been responsible for the deaths of those like you and yet I have allowed you to live. Can you not *see* why, Artemi?” Desperation tinged his voice.

She shook her head. Had she upset him somehow? She didn’t understand this man at all! “I’m sorry for whatever I have done to you. If you want me to leave, then simply order it.”

His desperation turned to frustration. “I am... unable to tell you to go. I cannot bear for you to leave and yet I cannot bear your sadness if you stay. Please, tell me what *you* want and I will do it.”

He really had gone mad from wielding, and was making absolutely no sense! She tried to re-state what was important, “I am just a tool for your army. That is my job and my purpose. You have no cause for concern over my happiness.”

Morghiad seemed to be even more frustrated by her response. “Your happiness has *always* been a concern of mine. My tie to you was set the moment I met you. I will never be able to have you, Artemi. No man could ever hope to own you. But that does not alter the fact that you own my heart, my soul and my sword. You have broken me completely, Artemi, in spite of my best efforts to prevent it.” His eyes glistened now, and his fists clenched and unclenched as if they wished to ... do something.

He couldn’t love her. It was impossible. He was capable of love, surely, but what could he desire in her? Even if he did care for her, what could ever happen between them? One night in her bed and his mind would be lost forever or he would die in her arms!

Artemi looked up at him carefully. His black hair shone almost blue in the light. Morghiad was very handsome indeed when he used his features to display emotion, and though she felt guilty admitting it, he did cast Silar into the shade with his smiles. She reached up to his face with her hand, and felt the familiar flow of Blaze echo from him. Artemi opened her mind to let him take her power, which he did. He drew as much as he dared into them both, and then he pulled her close, and they kissed.

It probably lasted longer than it should have, and she probably allowed him to undress her a little further than safe, and he certainly had allowed her to remove far too many items of his clothing... but it felt fiercely good. Hot fire still burned through her from the numerous points at which their bodies made contact. She was curled up in his arms now, head resting upon his bare chest. Morghiad stroked her hair gently - he seemed to have an odd appreciation for it.

“Kahr-captain?” Birdsong rang through the woods as she spoke.

“Hmm?” The humour in his voice was clear.

“I want to stay with you.” Artemi lifted her head to face him. “But I am afraid that, if I do, you will be at risk.”

He thought for a moment. "I have faced more frightening things than you." He grinned at her. "We will be alright if we trust each other. I trust you with my life, Artemi. I need you to trust me."

"Of course I do. And the issues we had with dancing... had nothing to do with trust." Artemi traced the line of a scar across his chest. "It was more that I became... well, I'm sure you understand." She hoped he was right; she shivered to think of killing him.

"You and I should head back before we are caught out here."

"Lead the way," she said, not moving.

He lifted Artemi to her feet and walked her back to the horses, picking up clothing as he went. They helped each other dress, where Morghiad showed a remarkable knowledge of exactly how her benay-gosa scarves were organised.

When they were ready to leave, he kissed her on the lips and helped her onto Glacier, before he mounted Tyshar. Glacier seemed an inappropriate name now - perhaps she should change it to something altogether warmer.

Artemi and Morghiad trotted out of the woods together, grinning at each other like silly fools. They made little haste back to the city gates, and Artemi noted that Morghiad's smile did not drop as they entered. It would not be long before the whole army knew of the change that had occurred between them. Few had believed she was not sleeping with him, anyway, though somehow she imagined wager money would change hands as a result of this.

The gate guards did offer some curious glances when the two of them rode past, but no elbows were nudged or winks made. Their ride back to the castle passed quickly, and before she knew it, she was being kissed in the secrecy of the stable box. Artemi could not help but giggle at the ridiculousness of the situation, but was cut short when she noticed someone standing at the door. Morghiad spun round as soon as she did, shielding her from the onlooker.

"I know she's behind there, Morghiad." It was Silar's voice.

He moved slightly to allow her to see the other man.

"So when did this happen?" Silar asked, "Actually, I don't want to know." He tapped his foot against the wood of the stable block and looked thoughtful. "Well, it's about time you two were honest with each other. I thought this was going to happen bloody ages ago and I don't know why you were so bloody slow about it. Anyway, you have to tell the other men."

Morghiad nodded. "I know, and I will."

"And another thing." A threatening tone touched Silar's voice. "Keep her happy." With that, he stalked off.

Artemi felt terrible guilt for Silar. He should never have pursued her, but she had encouraged him with her conversation at that feast day - she just... hadn't realised it. At

least he was the sort of man who could find another woman easily. Yes, he would be alright soon enough.

At that moment, she realised that she did not feel nearly so strongly for him as she did for Morghiad. Artemi ran her fingers through his hair with affection, and he turned back to smile at her.



Pale moonlight drifted through the window veils and landed in glowing pools on the red-gold filaments of her hair. Morghiad had spent many nights staring at her beauty, trying to work out which of her features made her perfection, but it was even more intoxicating up close, when he was able to share a pillow with her. He had thought his desire for her would calm once he had admitted his true feelings, but instead it had only grown more turbulent. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The vaulted grey stone arched above him impassively, and he wondered if he would ever control his emotions again.

Artemi had a safe route out of here if anything were to happen. He trusted her not to sleep with him but, increasingly, he was losing trust in his own ability to stop himself. His greatest fear was that he might bed her, die, and then leave her wandering the world with only two weeks to live. Artemi was still too young to properly survive *nalka*, and the thought of her dying in agony was enough to quell his passions. He hoped that it would remain so. Of course, he had toyed with the idea of sending her away altogether. Perhaps it was selfish, but he could not bring himself to do it.

He rolled back onto his side to study her again. Her dark eyes were open and looking at him, but she smiled her luminous smile, and moved to embrace him.

Her idea of placing a thin sheet between them had been ingenious, and allowed him to feel her warmth without driving him wild with desire. He wrapped his arms around her, and closed his eyes. Tomorrow was the first practice session of the week, and he would have to speak of his relationship with her. They did not need to know about the awkward details - no one else needed to know about that. He would have to face Toryn's disapproval once more, then he really *would* be in trouble.

Artemi stirred against him and nuzzled at his chest. She always seemed to know when he was worrying over something. He worked his fingers into her fiery hair, and fell into a guardian sleep.

When he awoke, she was standing at the window, completely naked. That was very mischievous of her, but also quite typical, since the woman seemed to thoroughly enjoy teasing him, and had no shame. He did not stop to admire her smooth, ivory physique, and instead sprang from the bed to embrace her before she could escape. Artemi play-fought him momentarily, but gave in very quickly to the kisses he had for her. “We had better get you dressed and down to practice, soldier,” he said, squeezing her tightly.

She saluted with a hand across her chest. “As you command.”

Morghiad went to find her green scarves, strewn around the room in various odd places. As he wrapped them around her, he noted the scar on her right thigh. It had healed quite well, but it was his fault it was there at all. He growled beneath his breath and finished the scarf arrangement with a knot at the back of her small waist. When he had dressed, they walked together to the hall, her hand where it belonged upon his arm.

While she changed in the secrecy of the practice hall bathing rooms, Morghiad dropped to the floor and started a series of press-ups. They were good for focussing his thoughts... and distracting him from her naked body. How was he going to broach the subject of his love for her in front of nine thousand men?

Did he just slip it in between instructions, or would it be better if he devoted an entire speech to it? He had no concept of how to deal with a situation like this, though men like Rahake had to do it often enough. It certainly was not something any of his instructors had taught him. Gossip could usually be trusted to spread the word, but he needed them to hear it from his mouth. He finished his set and paused for breath.

Artemi was watching him.

“Everything alright?” he enquired.

“I see that *you* are teasing *me* now.” She walked into the hall, hips swaying seductively in her uniform.

Morghiad rose to join her. “Would you do me the honour of fighting a duel, my lady?”

Artemi gave a gracious bow, and drew her sword. She had advanced considerably since his last fight with her. Every strike and reaction was very quick indeed, she moved with surprising agility, and he found it a challenge to predict where she would dart to next.

Morghiad managed to touch her with his blade a few times, but it would be nothing of note in a real fight. She cut him several times, apologising often and pointlessly. He ended the fight with a quick cross-swipe and grab, pulling her close to him. He kissed her on the cheek while she struggled, provoking an angry stamp on his foot. Morghiad released her and grinned. “You are much improved. It won’t be long before you best Silar and me.”

The first men filtered in as the words left his mouth, and when full, he ordered them to perform the forms, then fight in fours. The entire room whirled with glinting blades and vibrated with the clatter of metal.

He still could not think of how to announce that he had shared a bed with a four-thousand-year old legend. His eyes scanned the faces of the men in front of him. Silar was watching him expectantly, arms folded, so Morghiad clenched his teeth together, and called attention to the hall. He cleared his throat and drew breath. Then hesitated. He couldn't think of how to start. Some words fell into his head. "I thought you should know that... It is important that all of you are aware..." His thoughts became tangled once more.

"You should know that the captain and I are lovers," said Artemi, hand on sword.

Lovers, *yes*. Why hadn't he thought of putting it like that? His cheeks coloured anyway. "Does anyone have any questions?" He compressed his lips in anticipation of the ridiculous things he was about to hear.

"So that's why you're smiling like an idiot," Beetan yelled out. Some sporadic laughter followed.

Did that count as insubordination? Morghiad gave the man a glare for good measure.

"Does that mean you won't be letting her onto the battle field, kahr-captain?" a sergeant asked.

"Artemi will fight were she's needed. But you are right in thinking I may alter my tactics to see that she is protected and likewise, Artemi may behave differently where I am concerned." He felt like an idiot, stating the obvious.

Silar interjected, "I think what is important to recognise here is that Artemi is now the closest thing we have to a future queen and, just as we promised to protect you and your father, she should be part of the army's charge too." Some of the other men nodded in agreement.

Queen? Silar was getting a bit ahead of himself there, and Artemi was blushing quite severely. But Morghiad finished what Silar had started, "All those in favour of naming her as the army's ward, to the right. You know the rest."

The entire Calidellian army poured across to one side of the hall. All bar one, fiery-haired soldier.

"Are you not going to offer protection for yourself, my lady?" he asked as he walked to meet her. She looked a little confused by the display, so he smiled at her in reassurance. "Then it is decided. Artemi, you are now Ward of the Army of Calidell. Every man here has given his word that he will protect you from all who would bring harm to you, in or out of battle. Does this arrangement please you?"

She looked at him wide-eyed, and then back at the men. "I am honoured and yet I profess I do not know how I have come by such an honour. I have never known such selfless men as those in this room. I can only offer my sword and my power in return for your kindness. I do not know how else to express how humbled I am." Spoken like a true queen. One of the histories had described her as one of the Five Great Beauties who reigned during the Era of Half-Light. He could well believe it.

Morghiad dismissed the army, and later waited while she showered. It was good that he could rely on them to protect her wherever either of them went. Even an off-duty soldier was now honour-bound to save her if she required it. A wet hand touched him on the shoulder.

“You could do with a wash too, captain,” and with that, she dragged him into the shower rooms too.



Preparations were well underway for another Gialdin Day, and Artemi was nervous of being paraded in public like an oversized, green trophy. Morghiad had offered to buy her a ridiculous dress, consisting of very little fabric and costing far too much money. She had refused to accept it, of course, but now found herself with nothing to wear. At least she could make a half-credible attempt at dancing with him. That was something.

The two of them had practised everywhere there was space, and moving with his graceful steps was a journey into freedom. Artemi could only hope that she did not look like too much of a sack of kefruit next to him.

She raised the sponge to her arm once more and scrubbed gently, reaching round the back of her neck to relieve the tension. Her captain was out in the castle, busying himself with arrangements for the day, and she had his chambers to herself. A knock sounded at the door, and she thought it might have been the guard he had left for her, perhaps about to tell her something urgent was happening...

Artemi stood quickly, water cascading from her noisily, and wrapped herself tightly in a dressing gown. The rich, heavy fabric brushed noisily on the floor as she approached the entryway. She unbolted the oak door and opened it. Silar stood outside, blinking in apparent confusion. “I... ah.” He swallowed. “Should I come back later?”

His timing was not wonderful, and he would certainly have rumours flowing by visiting like this. “Is it important?”

He shook his head and looked down. “Not especially.” He sighed through gritted teeth. “I just thought you should have this.” Silar handed her the bundle he held under one arm.

The object felt weighty in her hands, and she opened it there to peek at the contents. Shimmering glass shards glittered back at her. “I cannot wear this. Silar... how will I explain it to him?”

“It would be a shame if no one else could see you in it. And it has no more association to me than the floor you walk on. Everything you touch you make your own, my lady. Perhaps you could simply tell him it was from an admirer.” He turned and strode off into the darkened halls without waiting for a reply.

Whatever did he mean by making things her own? It was not as if she owned that revolting king, or even bloody Morghiad! Morghiad never behaved as if he was her property, and nor would she want him to. *Men!*

Artemi closed the door before a curious-faced guard, and examined the mirror-laden dress. At least their conversation had been quiet enough for the guard not to have overheard.

The dress was as luxuriant as she remembered. It glittered as if made of sun-filled gemstones, giving off the slightest tinge of blue. She *could* wear it this evening, though it was perhaps a little too extravagant for a benay-gosa. Artemi sat on the bed and pondered her conundrum. It was ridiculous that her decision-making had been reduced to choices over her attire, and that she concerned herself so deeply with it.

She would much rather be made a sergeant with a few men to direct. That would be altogether far more exciting!

She laid the dress out on the bed and went to stand at the window. A few nobles milled around amongst the autumnal blooms of the garden, just as primped and decorated as their surroundings. Life would have been so different if she’d had the chance to be born as one of them.

Artemi wondered if Morghiad would have liked her nearly so much, since he seemed to dissociate himself from them as much as possible. Probably not.

She returned to her bath, which had by now grown quite cold.

The rest of her cleansing was rather hurried, and before long she was browsing the shelves for some reading material. Why Morghiad had a copy of ‘Chronicles of Artemi’, she had no idea. She had always found the book tedious and uninspiring as a child, even though it contained her infamous namesake. A funny thing Morghiad had no books about the other Morghiads through history. Perhaps they were not as exciting for a man to read about!

Artemi took hold of a grey tome with browned edges, and allowed it to flop-open on a random page. It was filled with idle foretellings - verses constructed by con-women to sell and pretend they described the future.

*“And so the great battle of Asterid will rage ‘neath rock, water and snow.
Two armies in black; flames wrought, released and lo,
A place with no entrance - the way in, the Fire Blade only can show.”*

Utter tripe! It was so vague and date-less; it could be about any battle! She read on to the next verse written by the so-called “Mistress Cloud of Dragons.”

*“For the House that rules the white palace in the light,
Their son will know the greatest love in heart and in sight.
From this love he will perform great acts to save, to guard.
But out of that love he shall bring the long night,
From it, evil will burn this world’s people to ash; full-charred,
And Achellon will be frozen; it will be deaf to their plight.”*

It was very convenient how Mistress Dragon’s foresight always seemed to rhyme. Very convenient indeed.

Artemi closed the book and scanned the shelves for another. She pulled out a volume on far-off lands known as Casfin and Rhofin. The countries sounded rather exotic compared to the dullness of Calidell. Before long, she was curled up in the embrace of the ancient chair, learning of their peculiar culture of male subservience.

When the sky had darkened, a second knock came at the door. Artemi had her head buried deep in the marriage rites of Casfin, where women would offer their arrows to a man of their choice, and then proceed to lambast him while he hunted for their wedding feast. A very singular people, indeed.

She closed the book and went to answer the knock, but before she reached it, Caala came storming in. The broad woman blustered about for a moment, tidying things that were not out of place, but Artemi had missed her regular company, and went to hug the older woman, or to calm her.

“What in blazes?” Caala looked her up and down. “You’re not ready yet! You do know you are to dance in the Malachite Hall in under an hour, don’t you?”

Artemi nodded with resignation.

Caala harrumphed. “Well, we’d better get you bloody ready then, hadn’t we?” Her gaze caught sight of the dress. “Is this what you are wearing?” she said in half-astonishment.

“I think so.”

The servant blinked, open-mouthed. “You *think*? Bloody fires of Achellon, girl! Sit down while I sort out that hair of yours.” Caala practically raked a brush through her hair, before fastening parts of it to her head in complicated ways. The end result took most of the hour to achieve since her hair was such an untameable mass, but Artemi was quite impressed by it. Caala had rolled her hair around the end of the fire poker, making it twist like an elegant vine. Several of these trailing ringlets fell over one shoulder, while the rest was arranged delicately around a silver headband.

Caala was similarly proud of her work. “Right, no time to lose. Time to get into that dress. Though I’d be surprised if that tiny body of yours could support something so heavy!” She seemed to find that very funny indeed.

Artemi compressed her lips and undressed quietly. The glass-clad gown did feel heavy as it settled on her hips, heavier than she remembered. She took a deep breath as

Caala pulled the ribbons of the bodice tight. Why was she always so zealous about that? A woman needed to breathe, after all.

Caala soon finished tying off, and walked round to admire the finished product.

“Am I presentable?” Artemi suddenly felt nervousness bubbling up inside her stomach.

Caala folded her arms. “Passable, I suppose,” she grinned. “You’ll be the envy of every woman there. Chin high, girl. Do us linen girls proud, won’t you?”

She felt the weight of new responsibility settle on her bare shoulders. Did they really think she had achieved something by becoming the kahr’s bed fellow? “I shall do what I can, Caala.” A bell rang twice in the distance. “I should go and meet my escort for the night. Thank you, for fixing my appearance.”

There really wasn’t much time, and Morghiad would not appreciate being left partnerless. Artemi burst into the high-ceilinged hallway outside, causing her guard to jump at the sight of her. His eyes were wide, and she hoped that was for a good reason rather than bad. She hitched the narrow skirt of the dress up and broke into a brisk sprint. The soldier fell in beside her, keeping pace with ease. “You look lovely, my queen,” he whispered between footfalls.

She could not help but smile as she ran, in spite of the false title, and that she would probably end up looking a mess by the time she reached her destination.

The corridors sped past her in a blur of greys and blacks, and Artemi was glad for her training in covering short distances at speed. At last, they turned the corner which would bring them to the base of the hall steps. She was breathing hard when she came to a halt.

The vast doors were already open, and so she cursed loudly. “Follocking, bloody blazes!” She was too late! Artemi squeezed her eyes shut; she had embarrassed him when she had promised she would not! *Blasted vanity*.

A figure moved in the shadow cast by the door. “You swear like a soldier.” Morghiad stepped out from the darkness and unfolded his arms, offering her a hand. “Will you come into the light so I can see you properly?”

She hadn’t been the one hiding in obscurity. Artemi began climbing the elegant, curved steps to him. Abruptly his hand dropped and he swallowed. He mumbled something she couldn’t make out.

She froze her ascent. “Is everything alright?”

Morghiad said nothing. He stared blankly at her. Had an invisible arrow hit him in the head?

A steward came to tap him on the shoulder. “The king awaits your presence, my kahr.”

Finally Morghiad moved, as if registering he was still alive. “Oh.” He took a breath. “I’ll... be there in a minute.”

The steward became anxious. "My lord, I do not think your father will wait a minute."

Morghiad waved him aside absently and intensified his focus on Artemi. She couldn't help but feel like a rabbit caught in his snare. He came down the remaining steps to meet her in silence, and rearranged a few strands of her hair that had become loose during the journey. "Must you destroy me every time I look at you?" He cupped her jaw in a long-fingered hand.

"My kahr, I really must insist!" The steward was almost hopping on the spot.

Morghiad half-growled, but dropped his hand to her waist. "Let's go, then. Though it seems unfair that I should have to share you with them tonight."

Artemi boxed up the frustration she felt. The idiot man never seemed to register how handsome he was, no matter how many times she said it. He would always whine on about not being a match for her or claim she was some great beauty. Utter nonsense. It was all very well being complimented, but sometimes he needed a slap to bring him back to reality. The Blazes had driven the man half blind, she was sure.

Then again, his myopia did serve her purposes, meaning she was able to keep him merrily to herself.

They strode into the glare of the Malachite Hall, and Artemi felt the trickle of self-consciousness turn to a torrent as innumerable pairs of eyes fell upon her. Morghiad's hand tightened at her waist, offering her support, but her panic was already there. Why had she ever agreed to this?

She struggled to keep her shoulders back and relaxed, though she remembered to keep her chin high for Caala. It wouldn't be long before she tripped over his feet and was made to look a fool in front of thousands of Calidellian notables, but Artemi hoped it would be over quickly, so she could retire to their bed and his embrace. *If* he would still have her after she publically shamed him with her clumsiness.

The king eyed her suspiciously as she neared him and his red-clad retinue. "That is not a dress for a benay-gosa," he muttered audibly.

Artemi felt her cheeks redden. She wanted to leave, or to melt into the floor! Either would do.

Morghiad pulled her closer gently. "There are no written rules on that. She may wear whatever she wishes."

What sort of statement had she accidentally made? Would everyone think she had presumed to be a noblewoman when she was nothing more than a glorified whore? *A whore who did not even satisfy her customer.*

King Acher frowned and waved for the music to begin. The sound of it eased her tension to some degree, but she still felt as if she was about to revisit her lunch.

Morghiad led her to the centre of the space made by the parted crowd, parallel with the king and one of his women.

"I can't do this," Artemi whispered. Nor could she meet his eyes through shame.

Morghiad smiled. "You've executed it perfectly every time we've practised, so I doubt that very much."

Her panic grew. "You don't understand. I -"

"Call yourself a man, soldier?" he taunted under his breath.

Artemi smiled, and then laughed, feeling her resolve return. "You can suck my -" Her sentence was cut short as he spun her into the first step. Her movements flowed naturally in response to his, and she found herself relaxing into his arms as she had done so many times before.

The onlookers melted into nothingness around them. Before she had even begun to conceive of what she was doing, it was over, and she came crashing back into the hall. A deafening applause rose from the onlookers, so loud it hurt her ears.

"Let's find someone sensible to talk to before the vultures close in," Morghiad said. She had no doubt as to whom he was describing. Morghiad hurriedly led her into the mass of faces, nodding in polite recognition of the compliments he received. The crowd parted easily as he moved through it, looking for someone who preferred to talk of swords rather than lace ruffles or money.

His height permitted him to spot someone before she did, but it served no benefit. For as soon as he had changed direction, the pair happened upon a circle of noblewomen. The ladies did not give way, and Morghiad squeezed Artemi's hand tightly.

All of the women were tall, elegant and willowy. Artemi had never thought herself especially short for a woman, but next to these ladies, she could not help but feel intimidated. She affected a curtsy, and Morghiad bowed his head slightly out of politeness.

The tallest, a blonde woman with a creased forehead spoke first. "That was quite a dance, *Miss Artemi*." She emphasised the address with a hiss. "Tell me, where did you learn to move like that?"

She chose her words carefully. "The kahr instructed me, my lady."

The blonde woman raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "In under a year? I hardly think that possible among even the most proficient of... girls." She eyed Artemi up and down. "Though I daresay even a servant can be taught how to hold a tray, why not how to step in time to music?" The other women laughed melodically.

Morghiad stiffened, but held his tongue.

"But really tell me, child. Where were you schooled?" The noblewoman leaned in.

"She learned with me," Morghiad answered before Artemi could. "She has a natural talent that cannot be taught."

The woman sniffed, and one of her companions joined in. "True enough, a low-born woman may improve herself. But there is no substitute for proper breeding. Wouldn't you say, my kahr?"

Morghiad's brow darkened visibly. "I have found that breeding is no substitute for wit, beauty or intelligence. Wouldn't you agree, Lady Harcoure?"

The woman's eyes bulged at the implied insult, but she did not respond.

Morghiad made as if to leave, but a third woman in the group spoke before he could. "My kahr, tell us how you met your lovely benay-gosa. I am given to understand that, prior to her current... position, she would change your sheets?" The black-haired lady smirked and her companions mirrored the expression. "Some say she wields a sword!" With that, the other ladies burst into fits of laughter.

Artemi answered for him this time, "You are quite correct I was a laundress. And it was work for which I earned a wage and proved myself of use. And in my current role, when time permits it, I endeavour to work for the betterment of my country. Tell me, my lady, what do you do for Calidell?"

The noblewomen ceased laughing, and stared at her, wide-eyed.

"I think that is enough charming conversation for one evening," Morghiad said, "Enjoy the festivities, my ladies." He gave a shallow bow and led Artemi away.

Over the surrounding chatter she heard "out of control" and "impudent" drift from the noblewoman. Artemi permitted herself a small smile.



Chapter 12

The tavern light was dingy at best, with candles only illuminating nearby tankards of ale and the closest of faces. At one table, buried in the curtained-off recesses of a particularly dark corner, sat a man and a woman. His face was red with ale and his pupils had grown large with intoxication, yet his sense of desire remained strong. Limp strands of dark blond hair fell over one of his hazel eyes as he drew a side of his mouth to a toothy smile. The woman opposite him returned the smile with her dark lips, and continued to twist her delicate fingers in deep brown waves of ironwood hair.

“Great fires of Achellon, girl,” the man exclaimed, “You’ll have me drawing a marriage square around your toes before I hit the pillows!”

She touched his hand gently. “I would never bid you enter such a contract for me, my love.” He was good-looking enough for a husband, but far too stupid. No, this man would serve better for other uses... “But perhaps you’d like to join me for an evening?”

The young man’s face creased into a full grin. “Oh aye, Artemi. I would.”

She stood slowly, revealing her slight figure and tightly fitted assassin’s garb. Two gale-swords crossed her back, and a row of spin-daggers glittered along the length of her legs. No one ever told her to disarm in their establishments, but then few believed her capable of using her weaponry.

“I’d like to duel you again, if you’re keen,” he slurred, eyeing her numerous blades.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps when you’ve had some sleep to soak up that ale.”

He only grunted in response, and moved his gaze elsewhere on her body.

They strode, or rather strode and staggered, out of the bar and into the cool Sokirin night. Corynorh was not a bad fighter at all. In truth, he was very good for so slow-witted an opponent, but his arrogance was his downfall. That, and he didn’t stand a chance against her, few people did. The abilities he had, however, made him a prime candidate for her task. It was a duty that had lain upon her shoulders for millennia; a duty to keep the world in good order; a duty to tidy up the mess created by that foolish *Daisain*.

The Dukusu forest had remained exactly as she remembered it, and its rich scents of greenery were welcome reminders of her home. She pushed past an especially broad-leaved fern, allowing it to snap back into her new friend’s face.

“You’re a very bad woman,” he muttered in warning tones, before emitting a series of wet hiccups.

She ignored his drunken noises and proceeded down a narrow alleyway of closely packed rubber-wood trees. Soon they had arrived at a fissure in the white rocks, her hidden lair within a maze. Two warm and inviting lamps burned at the entrance.

Corynorh squinted at the pale outcrop. “You live *here*?”

Evidently he didn’t think much of caves, but to her they were the perfect place to live. No one else but the odd tiger or bear would go near them, they tended to last longer than houses, and they had a certain antiquated charm about them. Occasionally, even the most powerful wielders needed a secluded place to hide away in, and this one was perfect. “Have you changed your mind?” she asked, returning to her hair twirling.

“Not a chance.” He grinned broadly in a way that only drunken, desirous men could.

She drew her hand along the length of her bodice and reached over to the young fighter’s lapel. “Come,” she whispered. They entered the soft light of the cave together, their bodies both eager with the heat of lust.

As all men would do in her bed, he was keen to show her his command and aggression. And she, in her way, was content to allow it. She was happy to bear his heaving, sweaty body and oozing spittle. She was happy to endure being bonded to a charred lump of crazed meat. She would be happy to endure the subsequent punishment of *nalka*, and the gut-wrenchingly painful spasms that came with it. It was all part of the fight, the eternal battle that destiny had designed for her. It was her purpose.

For a brief moment, she could enjoy the extreme pleasures that came from his efforts and her power. But it was so brief, so very disappointingly brief. His eyes widened to white spheres as he took the full force of her wielder Blaze in his ordinary, hollow body. The energy flowed out of her uncontrollably, fizzling in the air and scalding his skin. It became so hot that he began to redden, blister and smoke.

Corynorh screamed from the bizarre mixture of pleasure and pain wrought by the fires, which continued their assault on him until his skin started to blacken. It was the same every time: the same smells, sensations and sounds. Finally his cries drained to a soft croak, and he flopped onto the rocky ground.

For a while she lay there with him, unable to disrupt their bond. Of course, she could have simply used a dagger to cut herself free but, having tried that once before, she knew the results could be... unsavoury.

When the sun had raised enough to turn the skies outside to a dull grey, the dark-haired woman was able to push him off. She dressed quickly and re-armed herself with her various items of weaponry. New soldiers could be very unpredictable, and were rendered utterly immune to the effects of Blaze Energy. The man’s figure lay inert on the floor, and

some of his tan skin had started to heal around the burned patches. Not that it mattered. It would all blacken again soon. He stirred.

“Corynorh?” she sang in her melodious voice.

His eyes flicked open; his hazel irises rendered a milky white by the fires. With impossible speed, he leapt to his feet and charged at her with his bloody teeth bared. She reacted instantly, drawing her gale-sword and beating him across the face with it. “Bad Corynorh!” she shouted at him as he stopped, stunned by the admonishment. “Are you going to behave now, like a good eisiel?”

“Eisiel?” His destroyed vocal cords rasped against one another. There was a moment of brief introspection, before the man knelt at the feet of his new mistress.

She leaned forward to place a hand on his flaking shoulder. “Very good. Now, go and put your clothes back on. You remember how to do that, yes?”

He nodded slowly. That was good. Sometimes they barely remembered how to walk.

The eisiel diligently drew his trousers and shirt on, but failed at numerous attempts to tie them properly. It would do.

“Eisiel!” she called. “I have orders for you. Sit.”

The blackened man dropped to the floor with his head bowed. “I like orders, yes I do.” He grinned at the floor. “Always liked them. Always, always!” The eisiel began to laugh in a high pitch.

“That is good. Now, you are to go and find someone. She is known to be a Kusuru Assassin, and has wrought a great evil upon this world. You will know her by her hair...”



“Has that army of yours found Katin yet?” The king rubbed at his beard vigorously, it was growing too long for its own good. A man needed a well-trimmed beard to look imposing, knowledgeable and, above all, masculine. Morghiad should really grow one if he wanted to progress in his career or do anything of note. Not that such things were likely, of course.

Morghiad shook his head. “I am sorry, but the girl has eluded our searches so far. Rest assured, I will have her beheaded as soon as we find her.” His cold, green eyes remained impassive. Good, perhaps the boy was finally learning. He still needed a firm hand though.

“This is not good enough!” Acher boomed. “She has committed treason and is now running around *my* country with *my* bond! She has stolen from me and must be brought to account for it. Work harder at it, or have your men whipped for their poor performance.”

Morghiad half-raised an eyebrow. “All of them? That could take a few years...”

“I don’t care for the logistics, lad! Just see that justice is done. I want to see that girl’s head decorating a spike within the week.” And Acher had the perfect place for such a spike prepared in his mind. “Now, what was it you wanted to see me about?”

Morghiad compressed his lips. “It has been brought to my attention that the kingdom of Kemen needs our assistance, assistance which could benefit some of Calidell’s own towns.”

“We owe Kemen nothing, lad. Leave them.” They should have ceded at least a province to him in the previous century, but then those had been his fighting days. He had a son to do all that for him now, leaving him far more time to enjoy the finer things.

Morghiad gripped his sword hilt. “Our army is willing to go to their aid. Think how indebted Kemen will be to us if we do.”

Acher pondered at the grey, simply carved ceiling for a moment. Such simplicity was the most beautiful form of art, and dark stone spoke of everlasting strength. It was much more durable than any Blaze-wrought, poncy white rubbish. The council office was very rarely empty during the day, and Morghiad appeared to have chosen his time well in isolating him.

But the lad was an overgrown sword hand, too simple for such advanced thinking. Too simple, especially, to have employed a woman in his army as the rumours said! *Hah! How ridiculous!*

No, this was quite an accident of timing. Acher leaned back in his finely carved chair of mahogany firewood and placed his hands behind his head. “Kemenis are slippery creatures. They won’t give anything back for the blood you spill. No, I want the army to stay here and find my benay-gosa.”

Morghiad folded his arms. “You know she had family in the south?”

He hadn’t known that. Foolish of him really “Of course, I knew that! Do you think me an idiot?”

“No, father. I -”

“Well, go and take your bloody blunt-edged and blunt-witted army down to the south then. And make sure you kill a few people while you’re at it, maybe some Kemenis too. There’s no point in any of this prisoner business I’ve been hearing about. Oh, and don’t try to save too many of your own soldiers. You need enough to win, but if you don’t lose a few hundred, then this country will be overflowing with people before you can call upon Achellon for a tornado to exterminate the excess. Everything is so very finely balanced.” And so easily disrupted. A rich country could not stay rich if the money had to be shared between more hands.

A small smile worked across Morghiad's face; the nature of it was very curious.
"Perhaps you should invite the wielders back to do your pruning for you?"

"Hah!" Dangerous witches. One never knew if such a woman might end up in one's bed... and then... Acher took a deep breath. He was safe. His country was safe from that.
"Better for us to keep the country's whores free for whoring, don't you think?"

"I would not deny my countrymen their opportunities for enjoyment."

Acher rose from his chair and strode around the front of his glittering, night-stone desk. "Is that so? I hear your army does not partake of so much *enjoyment* these days."

Morghiad went to stand at the tall, cloud-filled window. "They enjoy serving their country."

"They are at risk of taking themselves too seriously. Calidell's army serves this country by killing and being killed. And if they want to enjoy the parts in between then that is to be encouraged. You know that very well, lad." Acher sat back against the surface of his desk. This idiot child was probably too stupid to learn as quickly as was required.

He sighed. "If they are not sleeping with so many women then it will take longer for them to find someone to breed with."

"It's not the army breeding we need to worry about," Acher muttered, "Bloody commoners, farmers and village idiots!" - the ones who donated little of worth to the country through the creation of their idle offspring, believing it to be a right bestowed upon them by Achellon - how he despised them and their hungry, needy little families!

"We need someone to work the fields, father."

Acher harrumphed. There were more than enough people to do that, just too many to be fed from those fields! "Take your bloody celibate men south and find that bitch of mine." Three years of his companionship wasted on her, and Morghiad had greater concerns for his precious men.

At least now that his son had that little red-haired girl, Acher didn't have to make excuses for his son's sexuality. That had been an embarrassing matter to deal with daily amongst the visiting royal snakes. The *lad* was an embarrassment! Blazes, how he needed to father another son!



The blue streams of fire fanned through his consciousness like a fine network of glowing tree roots, pulsing and heaving with their energy. He felt along the largest of them

for the thousandth time, sensing its awful power. It had finally matured that summer, finally ceased its improbably rapid growth from a tiny trickle of energy.

Passerid snapped open his brown eyes and padded around the room again. It was simply furnished, with only the most basic things a soldier would need: a small bed, a writing desk and a wardrobe for his uniform. The grey walls had been decorated with the sigil-marked flags of his House, Collibry, and the small brown bird on them reminded him of himself: unremarkable, unheard but always watching. He sat at his desk, withdrew a sheet of paper and began writing.

It was a sickening punishment that never seemed to end. He checked the register of names to be sure that he would spell the next one correctly.

Dear Madam and Sir Retsinnal,

It is with great regret that I write to you about the death of your daughter, Miss Enodia. It was I who ended her life, and I hope it will reassure you to know that I suffer daily with -

Just how many wielders had he dispatched during his time in Calidell? The register was large, spanning several volumes, and he had only made it part of the way through in a year. Some of the names he vaguely recalled, others he had absolutely no idea to whom they belonged. All babies looked the same when you took them from their parents, anyway.

He could hardly be expected to distinguish one wielder child from another across the centuries! Some of the families had since moved away, often to another country, but Morghiad had insisted that he make efforts to locate them for his apologies anyway. It was a punishment he suffered for, alright! And it was ridiculous. How could a letter of apology from their child's executor ever come close to lessening the parents' grief? He'd already received several letters of abuse from them in return for his atonements and admissions.

Passerid slammed down the brass canal pen and kicked his chair to the floor in annoyance. He'd be lucky if one of them didn't hunt him down to kill him.

Breathing deeply, his mind returned to the Blaze streams that his abilities permitted him to see. That great stream - it matched Artemi's age perfectly, but it must have been a grade thirteen or fourteen. How could she be the lover of a kanaala only graded twelve? Not that twelve was insignificant; as an ordinarily respectable six, Passerid couldn't even see to the end of Artemi's fires when he touched her.

He searched again for a more likely candidate, but only succeeded in finding a twelve whom he knew had been around for centuries, and an eleven in her seventies. Could it be that their relationship was some sort of elaborate masquerade? And to what end? Artemi never seemed to leave the kahr's rooms these days, or was always seen hanging from his arm like an obedient pet if she wasn't at practice.

It had surprised no one that Morghiad had given in to her charms so rapidly, but what had been the cost? Perhaps their kahr was already an eisiel, and she was manipulating him like a Blaze-burned puppet. The girl could have all sorts of mind control techniques learned during her previous lives, or ways to make other people believe Morghiad wasn't the walking dead.

Passerid sat on the bed and rubbed at his temples vigorously. Artemi seemed like a sweet girl, and she had fulfilled her oaths to the army so far. The legends spoke well enough of her honour and her victories, so he trusted her to keep him alive if they fought together on the battlefield.

But she was a wielder nonetheless. They were still dangerous things with dangerous abilities, governed by their irrational female emotions. He looked back at his task on the desk.

No, Morghiad was just as difficult as he had always been. And what could Passerid do to save the Ward of Calidell's army from another Ward, anyway? Nothing. He just had to trust Artemi not to do something catastrophic to their captain at so critical a time.



Chapter 13

Soft flakes of snow drifted down to the carpet of white that enveloped the black Mountains of Kemen. Artemi turned her face to the low grey clouds to catch a few more of the flakes on her hot cheeks. They landed there like visiting butterflies and then melted away quickly. A chuckle to her left stole her attention from the flurry. Her captain was looking at her in amusement. “One would think you had never seen snow before,” he said.

Winter had arrived quickly, and it seemed all the more vigorous up in the mountains. She pulled her fur cloak tightly around her and nudged Glacier on. “I am simply taking my time to enjoy the surroundings, my captain.”

The horses were making slow progress through the Orsenid Pass, so there was little else to do but appreciate the scenery. At least, this time round, the scenery included Kahr-Captain Morghiad of House Sete’an instead of a group of wagon drivers. She reined in closer to him and took a glance at the army behind them.

There were thousands of men, all huddled against the cold, and behind them rode their families. These were truly dedicated people. Sometimes she caught a glimpse of the weight of her lover’s responsibilities, but she knew she could never truly understand it.

“They will get through it, Artemi. They’re tougher than you’d think,” he said, detecting her concern. “We’ll reach camp in another hour or so.”

She nodded. She was looking forward to slipping back into her uniform, and it would be so much warmer than the benay-gosa assemblage she had on. Even with the thick fur collar on the cloak she felt exposed, and she longed to jump horses and wrap herself up in his sword-honed arms. But it probably would not be appropriate in front of all these men.

She thought back to some of the things she had done with Morghiad - things that would make the most experienced benay-gosa blush. He was insatiable at times, but then so was she, and given that the two of them were ultimately unable to satiate their desires, there had been some very, very narrow escapes recently.

At times Morghiad would become angry at himself for it, and lament that he risked her life by being her lover. This was ridiculous when it was she who was the true threat. She desperately did not want to be separated from him though. And Artemi certainly did not want him on the battlefield without her at his side.

The two of them were equally matched in sword-handling now; with her lightweight speed compensating for his superior strength. At their last duel, they had put

on something of an exhibition for the practice hall. Except, unable to best each other, it had lasted for a day-and-a-half. Most of the men had left by the time they decided to call a draw, but the few who'd remained had worked hard to get them both blind drunk afterwards, and that had led to some... amusing bedroom antics.

Artemi glanced at the men behind again. She and the kahr were far enough ahead to have some privacy in their conversation. "Morphiad? I wanted to talk to you about something."

His green eyes flashed at her. "What troubles you?"

"It is difficult for me to... You know that I love you with every essence of my being..."

He smiled warmly at her.

She continued, "...and your happiness means the world to me."

"I am beyond happy to have you, Artemi."

"But you have not *had* me, my captain. What if one day you want to experience what it is like to... do that? Or perhaps you will want to be a father. I cannot offer those things to you. And so... I must offer you my blessing."

Morphiad looked confused. "Blessing for what?"

"If you want to take another lover; someone who can give you those things." Artemi felt a chill rise up her spine. She'd hated saying that.

Morphiad's brow darkened suddenly. "Silly girl. You think I have space in my heart for anyone else? Do you think any other woman could rouse my desire after you? Honestly, Artemi. Sometimes your humility is endearing and other times it just makes you blurt out idiotic things."

She felt as if she had failed him. What sort of excuse for a woman was she?

He rode closer to put an arm across her shoulders. "You are everything to me, and those other things do not matter if I can wake each morning to see your face."

Artemi nodded slowly. It wasn't good enough for him; *she* was not good enough, but she was glad he had said it. She did not want some other woman stealing those mornings from her.

They reached the camp at the top of the pass and the men made haste about their preparations. Morghiad went off to organise various people and bark a few orders, which Artemi suspected he secretly quite enjoyed doing. She trudged along with the two horses to a growing corral and led them inside.

"Let me take the saddles off, my queen," a young soldier said.

She placed her hands on her hips. "I am *not* a queen!" Why did they have to keep calling her that? Well, she would keep denying it until they learned.

The soldier had the front to smile at her. "Er...yes, my er- lady."

And she wasn't anyone's lady, either. But that would have to do. She tramped off into the snow, carrying the saddle bags. At least no one had tried to take those off her.

But something caught her attention to the left. A broad-shouldered sergeant with dark red hair ran towards her - her father. He had insisted on signing up to the army as soon as he had heard of her relationship with Morghiad, presumably to keep a close eye on his behaviour. Her father's attitude to Morghiad still remained frosty at best, and she only wished that they could get along better. Peculiarly, he seemed to like his lieutenant, Silar, an awful lot. Artemi wondered if he'd like Lord Forllan so much if he knew how many bed fellows he had worked through the year before.

"That's a sour look, if ever I saw one," he winked at her.

Artemi was worried about her father fighting in the army. He was good enough with the sword, but he was too bloody protective to be sensible. "Oh, it is nothing. Where is Silar setting your lot up, then?"

He took a saddle bag off her shoulder. "Our lines are over there. Listen, Artemi, I've had a bit of a think on this epic trek of ours. About your man and... well, you could've chosen worse than that pretty boy. Ah – that is another matter. Anyway, I was thinking. I know you two can't really have kids, well... sons. Though that didn't apply where you were concerned. So he'd better not try it -"

"We're not going to have children, father," she cut in.

"Right, well... I was thinking, when the time comes... why don't you adopt one of the kids from that orphanage we passed? Some of them will probably be like you."

Artemi laughed. Her father had always been so keen to be a grandfather. He would be a good one, she was sure of that. "Perhaps we shall adopt one day, and I would be honoured for you to be pride-father."

He grinned broadly at her offer; then drew his smiles under some control. "Yes. Well, see that the Sete'an lad takes good care of you. If he doesn't, you just tell me."

Artemi tssked. "He is a good man with a good heart. I wish you would believe me!"

"Until he does the honourable thing and marries you, he's going to have to work hard to impress me."

Her eyes bulged. "He's not *allowed* to marry me! Not unless you are secretly a king in disguise and I a kahriss. And besides, what does it matter? It's just a signature on a piece of paper and the exchange of some ridiculous item or other."

Her father muttered, "It'll stop him marrying anyone else."

Artemi was exasperated with the conversation. Her father simply didn't *want* to like Morghiad, no matter how hard Morghiad tried.

They reached the site of the captain's tent, and her father set down the saddle bags. He gave her a hug. "Take care, my queen."

Not him as well! She nearly threw the bags after him.

Multiple tents sprung up in the snow around, and she helped where she was permitted to. Far too many of the men seemed to have forgotten she was a soldier, like them, and out of boredom she trod up to the summit of the slope beyond to take in the

view. It fell to a smooth hollow that was entirely surrounded by sharp, pointed mountains. Not a good place to be trapped. The air stirred beside her. “Does it have a name?” she asked.

“The map says it is The Crater of Souls,” Morghiad replied.

“That is an ominous name. The place makes me feel... uneasy.” Artemi cuddled against him.

He ran his hands over her hair and cupped her face, raising her chin so that their eyes met. “*You* have nothing to fear from it. Let’s go back to our tent, my lady.” Morghiad had always insisted on setting up his own tent, and this time Artemi insisted on helping him. At least her captain would allow her to do some work!

They climbed inside once done, and warmed themselves with a mid-air ball of Blaze. It wouldn’t be long before he convened a meeting, and she made the most of her private time with him by removing all her clothing. She had to change into her Cadran uniform, of course, but she enjoyed putting a smile on his face with her escapades. Every time she put on a new item of clothing, he would interrupt by wrestling her to the floor and covering her bare skin in kisses. The ground beneath the base mats was quite disturbed by the time they had finished, and both parties had flushed cheeks.

The meeting eventually convened in their tent, where battle plans were hatched and details meted out. Silar gave her his usual attentions, but was warm towards Morghiad. It was good that their friendship had endured. She wanted to know that Morghiad would have someone to lean on if anything happened to her.

Rahake was another man full of smiles. Apparently he was sharing his tent with some blue-eyed recruit, and it was a pleasure to see him overflowing with happiness amidst such seriousness.

Artemi offered her thoughts on some of their war plans, for what it was worth. She hardly had training in this sort of thing, though by the way some of them reacted, she was a blazed expert. Worse, throughout the entire meeting, the lieutenants and even the bloody kanaala kept talking about “the queen” and “The Lady Artemi,” but Morghiad simply let it go. How was she to stop this ridiculousness if he wouldn’t support her?

She was relieved when the meeting was over, leaving her alone with her kahr. Artemi curled up under the thick woollen blankets and waited for her lover to join her, but must have fallen asleep before he did so. When she opened her eyes again, it was daytime and she was alone. Discovering she was still dressed, she strode straight out of the tent.

There was something odd about the world outside. Something felt... unsteady. The ground seemed weak with every one of her footfalls, and before she knew what was happening, a black-swathed army poured over the hill from The Crater of Souls. They cascaded down the hillside, chopping Calidellian soldiers down in tens.

This was wrong - it all felt so horribly wrong! She glanced about, but could not see Morghiad anywhere.

Artemi did what she was not supposed to do. She reached deep inside herself for The Blazes. They were so close to her reach now, and if she could just break through and touch the fire, she could use it to stop the army. A solid wall came crashing down in her head - it blocked her from the Energy, and she hammered against it as hard as she could, but her efforts were in vain.

And so she took up her sword to fight the darkened army. Artemi whirled her blade around as fast as she could, swiping body after body out of the way. Men fell, but more men seemed to spring up to replace them.

Artemi fought on, her uniform becoming soaked in her own blood as more men cut her. She was being overwhelmed and would die soon - she knew it!

Knocked by a rogue blade, she fell to the bloodied snow as another man dived in to kill her. She closed her eyes in anticipation of the end, but it didn't come. When she opened them again, the men were running from her, or rather, they were running toward someone else. Artemi climbed back to her feet, and saw it was Morghiad.

They were going after him, but her feet would not move to pursue. Powerless, she watched as they piled on him, pulling him to the ground as they had done to her. She cried out to him to fight back, but the blackened soldiers took his body up and ran with it. Artemi screamed after him.

Why couldn't she move?

She wept as they sprinted back over the rise with her lover, and screamed again as all of them were swept up in a black, swirling cloud. Why had they left her? Why could she not die with him? She collapsed into a wailing heap in the snow.

Footfalls brought her attention from the ground, and when she lifted her chin, she saw it was her father. She tried to get up to embrace him, but could not move. "What has happened, father?"

He studied her for a moment. There was a strange light in his eyes. "The captain has been taken."

She breathed through her tears and looked at him closely. "You are not my father. Who are you? What have you done to my father? Where have they taken Morghiad? Is he still alive?"

The man in her father's body knelt down in front of her. "I am who you need me to be. And yes, Morghiad is still alive. But you don't have much time."

"Where is he?"

He brushed the hair from her eyes. "You will know. But you must employ swiftness to save him." He stood and walked off into the snow. "The flower holds the key!" he shouted in the distance.

"Wait!" she called after him, but he did not respond. She clenched her eyes shut, and then opened them again.

Morghiad was looking at her worriedly in the firelight. Her whole body was covered in sweat, and she was out of breath. But he was well, and there, and alive. "I was dreaming," she said, swallowing.

Morghiad shook his head. "That was more than a dream, Artemi. You practically blew this place apart with your attempts to reach for The Blazes. I had to dam up everything in there to stop you, and nothing would wake you. What did you see?"

She sat up amidst the blankets. All her clothes had been removed, though she could not recall it happening. "I saw them take you."

Morghiad wrapped his arms tightly around her. "Who took me?"

"The army we're chasing. The one we're supposed to find. There were many thousands of them. They poured from the crater, cut through our soldiers and then they took you." She felt tears pressing to escape.

"I am here now, Artemi. And I have no intention of going anywhere." He brushed her cheek and kissed her deeply, sending flames rocketing through her body. She pulled him as close as she could, and reached into the burning fires. He allowed her to take The Blazes through him, and she drew upon it heavily. Distantly, she felt him form something from it, but it felt so intense.. and being a part of him was... other-worldly.

She wanted more of it.

As if he could read her thoughts, he tore away the sheet that separated them and pressed his body tightly against hers. Artemi almost cried out at the sensation of all the contact, all the fire that ripped into her body from his skin.

He moved to kiss her neck and she writhed against him, clamping his body to hers with her legs. Artemi rolled him onto his back and held him to the ground with her hips. She could feel that he was desperate for her, that he had to enter her now. She pushed herself onto him, hard.

Morghiad kissed her lips as she did so, and gripped her at her hips. He pulled her ever closer, pressing himself deeper inside her. It happened slowly, but they did not stop or fight it. At last, they were locked together, and there was no going back. In that moment, Artemi fires fought themselves free of her grasp.

Some of it flowed into him, through him, and she could feel everything he felt - the softness of her skin against his, and the lightness of her form by comparison. She breathed through the pure pleasure of the sensation, and their bodies began to rock. She was not sure how many levels they worked through, but with each one, she found herself screaming at the growing fires that engulfed them.

She could not release herself from him, and struggling only produced more hunger in them both. By the end, Artemi could barely move against him. Every twitch of her hips produced pleasure so intense that she could not bear it. Or he could not bear it. The end was close now. Morghiad held every drop of Blaze Energy he was capable of holding, and soon she would kill him with more of it.

Artemi kissed him gently and pulled what she felt to be his very essence into her. She wrapped herself around every sensation that was his and every emotion that poured from him. When she had savoured it all, she pressed her body more tightly against him - gently at first, but then harder.

Brilliant white light enveloped them both in purest ecstasy. It was blinding, searing light. It was death, she knew. They had to be dead, and her last thought was a lament for the loss of the man she loved.



The camp fire spat and jumped about on top of the damp wood that somehow fuelled it. Passerid was poking it absent-mindedly with his short-sword, but clearly his thoughts were elsewhere. To the right of him sat one of the newer soldiers, as young as Artemi and seemingly with half the maturity. But then, she did have the advantage of being vanha-sielu.

On the young soldier's right was a well-worn sergeant, known as Garadin.

Silar gnawed off another lump of snow rabbit. It was chewy and unsatisfying, but he was glad because Morghiad made Artemi happy. That was all he had wanted. Well, that and the promise of her safety. But it had been pleasant to see her smiling away during the meeting, or at least smiling in between the glowers she'd thrown every time anyone called her a queen.

It had started off as a bit of a joke amongst the men when Morghiad had first taken her as his benay-gosa, but gradually they had come to believe in her as their queen. And the title was finally sealed in stone the minute Morghiad admitted he was head-in-the-milk-bucket in love with the woman. For all her complaints at being called queen, it tickled Silar that she failed to see how her presence had galvanised the army. And the relationship had made a stronger man of Morghiad, too. Now they really had something to fight for.

What a joke it had all been to the men, and how serious it was now.

This particular mission had been set when a rogue army raided two cities in southern Calidell and twelve on the borders of Kemen. The Kemeni royal family had pleaded with King Acher for help, but he had offered nothing and said nothing to Morghiad of it. Fortunately enough, Silar's growing network of sources had intercepted some of the missives, and he was able to get the message to his captain.

The army had voted unanimously to aid the Kemenis, even though the countries typically had little love lost for each other. No one knew much about the army they were

chasing, and meditation revealed less. Some of his sources had indicated that it was made of disgruntled mercenaries - others that a rebel leader had established it in a lair, hidden in these mountains.

The descriptions given of the mystery soldiers gave Silar cause for concern though. Words like “blackened”, “twisted” and “dead” seemed to crop up often, and reminded him of eisiels. You couldn’t have a whole army of eisiels, surely? If only Artemi could remember her past battles, she’d be a goldmine of information on these sorts of things.

Passerid dropped his sword into the flames suddenly, his eyes widened, and focussed in the near distance. “Bloody fire and Achellon!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” Silar clutched his sword hilt and looked around the camp. All seemed calm enough.

Passerid’s eyes shrank back to their normal size, but his face went pink. “Ah... you don’t want to know.” He pulled out his other sword and used it to fish out the now very hot one from the fire. Then he huddled uncomfortably in his cloak.

Silar relaxed again. Must have been some sort of kanaala thing. They could be a jumpy lot sometimes.

He went back to chewing the tough rabbit meat and thought deeply about the rogue army. There had been no reports that they had a wielder, but one could never be sure. If there were eisiels in it, then a wielder might be behind its creation. That was a nasty thought!

With any luck, Artemi would be strong enough to blast them all into oblivion. His thoughts were interrupted again by running feet. What was it now?

Beodrin and Jarynd came hurtling into the group. “Did you *feel* that?” Jarynd demanded of Passerid. He grunted in the affirmative, and Jarynd blew for a moment. “Well don’t you think we should find out what’s bloody well going on?”

Passerid grimaced. “Definitely not. It’s their business and I have no wish to see it.”

Silar frowned, and then realisation began to dawn on him.

Jarynd was practically hopping up and down. “Every kanaala and wielder within a thousand miles of this place will have felt that!”

Silar caught his arm. “Er... Jar, I think what he’s trying to say is...” he cleared his throat. “You should leave them to it.”

“And what would you know? Their tent is almost on...” His voice trailed off as the coin chimed. His face coloured, he hunkered down next to Passerid, and assumed the same uncomfortable scowl. Beodrin raised his eyebrows at his friends’ behaviour, then said, “I’ll go and see that the other kanaala... understand what’s going on.” He turned to go back to his section of the camp.

“He could have set up a partition first,” Jarynd muttered quietly.

Garadin looked around at the men with his ancient, knowing eyes and a grin. He had seen more battles even than Jarynd, and probably more lovers, too. It was strange that

he had fought in King Acher's name for years, and had been part of some of the greatest victories, yet his loyalty had been so completely and smoothly assumed by Acher's son.

Silar did not believe that the world had simply tired of King Acher, rather that Morghiad's desire to do the right thing had revealed all the faults in his father. Acher of House Sete'an was not a good king. Many of the men had awoken to this fact in recent months. But Morghiad would never allow them to depose his father, and Silar increasingly worried that his men might find ways of getting someone to do it for him. He cast his mind to Morghiad and Artemi.

He did not particularly want the image of them together in his mind, but he hoped the man was treating her like the queen she was. If she didn't emerge tomorrow with a great big grin on her face, there would be trouble for the young captain.



The first sensation Artemi felt was cold: biting, freezing, unemotional cold. The second sensation, oddly, was warmth. She snapped her eyes open, and blinked in the harsh light. It took a few seconds before she could see anything, but slowly shapes came into view. She recognised a pillow on the floor of the tent, and then a discarded blanket in the corner. Items lay strewn around as if a wild tempest had blown through their accommodation.

Artemi closed her eyes as she thought about what lay beneath her. She couldn't bring herself to look, and yet she could not stop her eyes from opening and focussing on him anyway. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, his beautiful face was devoid of expression. His body was still warm beneath her. *Fires, what had she done?*

She fought back the tears and shook him. "Morghiad?" She whispered at first. "Wake up! Morghiad!"

He did not stir. *Then* her tears came in force.

"Morghiad! Please! Wake up, you blazed son of a whore!" He remained lifeless. *Light of Achellon, what had she done?* Artemi reached out to him through the fiery connection of their skin. That she could feel it all could mean that he was still alive - that there was hope. She delved into his consciousness, and found... nothing. Emptiness.

Artemi wept quietly in anguish. She stroked his thick, black hair and kissed his lips. No one could have made her relinquish his body at that moment.

She laid her head on his chest and felt the anger build up inside her - anger at herself, and anger at him for loving her. Artemi reached for The Blazes again, now so close

to being able to wield the fires for herself... so close. Her anger helped her surge towards it, and it felt as if it was working.

Soon she could wrap herself in the flames and burn this whole place to ashes! Her grief would be consumed by the awesome power of it, and she would be razed to nothing but dust. Artemi would never have to feel again. She reached for a third time - *almost there*.

Artemi extended her mind for one last push, but then she faltered. Out of place emotions began to erode at her anger. She battled them, but they were impervious to her strikes. She felt... contentment and desire and... *love*. A deep torrent of love! It did not make any sense.

Her anger turned to confusion, and she was left helpless as The Blazes spun away from her. It made no sense!

A hand came to rest on her hair. She raised her head with what little strength remained in her, and from beneath her, Morghiad studied her with his brilliant, grass-green eyes.

Artemi ran her fingers over his face, checking that it responded to her touch. And it did so with smiles.

“Artemi,” he chided.

“You’re alive.”

He grinned. “So I am.” He didn’t sound that surprised, though he should have been.

She realised with a start that those had been *his* emotions in *her* head. Artemi was experiencing everything he felt. He reached to pull a fur blanket over the top of them, and she could sense the softness of it between his fingers. She even knew the weight of the blanket as he had experienced it, though it presented itself as a stream in her mind.

“You should have told me you were cold,” he said.

Artemi knew it was normal to share sensations during love making, but this was something altogether different. And, though still tightly intertwined, they weren’t currently making love... “Morghiad?”

“Hmm?” Warmth drifted through his emotions.

“Can you feel -”

“Everything you do, yes.” He squeezed her to check. The sensation echoed between them.

Whatever had resulted from the previous night had linked them inextricably. Morghiad seemed to accept it as if it had been completely normal, as if it was to be expected. He sensed her confusion, and answered it before she put it into words.

“I don’t exactly know what you did, Artemi, but just as I thought I was going to be burned away to dust you... tied me to you somehow.” He smiled at her and twisted a strand

of her hair round his fingers. She felt it buzzing against his touch. He continued, "I always knew I could trust you with my life."

Artemi felt a burst of desire to sleep with him again, though she wasn't sure quite from whom it had originated. "We have work to do and it is already late," he warned her. Artemi smiled at the curiousness of their situation, and at her relief that everything would be well. It took some effort to relinquish her grip on him, and by the fires, she would have been more than happy to lie there all day.

But, eventually, they parted to locate some clothing. Even with their bodies isolated, she could feel all of his emotions and all of his corporeal sensations coursing like a river, and they interweaved with her own. She wondered how long it would be before she couldn't tell whose sensation belonged to whom, or if that truly mattered.

Well, this was wonderful for kissing and lying together and eating good food, but what about the less pleasant business? Evidently Morghiad had just had the same thought. He looked at her with some embarrassment.

"I suppose it's just something we have to get used to. Perhaps there is a way of... blocking it?" she said.

He had a particular talent for working out how to do new things with The Blazes, so perhaps he could find a way to section off their minds when required. Morghiad responded with deep thought on his face and in his mind, and then he met eyes with her. "Try focussing on the centre of your being, just you alone."

She did so, not really quite knowing what he meant. Suddenly, all of his emotions faded from a river to the tiniest trickle of water. It worked, after a fashion. She didn't like the sensation, and brought the comfort of them back. "Well I suppose that'll do," she smiled at him.

A realisation dawned on her. "Oh, no. Oh blazes, no!" She closed her eyes.

Worry emanated from him. "What's wrong?"

She kept to a hushed whisper. "Last night. The entire camp will have heard us!"

Morghiad laughed warmly. "It's alright. That is what sound walls are for."

Artemi walked over to him to touch his skin, and assessed the sides of the tent. They glittered with the pulse and forms of several barriers. None of them was a partition, however.

"I didn't have enough time to do that one," he grinned. He leaned down to kiss her on the neck, and helped her buckle up the green-striped bodice of her uniform.

Artemi scraped her hair into an almost presentable braid and stepped out of the tent. A large number of eyes turned to look at her, and she could feel her cheeks reddening slowly. Had that sound wall truly worked?

She sensed Morghiad stepping out behind her, and feeling similarly self-conscious. Some of the men went back to whatever tasks they had in hand once they had assessed the pair, but Silar strode out of the crowd and studied them intently. "Hah. What time do you

call this? We have to pack up in a minute.” He handed Morghiad some papers, gave Artemi a final head-to-toe appraisal and stalked off again.

Beodrin met with them looking somewhat weary. “Good morning, both of you. I believe it is still morning.” He looked up at the sky. “Now, all the men are set to go as you requested, kahr-captain. We managed to organise that much in your absence. Once the last of the tents are packed up we’ll be off.”

“Thank you, Beodrin,” Morghiad said.

The lieutenant continued. “And Artemi, I’ll be needing you to fall in. If you would come with me, my queen?”

Her initial excitement was quelled by her annoyance at the title, and then further confused by Morghiad’s surprise at her reaction. “Yes, Lieutenant Beodrin,” she answered. Momentarily she clasped Morghiad’s hand, turned, and then left to fall in behind Beodrin. She could feel her captain growing more distant behind her, and she could sense that he was watching her, or rather, leering at her. She turned her head to examine his expression. It *looked* like an innocent stare, but those were definitely leering thoughts.



Morghiad watched his queen blend into the melee of his army. He still didn’t feel as if he owned her, nor that he ever could, but sleeping with her had brought him a level of peace and contentment he could not fathom. He felt... *stronger* with his new connection to her and, better still, with her flame burning in his mind, he would always know if she was safe. The pressing matter of his duties broke his thoughts.

He returned to the inside of the tent to pack up some items and collect the necessary maps. When he left, he ordered a small group of soldiers to dismantle it. He would have done it himself, only his late rising had put him behind in his duties.

Morghiad set about drawing together a small team of scouts. These were the best runners and trackers in the Calidellian army, capable of stalking their prey for miles in rough terrain. He commanded them to ride for the end of the pass. With any luck, they’d soon find traces of the rogue army, and report back important information. Morghiad was not far behind it now.

He hurried to the horse enclosure to fetch Tyshar, barking a few orders along the way. Most of his men knew what they were doing, but it could not hurt to chivvy them along a bit. Tyshar was in a corner on his own, as usual, probably having kicked at the other horses. *Perhaps he needed to find himself a nice mare*, Morghiad chortled to himself.

He tacked up the horse and vaulted onto his back, before trotting him out of the churned snow paddock. A dark-haired woman came running over to him, and several heartbeats passed before he recognised it was Lady Aval di Certa. What was *she* doing here?

“Yes?”

She hesitated at his harsh tone. “If you please, kahr-captain, I wish to ride with you until you go to battle.”

What was this woman drinking? “You may not. Go back to the caravan where you belong.”

Aval looked indignant with her hands upon her hips. “But you take your benay-gosa into battle. Isn’t that obscene? If she can go then I should too.”

This was just what he needed - a nosy noblewoman who followed Artemi’s every movement. How to cover this one up? Vague, he’d have to be very vague. “Artemi will be kept safe. And if I see you near any of my lines I will have you forcibly removed, and sent back to wherever you came from!”

He turned Tyshar away from her and galloped back to the throng of army uniforms.

It wasn’t long before the column began moving again. Morghiad felt alone without his Artemi riding beside him, though he could sense that she was some way back in the line, feeling embarrassed about something. Probably the men were teasing her, as they liked to do, though he hoped it was not about last night. After all, many of the soldiers enjoyed the company of their wives on these outings, and that was why they brought them.

Snow began to fall heavily from the low clouds, obscuring the view of the pass ahead. This was a dangerous situation for an army not used to such conditions, for if the rogues were based up here, they would know how to use it better than he. Morghiad did not want to be surprised by them. Oh no, he wanted that element for himself, and he would have to cheat. He turned his head to the two cloaked and hooded men riding behind him.

“Ride to Beodrin and tell him to get this cleared two miles ahead of us.” One of the men nodded and galloped back in haste.

The sensation of Blaze Energy filtered through him from Artemi and, simultaneously, he felt it burst out behind him. Before him, the snow parted as if it were a giant frosted veil moved aside by some unseen hand. Tyshar’s ears pricked forward. There was no doubt the animal could sense it, perhaps he could see it.

They pressed through cleared lands, deeper into the pass. Within six miles, they would come across numerous markings on the map which no one could quite understand. Various theories had included castles, wells or volcanoes. Morghiad was inclined to think it was whatever they’d least like it to be: caverns. Everyone had been trained for fighting in confined spaces, but it was still the nastiest situation to be caught in. And if the rogue army

had a wielder with them, his army would be trapped like rats in a hole. Artemi had come to him at a very opportune time.

Four riders came into view ahead - the scouts.

Morghiad rode forward to meet them. "What news?"

The men looked between each other nervously, and the blond one spoke first. "We found their tracks, kahr-captain. The army is big. Possibly bigger than we are."

"I don't need analysis. Give me numbers," Morghiad growled.

The short, square tracker spoke next. "We think maybe fifteen-thousand, my captain."

Morghiad clenched his jaw tightly. He should have gathered reinforcements, contrary to his father's wishes. But a big army was not nearly so manoeuvrable or so fast, and they would never have caught up to the rogue soldiers with swollen ranks. Professionals were so much better against mercenaries, besides... assuming that's what these men were.

No, Morghiad had brought them this far and now he had to push on. He knew though, in order to limit unnecessary casualties, avoiding any engagement altogether might be the better option when it came to it. "Right. What else have you learned about them?"

The blond man looked nervous. "These men have... disappeared."

Morghiad blinked. "How?"

"We followed their tracks to the edge of a cliff. They simply ended there. No bodies at the bottom." The tracker's horse twitched, sensing his rider's unease.

He thought for a moment. "Did you check the cliff face for caves or openings, hidden trails?"

"Of course, kahr-captain. We couldn't see anything. We've left the other four there, searching for more clues."

That was a curious mystery, but no army could simply disappear, and certainly not one made up of fifteen-thousand men! He needed to be cautious.

"Fall in, men. Tell what you know to the lieutenants, but don't start a panic." He turned to the soldiers behind. "Halladin! Go and tell the wagons to stop here. They must travel no farther into the pass." Morghiad had a very bad feeling about the storm he was leading his men into.

They reached the cliff on a double-quick march once the wagons had been dispensed with, and Morghiad had the men stop quarter of a mile from the edge, so that they didn't end up in some sort of horrid massacre. Artemi was somewhere in line in Beodrin's battalion, but he could feel through her fire that she was desperate to leave it and join him. She would have to stay there though. He wasn't about to risk her in an area where an army had gone missing without explanation.

Further, the other four scouts hadn't ridden back to meet them, which was concerning. Morghiad gathered Silar, Jarynd and Hunsar together to survey the cliff. They galloped up to the edge and inspected the trails that led over it. Hundreds of footfalls were evident in the snow, and some of them had belonged to horses.

There were even tracks of wheeled vehicles, or possibly chariots. All simply terminated at the edge of the cliff, and there was no sign of the four missing scouts. Morghiad took a handful of snow, and threw it over the precipice. It fell, quite as it should have done, straight to the bottom. "Feel anything odd, Jarynd?"

Jarynd shook his head, but there was no sign of Blaze having been used here. The amount needed to hide an army would have left some sort of detectable mark.

Artemi tugged at him in his mind, her flame burning ferociously. *No, he wasn't going to bring her out here.* Would there always be a mental battle of wills like this?

Morghiad examined the view from the cliff again. He could see for miles across the Kemeni peaks, probably to the city of Tordhani on a clear day.

He kicked at the snow in frustration and re-mounted Tyshar. "Let's go back, lads. This may be a case of waiting." The four of them ambled to the lines, deep in thought. Morghiad tried to think through every myth and tale he had read that involved missing armies, and recalled that some spoke of castles hidden in Blaze Energy, one had described cloud of stones, and another mentioned animal disguises and moving trees.

But none had talked of cliffs!

The soldiers were gossiping away furiously when he returned, and news had spread quickly about the mystery. By now, Artemi was hammering at him for attention. Morghiad had no choice but to search her out, and there was time to kill, in any case. He followed the heat of her fires to her position, deep inside the ranks with Beodrin. Her dark eyes had lost their usual warmth, and glittered wildly at him.

He could not help but lose his train of thought, and appreciate how excellent she looked in black and green. Though he had not come to moon over her, it was difficult to do anything else.

"Use me to explore the geology," she demanded before he could speak.

The men around seemed to accept her tone to him as normal. Perhaps that was an allowance they made for *the queen*. If anyone else had spoken to him like that, they'd be in some serious trouble. Evidently Artemi had detected his annoyance at her address, as he felt a pang of guilt from her. But she suppressed it quickly, and then all he could sense from her was the warmth of her love.

"Give me your hand," he said. It couldn't hurt to have a look, surely.

Morghiad had come to accept that he had indeed become addicted to handling Blaze Energy from her. He had never felt so alive as when the fire of it tore down his arms and through his torso. It was part of the fury that had made their love making so...

rapturous, and it ripped into him now, pulling at the fibres of his being, trying to burn him from the surface of the world.

He closed his eyes to sense the world around him. He could feel the condensation of the horse's breaths on the air, the stamping of thousands of hooves and feet upon the ground, the soft touch of snowflakes as they teased the earth. Morghiad reached further down into the rock. He found a sort of fault line that ran parallel with the cliff in front of them. It ran vertically through the stone, and so Morghiad looked deeper still. The entire, hole-filled cliff was sitting on something. It was...

"A pillow of water," Artemi said.

Morghiad opened his eyes and nodded, releasing her hand. "Thank you, my heart."

He turned his horse and rode it back to the front of the lines. "Broad reach, men!" he ordered. This was utterly crazy, but if a bigger army had survived it, so could his.

The hooded and cloaked soldiers arranged themselves into lines only a few men deep, but many men wide. "Forward, one-hundred paces, double-time!" His voice echoed between the peaks.

The entire Calidellian army marched forward at some speed over the fault line. As they did so, Morghiad began to feel the earth tremble. "Faster!" he yelled. More soldiers sprinted onto the vast block of stone, causing it to undulate.

He sighed with relief when they'd all made it over the fault line, though the ground continued its gentle earthquake for a handful of breaths after they'd all crossed and then, slowly, it began to sink. The entire cliff, with soldiers on top, descended below the floor of the pass, drawing down small avalanches of snow at the edges. Vast walls of rock rose above them until they were level with what had been the cliff bottom, and then even that rose above them. They descended into the bowels of the Kemeni Mountains themselves.

Morghiad ordered the men to have swords at the ready as they dropped. It was fortunate that they heard him over the noise of scraping boulders. Whoever that rogue army was, they would be waiting to trap him when they hit the bottom... assuming there was a bottom. Artemi's flame kicked and jumped from the exhilaration she was experiencing, fires, that girl did seem to find thrills from of the strangest things!

Eventually the descent slowed and a vast, fire-lit cavern came into view. *Blazes, why couldn't this have been a nice tunnel to the outside world instead of a channel into the depths of hellish oblivion?*

But what was curious was that no enemy awaited him there. *Where were they all?*

When the floating stone halted, he ordered the men to offload sharply, which they did with appreciable smoothness. Once empty, the great cliff rose behind them slowly again.

Morghiad took in the new surroundings as quickly as he could. The cavern split into two branches ahead of him. The entire thing had been hewn by hand many centuries ago by the look of it, and drawings of hunters and rulers the height of twenty men adorned the walls in a style he wasn't familiar with. It certainly wasn't Kemeni.

Sadly, none of the murals or numerous scratchings on the floor looked like a map. This was a time when he could really do with the knowledge of a hero of legend.

Someone had been down here recently enough to light the lamps, and so he had to assume they knew he was here now. If they hadn't come for him here, it meant they must have a better trap for him elsewhere. Blazes, how he hated caves!

He wanted to keep Artemi a secret for now, so it was best he avoided using her for sensing what lay ahead until he became desperate. They might not feel her, but with all these hidden niches they could still see her. The cliff had stopped moving behind them, and the lack of movement brought about a deathly silence.

"Alright men. Luna's battalion with me. Rest of you stay here for now." Over nine hundred men surged behind him in a flurry of black and green, and he moved toward the left exit of the cavern to sniff at the air. Having spent years living in that twisted warren of a castle, he knew the smell of old cavern air against new.

The left exit smelled ancient, older even than anything at Cadra.

"Round to the right, men," Morghiad ordered. The band trotted into the right exit, which smelled much fresher. They came through to another open cavern, where a narrow bore at the top let in a thin bar of light. "Just like home," he whispered. The sound echoed around the stone walls. "Sorwyn and Talonfor, fetch the rest of the men. We may have to do this in steps." They nodded and vanished back into the blackness of the tunnel.

The army progressed cautiously through the network of caverns, Morghiad choosing an uphill route where he could. They passed through chambers that could variously be described as meeting rooms, theatres and practice halls.

Every one was empty, and this only served to make his muscles tighten. He feared that, through a lack of knowledge of the caves, the enemy might find a way round to the back of his men and take them unawares. To combat this, he placed the weaker soldiers in the middle, and his best men at both ends. Much to her disapproval, he put Artemi in the middle too.

He rode to the entrance of yet another wide tunnel, and could smell dampness through this one - lots of water. He motioned for the men behind him to be quiet, and they were excellent at that. Morghiad *was* very proud of his army, and he was doubly proud of the speed at which they'd dispensed with pinh-covered blades in favour of poison-free ones.

At first he and the lieutenants had led by example, but then, more and more men had imitated them. Soon, he hoped, it would be a practice that was looked-down upon.

His thoughts were broken when he sensed a great deal of tension rising in Artemi while he moved forward. He took her emotions as a caution - if the legends about her were right, her instincts were usually reliable.

He trotted to the end of the tunnel where there was light, and it *was* a great deal of fire light. Then he saw faces in row upon row, several-hundred yards away. An entire army poised to cut him to pieces! *And he had nowhere to run.*

“Forward, men. Narrow round!” he shouted at them. The rogue army ahead surged forward to meet him, and he drew his sword with a roar. He had to get his men as far in as possible to give them the best chance. As he drew close to the enemy, he noted their faces has been daubed in black mud, presumably from the caves.

Tyshar dashed through the shallow stream of water that lay on the cave floor, and behind the blackened army, he could see a castle of red stone. It was a fortress within a cave.

His sword slashed through the first three soldiers he met in a single swipe. They had placed their worst fighters at the front, leaving their best to meet his men once they had grown tired.

Morghiad cut down soldier after soldier, the motion becoming so repetitive that he lost all sense of time. His Calidellian army fought with superior skill to those first soldiers, and made good progress through them. Distantly, he could sense that Artemi was fighting hard as well, and sweat had broken out upon her brow. She would have enough skill to be safe for now.

A tall, muscled giant with ancient eyes came to face him, and Morghiad knew better than to underestimate him. He flew at the man with all speed and strength, but his foe reacted with lightning rapidity, evaded his strike and slashed Tyshar’s girths. The horse screamed, knocking soldiers down left and right with kicking hooves.

Morghiad was forced to jump to the ground and face his enemy there. He sliced the other man’s girths in a similar fashion, dodging his blows as they came down. His opponent must have been a full seven feet tall, for even Morghiad found himself looking up at him when he finally stood upon the earth.

Morghiad clenched his teeth, and drew his second sword. He sensed another soldier running to attack from behind, and swung his blade back to catch him in the head. A soft, wet *thunk* accompanied the strike. Morghiad withdrew the blade, and swung it counter to his other sword. The cross motion caught the giant in the stomach, spraying blood in a scarlet fan about them both.

Morghiad pressed forward with another swipe, but the giant countered. He met every one of Morghiad’s subsequent strikes, and Morghiad began to wonder if he had come up against another Kusuru Assassin. That was until he made a fast slice at his enemy’s left arm. It cut clean through, and sent the limb flying through the air.

The giant fought on, but Morghiad made multiple disabling slashes until his opponent fell. Morghiad stood above him to wield the final blow, and knew he would be merciful in his speed. This man deserved as much.

“Little Kahr Morghiad,” the man whispered with a smile.

Morghiad hesitated. "You know me?"

"You're just like your father. Mother's eyes... but you look like him."

Morghiad frowned. These were mind tricks. "I look nothing like him." He raised his sword.

But the giant kept talking. "Nonsense. Same build, same grit. I'd know the son of Hedinar Kantari anywhere. Thought you were dead."

Morghiad lowered his sword, but was forced to swing it as another soldier came for him. He beheaded his attacker with a single blow, and looked back at his defeated opponent. "You are a prisoner of our army." He pulled a nearby soldier out of combat and swiftly dispatched his opponent for him. "Take this rebel here prisoner. See that he is well tied-up."

"Yes, kahr-captain." The soldier dragged what was left of the giant back toward the tunnel entrance.

He sought his horse and found him after cutting through a swathe of black-painted soldiers. Tyshar was too panicked to be ridden, so Morghiad sent him to the rim of the cavern with a slap on the hind quarters. He sensed Artemi was still cutting through bodies at speed, and she still had enough energy to fight on. His army were making excellent progress through the rogues, which meant they had to capitulate soon.

He chopped down more attackers and moved forward to the red fortress, but before he reached it, a woman's scream rang out across the cavern. Morghiad's first thought was Artemi, but her fires did not tally with the noise. The other men looked around in confusion as they battled. Then his eyes fell on the source.

A Calidellian soldier lay upon the ground. The soldier's sword had been cast aside by their opponent and her brown, chestnut hair fanned out from under the hood. Aval. How had she-? There was no time to speculate. He ran at her assailant and swung at him with his blade. The man jumped rapidly to avoid the strike and countered, but Morghiad defeated him in three moves and kicked his lifeless body to the floor.

He helped Lady di Certa up roughly. "What are you doing here?"

She blinked at him. "I know my way around a sword, kahr-captain. I wanted to help."

"You've put your life and the lives of everyone else at risk by coming here. Get out of my battle!" He pushed her away, and felt something cold press into his ribs from behind. Aval's eyes bulged.

He felt Artemi's heart skip a beat. Had she been injured? He looked down, only to find the tip of a blade jutting from his chest. Thank Achellon it wasn't her!

Morghiad turned and fought his attacker, but more men piled in to fight him. He could not breathe, but he continued to swing his sword at them as fast as he could manage. The world turned to shades of grey as he spun, and then the noises faded to silence. All he could see were moving shapes. His legs gave up on him, and Morghiad hit the ground.



Artemi felt every inch of steel as it penetrated his heart. She was powerless to help him as a crowd of rogue soldiers had surrounded her and were doing their best to keep her occupied. She had lost count as to how many there were, but if she could blast a few of them away with Blaze they wouldn't be a problem. Still, they kept piling in, one after the other.

She hadn't seen Beodrin in an age. Artemi knew there was only one course of action if she was to save her captain, and as she whirled her blade between her attackers, she delved deeply for the Blazes. This time she would have control of them!

Artemi channelled all of her anger, all of her desperation and all of her love into building a bridge to the torrent of Blaze Energy that hid behind the veil. She felt something give, and Blaze poured into her like a river released from a dam. The awesome power enveloped her, and she began to form a complex shape from it, all the while slashing her blade at her opponents. It felt so good to wield!

Fire shot out from her body in every direction, incinerating the crowd of men around her. Their burned corpses fell to the floor in a puff of smoke and crackling ash. The rogue soldiers saw her step out from the smoking debris and, in tens, turned and fled to the catacombs that led from the chamber. She blasted a few more of them for good measure and then turned her attention to finding her love. He was not there. His river flowed... distantly.

"Artemi! Stop!" Passerid came running towards her. "Stop. You're not ready."

Artemi held onto the Blazes tightly. "They have him."

Passerid skidded to a halt in front of her. "He's still alive?"

She reached out for him. His torrent of emotions had drained to a brook. She nodded. "Yes."

Passerid took her by the arms. "You have to let go of that Energy now, Artemi. You're too young yet. Please, let it go."

She shook her head.

"He wouldn't want you to risk your own sanity. Release it."

She clenched her jaw. They were taking him farther from her with every second that passed. She had to get to him soon and this man – *this thing* - was in her way.

Passerid shook her. "Artemi D'Avrohan, I command you to release the power you hold. That is an order!"

She looked at him, knowing she could crush the man like a fly if she wanted to.

“How will we find the captain if you’ve gone half mad?” he yelled.

“We?” She felt nauseous... and dizzy.

“Yes, you and I and whoever else is needed.”

Artemi gave in and let go. She felt weak, like she had fought a thousand battles in a thousand days. She started to fall to the floor, but Passerid caught her. “It’s alright, my queen,” he said, “We’ll get him back.”

They had to be quick, she thought. *They didn’t have much time.*

When she came round again, they were still in the caverns. A few of the wounded were being tended to against the walls, and Silar was studying her intently.

“Saw you incinerate a few bad guys. That was impressive stuff, girl.” He smiled.

She looked around at the men. “We need to find him. Soon.”

“And we will, Artemi, but we can’t go charging into this maze without a plan. Though,” he laughed. “That’s exactly what we did to get here. We don’t even know how to get out of here yet.” He squeezed her arm affectionately. “And you need to get your strength back, too.”

Artemi tested her arms and legs, and they were perfectly fine. She stood, and Silar rose with her, so that together they walked between the men to a crowd that had gathered in one corner. Silar guarded Artemi as she made her way to the front, where a woman in a Cadran uniform stood. It was Lady di Certa. What, in the blazed fires, was *she* doing here?

The lady continued to speak, “I followed you with my hood raised, no one seemed to notice ...the kahr saved me. I was about to get my head cut off when he stepped in and slew my opponent. But just as he was telling me to go to safety... he -” she broke-off, and swallowed dramatically.

Artemi folded her arms and finished the sentence. “He got stabbed in the heart.” She was doing her best glower at the stupid woman, and hoped it looked suitably intimidating.

Aval turned to face her. “He died saving my life, child!”

“You do not speak to her in that manner here, Aval,” Silar said sternly. A few of the other men nodded.

Aval frowned as if an insect had landed on her pretty nose. “Why is this wi- this woman a professional soldier anyway?”

Artemi could contain her rage no longer, and so she stepped forward, and slapped the woman, hard. “Your *idiocy* has endangered the lives of my brothers and has left my captain perilously close to death! If he dies, I will hold you personally accountable.”

“Kahr-Captain Morghiad is alive?” one of the men asked.

Artemi turned. “Yes.” Why did they seem so surprised? She could sense that the sword had been removed from his torso and that he was healing, but feared what would happen to him next. “We must find him quickly. I can locate him.”

Silar left her side to collect together the men he thought best for the rescue party, and so Artemi was resigned to pacing rapidly among the men.

“Artemi?” A surprised voice stopped her in her tracks.

She looked to its source, and saw a giant of a man, missing an arm and a leg. He was tied up with numerous belts, but his eyes glinted with mirth, and they spoke of many years alive. Scarred Jarynd stood over him as his guard.

“Do you know me?” she asked, confused.

Jarynd shifted his stance.

The captive smiled. “Ah, perhaps I am mistaking you for another red-haired beauty. Forgive me.”

Artemi sat down next to him, and a thought occurred to her. “Could you help these men to find their way out of here?”

He eyed her levelly. “You want me to help the enemy?”

“You seem nice enough.” She gave him her best smile.

He cracked a short laugh. “Ah, you women never change. Perhaps you can enlighten me on something. I saw your little display earlier and was wondering... why would someone with your... *abilities* throw your lot in with an army of Calidell?”

Artemi was happy to answer. “Because I made a promise to them, and because they are good men.”

He frowned at her.

“Why did you throw your lot in with this bunch of cave-dwellers?” she asked.

He thought for a moment. “Because an army of Calidell destroyed my home, my friends and my queen. Which brings me onto another point.” He twitched his stump oddly. “How did Morghiad come to be in your army?”

Artemi was taken aback. Was this some sort of espionage technique? Ask the obvious questions to reveal hidden relationships? Not that there was anything hidden about her and the kahr. She remained as impassive as possible with her answer. “Kahr Morghiad is our captain. His father, the king, appointed him to the role.”

The giant’s face contorted with confusion. Then something fell into place in his mind. “He is King Acher’s son?”

Artemi smiled. “Of course.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“No?”

“That lad was born to House Jade’an. Acher must have stolen him during the battle.” His square face grimaced. “It is the ultimate insult.”

She was not sure if the aged soldier had gone completely mad through his years of battling, or if he truly believed it was the truth. She decided to play along. “What battle?”

“Why, the battle of Gialdin! Good people fell in that battle, lass. Some of the best.” He winked at her. He was almost certainly insane.

Artemi pressed further. “And what relationship was the House of Jade’an to Gialdin?”

He frowned at her. “Don’t you young things read any more? Queen Medea of House Jade’an ruled Gialdin. And your young *kahr* is her son. So you see. Acher took the city, he took the country and he took its only surviving heir.”

That was a very strange story to come up with. Morghiad already stood to inherit the lands of Gialdin upon Acher’s death. That and more. Perhaps this man hoped to create some sort of rift by proclaiming such a thing had happened, and so Artemi decided to be practical. “Well then, if he is your lost heir to Gialdin, why don’t you help get his men out of this hole in the ground?”

“Bloody blazes, Artemi, you always were a rock-in-the-grass when you wanted to be.”

Artemi was sure he was delusional. Jarynd kicked him, and she spied Silar heading toward her.

Silar took a good look at the prisoner and offered him a polite nod. “We’re ready to go, Artemi.”

She rose and said goodbye to the insane giant, and he gave her an overly familiar grin.

It was time to find Morghiad. She followed the course of his stream, and could sense that he was in pain – truly, rather a lot of pain.

“He’s that way.” She pointed to the area at the left of the red castle, and said, “We must hurry.” Artemi ran to the horses they had assembled, and jumped on Glacier’s back. She took Tyshar’s reins in her other hand, and kicked her horse into a trot.

Silar caught up to her, and said, “Artemi, you need to stay in sight of the group. If we lose each other, that’s the end. We’ll all get picked off like ants on a plate before we can find Morghiad.”

She nodded in quiet acquiescence. They should have let her do this alone, and if only she hadn’t bloody fainted!

Ten men followed behind them, including Beodrin, Orwin and Passerid. They passed the red stone structure swiftly, and upon closer inspection discovered it was a ruin, once home to some great king or queen, she thought, but now empty.

Artemi followed the river-borne sensation of her lover’s pain through the twisting tunnels, and as she neared him, it came more sharply into focus. He was being tortured. As far as she could tell, it was something metal being repeatedly stuck into his abdomen, but each time she found herself thinking of it, she would kick her horse into a canter and Silar would have to rein her in.

He was right that they had no idea what lay behind each corner, but she was so desperate to get to Morghiad, to stop his pain, and wreak some revenge on his captors.

They encountered a few scattered, rogue soldiers on their route, but most cowered at the sight of her or ran screaming. Artemi was quite satisfied with that, though the sensations of Morghiad's agony intensified as she neared him. It was almost unbearable, forcing her to double-over as his torrent of sensations surged through her own.

Silar came to fuss at her and ask if she wanted to go on, as if she would leave! But they pushed on at a fast trot, and his captors would know of her wrath soon enough.

The caves wound deeper into the ground and narrowed until they could only go in single-file, and they hit a dead end. They were close, but she could feel him only a few tens of yards away, now being whipped ferociously.

Artemi gazed around the dark chamber, and saw that a slit of light poured in through a hole, high in the wall. "Can one of you hitch me up there?" she asked.

Silar was the tallest, and probably wouldn't have let anyone else touch her, in any case. He stood on the back of his horse and boosted her up the wall.

Artemi gazed through the fissure, and observed fifty men who stood in a circle. They were watching a red, heaving mass in the middle. A stout man paced around the mass with some sort of stick and when he slammed it down in the red lump, Artemi felt another shot of agony. It was Morghiad, covered in blood - huge amounts of blood.

Surely more than anyone could have inside them!

His torturer was shouting something about gold stores, and so she tried to reach for Blaze Energy again, but nothing came. Her head pounded, and Artemi dropped down from her spy hole, unable to watch any more.

"We need to get into that room. There is an entrance somewhere to the left of us. There are about fifty men in there. Passerid and Beodrin, can you both take my power at once?"

The two men looked between each other, dumbfounded. Passerid began, "I've heard of it but I've no idea how safe -"

"Then we'll do it. It's a tight room, full of pillars and I need you both firing balls of flame at them independently."

They nodded in agreement, and filed out of the dark room. It wasn't long before they found the entrance to the chamber Artemi had spied, and the twelve of them charged in with swords brandished. The two kanaala took a hand each of Artemi's, but to say that the sensation of being held by them both was akin to being torn apart was an understatement. It was as if the two men fought over Blaze Energy inside her head, finding ways of ripping every little part of her in two. But the result was effective. They blasted the rogue soldiers away faster than the black-painted men knew what was happening. At the end, only the torturer was left and Artemi saved him for herself.

She leapt from Glacier, drew her sword and thrust it into the man's gut. It cut upwards, through his chest, until its route became obstructed by bone. She lifted him from the ground, let him hang there screaming for a while, and then threw him to the floor. If

Morghiad had not been so ill, she would have spent longer taking her revenge, but instead left him for Orwin to deal with.

Artemi ran to where Morghiad lay, and untied the bonds that held him. His whole body was shaking. It had become drained of the energy it needed to heal, and he was bleeding heavily across the floor of the chamber. His entire back was shredded from the torture, completely devoid of its skin. She supported him by his arms, which were probably the least lacerated areas, and helped him onto his knees. His pain was intense, and Artemi had to work hard to compartmentalise it as he did. "Morghiad?" she said.

His eyes were focussed elsewhere.

"We have to get you out of here now."

He gave no reply. Instead, his breathing quickened and he squeezed his eyes shut. Morghiad was fighting to stay alive with everything he had.

Artemi looked up at Silar, and she hated what she saw in his eyes - resignation, pity and sadness.

"We cannot take him out of here, Artemi," he said softly.

They had been too slow in getting to him. Her false father had told her to be quick. Why had she collapsed in such a pathetic way? Why hadn't she had gone against orders? The punishment would have been worth it!

Artemi let Morghiad slump into her lap, and ran her fingers through his hair as he drifted. *That Aval woman would pay dearly for this, perhaps as dearly as his executioner!*

The room around was dark, low-ceilinged and filled with strange, sculpted columns of limestone. The smell of charred flesh made her want to vomit everything from her stomach, and strewn across the floor were numerous implements of torture, rubbish and items of clothing.

Strange artwork covered the walls, and some of it seemed to glow in the shadows. Artemi tried to decipher the patterns, but they were mostly abstract, and there was only one motif she recognised. It was a stylised drawing of a plant she had seen in the foothills of the mountains. The orange flower had been in one of Morghiad's history books. She dug around in her brain for the name of it.

"Swift flower," Orwin said, following her line of sight.

Something clicked in her mind. "Swiftness to save him..." she said out loud. Artemi gently lowered the now convulsing Morghiad to the floor and rose to inspect the painting. Beodrin and Silar darted to their captain to hold him still as she wandered off. The image looked old and worn up close. How could a wall mural be used to save him?

Artemi put a hand out to touch it. Nothing. It was just a painting. She refused to cry. *She had felt despair enough times already today!* Her foot kicked something made of glass. Artemi bent down to pick it up and examined it closely. It was a small, clear bottle and written on it in old-fashioned symbols was the word, "Swift." A manner of clear liquid

swished about in it, and Artemi rushed at their prisoner and thrust him against the wall.

“What is this?”

The man grinned wildly at her.

She pulled out her sword and sliced it through his leg. “What is it?!” she yelled as the man fell to the floor, screaming. He whimpered for a moment as his stump healed. “Tell me,” she ordered.

The torturer looked back at her with fury in his eyes, but it was clear he would reveal nothing in the time she had.

Artemi had no choice but to trust her dream, so she returned to Morghiad and lifted his head. His green eyes flickered uncontrollably as he tried desperately to focus on her, and she opened the bottle. A strong floral odour sprung from it. “Drink,” she demanded, and poured the entire contents into him.

She heard their prisoner giggle in the near distance.

Morghiad coughed and spluttered the foul-tasting liquid, but swallowed most of it.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing?” Silar asked worriedly.

Artemi compressed her lips and shook her head. “I had to try something.”

Abruptly, she felt something cold shudder through him. She, Silar and Beodrin struggled to grip him firmly as his muscles contorted, causing him to thrash about. Artemi had known he was strong, but the three of them were almost thrown across the room. The other soldiers rushed in to hold him down on his side, but then something incredible happened.

The skin on his back began to grow into the open wounds, and he began to heal. She stared open-mouthed as his back began to close and his consciousness returned, not daring to say anything lest it hinder the process. The other men looked on agog, too.

It normally took days or even weeks to recover healing strength once it had been depleted, but this was happening in seconds. As fast as it had started, the skin stopped growing. He was much improved, but there were still large wounds upon his back and chest. Morghiad had stopped writhing.

“Should I give him more?” she asked the men around.

Her question was met with blank expressions as the other soldiers released him, but Morghiad stirred and pushed himself up from the floor.

His entire body stung, but he felt oddly robust. “No more,” he said, “Or you’ll have me thinking I’m invincible.”

Silar chuckled, and gave his friend a playful slap on the shoulder. Artemi did not like how it felt when he did that, but she gave her captain a smile when his eyes met hers. Then his light expression darkened when he realised, “You wielded alone?”

Artemi really was in no mood for a telling-off, not after she had saved his bloody life! She folded her arms. “You’re alive and so am I. Now let’s leave this forsaken place!”

He frowned, but pursued it no further.

“I think we ought to take a few of those bottles with us, my queen,” Beodrin said, “Er... and kahr-captain,” he added.

Morghiad ignored the lieutenant’s mistake and nodded. “Take as much as you can carry.”

They scraped up all the bottles they could see, and climbed back onto their mounts. Morghiad, now clad in a somewhat bloodied and torn coat and shirt, sat upright on Tyshar in spite of his ailments.

Artemi grabbed a burning torch to light the way back, but then, she did not trust those black-swathed men to leave the lamps burning for them.



When they reached the main cavern again, the army had spread out to investigate its various nooks and crannies. Upon seeing Morghiad lucid and in one piece with his rescue team, a loud cheer rose from them.

He glanced over at his Artemi, and remembered again that she was so young. It was easy to forget that, given her abilities and intelligence, but she was still a girl in some ways. He had thought himself absolved of wrongdoing once he had found he survived his night with her. But through his torture, he realised the weight of his responsibility to her to stay alive. He absolutely could not leave her to go through *nalka*, and yet he could hardly be as good a fighter if he feared death. Of course, she’d be fine in another year, but he’d have to settle into this new mentality of fighting somehow.

Morghiad thought about what it meant to fight as if you had nothing to lose, and to fight as if you risked losing everything. He had believed that Artemi made him stronger, more driven, but what if his capture was an indication he had weakened? He did not want to live up to his father’s poor opinion of him.

Artemi reached over to lay a comforting hand on his, and he clasped it tightly. *Fires, no* - how could anyone be weak with a famous and fearless warrior like her at their side?

Their group stopped outside the ruins of the curious red castle and dismounted. Morghiad was ready to give his torturer a beating in order to elicit some information as to a route of escape, but before he did that, he wanted to find some clues for himself. Artemi stayed close by him as he climbed the steps to the enormous, crooked doors.

Both structures appeared to be hanging perilously on their hinges. “Who do you suppose lived here?” she whispered.

Morghiad had never read of an underground castle, and he was sure he would have remembered stories of a great, sinking rock. "Perhaps this is from a time older than the legends," he guessed.

Inside the main doors was a huge, crumbling hall. Two symmetrical sets of stairs led, in a broad oval, to a second level. Together he and Artemi trotted up the broken steps, though the movement caused his back to sting painfully.

"You need to slow down!" she admonished.

When they got to the top, they were met by a sight Morghiad had not expected at all. Bodies. Thousands of bodies.

"This is a tomb for the dead," she murmured.

Morghiad looked closer at the corpses, and realised they must have been there for some time, as all were skeletons, heavily covered in dust and webs. Many still had scraps of clothing and all appeared to have weapons of some description. He knelt down in front of one of them and assessed the remains of its uniform. It seemed to match all the others: purple or blue with a grey stripe. Or perhaps it had once been white. "I don't recognise these colours, Artemi."

She grimaced at the bodies. "We didn't recognise the black-painted army, either."

For all Morghiad knew, this was an army from a country that had existed long before Calidell or Kemen. He picked up a heavily rusted sword and turned it over in his hands. It was too heavy to be held with just one hand - a type which he'd seen few people ever use in battle. He stood and walked on through the corpses, trying not to step on too many of the crumbling bones.

But before he could venture farther, a lightning bolt of pain tore through his skull, he tripped, and his feet yanked the ribs of one body clean off its spine. With what remained of his balance, he spun to seek the source of his injury, and discovered Artemi clutching her temples, eyes squeezed shut. *Headaches*, he remembered. *She was nowhere near ready to remember yet!*

Pushing the pain to one side, he caught hold of her, threw her over his shoulder and ran back to the top of the stairs. The pain in her head winked out as quickly as it had come. He set Artemi down, and assessed her carefully. She appeared to be fine, if a little shaken. "What was that?" she asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Morghiad said, hoping his half lie wasn't detectable through their link. Artemi didn't question him, in any case. "Stay here for now," he instructed, and went back to the position where her headache had hit. Something here had triggered it, something she had seen or sensed. What could it be? He looked about at the bodies.

"Be careful, you royal idiot!" she called.

Morghiad nodded to her absently and continued his search. A glint caught his eye. He knelt down and rubbed the dust from the shiny object. It was a slender sword, still very sharp to the touch. Its handle was small, perfect for the hands of a woman. Morghiad ran

his fingers along the blade. It buzzed with the faint fire of Blaze. He had heard of weapons made using Blaze Energy, but had never thought he would ever see one.

Morghiad turned his attention to the skeleton of its owner. The bones were delicate, thinner than those of its neighbours. Morghiad noticed several vertical strips of metal poking out from the uniform on the body. It had belonged a woman's item of clothing, and this skeleton had almost certainly been a female warrior. Of course, what would the effect be of a vanha-sielu walking across her own grave, or one of them? He touched the cheekbone of the skull tenderly, and it crumbled into the dust.

He rose and carried the sword back to the living Artemi. "You could use this." He offered it to her, and hoped it wouldn't set off some horrid memory reaction. Things she certainly would have seen in the past, like the sun, trees, sky and even Jarynd didn't seem to have any effect.

"We're grave-robbing now?" she asked.

Morghiad smiled at her. "I think whoever owned this would have wanted someone like you to have it. It's been wrought with The Blazes. Still sharp. These people no longer have a use for it."

She looked at it suspiciously, and frowned. "You look after it for now. No, wait. Fine. I'll take the poor, dead woman's sword then." She thrust it into her belt alongside the steel one. The angle of the curve was slightly different, and the plane of the blade was rotated oddly. Morghiad wondered if that would make a difference to her style, or even his.

They meandered through the dusty corridors and stairs of the ancient building a while longer, but found nothing that would hint to a way out of the caves. He didn't know if it was the waning effects of that odd potion Artemi had given him, or a long day catching up with him, but Morghiad suddenly felt very weary indeed.

"Let's go and rest with the other men," she urged.

Morghiad nodded in agreement and put his arm around her. She seemed to like that a great deal for such a fearless woman.

They sat with the men for a while, nibbling on what rations they had brought. Morghiad ate an embarrassing amount of food, for it felt as if nothing could sate his appetite, though Artemi appeared to approve rather than feel disgust at his gluttony. Even with a link to her emotions, he still didn't completely understand the woman.

Morghiad shared a few stories with his men, then curled up on the ground, and promptly fell asleep. When he woke up, the men were still milling around the grand chamber. Artemi was sitting cross-legged, watching him. "I see you're feeling refreshed after your epic slumber?" She smiled at him.

He sat up. "How long have I been out for?"

She twisted her mouth. "Oh, time passes oddly down here. But I'd say a full day, at least."

Morghiad leapt, or rather stumbled, to his feet. "Why didn't you wake me?"

“You needed the rest. You’d been tortured to near-death.” She sounded, and her flame felt, calm but indignant.

He could feel the break in the barrier that protected her from The Blazes, where she had forced her way through to wield alone. The barrier was supposed to thin naturally with age until a wielder was ready to control it herself, but trust Artemi to be so defiant and wilful as to break through it herself! He’d have to find a way to block her off from it again when they got back, otherwise there could be all manner of problems.

Morghiad snapped up his swords – someone must have recovered them from the battle for him - and strapped them onto his still-aching back. Jarynd came running over.

“Kahr-captain, good to see you’ve joined us in the land of the living again. I have some good news, assuming it’s not a trap. Our giant of a prisoner over there has offered to lead us out of here. He seems to think he owes you some form of debt, though I can’t think why given you chopped his limbs off.”

Artemi was cautious. “That man is half-mad, if not completely. Seems to think he knows me, though I reckon I’d remember him!”

Morghiad masked his understanding with a surge of love for her. “We’ll follow his directions, then. It’s the best we’ve got, after all.”



Chapter 14

Koviere examined the thick, creased and well-oiled leather belts that held his one arm to his back, and sighed. He wasn't especially grateful to have been spared by Kahr Morghiad. Much better to have been cut down in battle with honour than to live as a prisoner in shame. He had lived a good and long life in any case, longer than a warrior could expect, but perhaps he still had one more task to perform.

Perhaps there was something he could do to correct the crime that had been committed against the Jade'an boy. He looked on as the Calidellians carried the dead to their camp of women. It was not the army he remembered from his last battle against them - that army had left their men where they fell and then forgot about them.

Koviere had no doubt this was the influence of the young lad; he couldn't deny the good blood he had in him, or at least Acher's influence had failed to taint it. These were soldiers with a purpose, too. Whatever it was they believed they were doing, they believed it was right. That was a curious thing he hadn't experienced in many years.

A handsome woman with waist-length hair the colour of old gold and fire walked past him. Artemi was another oddity he couldn't quite make sense of. It was certainly her - face and eyes a little youthful, but just as tough as she always was. Calidell was well-known for its appalling treatment of wielders, and she was clearly aware of her abilities, so why on Earth was she fighting for them?

And why did an army full of Calidellians tolerate her presence so readily?

The thing that utterly flummoxed him, however, was the way they all referred to her as "the queen." Surely Artemi Fireblade, Artemi the Wielder, honourable and fine Artemi would never marry a revolting specimen of a man such as King Acher? The idea sickened him, and she'd always sworn she'd never take a lover - even if she could.

But it would make sense of her integration into the army. And she did have a way of turning men's heads to her way of thinking. Perhaps Koviere had been living in the caves too long. He thought back to the evenings he'd spent with her at the bar, relating tales of battles won and lost, comparing notes on pretty men and women, and drinking heavily. Those had been good times for hired fighters. Still, she seemed happy enough where she was, and that was the important thing, even though it made no sense.

Koviere's scar-faced captor came back from a nearby camp fire with some food. The wiry man seemed to understand the shame of being a prisoner and was good enough

not to engage him in conversation. He was also aware of Artemi's true identity, which probably meant everyone else was... though he couldn't be sure.

Koviere gobbled down the stew greedily, spitting the bones into the snow as he found them. It was surprisingly tasty, and he was going to need it if he was going to grow these limbs back any time soon.

Jarynd eyed him carefully with that twisted face of his, checked his bonds and then went to sit with some of his compatriots.

Oh, how Koviere yearned for a swig on the warm beer they were drinking! He closed his eyes and dreamed of its bittersweet, throat-quenching taste. But a movement nearby broke his thoughts, and Kahr Morghiad came to sit opposite him. He poured a mug of brown liquid, released Koviere's tied arm, and gave the drink to him.

"In thanks for your help getting us out of those blazed caves," the young man said.

Koviere raised his mug and drank deeply. It was a bit watery for his taste, but good enough. He considered Morghiad closely, and it was evident he possessed the bearing of his father - no doubt about it. His colouring was just as his mother's had been, and those eyes were unmistakable.

The two men sat in silence for a while, each waiting for the other to speak.

Morghiad began, "Artemi says you claimed to know her..."

"And I did. For many years. Last saw her in Gialdin, as it happens." Koviere took another sip.

Morghiad remained inexpressive. "What sort of woman was she?"

Koviere couldn't help but cough at the question. "What do you expect from a hero? She fought harder than most men, blasted bad people into ashes and protected the innocent. And she liked a drink or two afterwards, but who doesn't?"

"With your knowledge of her, do you think she would choose to stay with an army like this?" Morghiad asked.

Koviere chewed his lip. What was the boy getting at? "When she remembers? Artemi was always a force of nature, lad. Few people could tell her what to do and, from what I saw, she usually preferred to fight alone."

Morghiad's eyes became distant. "I've already discovered some of that."

"May I ask why a wielder is among your ranks, Kahr Morghiad?"

"She has earned the respect of these men and she has given her word that she will fight for Calidell," he said succinctly.

Koviere knew that Morghiad was hiding something from him, but did not know the reason for it. "Is she married to King Acher?"

Morghiad's eyes very nearly bulged out of their sockets, and a small smile crept across his face. "No. Her title is a sobriquet given by the men. As I said, she has earned their respect."

"And you, the kahr, allow it?"

He reacted quickly, perhaps a little too quickly “I thought you said I wasn’t the son of King Acher.”

“No. On that matter I can better inform you. You are the son of Hedinar Kantari. He was a good swordsman like you, former General of Sunidara’s army, but he left his command to be with your mother,” Kovierye said.

Morghiad frowned. “I think King Acher might have noticed someone interfering with one of his benay-gosa long enough to sire me!”

“Benay-gosa?” Kovierye grimaced at that. “No, lad. Your mother was no benay-gosa. I guess that’s what King Acher cooked up to explain you?” He laughed. “No. Hedinar and Queen Medea were your parents. Acher must have taken you when he razed Gialdin. You’d have been about three or four then. And your sister, well she was thirteen going on thirteen-hundred!” Kovierye’s face darkened. “Though I don’t suppose Acher would have had much use for her.”

Morghiad had grown very pale, and clearly Kovierye’s words had triggered something painful. “Alliah,” he said.

“Yes! That was her name!” Kovierye exclaimed.

Morghiad stood up, paced, and sat down again. “How did you know them?”

“They hired me to fight for them, keep the city empty of bad men. Me and her, as a matter of fact.” Kovierye nodded toward Artemi, who was jogging in their direction.

She reached them in something of a flustered state. “What’s going on? What have you said to him?” She looked accusatorily at Kovierye.

“It’s alright, Artemi. I’ll join you in a minute,” the kahr said.

Artemi clenched her jaw in frustration. “That man is crazy, Morghiad. I hope you’re not taking too much of what he’s said to heart.”

Morghiad looked at her, but said nothing.

She bit her lip and then looked back at Kovierye. Her features softened, as did her voice. “I see. Well, I’ll be waiting when you are ready.” With that, she stalked off into the camp.

That had been interesting, Kovierye thought. There had been something... intimate about their eye contact. But it explained some of the lad’s questions about her. Kovierye chose his next words carefully. “Aye, she had her admirers, all right. Never seen her look at a man like that before though.” He winked.

Morghiad compressed his lips, but Kovierye was sure he detected a hint of relief in his features. “What is your name, soldier?”

“Kovierye Dohsal, my lord.”

“What were they like to know, the queen and Hedinar?”

Kovierye scratched at his stump. “Kind. They loved their people and their staff as they loved you. They always did the right thing. They used the money they had to provide for those that needed it. And they allowed wielders to roam as they wished.”

“You are telling me what I want to hear,” Morghiad warned.

“No. Well, perhaps a little. But they were good people. Hedinar sometimes had a temper if he thought you’d been stupid enough to put his family at risk. But then, he had good reason to be jumpy about that. And Medea. Medea’s only fault was to allow King Acher to fall in love with her. But from what I heard, the feeling wasn’t returned, and he was more than a little slighted by her choice of your father.”

Morghiad looked distant. “Well, Koviere, I’d appreciate it if you kept your information to yourself for now. And be careful what you say around Artemi, she’s not ready to learn about all that yet.” He certainly was protective of Artemi, that much was plain.

“As you wish, my lord.”

“One more thing, how did you end up in the caves with those men?”

Koviere felt a stab of guilt inside his guts but did nothing to remedy it. “It is a safe haven for men like me, my kahr. We answered to no tyrant or tax collector. I had fought enough for one lifetime, and I had let down your parents in protecting you. Asterid was my retirement from the world, though I suppose the fires of Achellon have more planned for me since you have been returned to my care.”

“You have no obligation to me.” Morghiad stood and left without reattaching Koviere’s restraints. But of course he knew that Koviere had a debt to him and his family, and would never leave.



Artemi lay stiffly on the rug in their tent. She didn’t like the unhappiness Morghiad was feeling, not at all. As if the man hadn’t been through enough, and that square-faced lump had gone and dropped a fireball of revelations on him. She still wasn’t entirely sure they were true, but then, Acher looked nothing like her beautiful kahr, and something had convinced Morghiad of the old soldier’s claims.

Maybe there was some truth in them, but Artemi knew very little of Gialdin beyond the feast day and the battle it celebrated. If Morghiad was a son of Gialdin, then surely such celebrations would have been little more than a slap in the face for him. Worse, he was leading the very army which had been responsible for the fall of his country and the deaths of his family.

Acher had been cunning, indeed. *If it were true.*

And if Morghiad wasn't his son, then publicising the truth would lose Morghiad his inheritance, his army and possibly his life. He liked to be honest with his men, but his honesty in this respect could have catastrophic consequences.

Artemi's head felt thick with problems and contradictions.

Morghiad stepped through the tent flaps and sat before her. She wasn't entirely sure how to comfort him, so started by wrapping her arms around him. He buried his face in her hair and cuddled her tightly. His back was stinging again.

"Will you let me see to those wounds?" she asked.

He nodded with weary resignation, and began stripping his bloodied coat and shirt.

Morghiad's body was still fine enough for her to appreciate greedily: strong legs, long fingered hands, a well-muscled torso and arms, but still athletic enough to be fast. He had excellent thighs, too, and it was ridiculous that he always seemed surprised at her admiration of him.

Artemi made him lie face-down on the floor while she cleaned the dried blood from his skin. Most of the wounds had healed a little further than when she'd seen them the day before, but there were still strips of exposed muscle.

It would likely not be safe to administer any more of the swift liquor just yet, though she did wish she could heal his hurts for him.

The cleaning took a while before Artemi had him sit up, and then she ran bandages slowly and tightly around his upper body. Morghiad appeared to be thinking hard about the news he'd just received, only making her more impatient to discuss it with him.

"I arrived at Cadra when I was four," he said softly.

She crawled round to meet his eyes. "I thought you said that was normal."

He nodded. "What if it was a coincidence? I have no recollection of my life before the castle."

"There is only one man who we can be sure knows the truth," Artemi said.

Morghiad grimaced. "I'm beginning to think he spins nothing but lies."

She felt his hurt keenly through knots in his river, and wished there was something she could do to fix it. "My love, you are captain of these men. And they would not give you up easily. We are your real family." Artemi ran her fingers gently down his cheek.

Anger welled up in him. "How can I claim to be captain when I am not even a kahr of Calidell? All I am heir to is a country that no longer exists and a pile of stories in history books!"

"You are their captain because you earned the right to it." She took a breath. "Then you believe the prisoner?"

He pushed down his anger. "I remember my sister. Or at least the name. I remember having a sister."

It was possible either way... if the girl had abilities like he did, Acher almost certainly would have disposed of her regardless. "I don't know what advice to offer. All I

can promise you is, no matter what the outcome, you will always have my loyalty and my love.”

He smiled at that. “You and I could end up out in the woods with nothing but the shoes on our feet.”

“That sounds like a good future.”

Morghiad pulled off Artemi’s clothing and fell to the blanket-covered floor with her. Where he found the energy, she never understood, but marvelled as he kissed her whilst simultaneously throwing complicated forms of Blaze at the walls of the tent. She suddenly felt very, very hot indeed.



The brilliant white of the walls effervesced, even in amongst the shadow. A cool autumn breeze flowed in through a window three times as high as any man, carrying with it the noises of shouting and clattering metal. Morghiad threw the wooden horse onto the floor in annoyance. He had never liked it, and his friend had a better one, anyway.

It was so boring being shut away in this big, empty room alone. Wasn’t anyone going to come and get him? He climbed up on a box to look out of the window, where his vantage point was high enough to reveal that there were hundreds of men in black beyond the walls. They all appeared to be shouting something, though he could not understand what.

A flash of red caught his eye, and he knew it was a woman’s hair, lit like flames in the sunlight. She ran toward the walls ahead of the other men in blue and gold, swords in their hands and ready to do battle. As she neared, the outer wall of white began to shimmer and wobble.

Morghiad inched back from the window, but kept watching closely. The wall began to bulge in the middle as if struggling to contain some unseen leviathan, and then it burst, sending white chunks of crystalline rock flying in all directions. Waves of bright blue energy followed it, rolling free as if released from centuries of imprisonment.

Morghiad fell off the box in shock, but climbed on top again to see what was happening. The soldiers were pouring in over the remains of the wall now, yelling and shouting and brandishing swords. The sound of the door behind him stole his attention, and it was Alliah, bearing a furrowed brow and a thin smile. “Come on Mor, we’ve got to go now,” she said, holding her hand out.

He ran to his sister and grasped her thin fingers, and together they rushed down the luminous corridors. A giant stepped out in front of them, and Morghiad tripped headlong

into the icy floor in an attempt to avoid him. But just as quickly, he felt himself being picked up and hoisted onto the man's shoulder.

Morghiad struggled to escape, but was nowhere near strong enough; the man's shoulders were like tree trunks! Pale paving slabs moved away from him at frightening speed while his head bobbed up and down. "Are you taking us to mother and father, Captain Terand?" Alliah asked from below.

The big man grunted what Morghiad thought was a 'yes.'

A heartbeat later, there was a heavy blast through the hall window at their left, forcing Morghiad's carrier hard into the opposite wall.

The giant took a few breaths before steadying himself again. "You alright, little one?"

"Yes," Morghiad said sharply. He wasn't terribly impressed with being carried around like this, nor being called 'little'.

"Tough as nails, aren't you?" Captain Terand said as he bent down to pick something up.

Morghiad saw his sister's black braid fling over the captain's other shoulder. Was she dead? She didn't seem to be moving. He had seen dead animals before in the kitchens, and didn't want his sister to end up like them. Alliah was always kinder to him than the nurse, and in truth, everyone was kinder than that nurse and her stupid rules.

Terand ran with them both until they reached the royal apartments, and the moment they arrived, he heard his parents' familiar voices. It was so good to hear them after so long.

His father plucked him from the captain's arms and squeezed him tightly.

"Put me down!" Morghiad yelled. Fires, how many times did he have to tell them?

His father set Morghiad on his feet, but kept a hand upon his head, and when Morghiad looked up, a dark-blond man glanced back down at him with a weak smile. It was his father, for certain, but he looked so different now.

Worry marked his father's square jaw, and so Morghiad turned his eyes to Alliah, who was being checked over by their mother. Strange light sparkled and glittered in the air around her, and in a gnat's breath, Alliah sat upright, quite of her own accord. Her green eyes were open and bright, and very much alive.

"We'll put them both in the book room," his father said solemnly. "It is the only place left, then perhaps after that..."

Morghiad's mother turned around and nodded. He always thought his mother was the prettiest out of everyone's, and that was what his father always said, so it had to be true. She moved forward, wrapped him in a tight embrace and kissed him on the forehead.

"I hope you can forgive us one day. Make sure that fighter girl takes good care of you, Mor." A single tear rolled down her cheek. "I love you so much." With that, his mother stood and went to embrace Alliah, whispering something in her ear.

Then, the four of them proceeded into a small chamber stacked high with books, and his father knelt down to give him a hug. "Always remember to guard your left side and never underestimate even the weakest-looking warrior. Fight to save what you love, never to destroy what you hate. And always be ready to listen to counsel, you never know when it might help. And here..." He pulled out a silver-hilted dagger. "...Take care of this for me." His father handed the blade to Morghiad, and ruffled his hair. "Don't cut yourself with it. Please."

His father went to say something to Alliah, and hugged her tightly too, but a furious crash from the room beyond interrupted their embrace.

His father whipped round, drawing his sword, and ran to the source of the sound. The air around his mother came alight, and she followed close behind her husband, teeth bared.

Before he could watch what they were doing, Alliah ran to Morghiad, grabbed him by the hand and dragged him to a cupboard. "Get inside!" She pushed him in with full force and slammed the door.

There was a gap at the hinge, so Morghiad peered through it. He could just make out his father and mother, battling a group of soldiers. Red flames burst out around them, engulfing everyone in the room, and when they cleared, his mother lay motionless on the floor. Dark hair fanned around her head, but bodies continued to fall left and right about her body from his father's blade, until no more of the black and green soldiers remained standing.

Then, his father dropped to his knees beside his wife, and put both hands to her face. Morghiad could hear his sister weeping quietly in front of the cupboard, and he wanted to go and comfort her, be strong for her, but he could not open the doors.

While he struggled with them, someone else stamped into the room, though out of view. The newcomer's voice was gravelly and rough, and his father did not remove his gaze from the queen's body nor raise his sword. He appeared... lost or confused.

Abruptly, a blade cut cleanly through his kneeling father's neck, killing him instantly and sending blood across his mother's body. Morghiad did not want to look anymore; he wanted to close his eyes, but he was too paralysed with fear to look away.

The executioner strode into the book room, and his narrow eyes glittered when they found Alliah. She was screaming at the man, yelling at him to get out, to leave them alone. But he advanced rapidly with his sword brandished, and he shouted words Morghiad did not understand.

He picked Alliah up by the neck of her dress, slit her throat right through and dropped her to the floor with a thud. Morghiad fell against the back of the cupboard in shock, and clamped his hand over his mouth to stifle the scream that wanted to escape. The executioner must have heard the noise, for he flung open the cupboard doors, grinning wildly through his beard.

He hauled Morghiad into the air by the scruff of his neck and turned him from side to side to examine him properly. "I didn't know about you, little boy!" The executioner raised his sword, but hesitated. A look of thoughtfulness played across his lumpen feature, and he studied Morghiad a moment longer. "Do you know why you were a secret, lad? Eh?"

Morghiad shook his head. Fires, how he wanted to cry!

The man's eyes narrowed to tiny slits in his pudgy face. "What is your name?"

"Mor," he said with a whisper.

"That would be short for Morghiad, yes? Well, you won't be needing this where we're going!" The bearded man threw the silver dagger onto the floor. "You will call me father," he said sternly, and stepped over the bodies with Morghiad gripped firmly in his arms.

Morghiad sat up. He wanted to cry, to shout, to vomit. Nothing would come. Artemi, woken by his movement, drowsily reached for his arm. But his emotion spurred her alertness on, and tension touched her voice when she spoke. "Another nightmare?"

"Will you look at the crest on my shoulder?"

Artemi's forehead wrinkled in the half light.

"Please." Morghiad turned his back to her, and she hesitated, but presently he felt her delicate fingers trace the outline of the mark, fire sprouting from each point of contact. "What do you see?"

"A hawk on a sword and feathers. I don't know what—" Her fingers pressed harder into his shoulder blade. "Wait." It was a full minute before she spoke again. "It was made by two different wielders."

Morghiad did not want to hear it, but pressed on anyway. "Can you tell what is underneath?"

"Underneath?" He could feel that her mind was working groggily, and that her confusion was only deepening. "I'll need to use Blaze to reveal it," she said.

Morghiad scrambled for the flames, caught them and released control to her. A soft white light filled the tent, and it was a point of illumination that grew out of the skin of his shoulder.

"It's a large cat of some kind. A panther, I think – raised on its hind legs. What did you see in your nightmare?"

"A memory," Morghiad said. The horror of it dug at his heart and made it ache something fierce. How could he have forgotten them? He had disgraced them deeply with every action he had performed since their deaths.

Artemi waited soundlessly for him to continue.

"I remember...I..." It was almost too painful to put into words. Morghiad turned to her, summoning the strength from their tie, "I saw them die. My parents and... my sister. Acher cut her throat." The image echoed through his mind. "She was just a child."

Artemi's eyes widened. She could feel every sadness he felt, every anger, and the emotions echoed between them. She moved her gaze to the floor, experiencing true physical hurt at his pain, and then some curiosity. Thinking about her emotions seemed to make his own easier.

"You said parents."

Morghiad nodded. "My mother was alive. And I knew her." How it was possible, he could not fathom, but he remembered her face clearly.

Artemi placed her head against his arm and began to weep the tears he could not. "What will you do?"

Morghiad's first thoughts were right there, at the front of his mind and plain as the sun on a summer's day. "King Acher will pay," he said, balling his fists.

And the king *would* pay for the crime he had committed. The dark river of anger began to boil viciously inside Morghiad, and though he fought to smooth the uneven surface down, it still bubbled up inside him. Artemi did not deserve to feel that, but it was there, and it told him a swift dispatch with the sword would be too kind for Acher. It would draw the entire country into conflict.

Provincial nobles would vie for The Marble Throne and neighbouring countries would strike to claim portions of Calidell as their own. Thousands would die as a result of his reprisal. Morghiad would then become hunted - he and all those he cared for.

...Never to destroy what you hate...

No, Acher could be made to suffer in other ways. Morghiad would fill the entire city of Cadra with wielders! Of course, he would have to resign his command of the army, and his men could hardly be expected to follow the son of Gialdin - their one-time enemy. But he could still find ways of making life extremely difficult for Acher, and he would have time to build a good replacement government.

Once he killed Acher, as he would eventually, he would have to submit himself for arrest and trial. Morghiad could never be king himself. He needed to find someone strong, someone with experience... someone whom people respected. Morghiad glanced down at Artemi's locks of golden-red hair that cascaded over her pale skinned arms, and smiled. Artemi had been a legendary queen, and the men had already adopted her as such. The only problem would be convincing her that she could do it.



The ragged clouds pressed down heavily upon the mountaintops as a very hungry Calidellian army exited the Orsenid Pass, snaking into the green lands that marked the

edge of their kingdom. The men were tired, but buoyed by the scale of their adventure, and it would surely become a story of legend. They had been part of it, and Artemi might have been buoyed too if she had not been so troubled by the inconsistent mood of her captain.

Violent, frightening anger would sometimes surge in him and, though he gave no signal of it in his features, he battled hard to suppress it. How he controlled it, she had no idea. He was like a dormant volcano, simmering beneath the surface in a prelude to the destruction it would one day unleash. Artemi fully expected him to assassinate King Acher; it only seemed reasonable, after all. But the kahr had told her of his desire to postpone it, and she thought she only partially understood.

In seven hours, they would reach the city of Larkena, which was one of the victims of the rogue army's attacks. Morghiad wanted the army to stop there for a day while he travelled to the ruined city of Gialdin with her, and then they would all rendezvous at Jesundh in the north. The plan concerned Artemi, not because of his desire to visit the ruins, but because his absence would not be so clear to his soldiers.

Silar rode up to join them as she thought. Since that morning, he had been buzzing around them both like a fly that had found a chicken carcass, and saying most unhelpful things.

"Will you tell me why you both have faces as grim as the caves we just escaped from? You two ought to be grinning like the fools you are. Tell me. We are far away enough from the others now," he said. His blond hair was a touch more ruffled than usual, and stubble had begun to roughen his jaw. Artemi still appreciated his prettiness, and was surprised at how Morghiad tolerated it, but then, he must have known the relative depths of her feelings for them both.

Morghiad's features remained placid, but Artemi felt the gentle trickle of tension that preceded his words. "King Acher is not my father. My parents were the rulers of Gialdin." He took a breath. "I must resign my command, Silar, when we get back. Would you look into the problem for me, in your usual way?"

The good humour dissolved from Silar's face in a single breath. He stared for a minute, as if waiting to hear it was all a joke, then said, "I'll do my best, Morghiad," before he trotted back to the column.

Artemi hoped her father had not caught sight of their moods in the last few days. Silar was a little more understanding, but she knew her father would think it was Morghiad's fault. *And* she could not predict how important her father, a man of limited means, would consider this change in Morghiad's heritage. Her love completely blinded her from thinking any less of Morghiad, no matter who his parents were.

And, if anything, she was more honoured to have earned the fondness of a kahr who was *not* Acher's progeny. Blazes alight, any parents had to be of better blood than Acher!

But she feared what hopes her father had built for her, and he almost certainly would not want her with an outcast - potentially an outlaw. Now that her father had re-enlisted, he would be forced to stay, forced to oust her lover from his post in the army. And if Morghiad had to leave Cadra, then so would she.

Her father could not afford to be arrested for desertion a second time, which meant he would be left alone, or even killed for being a relation to her. Artemi could not afford to leave either man alone and unprotected.

“We have to deal with Aval,” Morghiad said, disrupting her reflections.

Ugh! Just the thought of the woman made Artemi want to dispense with her lunch all over her horse. It was bad enough that the noblewoman was so handsome, worse that she admired the kahr, and deeply troubling that she now knew several of Artemi’s secrets - *the army’s secrets*. Aval had only to speak a word of it to the king, and Morghiad would be Aval’s to do with as she wished.

Artemi chewed on her lip to stop herself from spitting on the ground like a horse thief.

“What do you propose?” she asked once she had regained a measure of calm.

An idea was rattling around inside Morghiad’s head so noisily and visibly that Artemi could almost hear it. “I will talk to her,” he said. “She will not be permitted to return to Cadra. I will make sure of that.” He looked at her intently. “I would not allow her to endanger you, Artemi.”

She found it amusing that he had allowed her to fight in a messy battle against hardened warriors, and yet seemed more concerned about a noblewoman with poor sword skills. Morghiad was a curious man at the best of times, and in many ways he was now more of a puzzle to her than when they had first met. That current of anger was worrying though, and she felt it bubble up again inside him. Had it always been there? “That peahen of a woman doesn’t scare me,” Artemi said. “Just don’t let her seduce you with her looks.”

Morghiad frowned at her. Was that mirth she could feel in amongst his emotions? Artemi had no idea what that meant, but she hoped it was in her favour.



Thick weeds were wedged between the gaps in the broken, grey brick road. It had not been maintained in all the years he had been absent, and Morghiad doubted many people had travelled it in as long. The uneven nature of the paving made for slow going, and anything faster might break a horse’s leg. Artemi’s mount stepped lightly a few yards

ahead of him, but Artemi had grown morose in light of the revelations of his parentage, and he despised himself for infecting her fires with his unhappiness.

Artemi's smiles had further faded when she had been made to wear dresses once more, and Morghiad would have paid a small fortune if he could have made it possible for her to wear breeches in public. If not simply for her happiness, then for his own selfish pleasure at regarding her in them.

There could be a good future ahead for her and for Calidell, and he would do his best to ensure it came to pass. His surge of optimism caused her to turn and smile at him, and how he had missed that smile for all of the four days it had been absent!

Morghiad caught up with her, and pulled her onto Tyshar's saddle with him. The smell of her hair alone was enough to warm his heart, and they walked on for several hours before the tall, bare birch and alder trees began to thin.

Fallen red brick structures poked through the undergrowth here and there, indicating the abandoned farmsteads that had once been occupied. Rotten wood beams jutted from some of the debris, covered in ivy and pale green moss. No one worked these lands now, though the soil looked as good as any Morghiad had seen. He kicked the horses on eagerly through the low scrub, and hoped they would not trip upon the bricks.

Ahead, brilliant white fragments shone from beneath the leaves, breaking up the deep green of the foliage. The trees had now cleared completely, so that only stubby bushes and grass could grow. This was the edge of the city proper, and by the blazed light, it had been vast!

Morghiad pulled the horses to a gentle halt while he looked across the land – his land.

The area was almost entirely flat, save for the route of a silted river, which etched across the middle. Shards of white wall jutted out of the ground closer to the core of the city, and those must have been the castle fortifications. Around them, the birdsong was close to deafening, even in the heart of winter.

"This place is alive like a still-beating heart. Can you feel it?" Artemi asked.

Morghiad could feel it. The Blazes seemed to resonate here in a manner they did not elsewhere.

A muddied and ivy-laden white road led to the centre, but it was too densely covered in fallen masonry to take the horses down. "Let's dismount here," he said.

Artemi jumped off with appreciable agility, and Morghiad followed in a heavier fashion. He had begun to feel rather clumsy next to her lately, though she had always been graceful, but recently she had assumed an ethereal elegance in every action she performed. It was as if Artemi had become a part of the leaves that waved in the breeze or the currents that ran through The Blazes themselves. Perhaps it was a resonance of her not-quite-absent memories.

With the horses tethered, they picked their way gingerly over the shattered masonry. Morghiad had been careful to approach the city from the southernmost gate, or what remained of it, as in his memory, Artemi had been running to the northern gate shortly before her death, and he didn't want her walking over her own body again. He need not have worried though, for there were no bones visible amongst the debris. Either the Gialdinians had taken pains to bury their dead, or the animals of the forest had done it for them.

Morghiad was not entirely sure what he was looking for here - perhaps some kind of reconciliation with his memories or a chance to ask forgiveness from his parents, but he needed to set at least one thing right, and whatever it was began here. This was where all wrongs had been committed.

The white fabric of the city buildings was still sharp-edged and piled high across the road in places, and Artemi seemed to glide over it as if it were simply a twig in her path. He scrambled across a particularly high and razor-like splinter, and it was no wonder the wreckage of Gialdin city still remained as it had fallen nineteen years earlier.

The crystalline structures would have been lethal to clear, and the smallest pieces were improbably heavy too. Morghiad placed his hand on the surface of one piece to test. It whirled with the sensation of Blaze echoes, much like Artemi's sword had, but the form of it had been disrupted. The energy was not locked in as it should have been, and it must have taken both a powerful wielder and kanaala to disrupt such a complex form to shatter these walls. Years of study would be required just to understand the structure, and Morghiad wondered where and how King Acher could have found such a person.

By the time they reached the central castle walls, Morghiad's clothing had been cut to rags. Artemi, naturally, looked utterly unscathed by the journey. If anything, she looked more enlivened by the challenge of the exercise. Her eyes were bright and her lips a deep shade of scarlet. Morghiad was forced to suppress his amorous thoughts, though doing as little as looking at her still made his breath catch at times. Blazes, she was beginning to react to his feelings!

Artemi smiled, stood on tiptoes and kissed him, but did not take it any further. He was grateful for her reticence, for he would not have been able to stop himself if she had pursued those feelings any further.

It was all very well being in love with one of the most beautiful women who had ever lived, but it had a tendency to get in the way of even the simplest of tasks. He tore his gaze away from her and focussed instead upon the walls. They were far too thin for castle fortifications, and yet... and yet the histories claimed they had stood for several thousands of years.

Morghiad took Artemi's hand in his, and led her deeper into the rubble. Silver shards of the construction were heaped yards thick here, creating a raised platform that

was at least a league across. Morghiad found a smooth, markedly less deadly piece and sat on top of it, drawing Artemi down next to him, and from there he surveyed his kingdom.

“At last I take my throne,” he whispered.

Artemi looked, and felt, horrified at what he’d said. “You could rebuild. Take back what is yours.”

“With what? The people of Gialdin are all dead or scattered to the winds. I’d have to raise my own army to protect this city and from where would I raise it? Then I’d have to fight against the men who have promised their loyalty to me. I would start a war over a grave. And that is what this place is: a burial site. It is a thing of history now.” He grasped a sliver of crystal and turned it over in his hand.

“And what are we if we are not products of our history? History is not in our past but forms us in the present. And how histories are written or interpreted depends on what we do today. You seem to think that being a kahr of a city and a nation in history makes you a kahr in history. But you are not yet. You are a kahr of the present, and being a kahr without a castle makes you no less of a kahr.” She looked at the rubble fiercely. “And you do not need to start a war. You already have the army you require.”

He thought through her words carefully. She was wrong about the Calidell army; he had no reason to believe they would keep him as captain, but she was right that he still had an opportunity to change history, or at least alter the ending. “Do you want me to fight for Gialdin?”

She closed her eyes. “When you told me I was a wielder, I learned of my responsibilities. They are nothing in comparison to yours, but I know I have an obligation to fulfil. It hurts me to say this, and I fear saying it will ultimately end in my loss of you, but not to admit it would end with a loss of your trust.” Artemi’s dark eyes opened and shone their warmth upon him. “The people of Gialdin *are* your responsibility.”

...fight to save what you love...

And Morghiad could think of no one he would rather rule over them than Artemi. She would do a better job of it than he could hope to, even if she had still been an eighteen-year-old linen washer. He only had to see her safely through the next few years, ensure she learned how the country was run, and then he had the simple matter of arranging Acher’s downfall.

Morghiad could not tell her of his plans yet; she would never agree to them unless she saw no alternatives, and he had to ensure she remained an innocent party. His arrest and trial would inevitably lead to imprisonment, possibly execution, which was something else she would probably try to prevent. “I will do my best for you, Gialdin and Calidell,” he said. “Upon that you have my word.”

She nodded, though the corners of her mouth were still tight, and he gave her a squeeze in reassurance. When he found she was still tense, he buried his cheek in her soft,

fire-like hair. His skin tingled against the strands, and he feared how much he would miss her in prison.

As the evening began to fall, they circuted the ruined citadel while Morghiad tried to remember more of his home and parents. But little of use would come. He held a vague recollection that he had been happy here, and some early memories of his time at Acher's fortress clambered from the woodwork of his mind.

He recalled being poked and prodded and tested when he reached the dark grey castle at Cadra, but that was all. The sun began to dip below the tree line, and it was time to make camp in this deeply uncomfortable place of points and edges. Morghiad and Artemi scrambled back toward the remains of the southern gate, until quite without grace, Artemi tripped upon a collapsed section of floor paving.

Morghiad was too far to catch her in time, and he felt a shard of white wall slice her side as she landed face-down amidst the mess. He hurried to help her, but knew in his heart something else must have been wrong. It was not like Artemi to fall over inanimate objects now that she was closer to remembering her past, not even in the fading light. "What happened?"

"I don't know." She blinked with only surprise in her eyes. "The energy of this place. I suppose I'm not used to it." She looked down to inspect her wound, and it *was* deep, but clean and healing rapidly.

"We need to fix that hole you punched through to wield. It's probably not helping matters."

She did not respond. Instead, her gaze was fixed upon an item in the broken masonry. Artemi reached a slender hand into a gap in the rubble, and tugged at something cold. Whatever it was wouldn't shift. Morghiad pulled away some of the nearby lumps of crystal, but still the object refused to budge.

He could feel its metallic surface against the skin of her fingers, and that it sang with the energy of the fires. Together they dug deeper into the rubble, cutting their skin and making a pink, bloodied muddle of the pure ruins. Two giant, flat slabs pinned the object at either end, and now that more was visible, Morghiad thought he recognised it. He took Artemi's hand, and reached for the fires through her.

They came to him in a torrent of fury and searing joy, rocking and shuddering through his veins and out of his wounds. He moulded the flames into shapes that would lift whole houses, and the slabs were sent flying to the opposite side of the city. Where they had been, a pile of unrecognisable debris lay flattened against the fragments below as if a giant's iron had pressed them. Some of it looked to have been textile once, or perhaps leather, and in amongst it was the cold, metallic object.

It was his father's silver dagger. The chances of him finding it must have been impossibly small, but then, Artemi had been the one to spot it – to fall on it. Morghiad picked it up and studied it closely. It was exactly as he had seen it in his dream. Filigree

patterning covered the handle, and the blade was a polished silver-blue metal he did not recognise. It had not been forged by hammer, but by fire from The Blazes. He flipped the dagger in his hand, and it rotated smoothly and evenly – perfectly balanced for throwing. Along one side of the blade was a single line of script: “Al Talone Kantari sur Talone Jade’an loitaar tuliden a tulevar.”

“You know this dagger?” Artemi asked.

Morghiad nodded. “This must have been a gift from my mother to my father. It says ‘In House Kantari, House Jade’an sees fire and the future.’”

She smiled. “That is an unusual way of declaring love.”

“I see the fire in you, Artemi, and I see the future with you. It sounds like a very accurate description of love to me.” He slid the dagger into the back of his belt. “Let’s get to the horses before we’re cut to pieces in the dark.” He kept hold of her hand this time, since he did not want her tripping over and injuring herself on more of his ancestral home.

The skies had not blackened fully by the time they reached an ancient tree on the outskirts of the ruins, and it did not matter that the sun had sunk. Birds still chirruped happily into the night, as if kept awake by some unseen light.

Morghiad checked the horses were safely hitched, and sat beside Artemi, wrapping his cloak around the two of them. It was a dry enough night not to need proper shelter, but cool enough to require several blankets. He buried his face in her hair once more and studied the inferno, now fully grown, inside her. It blew about like a torrential storm behind a translucent veil, forcing the barrier to billow and waver. Intense heat radiated through a fracture in that veil.

The break was small, but not safe, and unprepared wielders had been driven mad by lesser breaks, or so he had read. They had been described as unable to relinquish their grip on The Blazes because they lacked the necessary discipline that came with age. Artemi was well-disciplined when she wanted to be, but there was always that stubborn streak in her that could either work to her favour or to her detriment. Usually, it was the latter.

The veil was a natural, essential part of the wielder’s minds to shield them from their growing power, which Morghiad had also knew from books, and only a kanaala could reach through it as if it did not exist.

He had read only a little about repairing tears in the wielder barrier, and of course, he had never done anything like it before. But to leave her as she was would surely be more dangerous than to try and fix her, he was certain. Morghiad took the tiniest portion of Blaze from beyond the curtain, and began to shape the power as he would for a partition. It wavered for a blink of an eye, then faded to nothing.

“What are you up to in there?” Artemi asked with some amusement.

Morghiad tilted her pale face to meet his. “Fixing you.”

She smiled mischievously, almost proud that she had endangered her own life.

He frowned sternly at her and tried another approach, again drawing only a sliver of energy from the fires inside her. This time, he formed it into strings that stitched the tear in the veil. The minute he left control of them, they evaporated. Burn it!

“If it helps, I felt as if I was building a bridge to it. Perhaps you need to undermine the connection,” Artemi said almost absently.

He examined the veil once more, but could not see any bridges across it. “You didn’t feel as if you’d broken through anything?”

“No. I just needed to cover the distance.”

Morghiad waved away his confusion, and tried to understand it as she did. Artemi’s words meant she perceived her block differently, where remoteness and distance was the barrier rather than anything solid. He closed his eyes and tried again. *Break the bridge.*

No matter how hard he tried to conceive of it that way, he could not seem to feel or detect any form of link between one side and the other. Even so, he took the Energy from her once more and formed it into a small block of force. Carefully, he aimed it at the veil, and then at the fracture itself. Morghiad blew it against the veil like wind upon a curtain, and Artemi jumped as if he had poked her at the waist. The veil seemed to move forwards by a tiny increment and, almost immediately, the breach sealed closed. It made no sense, but it had worked.



Chapter 15

A gangly insect patted against the pale ceiling of Silar's tent, trying to escape to the faltering red rays of the winter sun. He opened the door flaps a touch to let it free. The brainless creature batted around the edge of the exit fruitlessly, before Silar swatted it out himself. He lay back on his bedroll and considered the news he had received the previous day. He had fully expected to admonish Morghiad for allowing his woman to become so unhappy, but he had not expected such a reason behind her sadness.

Morghiad had dealt with all manner of problems in the last year or so, but surely this would be most likely to unseat him, and more so given his foolishly honest personality. It would make everyone's lives so much easier if he kept that revelation to himself, and Acher probably expected as much.

Fool bloody man, and no one would be particularly upset if Morghiad removed Acher's head, anyway. Silar's new network told him that much of Cadra, usually home to the king's strongest supporters anywhere in Calidell, had grown tired of Acher in the last few years. Taxes were rising, and poverty too. The hinterlands of Calidell were neutral at best, since all they ever saw of their government was its tax enforcement officers and billeted soldiers.

It had not taken Silar long to track down and verify the source of Morghiad's most recent information. Koviore sounded lucid enough for a man who had lost so much, and he had displayed a curious level of loyalty toward *his kahr*. He had unusually keen eyes and ears though, which were aspects that made Silar feel nervous.

Further, Koviore appeared to be equally in awe of Artemi as if he had known her before, and he had been particularly surprised at her relationship with Morghiad. With any luck, Silar would be able to recruit Koviore to the Calidellian army once he was recovered. A man like that could be a wonderful ally, but a terrible enemy who might drag Artemi Fireblade with him once she remembered. Artemi *and* Morghiad.

Silar's mind turned to Toryn, who he had been able to keep from observing too much of his daughter's recent mood. It would be a matter of time before he discovered the truth of Morghiad's parentage, and Toryn's fear for his daughter's safety would be paramount. Toryn had naturally been curious about the couple's trip to Gialdin, and was wise enough to know that something other than reconnaissance was going on. Some of the other men had joked that she and the kahr-captain had departed to spend some private

time together, or planned to marry in secret, but none seemed to begrudge their departure. The men trusted their queen and they trusted Morghiad.

It was time to test how far that trust could be exploited. Silar ran a hand through his pale hair and closed his eyes against the crimson light. His breathing slowed almost to nothing, and his heart gave no outward sign of beating. Beautiful, crystal clear darkness swathed his mind and pushed out all previous thoughts.

He opened his consciousness to the most recent object he had seen - the gangly insect. It flitted around his mind space in as pointless a manner as it had done in his tent, occasionally butting against an unseen wall or dropping to the floor in confusion. Silar allowed it to escape, drawing forth new thoughts in its wake. Toryn was the first to walk through the mists, his sword drawn and his expression of sadness rather than anger. Silar was not sure of the reasons behind it, and so he decided to introduce Morghiad to the situation, extracting his lofty form from the grey fog.

As had become typical in Silar's last year of meditations, Artemi invaded the scene without invitation. Unfortunately, Silar could not interfere with such things that plagued his viewings, because he did not yet know if she was a symptom of his deepest consciousness or a key figure in all the futures he saw. And so he had to let her play her part in it, though at times, her presence could be more enlightening than her absence.

She looked on at the two men, her brow knotted and her lips downturned. There were no surprises to be found there; hers was a normal reaction to the feelings of the two men she cared for. Then, Morghiad held his hand out to Toryn to shake, but Toryn would not take it. He did not display his disapproval, but before anything else could happen, a glassy wall of ice began to grow up around him as he folded his arms across his sword. Artemi's face reddened as if she might burst into tears, but Morghiad made no attempt to arrest the growth of the ice or destroy it.

Toryn was now trapped inside his cage of ice, also close to weeping, but the shadow he cast lay outside it. It dropped to its knees, appearing to beg for forgiveness from Morghiad, while Toryn's body remained unmoved within its walls of ice. His daughter, meanwhile, was beginning to fade into the background. Her tears had grown into a broad, rippling blue lake at her feet.

She gazed into it for two breaths, and then dove in without a further word. The splash alerted Morghiad, who spun from Toryn and his shadow, tore off his coat, threw off his boots and leapt in after her. The icy walls immediately evaporated from around Artemi's father, and his look of anguish vanished too.

Exactly what all of this meant, Silar could not be entirely sure, but he guessed that Morghiad would have to save Artemi in order to gain the approval of her father. It was impossible to tell how literal the events were, as sometimes they happened exactly as he saw them, and other times the scenes turned out to be loaded with metaphor. Perhaps the

ice had been real ice, and perhaps it had only been a reflection of Toryn's feelings. Whatever it was, Toryn sank down into the mists and the lake calmly folded in upon itself.

But what of the army? Silar wondered. After all of the recent changes, the last thing they needed was a new captain.

Silar drew forth as many faces of the army as he could recall, and thousands more followed in behind them, filling the gaps and expanding the ranks. When his mind felt as if it might burst from the number of people inside it, he pulled Morghiad out from amidst the fog. He stood like a giant before them, revealing nothing of his emotions, but certainly no discomfort or trepidation. He was speaking to his men, and Silar knew, though there was no sound to accompany the viewing, that he was telling them of his true parentage.

Artemi crouched in a dark corner behind him, sword drawn and ready to pounce. A mysterious, flame-covered blade burned at her hip, and she was either ignorant of its presence or thought nothing of it. When Morghiad closed his mouth, the army ranks rippled and wavered, and it was a movement that made Sila's stomach twist. Then everything began to rotate, almost imperceptibly at first, but the rotation grew to a slow spin.

Faces moved about faces, sword slid past sword and expressions changed to confusion, fear or guilt. The entire army was swirling about an axis, spiralling into a vortex of its own making. Hard, white mist dug into the sides of the soldiers, causing them to cry out in pain and tearing some of their number limb from limb. Artemi leapt forward to slash at the mist with her burning blade, but her attempts were in vain. The white mist swallowed up every soul and then turned to consume her. Morghiad watched on, implacable, as she screamed noiselessly and was drawn into the fog. Whatever this meant in the real world, it was not a good omen for Morghiad's honesty.

Silar squeezed his eyes before he opened them to take in the darkness of his tent. He sucked the damp, cold air into his empty lungs and felt their aches subside with each gulp. His head hurt from the effort of the many factors it had assimilated.

His mother had said anyone could look into the future if they knew enough about the people, their history and environment, and she had believed he had a special capacity for it, infinitely more than his brothers. And so she had trained him to truly see the possibilities through deep introspection. *Some talent this was!* All he had seen was what he had thought inevitable, anyway, and it meant he would have to work through the night to solve it.

He would have to introduce new variables to see if they would alter the outcome, and if not, try other ones, and again, and again and onward to insanity.

Morghiad had better be bloody grateful for this, and sorry for the headaches it would undoubtedly cause!

Silar took a swig of water from the canteen by his bedroll, and lay back on the lumpy travel pillow. No doubt Morghiad had something more comfortable upon which to rest his head, and Silar scrubbed that image from his mind hastily. He did not want a

naked Artemi traipsing into his visions, wonderful though it sounded. Such appearances from her had a tendency to cause all sorts of odd outcomes and silly predictions that were useless.

He closed his eyes and fell back into the clear depths of nothingness, the situation was set up once more, and this time Silar tinkered with the number of soldiers present. The outcome was the same. He locked Artemi in a box, hidden from view, but again the army swirled into the white mist. Then he tried getting Artemi to whisper the truth about Morghiad to the men individually, but once more the men were torn apart.

Hours of the night passed as he endeavoured to find a way of saving Morghiad and the army from Acher's influence. Silar even tried placing the king directly into the situation, and the results of that were even more disastrous. Worse, if Morghiad kept the secret, the army would find out eventually anyway and imprison him, before being violently torn apart anyway.

Silar was exhausted, hopeless and drawn. His head pounded from the effort of seeking a single solution.

Sometimes change is inevitable, his mother had said when he'd predicted the death of his favourite, young and apparently healthy horse. He had cried about that in the weeks before it came to pass, but then Silar had only been seven years old. And Faidar had been as good an animal as a boy could have wished for. But that had been something he could not fight. *This* was avoidable – it had to be.

Light from the early sun began to brighten the innards of his tent, which meant it was already time to get up and move the army northwards. Sometimes Morghiad had no idea of the trouble he caused.



Morghiad grabbed Aval roughly by the arm and pulled her to a small copse of tangled oak at the edge of the camp. His fine black hair fell about his ears in unruly wisps and dark stubble marched along his jaw. It was unlike him to appear unshaven, but there was something urgent about his disposition. The man's shoulders worked smoothly with each stride, and days of hard travel and fighting had roughened his looks to new levels of attractiveness. He had been gone for too long while he and his servant witch cavorted in the woodlands of Calidell, but now he was back – back for *her*!

At last, Aval knew, he had accepted his attraction to her over all othes. At last he was going to throw her against a tree and take whatever he wanted from her body. Aval could

not deny that she loved him, but she had met more troublesome obstacles in her time than that little witch.

She softened her lips in anticipation of the attention she knew she was about to receive from her kahr. Men had always been captured by her looks, and she had always ensnared her desired prey eventually.

Would he be as impressive with his clothes off as he was with them on? she wondered.

Aval made sure she took in an eyeful of his excellent bottom while they strode into the trees together, and then smiled lasciviously when Morghiad set her against a broad trunk. He folded his arms, but kept his expression stern, and said nothing.

Perhaps he was waiting for her to advance on him. Sometimes even the most confident of men could secretly be terribly shy, and so Aval stepped forward and raised herself on tiptoes to kiss him. His reaction was not what she had expected. Morghiad grunted, apparently in annoyance, and placed her firmly back against the tree before re-folding his arms. *What sort of game was this?*

Aval moved forward again, only to find her back meeting the rough bark of the trunk once more.

“What is it that you want of me, Aval?” he asked gruffly.

That was a stupid question if ever she had heard one, and clearly brains did not come with beauty. “Oh come now, you know what I desire. Why else would you have brought me here? I have seen you admiring me for some time, so why don’t you—”

“I can assure you that I harbour no admiration for your looks or character.” He added a frown to the words.

By the fires, Artemi must have brainwashed him into saying such idiotic things, and she would get her comeuppance for this!

Aval could think of several ways to make her suffer, not least informing the king of the witch’s little secret. “If that is true, then why have you brought me here?”

Morghiad took a long breath before speaking. “You are not to return to Cadra. If I catch sight of you there, or I hear from my network that you have entered the city, I will have you hunted down and forcibly expelled. You must never go back there. Do you understand?”

He was talking nothing but rubbish. She was a free woman, a daughter of the powerful di Certa family, and no one told them where they could or could not go! Not even a kahr! “I go where I choose. I am not a criminal.”

Morghiad seethed through gritted teeth. “You endangered the lives of people I care about. And impersonating a soldier of the Calidellian army is a punishable offence. So yes, you have committed more than one crime in my eyes and in the eyes of others. You will not return to Cadra.”

Aval's found her heated passion and excitement replaced entirely by the searing burn of anger in her belly. But instead of arguing, she bit her lip and stomped out of the copse.

His voice came from surprisingly close behind her. "I need you to give me your word that you will not return there."

She stalked back into the camp, shoulders stiff with annoyance, and spun to face him. "Why should I do as you command if the king is pleased with my presence?"

"Because you have no choice." Some of the resting soldiers snapped their eyes to their captain, alerted by the tone in his voice.

Aval hadn't wanted to use this threat against him; it was below her, but he was right that she had no choice. "Then I will tell the king about your little whore's secret." Several of the nearby men stood, hands on hilt.

Anger flashed in Morghiad's brilliant green eyes, and his face twisted into a snarl. "If you do anything to endanger her life, I can guarantee that you *will* suffer for it." He clutched at the uppers of her arms with an iron grip that ceased the flow of blood through them. "Do not think that because you are a woman I would spare you any more pain than I would a man. Tell the king, or anyone else about her, and you have my word that I shall. Kill. You." He released her arms, and his tone switched to one of calm. "Pack your things and leave today. I'll have your possessions at Cadra sent to your family's house when we return." He turned and strode from the area with his usual, arrogant grace.

Aval glanced around at the faces of the soldiers. All men stood firmly, arms crossed, and not one appeared to be sympathetic to her plight. One man had even nodded with approval at Morghiad's promise to murder her. *What sort of army was this?*

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as well as fear, though it had not been enough to dissolve her attraction to her cruel kahr. She feared that would take some time to fade, unfortunately. Aval drew herself up, raised her chin and pushed her shoulders back. She had missed her parents in the three years she had been absent from their home, and perhaps now was as good a time as any to visit them. Their lands were not too far from Jesundh, where they had camped. Yes, she really ought to go and see her dear mother and father now.



Silar called out loudly through the tent opening, "Is it safe to come in?"

Artemi stifled a grin, though it was plain in her speech. “Yes, Lieutenant Silar, you may enter.” She had missed him while they had been away - there was something reassuring about his presence, though she could not have said why it was.

She detected a grain of warmth inside Morghiad at hearing Silar’s voice, and though he might never have admitted it, Morghiad had missed him too. Mor’s face was still darker than a thundercloud for all that warmth inside his soul though.

Silar stepped through the doorway, wearing an uncharacteristically crumpled uniform, and the beginnings of a dark yellow beard clutched at his jaw. His hair was all over the place – a morning messiness that he usually wore well, but his face was grey and his eyes bloodshot.

“Light of Achellon, what happened to you?” Artemi got to her feet to look more closely at him, and it was not any better a view from there, either. He appeared as if he had aged a thousand years in the days they had been parted. She guided him down to a soft pile of cushions, fearing he might break, and inspected his exhausted eyes in the dim light.

Silar laughed softly. “As much as I enjoy you fussing over me, I fear it is only a symptom of my own actions. I’ll live, girl.” He brushed her hand from his face.

“What have you been doing?” she asked. “Drinking pinh by the pint?” She could hear Morghiad shifting in the tent behind her, echoing his discomfort with his movements.

“It’s what happens when you spend a few days staring into a pit of possibilities,” Silar replied.

She had no idea what he meant by that, and so she went to sit by Morghiad, who was spinning that dagger of his again.

Morghiad met her eyes. “Silar has something of a talent for looking into the future.”

“That’s not exactly true,” he said.

Artemi looked at Silar with narrowed eyes, but could not believe it when he grinned back at her. “Like the dream I had before the battle?” she ventured.

“No,” Morghiad said tersely.

Silar’s eyebrows drew together, which only made his appearance seem messier than it had before. “What dream was this?”

Morghiad spoke before she could. “It doesn’t matter now. Tell me what you saw, Silar.”

Silar compressed his lips and rested his forearm upon a raised knee. “It is not good. The men will learn of the truth no matter what you do, and when they hear it, the army will be torn apart, or dissolve into a great, big bloody fight between two factions.”

The news came like a punch to Morghiad’s stomach, and Artemi felt it just as keenly.

Silar continued, “The only way I can see to avoid it... and I cannot explain the reasoning behind it... is that you have Koviore with you when you tell them. And after that, you must kill King Acher. And it must be you, no one else. A young sergeant I have not yet

identified and Eupith will try, but we must prevent them. And if you do these things, you two will live and the army will stay whole.”

Why would the men listen to a prisoner who sounded like a madman? Artemi wondered, then asked, “How can you be sure of this?”

He levelled his blue eyes at her. “I’m not, entirely. It is simply the most likely of outcomes.”

“He is usually right,” Morghiad said quietly.

Artemi was more than a little impressed by this talent, if it proved to be true, of course. “Do you know the name of the sergeant?”

Silar shook his head.

“Can you look at the future of anything at all?” Her curiosity peaked.

Silar grinned mischievously at her again. “Only where human action is involved, and only if I’ve encountered the people concerned, or read something of them. No doubt I’ve seen that sergeant before, or brushed past him at some point. My eyes will have seen something about him that my consciousness did not. Of course, I cannot account for the actions of people unknown to me, but the repercussions of their actions cast shadows across the lives of the people I do know. And sometimes those shadows reappear in the things I see. Oh...” he grinned broadly, “And don’t ride into the Jesundh Town Hall naked. It won’t end well.” Silar winked at her.

Artemi could feel her cheeks reddening, and the slightest glimmer of annoyance surfaced in Morghiad, but he was quick to suppress it.

“Do you know if there’s a time limit on dispatching the king?” Morghiad asked.

Silar’s eyebrows rose steadily. “Well, that explains that part of the scene. It can’t be immediate. There was something about three years and a shadow -” He cut off to look at Artemi. “Beyond that I’m not sure; I’ll have to investigate further.”

Morghiad rubbed at his stubble, then said, “Take some days to rest first. There is something else I want you to apply your talents to, which may link closely with what you saw.”

They were keeping something from her, both of them, and she could *feel* it to her bones. *How she hated that!* Artemi trusted them enough to know they thought they were doing whatever it was for her protection, but it was enormously frustrating, and patronising to boot.

Asking about it in the past had only produced blank stares and silence from either, or a swift change of subject. She explored Morghiad’s emotions, but found nothing that betrayed his secrecy. He certainly did not appear to feel guilty about keeping this thing from her, and hopefully he could sense how irritated she was about it. She did not wish to upset him, only to let him know that she wasn’t blind to the undertones of their conversation.

Silar's eyes locked onto her second sword, and he frowned briefly. "Did you find what you were looking for at Gialdin?"

Morghiad nodded. "I can see why Acher was envious of it. If I could move Cadra there, I would. He deserves to pay for what he did."

Artemi filled her heart with love for him, hoping that he would find strength in it, and it worked. Morghiad's grim face relaxed a just enough to please her, and she could feel a smile building up inside him, though it did not surface.

"Well, I could do with a good sleep before we move off again tomorrow." Silar stood and offered a nod to them both. "I will see you then, *King Morghiad*." He grinned and shuffled out while his friend scowled after him.

Artemi regarded her captain as he lay back onto a row of cushions, and propped his head on his hand. His eyes betrayed that he was deep in thought, but his lack of conversation afforded her a chance to study him. She had no doubt that he would make an excellent king for Calidell, and would probably wear a crown on his head with aplomb. It was what he had been raised for, after all.

But the situation was still a surprise to her as she thought on it. Growing up in the poorest district of the capital, she had never expected to be the lover of a king, and certainly not one so handsome.

Artemi did not wish to interrupt his thought, and went instead to study the maps that lay in the corner. There was something very calming about looking at plans of far-off lands, their foreign names and the mysterious drawings of features there. On the top of the pile lay Koviore's drawing of the Kemeni mountain caves. The network was so vast that it stretched over the edge of the parchment and onto a second. How it had persisted without the knowledge of the Kemeni government was a curious mystery, but perhaps no more curious than her own secret within the army.

She placed the map to one side and examined the one below. It was clearly an old chart, since it marked Gialdin out as a separate country with a large, white castle near its centre. Gialdin had been a key acquisition for Calidell, as it provided a direct route to the sea and the vast trade networks beyond.

Artemi had never seen the sea before, though she had read enough books about it, and studied paintings at the castle, but the idea of a lake that stretched out to eternity seemed impossible. While she pondered endless waves and terrible leviathans, her eye was drawn away to a huge, green triangle on a separate continent - labelled *Dekusu Forest*. It covered an area the size of modern Calidell, and was dotted with several small towns. What must it have been like to grow up in an endless sea of trees?

She sensed Morghiad was watching her, and felt a sudden flush of self-consciousness at her own ignorance before him. It did not matter how much she read – he always appeared to know more than she did. He came to glance over her shoulder. "What interests you this time?"

“Dekusu forest. Do you think it is anything like the woodlands around the city of Gialdin or more like those near Cadra?”

“I’ve heard it is like neither one.” He ran a hand over her hair. “There is a book about it in my chambers. It says that they are greener than any normal green, and the trees grow taller than the Cadran walls. Perhaps some of it is a little poetic, but I understand the forests are thick enough to make farms as we know them impossible, and that cities could never grow very large there. It is an excellent place to hide, though you may never find your way out again.”

He was right, she thought. If you were horseless, with only the sun and stars to guide you, it could take months to reach the coast. Artemi returned her attentions to the map, and observed that they were still three weeks from Cadra. She was glad for the time away from the constraints of castle life, for at least while they marched she was free to enjoy Morghiad’s company, and she could be open about her wielding ability amongst the soldiers. That freedom could not be valued in ordinary terms.



The great crowd of chattering soldiers thronged in the practice hall, proud to be wearing their uniforms again. Three days had passed since they had returned to the capital, and in that time, news of their exploits had spread through the city like a plains storm. Great, sinking cliffs and caves with castles in them tended to get townsfolk talking more than bloodied bodies or frightened villagers.

The soldiers laughed loudly between the jokes they told themselves, and shared tales of the adulation and praise they had received. And they spoke of women. For all of their new discipline and sensible behaviour, they still believed they were owed women.

Orwin smiled warmly as Artemi came to stand beside him, and in truth, he felt rather ridiculous to be her sergeant given that she had now bested everyone in the battalion. And of course, she was a famous hero with many thousands of years of experience, which was an amusing thought when he was in the midst of giving her orders.

Artemi offered him a weak smile in return, and Orwin thought better than to ask about it, though signs of her displeasure made him anxious to the core. He had seen the lieutenants before the rest of the men had entered the hall, and all of their faces had been ashen. He stole another glance at Artemi again, and his fears were only further confirmed. Her red lips were thinned from the way she pressed them together, and her fingers fidgeted at her back.

“Whatever it is, Artemi, you will always have us at your side.”

She raised those large brown eyes of hers to regard him, and seemed about to speak, but no words came. She touched his arm gently instead, and resumed her distant stare.

Orwin felt yet more worry creep through his spine. He had not seen her react like that before, and if she had not been Morghiad’s woman, he would have given her a fierce hug to cheer her up. It always seemed to work on his sisters, and Artemi *was* like a rather wilful sister.

The dark figure of the captain flowed onto the stage in a swirl of cloak and sword, and the entire hall hushed in recognition of his presence. There was no doubt in Orwin’s mind that Morghiad had earned the respect of his men in the short time he had led them. They would have followed him to more horrifying places than those dire caves if he had told them it was a good idea.

Morghiad looked over his men, but his face was grimmer even than those of his lieutenants. Come to think of it, Orwin had not seen him crack a smile since leaving the caves, not that he smiled much at the best of times.

The kahr-captain motioned for someone to join him on the platform, and a low hum of chatter followed the guest from the very rear of the hall. Even with the gentle slope of the floor, Orwin could not see who it was from where he stood. Once more murmurs and whispers had passed between the men, two soldiers lumbered and grunted onto the platform with a stretchered man between them.

The giant they had captured from the Kemen caves sat upright upon the carrier. Most of his left arm had now re-grown, which was quite remarkable considering the chunk Morghiad had taken out of it only a month earlier. The soldiers set him down beside Morghiad with a groan at his weight, and went to stand at the edge of the platform. The noises of their feet were amplified both by the shape of the room, and the silence that surrounded them.

Morghiad began, “As you all know, I have given my pledge of honesty to each soldier here, for I believe that trust is an essential part of any army. And trust can only be earned through honesty. Following our exit from the caves, I learned of a truth that had remained hidden from me. It was not kept from me by any man here, because I believe that any soldiers with knowledge of this secret were either put to death, banished or imprisoned. The arbiter of all this was, of course, the man you know as my father, King Acher. And what he sought to hide from you, me and the rest of the country was that I am not his son.”

Orwin felt his stomach clench. There had always been jokes about that, since the two men looked so dissimilar... but why admit it to his own army? *Surely he knew they did not care about that! They did not, did they?*

Morghiad continued, “And it is my genuine parentage and the manner of events that brought me here which complicate the situation further. This man, Koviere Dohsal,

informed me that my parents were from Gialdin, and that their names had been Hedinar Kantari and Medea of House Jade'an."

Gasps and grunts and excited murmurs flew between the soldiers in the hall. Orwin recognised the noblewoman's name, but could not place it. Then again, he had only been ten or twelve when the city of Gialdin had been seized.

Kahr-captain Morghiad... if he was still a kahr, paced the platform. "I had good reason to doubt that any of this was true, but hearing the names of my family sparked a memory. I remember the moment soldiers stormed the white walls of Gialdin's castle. I remember Acher walking in to murder every surviving member of my family. He executed my father and slit my sister's throat without remorse." Morghiad halted and looked to the floor. His expression was unreadable, but there was a touch of emotion in his voice. "So you see, I am not a Kahr of Calidell at all, and I have no right to command you as I do."

"My Kahr-Captain!" shouted one of the soldiers. "It's true that you came to Cadra just after Gialdin was... ah... taken, and I and others remember reading in the city pamphlets about Queen Medea often in the years before. She was well known to us. But there was never any mention of a son. Kahriss Alliah, yes, but she was an only child."

Queen Medea! That was where Orwin had heard of her!

Koviere boomed through the babbling with his giant's voice, causing the stones in the roof and the floor to shudder. "I fought for Gialdin, and I swore my sword to the queen. She kept young Morghiad a secret, because you see, Medea shouldn't have survived his arrival, but she did, and she did not want kidnappers stealing him to investigate what made him special, and she did not want nosy nobles questioning if she had truly given birth to him. So she kept him safe – away from the eyes of court. I was sworn to keep this secret when I was hired to watch over the two children. But, as you can see, I failed miserably at the task I was charged with."

An old sergeant called out from the farthest corner of the hall, "Do you really believe all this, kahr-captain?"

Morghiad nodded. "I know it is for certain. Acher went to the trouble of having the sigil on my shoulder changed, but the original left a shadow, which even the most skilled wielder could not disguise."

Orwin and several of the other men around Artemi glanced at her questioningly, and she nodded in agreement with Morghiad's statement.

Chiming with her movement, another soldier on the far side of the room called out, "I want to hear what the Lady Artemi has to say about this."

She turned to address them, though she was nowhere near tall enough to see the source of the voice, or even above her neighbours' heads. "Both men speak the truth. Beneath the image of the hawk is the outline of a panther. And the two crests were made by different wielders. I do not see how else it could have been engineered."

Morghiad sighed loudly enough for the whole hall to hear it. “I *will* make Acher pay for what he has done, and I plead with all of you not to stand in my way, as I will proceed even with a hundred thousand men against me. I don’t doubt he will hear from this that I have discovered his lie. And now that you know my title is false, I must accept that I can no longer lay claim to captaincy of this army. It has been an honour serving with all of you; a captain could not have wished for better men, but I hereby tender my resignation from your command.”

The hall erupted in a tumult of argument and shouting. The men around Orwin swung between angry declarations of war against King Acher, to squabbles over who could be the next captain, and desperate laments over their guilt for their part in Gialdin’s fall. That battle had long been a sore subject for the army, and many of the older soldiers had simply refused to speak of it.

But now, almost twenty years of festering emotion rent itself free of the army’s wound and spread around the confines of the massive hall.

Morghiad remained where he was, surveying the mess with a pained expression, and Orwin was torn. He cared deeply for both Artemi and Morghiad - they had become the very heart of his army, and now his wielder stared blankly at the rough floor as if she hoped no one would notice her there.

Fires, she was crying! *That was it*. She was going to get a hug, whether it was proper or not, even if Morghiad stormed down from the platform and chopped off his head. He slipped an arm across her shoulders, and squeezed her at his side. “Do you have any good ideas on how to sort this?” he asked. At times, that young-ancient mind of hers could be astute and sharp as the blades she carried, but instead she stiffened and shook her head worriedly.

The booming voice ricocheted through the hall, but this time it was deafening enough to make Orwin’s ears ache. “Are you a complete and utter bloody idiot?”

The army’s furious arguments crashed into a dead silence, and all eyes fell back to Morghiad, who remained on the platform, blinking in surprise.

Koviere stood opposite him, leaning on a staff for support, and with a fierce look upon his square face. No one ever spoke to Morghiad like that, at least not in public, and such words could never be aimed a kahr, no matter what country he hailed from.

The giant continued, “You can’t just leave them without any voice or leadership. Honestly, lad, your father would despair of you!”

Orwin dropped his arm from Artemi, though it was more from surprise than his eagerness to hear a response from Morghiad. If anything, it was likely to be violence, which Orwin was fairly sure he had seen enough of this year.

“I have no right here,” Morghiad said in a low voice.

Koviere boomed again, “Being a leader is not a right, lad. It is earned!”

Orwin thought he heard a harrumph from Artemi, but he was too transfixed by the argument unfolding in front of him to check upon her.

Koviere turned to face the army instead. “Has this man not *earned* his place as your captain?” Many of the men shifted uncomfortably, and some shook their heads. “Is there anyone better to lead you?” he pressed.

That caused a moment of introspection amongst the soldiers, until Beodrin spoke, “Calidell has not known a finer captain. I believe many more of us would be littering the fields of Gorena if he had not been in charge.” Those words carried weight when voiced by the most experienced of the lieutenants, for not long ago, he had been one of the leading candidates to take up the very same title.

Lieutenant Rahake leapt in to speak almost as soon as Beodrin had finished, “If we voted to keep you as our captain, would you stay, *Kahr* Morghiad?” His emphasis on the title was far from irreverent, and there were some nods and shouts of agreement from the back of the hall. Someone else shouted ‘bastard’, but it was only met with laughter.

Morghiad folded his arms and nodded with such solemnness that the laughter faded rapidly. Traditionally, the captain had always been chosen by the King of Calidell, since he was the general in name, but perhaps these were special circumstances.

“Fine then.” There was a shuffling and a nudging of shoulders, then Rahake joined the men on the platform. “All those in favour of retaining Kahr Morghiad as captain, move this way.” He gestured to the windowed side of the hall. The entire room appeared to tip as over eight thousand uniformed bodies stamped toward the windows. Artemi stayed close to Orwin, her smile plain upon her face as she marched with them.

“And what are your orders for us, Kahr-Captain Morghiad?” Rahake enquired.

He frowned for a moment, then smiled. It was a small smile, but definitely there, and definitely happy. “Rahake, I want you to send half your men to tell those currently guarding the city what has happened here. Try to be subtle, if you can. And for the rest of you - go home. The day of naming a captain is traditionally a day of holiday, so that is what you shall have. And Koviere, if you ever speak to me like that again I’ll have your hair braided like a little girl’s and you can wear a dress for the week.”

Koviere bowed his head as a fountain of giggles spread through the ranks.

Just as the sound died down, a young and rather boisterous recruit called out, “My lord-captain, when are you going to get rid of Acher?”

Morghiad unfolded his arms. “Not for a while yet. I need to make sure there is an adequate government in place to take control. Otherwise the entire country could descend into civil war, and I do not think any of you here would relish that. This will take some time to arrange...” He looked in Artemi’s direction. “Likely several years. And I will need the help of every man and woman here.”

That made Orwin’s back itch. The Calidellian army was very good at keeping secrets, perhaps the best at it in the world... but a long-term plan to oust their king was an

entirely different matter from hiding a wielder. By this evening, Acher would probably know of his son's discovery, if not his anger about it.

Something clicked into place in Orwin's head. In 'several' years, Artemi would remember everything from her past. It could make her infinitely more powerful, if not useful, especially if she truly had been a queen.

Orwin wondered for a heartbeat or two if any of the other men had made the connection. And he wondered if the allegiances of the Artemi they knew now would be entirely the same as the one from the storybooks.



The cold air bit at Artemi's face and legs, even cutting through the satin-covered wool of her riding coat. Morghiad held her close, but even his warmth was not enough to fend off the bitter chill of the last vestiges of winter. He reined Tyshar to a halt, and jumped to the frosted ground with her. It felt as if an age had passed since they had last visited the clearing in the Cadran woods.

The kahr who had taught her to ride seemed a different man entirely from the one who was currently tethering the horses. He had been a frozen man, more distant than the lands of Tedarah, but this man exuded only warmth and tenderness. He shot her one of his exceptional smiles while she watched.

The acceptance of the army had lifted his mood immeasurably, and his optimism was infectious, multiplying inside her until she could not help but grin back at him. Morghiad unstrapped the ancient Blaze sword from the saddle and threw it to her. The weapon felt good in her hand, though the angle of it was somewhat peculiar. She gave it a few slashes to get a feel for the balance, but had to admit she preferred the nature of her old sword. Morghiad had insisted she try using only this one, and Morghiad *was* her captain, so she did as he bade.

"I want you to give it a chance," he said, withdrawing his own weapon from its scabbard.

"Older does not necessarily mean better, my kahr-captain, and its design did not save its previous owner." She swapped it to the other hand. It still felt odd.

Morghiad spun his sword in readiness for their duel. These days, their fights tended to last more hours than she cared to count. "Be ready, my *queen*," he said, beaming, before he lunged forward with a diagonal attack. It was very mischievous of him to try to throw her off with comments like that, but she could more than match them.

“My king,” she began, “I hope you are ready to have your royal backside beaten into next week!” Artemi unleashed a fast and powerful side swipe, but the blade turned oddly when it met his, and she found herself struggling to remain upon two feet.

“Oh you can do better than that, surely?” he taunted her.

She struck again, and this time the sword *bounced* off his blade. Artemi was forced to dart left, then right, relying almost entirely upon her speed to escape the worst of his assaults.

“Artemi,” he said between moves, “This is just how I imagined fighting a woman to be. Defensive.”

She crushed her annoyance before it caused her to make a mistake, and resisted the urge to go for a full rally of attacks against him. Rallies against Morghiad did not tend to end in her favour. “And you are just like all the other men - full of bluster when you know you will lose!”

He laughed. *Smug man*. This was not fair at all - how was she supposed to win with this misbehaving, misshapen weapon in her hand?

Morghiad cut faster and struck harder in an effort to push her to her limits, and though she was surviving, she only needed to be slowed by a mistimed blink for it all to end in failure. Her eyes ached, and still the sword reacted in odd ways to his strikes. Artemi strained her muscles to keep it under control, and felt very much as if she fought like a dairy farmer.

“You ought to stop thinking so hard while you fight,” he said in as patronising a tone as he could manage. “Your brain is not equipped for the two things at once.”

“At least I think with my brain and nothing else.” A very old insult - something of a cliché, perhaps, but the occasional truth of it amused her. Her jest sparked another thought her mind, which was surely worthy of experimentation. *What if she behaved more like a man of cliché, and let the weapon lead the way?*

Artemi went for a hard down-swipe instead of parrying Morghiad’s attack, and when metal hit metal, her blade began to fly off to the right. This time she followed it with her body. Before she knew what was happening, she found herself leaping into the air and twisting over his left shoulder, then landed with a thump behind him. She recovered, whipped up the sword, and was ready to swing at her lover again.

Morghiad was quick to spin and meet her next strike, but his emotions told her all she needed to know. Artemi felt a stab of satisfaction, if not a physical stab, over his surprise at the unconventional move. He parried in time to save himself from injury, but her blade cut through some of his clothing. Again she followed the reaction of the sword to her next stance, which seemed to involve a roll to the left. Perhaps the acrobatics were growing somewhat silly, but this time she had the opportunity to pull his feet from under him and send his sword spinning into the undergrowth.

Artemi pinned him to the ground and pressed the blade against his neck. In a real fight, she would have killed him before he knew he was falling.

But instead of embarrassment, or wounded pride and irritation at her, she sensed... excitement, admiration and even... *was that delight? What a peculiar man she had chosen for herself!*

Morghiad only smiled broadly when he felt her confusion, and several lingering looks passed between them before he said, "It's a wonderful feeling when a teacher sees his favourite pupil exceed him."

Artemi withdrew the blade, and felt her brow begin to knot before she could prevent it. Power aside, she had preferred being equally matched to him in most disciplines. "We still don't know what that... thing is that we sense in one-another," she said softly. They had spent many days trying to investigate the peculiar extension to the Blazes that lay between them, and had failed.

Morghiad pushed himself up and dusted a few leaves from his shoulders. "Perhaps it is just a sign that I was intended for you."

Blazes, why did he always talk like that, as if fate had any hand in their love?
"Surely, if anyone was intended *for* anyone else it would be a servant for a kahr?"

Morghiad gave one of those knowing, smug smiles that had become irritatingly abundant in recent months, and Artemi was made very aware of his intense appreciation for her. Before she could act on it, however, a noise drew their attention to the trees on the right.

She lost no time in regaining her feet and stashed the odd sword into Tyshar's saddle. Morghiad was quick to sheath his own blade, and jogged into the undergrowth to investigate the source of the sound. He returned shortly to join her by the horse, and whispered, "It's Acher and his hunting party. I had no idea they'd be out here today. I need you to stop me from stabbing his grotesque, overfed face. Can you keep me level, Artemi?" Hate surged in his river of emotions, making her skin grow cold once more.

She would have preferred it if he had exploded in a fit of rage over Acher, and she had read of countries run with weaker governments than Morghiad could provide with no preparation. The day after Morghiad's announcement before the army, King Acher had called him to account in his solar. Artemi had attended too, though it was not her business, Morghiad had insisted. *He needed her*, he had said, and he wanted to make sure that Acher's men did not murder her while he was being hauled away to prison.

"I hear you are no longer my son," Acher had begun.

"A malicious rumour, started by one of the di Certas," Morghiad had replied. "They want to make us weak because they believe they have a claim upon your throne, father, and because I refused to marry Aval."

Acher's face had grown pink with fury. "Is this true?! My spymaster—"

"Your spymaster," Morghiad interrupted, "Is receiving gold and jewels in payment from the di Certas and the families who would support them. Look inside his chambers if you do not believe me."

Caala and several of the servants had seen to sneaking six glittering items into Lisearon's drawers and under his mattress. He would be no great loss to Calidell when they were discovered.

"Why did you not come to me with this before?" Acher had asked, stroking at his beard.

"Because I had control, father, and I was about to leave for war. I did not anticipate that they would spread these rumours in my absence." Morghiad's lies flowed from him as calmly as a serene river in the Tegan lowlands.

"Fool boy!" Acher had spat. "Clearly you do not have it under control. And they have played this cleverly – very cleverly. Now the world believes you have discovered some great truth on your travels, and intend to kill me!"

"I did not realise," Morghiad had replied in a convincingly dumbfounded manner. "And kill you? Blazes, I would never..."

Acher had shaken his head dismissively. "No, no, of course you would not." And then his eyes had switched from the ground to measure Morghiad more carefully. Artemi could very well have read his thoughts as if she had been Silar. *You do not have the courage to kill me*, Acher had thought at him. If only he had known...

"Then we must *crush* these rumour mongers like insects beneath our boots – squeeze out their very blood until it turns the ground scarlet!" Acher had said finally. "And Lisearon... well, he shall learn the price of betrayal."

But that had been then, and though Acher had fallen for Morghiad's ruse, Artemi could not predict for how long it would work. Acher needed his heir to remain alive so that his reign held at least the appearance of security, and he knew full well that Morghiad controlled almost every part of a huge army. But even this forethought and care could be dispensed with if the king ever sank into one of his moods and Acher did enjoy decapitations.

"If that is what you want, I'll not encourage it," Artemi said finally, though she wished Morghiad would bring his sword out now and pre-empt the king in that regard.

"Thank you." He kissed her softly on her lips and lifted her onto his great warhorse, before taking his seat behind. They rode through the dried and frosted undergrowth towards the noises, which soon resolved into noisy chatter and hoof shuffling from the king's party. Something whisked towards them through the breeze, and in an instant Morghiad had swiped it from the air with his sword.

"Ah! My apologies," laughed Acher's voice from behind a tree, "Thought you were a lost wildebeest." He reined his horse out before them, holding a riding bow, though he did not hold it well. He had grown considerably more overweight in the last few months, which was almost comical to see upon his poor, suffering horse.

Morghiad's temper flared briefly, but he nudged it aside as he thrust his sword into the holster at his back. "No trouble. I didn't know you were hunting today."

Acher grinned broadly. "I didn't know you were out whoring today!"

Artemi was untouched by the insult, well-aware of how unconsciously the king had dispensed it. Her kahr on the other hand, continued to boil with irritation that leached through to her veins. He laid a hand upon hers in an effort to regain control, and she squeezed it firmly.

The remainder of the party filtered through the trees with their bows and spears held aloft, and Artemi was able to identify most as nobles. One of them was Passerid in his plain brown clothes, but the other soldiers wearing swords were Acher's guard for the day. Acher's by name, anyway. Each of them was loyal to Morghiad.

"Good to see you enjoying the fresh air, kahr-captain," Passerid offered a nod.

Morghiad returned it amiably. "Lord Collibry."

But Acher's eyes narrowed so far they became thin lines in his bloated face. "Yes, *kahr-captain*, I have been meaning to discuss a few more things with you about your recent trip to the south. I hear there's been no progress in finding that young lady we discussed. What's more, I hear your army came back almost completely unscathed. Now that is a combination of the impressive and unimpressive, is it not?"

Morghiad shifted in the saddle behind her. "My men are excellent fighters, but perhaps we are not so well-trained for detective work."

Acher fiddled with his beard for a moment, likely wondering if Morghiad was either stupid or a coward, or both. "They've always caught the runaways in the past, lad. What are you doing to that army of mine, eh?"

"I've done very little. They made themselves *into* an army, father." His last word filled him with revulsion and self-loathing, so much so that Artemi almost cringed from the feeling of it. She interlocked her fingers with his again and squeezed them a second time.

Acher drew his mouth tight and placed a curled fist upon his meaty hip. "Find that girl," he said, "Or I'll have that pretty wench off you as a replacement!"

Some of the nobles chuckled from their mounts, though Passerid was notable in his solemnity.

At those words, Morghiad's torrent of fury was close to exploding from his body. Artemi felt herself become similarly enraged, though she had not possessed the slightest intention of becoming so. His emotions were pouring from their river, directly into her own, and there was no dam to stop it!

She took a long, deep breath that stretched out her ribs, and forced calm back into her thoughts, picturing herself as a slow, blue-white glacier in the bleak mountains. And she pushed the image hard into the roiling, searing swirl of anger that now fought to control them both. The effect upon Morghiad was startling, and he spoke in even, measured tones. "She'll turn up, father."

Acher nodded in apparent satisfaction, and turned back to his party.

Artemi lessened her grip on Morghiad's hand, realising she had very nearly squeezed the blood from it, and he moved it to her waist to pull her closer. "I need you like winter needs summer," he whispered in her ear. Upon his expression of affection, or perhaps reliance, something happened in her body that took her entirely by surprise. Her vision became suffused by the brightest light, and her skin burned furiously with the fires inside her.

She shook with the force of it, and drew the air in deeply to feed it before she suffocated. The Blazes were there, glowing brightly in her mind, and no longer distant. She knew what it meant as Morghiad's eyes widened, he gripped her tightly and his concern suffused her awareness. She was finally ready, finally mature.

Artemi was a full, unfettered and powerful wielder, ready to raze the world and incinerate every one of her foes.

Passerid stared openly at her, his skin paling to a bloodless shade. But Artemi moved her gaze slowly, implacably to the king - the man who had wronged her Morghiad so terribly.

"Let it go, my heart," Morghiad said in low tones. "Now."

The fires burned so intensely through her soul, permeating every muscle with its roar and might. Passerid took a step closer on his mount, and she readied herself to blast him out of her way.

"No," Morghiad said, and he grabbed her hand and set about extracting her from the power she held. Artemi fought back vigorously, squirming from his grip and baring her teeth like a trapped wolf. *She* held superiority with the Blazes coursing through her, *and she was so much stronger than anyone else here!*

"Artemi." Morghiad clutched her jaw and turned her face until she met his eyes - *those eyes...*

"My apologies for interrupting your lover's embrace—"

They both snapped their gaze to the king, and Artemi felt her power dissolve to the corners of her mind. But it was still there, glowing, reassuring and ready whenever she required it.

Acher continued, "Well, you are holding up my hunt. And I want to get on with finding some tasty deer. Off with you, children!"

Morghiad gave a curt nod, and kicked Tyshar firmly to a fast pace. Once they were out of both sight and earshot, he pulled the animal to a halt and dismounted to speak to her. "I thought you were going to blow everything to Achellon! What is to become of us if I cannot hold my temper and you try to destroy everything in your path?"

"I wanted to..." she sighed as she shifted in the saddle. "It seems the summer needs the winter, too."

He smiled, and began to laugh. "I don't think you've ever needed anyone else to achieve anything."

Artemi allowed him to feel her annoyance. “The only thing I would have achieved without you would have been my own death.”

“How could anyone with eyes permit that?”

“Quite easily, judging by the number who’ve tried.” Artemi fiddled absent-mindedly with the reins on the pommel of Tyshar’s saddle.

Morghaid placed his hand on her leg. “They were simply bitter that they could not bed you.”

“Even the eisiel? And the entire rogue army in Kemen?”

“Of course,” Morghiad said. He almost seemed to believe it.

Artemi looked down her nose at him, chin raised. “You are a fool.”

“This fool has what no one else has.” His grin remained unchanged.

“I thought you said you could never own me.”

“I often own your company.” Morghiad reached around her waist to pull her from the saddle.

She swung her left leg across it, and slid down to join him on the ground. “I am your soldier, so you own me as you own your sword.”

“But now you are free to wield that weapon as you wish. Why don’t you have some fun? Surprise me.”

It was dangerous wielding here, so close to the king, but Artemi smiled broadly anyway, and reached into the rolling flames of the Blazes. Perhaps Cadra ought to experience a little sunshine against the cold.



Chapter 16

As she turned to leave the room, Artemi's braid flicked from her shoulder to her back like a bolt of golden fire. Morghiad admired the figure-hugging, green scarves that caressed the curves of her sinuous hips. He found his love for her had transformed into something of a deep obsession over the years, and his hunger for her had grown rather than waned. Being locked away from Artemi was going to be the toughest trial he had ever faced, and he would have to face it very soon.

Four years had passed since he had learned the truth of his parents, and though Artemi did not know it yet, she was nearly ready to rule. He had taken every opportunity to school her in the ways Calidell was run, dropping tid-bits into conversations, getting Silar to tell her of his secret network and its findings, introducing her to those he hoped to elect to government, even bringing items for administration into their chambers.

Artemi did not seem to suspect that he intended to place her solely on the throne, and he did not know how much longer he could keep it from her. She, like much of the army, believed that he would assume the role of king once Acher was dead.

But other developments had made the situation more pressing. First off, Artemi had started experiencing regular headaches, and they seemed to be growing in magnitude and duration. Morghiad had done his best to explain them away, but he was pushing her trust. She knew he was keeping the truth of the headaches from her, and had even started to describe events which could only have occurred in a long-distant past.

His second problem was that of the king's benay-gosa, Suhla. Incredibly, Acher had managed to keep her around for nearly nine years, and rumour was that she would fall pregnant very soon. If Suhla did produce an heir, all of Morghiad's careful planning could be for nothing. Even more troublesome, the man Acher had hired to guard his benay-gosa in the last few months carried dark airs about him. There was something in his manner that made Morghiad's skin itch all the way up his back. He was not a man pulled from the ranks of the Calidellian army, but hailed from Forda in the north. Hegard was his name, he was a mercenary, and as far as Morghiad could tell, not pliable with money.

The door slid shut behind Artemi and her guards, refocussing his attentions. He did not like leaving her unattended when she had nowhere to conceal a sword, so his men trailed her everywhere now. He felt her contentedly striding away from him, along the hard, stone floor that cooled her bare soles. Her flame bobbed in his mind from

anticipation of some freedom, as today would be one of her few outings beyond the castle walls.

Morghiad looked across at the assembled men; the ones he trusted the most to care for her, Cadra and Calidell in his absence. They were among the few who knew of his true plans. Silar was there, of course, and Toryn, still as cold towards Morghiad as ever, then Koviere, useful for his knowledge of her from before - if not just his excellent swordsmanship. Beside him was Beodrin, who seemed to have adopted Artemi as a second daughter, Passerid and Jarynd, for obvious reasons, and Orwin, who had the potential to make a fine lieutenant once either Beodrin or Silar became captain.

The matter of captain was something Morghiad still had to make his decision upon. Outside the army, he had prepared a number of excellent administrators, treasurers, and men of law, though of course, they did not yet know why they had been prepared. Finding sympathetic governors from the provinces had been tricky, but Silar had been indispensable in locating seven very reliable ones, including his own father. The nobles knew more, of course, but then, building factions and seeking political support was nothing new in their circles. "Any news from Lord Yardinehr yet?"

Silar shook his head. "I think he is nervous of agreeing to support her in writing, but I know he will be very useful once she is... in place. But Cadra is far more important for her. She has some concrete support here, especially as the rumours about her being some long-lost hero of the past seem to be circulating like wildfire." Silar grinned broadly, clearly proud of his gossip-mongering amongst the people.

Morghiad nodded. "Good. Beodrin, have you managed to find any more out about Suhla?"

Beodrin regarded him gravely, glancing to and from his sheaf of papers. "I found a little man in the castle archives. Dorlunh. He found the admission document for her - it is dated to the end of the first month, 3207 PD."

"Then it is only four weeks away..." Orwin half-whispered.

Toryn cut in. "The timing is not always that precise." He all but glowered at Morghiad. "What are you going to do to make sure Artemi does not end up in this situation?"

That was just what he needed! At the last meeting, it had been questions about marriage and dedications and honour, and now he was being pressed over *this*? How awkward did Toryn desire him to feel?

"I am hardly going to be able to achieve that from inside a prison cell, now, am I?" Morghiad replied in a rather more sarcastic manner than he had intended.

"Break her heart, and I'll collect your head," Toryn threatened for a fourth time. At least he was in a better mood than usual. The new woman Toryn had taken to his chambers seemed to be doing him a world of good, and though Artemi had found her

presence tough at first, she had proven herself able to accept she was no longer the only female in her father's life. The two women seemed to get along famously these days.

Jarynd rubbed his gnarled chin. "How long before Artemi remembers?"

Morghiad sighed, "About a month." They would certainly have to pre-empt matters to be sure there were no loose ends. He turned his emerald eyes to Koviere. "I want to know how the old Artemi would react to being told she was to be queen." He should have asked this months ago, of course, but he had feared hearing the answer too much to dare.

Koviere's rectangular forehead creased into great furrows that a good-sized plough could fit. He still believed Morghiad ought to be king, and still found Artemi and Morghiad's relationship at odds with his memories of her. "You know, there are some... significant differences between this girl and the woman. Trying to tell her what to do was like attempting to put a hurricane in a box. She won't agree to something like this unless you give her no choice. Don't tell her until Acher is dead and she is walking to the throne."

Toryn grunted.

Morghiad did not like it either. He was lying to her about so many things, and she knew it, but trusted him anyway. "No one will be able to put her in a box once she's queen." He stood and paced the room.

"No, indeed. We are all moths to her flame, are we not?" Silar commented absently.

Morghiad was doing the best for her and for the country, wasn't he? "And currently we push that flame about where we please." It was the only way. *Fight to save what you love*. Destroying Acher was a part of that, and he wasn't doing it purely out of hate. Not quite, anyway.

The window looked out onto the entrance courtyard and beyond, the dark grey wall that protected the castle. A light sprinkling of snow covered the untrodden surfaces like a dusting of icing sugar. He could sense Artemi was just entering the city proper, exchanging jokes and laughter with her guards.

"There is still the matter of captain to be dealt with. I need someone who can keep everything together... but still make best use of their respective skills. I've had a thought: Beodrin, you should be captain after me. And Silar, I believe you would be best-placed as general. Orwin and Toryn can fill your current positions."

There were some raised eyebrows at the declaration, and Silar raked his hand through his hair. "Shouldn't Artemi be Calidell's general? Even ignoring tradition, her experience considerably outweighs ours."

He was right, but it was likely she would have her hands too full of other problems to manage the two at once. "Acher uses the army outside of Calidell purely as tax enforcers. Silar, you have an opportunity to do something different with them. Though I am sure Artemi will offer her advice if you ask."

"I can't believe this is happening," Orwin whispered.

Morghiad allowed half a smile to escape. He had not quite come to terms with it all, either.

A wave of unexpected heat brushed at Morghiad's neck, and Passerid screwed his face up at the same moment. "Wielding in the city? Is that her?"

Morghiad grinned for his own benefit. He had been very underhanded when it came to the matter of wielders. "Not Artemi. Ignore it, it is not dangerous."

Acher now believed himself paranoid at seeing all the recent, strange lights in the city, and every kanaala had denied vehemently it was Blaze-related. Fires, but it was so very satisfying to see at least one of his plans come into beautiful fruition!

The women had been chosen carefully for their willingness to tease the king, and also for their integrity. All were relatives of the people he trusted.

"I thought they were only supposed to do that at night," Passerid said.

Morghiad nodded. "They have permission to place images before Acher, day or night. I suppose they're just more visible at night."

"You are a crafty man, Morghiad Jade'an," Koviore sighed with not insignificant amusement.

The meeting turned to matters of law enforcement, and Morghiad made clear he wanted the castle gaolers removed entirely and replaced with some more honourable types. But it was an awkward matter to advance, given he was their next prospective convict.

He had to serve through his punishment for what he was about to do, and how those men would treat him mattered nothing, after all. What worried him, however, was their fervent loyalty to, and apparent direct chain of command with, Acher. Morghiad was not foolish enough to believe they would be quick to switch allegiance to Artemi, and he hoped to leave Cadra a garden free of thorns for her. "Silar, has Sergeant Neleum been dealt with?"

He grimaced. "He won't be stabbing Acher any time soon, though he wasn't easy to persuade."

Morghiad nodded with approval, but as he did, he felt fire burn deep into her skin, and snapped his head back to the window. A kanaala had touched her, but not one she knew. She felt... concerned.

"Beodrin, are all the other kanaala in the castle today?"

He nodded with a puzzled look. "Training as you requested, kahr-captain."

Artemi had turned around, and was headed directly back toward him. "This meeting is finished," Morghiad announced, and he swept out of the room, cloak billowing in his wake.

He knew without looking that Silar was following him, but then, he was the only one who truly knew of the significance of Morghiad's link to Artemi. Others suspected, but could not credit it. "She's alright, Silar. I will deal with this," he said.

No one was behind him when he next glanced into the gloom of the halls behind him. He trotted down the steps as fast as he could without breaking into a run, and paced to the main courtyard. Artemi was already striding through the main gate when he reached the portcullis, with five guards flanking her like a dark halo. Her expression was of measured calm, which belied the worry inside.

Morghiad clasped her by the uppers of her arms. "What happened?"

Her features became tight as she did battle with them. "I was in the market," she began. "It was so busy, so crowded and someone... a kanaala, brushed against me. They *know*. They know I'm a wielder, and whoever it was is not someone we know."

"Didn't any of you get a good look at him?" Morghiad eyes each of the guards.

Artemi shook her head, and each of the soldiers looked away from his stare, embarrassed at their failure. "There were hundreds of people there. Don't blame them. It could have been anyone," she added.

Morghiad fought off a grimace. He could not sense other kanaala in the way he could wielders, and just like Artemi, their abilities remained invisible until touched. He could scour the entire city and never find this man, which meant a trap would have to be laid instead. "It's alright, I'll keep you safe. I made you a promise that I would." Morghiad embraced her tightly. "Though you know you could deal with him adequately yourself, if it came to it."

Artemi half-laughed into his chest, the tension lifting from her muscles.

Morghiad released her and stood back to stroke a hand through her hair.

"Dismissed, men," he said.

The guards filed off tidily, until they stood alone in the chill wind.

She made his heart ache when he studied her as she was, enrobed in the white fur and green satin coat as it swirled about her body. Thick flakes of white snow began to gather in her auburn hair, settling like spring flowers. Artemi interrupted his reverie, probably tired of his incessant stares. "Let's go back to your chambers."

Her flame was growing cold inside his head, and so Morghiad removed his cloak and wrapped it around her, which she seemed to find rather amusing. He held her close as they walked back to *their* chambers, and turned his mind to serious matters.

Along with her headaches had come her increasing desire for independence. She wanted to be out riding, walking or practising with the sword when he was busy with his own duties, but she abhorred asking his permission as if it made her feel unclean. Morghiad wished to accommodate her in all these things, to give her some freedom and anticipate her moments of claustrophobia, but it was difficult when her life was at stake - difficult when her life was so important.

The more he cared for her, the more he realised he could not keep hold of her, and yet the tighter he wished to grasp her.

“What troubles you? Are you missing your cloak already?” She smiled up at him as they walked.

Morghiad moved his hand to her waist. “No. What would you like to do tomorrow?”

“With you?” She felt hopeful, and mischievous.

“I’m sorry, Artemi, I have another meeting to sort out this government. Likely it will take all day. Is there somewhere you wish to visit, or perhaps I can send a good sword hand to fight you?”

She shrugged and pursed her lips. “I’d rather stay close to you for the moment. I’ll remain in the castle, if that’s where you’re having the meeting.”

He nodded, and could not deny he felt relief that she had opted to remain close.

“There are still parts of this building I’ve never explored.” Artemi pulled the cloak so that it fitted around her more snugly. “It’s going to happen soon, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes.”

When they entered his apartments, she draped his cloak across the back of the armchair and seated him upon the edge of the bed. There was no question that she commanded him in private, though all of Cadra likely knew that. “I have a gift for you.” She grinned with a sparkle in her dark eyes.

Morghiad hoped it would be something he could take to the cells with him.

She went to the dresser, upon which a wrapped package lay, and took it into her arms. “I had this delivered from a shop in the city. I don’t expect you to like it immediately, but I know I have chosen well...” Artemi handed him the soft parcel.

He frowned. She ought not to be buying anything for him. “My la -”

“Shut your royal mouth and open it.”

Morghiad obeyed, and set about un-wrapping the gift. Whatever it was felt weighty and flexible, like heavy fabric. Fires, what if he did not like it?! She would know, and then she would be hurt... and no amount of kissing would make her forget. He did his best to suppress his fears, and when the last of the paper had been removed, he spied folds of deep blue velvet. It was so dark, it was almost black. He glanced up at her, about to speak before she had opportunity to check his emotions.

She cut him off again. “Find out what it is first, and then you may reprimand me.”

He carefully unfurled the material and laid it on the bed next to him. It was a full-length, perfectly tailored coat, split for riding and subtly edged in gold. Morghiad had never owned anything so understatedly extravagant.

Artemi seemed pleased with his silence. “A beautiful man should wear beautiful clothes. And besides, you have spent the last few years dressing me, so it is high time I did the same for you.”

“You will turn me into a peacock of a man,” he warned.

She laughed. “I don’t believe anyone would think that of you, and you are prettier than a peacock. Are you going to try it on?”

He stood and unbuckled his old, worn, black coat. It had seen better days, and quite a few fighting ones. Artemi watched him intently as he slid his arms carefully into the new one, and surprisingly, it fitted snugly around his chest and arms, before dropping freely from his waist. Gold buttons marched up the front of it, and a slash at the left side made room for his sword, should he wish to wear the belt beneath the coat. Morghiad did not like that arrangement, and so he re-fastened the belt on the outside. He looked at Artemi for reassurance, feeling very, very much like a primed peacock in spite of her assurances.

But Artemi said nothing, and stared blankly instead. He could feel her love and sexual desire burning away, but there was something new there - a cascading feeling that made her skin prickle. "You will make a wonderful king," she said. "And not just because of your mind, lineage, or your sword skills. Now you truly look like one, and a legendary one at that."

Morghiad struggled for words as he waded mentally through his mire of guilt. It was not right for him to accept this when he had misled her so far already, and the more he thought on it, the deeper he became bogged down. And so he did the only thing he could think of to rid himself of the feeling. Morghiad picked her up, hooked her legs about his midriff and pressed her against the wall.

Flames tore through his face as he kissed her, arresting all the disquiet he had suffered before. These moments with her were the only moments of true clarity, when no events intervened and no worries interceded. It had been selfish of him, he knew, to keep her here when she could be hidden in the safety of a provincial farm. But as she pulled at his clothing and pressed her soft, rounded breasts against him, he believed that selfishness had been entirely correct. She was supposed to be here, and ruling Calidell had always been her destiny. He was merely her facilitator.

Morghiad would be the stepping-stone she needed to make her next legend, and fate had decided his love for her would be the bedrock for it. The pair fell to the floor, where they spent the entire night riding the ecstasy of their Blaze-filled passion.



King Acher squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, then squeezed them again as the lights danced upon the ceiling above. Sometimes they formed shapes he could almost recognise, but mostly they were abstract curiosities that kept him awake. No one else ever claimed to see them, and they only flashed before him when he was alone. At first he had

been sure it was a trick of a witch, but no kanaala he had asked knew what he was talking about, and one had given him the strangest expression when he had mentioned it.

Acher feared he was starting to go mad, and squeezing his eyelids together was probably making it worse, besides. The madness happened to older people, and he had endured the displeasure of witnessing it when he had been a young lad of a hundred. One too many centuries in this world, and one's brain started to rot within its casing.

But he ought to have made it to a thousand years before this happened! He was only three-hundred and sixty-bloody-seven!

Acher sprang from the black velvet of the chaise and paced his quarters, but the lights followed him around the room. Suhla was absent this evening, and he was not entirely glad for the time alone as he might once have been. She was pretty enough, and loyal, but the girl was entirely too stupid to be of much use beyond keeping him sane. Acher hoped the child she produced would take its intellect from him, and he prayed it would be male. A queen would never do for Calidell.

He thought briefly of Tylena, the woman who happened to get herself killed in the same year as Morghiad's birth, and a convenient substitute for Medea. Both women appeared to merge into one in his mind, these days, but then they had borne the same black hair.

He remembered that he had loved Medea, but that she had suffered the terrible misfortune of being a wielder. She could have lived in such wealth and luxury if she had accepted his kind offers. All the woman had to do was undergo quenching to remove her of that cursed fire, and all of her worst personality traits would have been washed away with it. True, she would never have been safe to take to bed, but she would have made a fine decoration for the court – a jewel in his crown.

Instead, she had clung to her dangerous ways, and had left him with that pathetic excuse for a son. And no wonder Morghiad was so useless at every task he was set - the boy's father had been just as soft, weeping over a dead woman before he bothered to defend his own offspring.

And what a problem Morghiad had become! Five times in the last year, he had directly defied Acher over military matters, and Acher was not about to lie back like a benay-gosa and accept it! *No*, he needed to punish Morghiad severely for his insolence. Taking that fine, red-haired girl off his son's hands would be the first step, and then perhaps a stint in the cells would be a good, reinforcing second. A noise outside his chambers broke his reverie, and it sounded very much like a man beyond was arguing with one of the guards.

"... This is an urgent matter, I must see our king."

"The king does not like to be bothered at this time in the evening. Come back tomorrow," came a muffled response.

"I'm telling you now before you lose your head, he would want to know about this!"

Acher recognised the visitor's voice and its northern accent as belonging to Hegard. A mercenary and a truth-speaker, he had proven himself reliable in matters that required a certain level of discretion. What's more, he had come highly recommended by one of Acher's most prolific provincial law enforcers. Acher had heard enough through his doors, and went to open them. "Let him in," he commanded.

A robust man with grey eyes and tied, lank brown hair strode in. All of his features were sharp and pointed like the mountains of his home country, giving the impression that his clothes must tear each time he put them on over his head. The door slid shut behind him. "Sire." Hegard appeared to be particularly disgusted at the world today.

Acher went to sit by the window, and there he rubbed at his beard. It was only then that he realised the man's presence had rid him of the lights. *Damned lights!* "What is it, Hegard? Is Suhla safe?"

Hegard straightened and drew his pointy features into thin lines. "She is fine, but there is something else I have discovered that may threaten her, you and everyone else in this city."

"What is this menace you speak of?"

Hegard's face darkened to a shade of black. "Today I took leave of my duties with Suhla, as I detected wielding in the city. There have been small amounts of it at night, which I attributed to be nothing more than the results of the castle's kanaala training, or perhaps an undiscovered wielder who was unaware of her talent."

King Acher felt his gorge rise. "What?!" he exclaimed.

Hegard had also been recommended on account of his effectiveness in dealing with witches, and by the fires, he *would* deal with this one!

"Indeed, sire. I expected that your son and his team would already have spearheaded these occurrences, but when I asked one of their newer recruits if he had noticed anything untoward, he replied that he had not. That aside, I went into the city to investigate, and that is when I happened on this worrying discovery."

Acher's bones seemed to weaken within him, and he creaked from his seat and scraped as best he could round the perimeter of the room. "You're telling me that Morghiad has not suppressed these wielders?"

"Worse than that," Hegard replied. "While I was walking the streets, I came across something very unusual. I chanced to brush past a wielder, by far the most powerful I have ever seen or sensed, and yet the moment our contact was broken, she was invisible to my senses. She is a *hidden wielder*, my lord. Further, her identity is known to you. She is the kahr's benay-gosa."

Acher felt fury consume his entire being. "*Her?* Are you sure of this?"

Hegard nodded gravely.

His body shook with rage, his heart pumped and thumped until his veins were ready to explode from his skin. *He had been deceived by a boy whose life he had saved!*

Acher had given Morghiad *everything! And this... betrayal was his gratitude for all of that?!*

Without thinking, Acher picked up a delicate glass ornament, probably worth more coin than most people could conceive of possessing, and crushed it in his hand. The remains clinked and chimed upon the floor as he released them.

Well, Acher thought, he could not very well execute his own, supposed son for treason when there was no other heir to replace him. That would have proved too much of an excuse for Hirrah to invade, and with Morghiad still at the head of the army... *No*.

Acher would have to be patient in that regard, and his guards... *Blazes! His guards*. They were commanded by Morghiad too, so he could not even trust them to hunt Morghiad down for this! How could he have been so blind, so foolish!?

Time, he told himself, staying his breathing and trying to bring order to his heartrate - he would have to take his time over this. With much difficulty, Acher forced his passions into a black hole inside his head, and said, "Hegard, can you dispatch this wielder alone?"

The man's jagged face nodded, casting peculiar shadows across his own cheeks. "It is possible, but she must be caught unawares. And I'll need to separate her from the guards that Morghiad has placed around her, assuming she is not with him."

Acher rubbed at his beard one more time for luck. "You and I will locate her tomorrow morning. I will deal with the guards and my son. You will escort her back to the benay-gosa apartments. Take her to a small room and get rid of her."

"I will need her to trust me, my lord."

Acher nodded. "You were recommended to me on that account, and you will not disappoint me. Do whatever is necessary to achieve this outcome I desire. I will see you here two hours after dawn."

Hegard bowed and made his exit, and by the light of Achellon, he had been worth every penny! *Betrayed, by the man he called a son!*

Wielders were horrid creatures, created by nature to kill and wreak havoc upon men, but when a kanaala, the first line of defence, turned on those he was meant to protect it was unforgivable!

Acher ground his teeth together and clenched his fists again and again. He had almost taken that woman as his benay-gosa, and in her arms, he would have died that night, utterly oblivious to his error. Morghiad - that bastard *child* had stepped in to keep her... it all made perfect sense that he must have known about her from the start. Acher stormed into his bed chamber, and collapsed onto the sheets, fully clothed. The lights had returned again, but now the sight of them comforted him just a little more. They would surely go once she was dead.



Soft dawn light teased Artemi's eyes open, and she squinted as it began to glare from the blade of Morghiad's sword. He was still fast asleep upon the floor beside her, exhausted from the previous night's exertions. The marble flagstones felt cool against her skin, though several of her muscles complained at being made to lie on it. Morghiad's arm rested heavily over her side, but she knew that moving it would wake him from his deep slumber.

Artemi was content to lie there for a while longer, letting him enjoy the peace that now so rarely filled his mind. She took the time to examine his fine features, his delicate waves of black hair that touched his eyelids - that brushed at the short stubble where it met his jaw. Though she had considered it so many times before, it still surprised her each time she recognised how handsome he truly was. His face now was a world away from the grimly cut statue of granite she had once regarded. Flawless silence filled the room about them, and she felt true contentment for the first time in months.

It was not long before his clear, green eyes popped open and smiled warmly at her. Artemi relished those few, delicate seconds before a world of concerns poured into his thoughts like a summer storm's deluge. He beat them back, forced them into a corner of his consciousness, but they were still in there, frothing their negativity. "Good morning," he said softly.

Artemi shifted to a more comfortable position and smiled back. "Hello."

"Come here." He scooped her up and carried her to the bed, where Artemi was happy to curl in his arms for the moment. Once believing herself a self-sufficient woman who needed little else but her earnings, it was odd how dependent she had become upon his company - how much she *needed* it.

Of late, Morghiad had been trying to push her back into self-reliance by sending her out to train, or walk the countryside without him. Not that any of it was truly self-reliance when one was surrounded by soldiers with their swords. She knew that part of it was to occupy her while he held his secretive meetings, but she would rather have been either alone or with him. It had been a long time since she had spent time on her own, and longer since she had been permitted to bathe without informing someone about it. She knew she had been... *tamed*.

Artemi switched her gaze to the scar that trailed the lower part of his left collar bone. A year's healing had made its surface relatively smooth, and now Artemi ran her fingers along the darkened line. The wound had been tricky to clean, but she was rather proud of the job she had done in fixing it. A dab of swift liquor had helped, of course.

Wisnden had been a muddy, rain-soaked and steam-filled battle, and Artemi had relished every minute of it. Pure life had flowed through her with each strike of Blaze and every slice of her sword. It was not that she enjoyed taking other men's lives, and thinking of that could have driven her insane, it was more that she was doing something with meaning. In battle, she fought for her home country, for its people, her brothers and for Morghiad. Moreover, she knew she was good at it.

Morghiad began stroking her hair in the way he did when she thought, sometimes twisting it between his fingers. "What do you plan to do today?" he asked.

"I thought I might spend some time in the library."

Morghiad stopped fiddling with her hair briefly. "You know the most ancient army records and city plans are kept there?"

Artemi laughed softly. He seemed to exploit any opportunity to educate her about running Cadra these days, and wasn't subtle about it at all. Of course, she would be happy to help him with the workload, but it surely meant he planned to marry her and make her his queen. Artemi *could not* allow herself to hope for anything like that – no, she would be perfectly happy to act as his steward when it was required.

"I know what you are trying to do," she said. "Perhaps I shall have a quick peek at them."

"Good. Have a look at city folder *thirty-four A*." Morghiad clambered off the bed and ambled lazily to his garderobe. "I have to meet with the council in the practice hall."

The council. That was his name for the men he trusted to rebuild Calidell's government once Acher was gone. She disliked being excluded from it, and she disliked him keeping secrets from her. In truth, Artemi was coming close to losing patience over it. "Morghiad, I have never questioned why you keep these plans from me, and I've never doubted that you're doing it for the right reasons..." She felt his river of emotions thicken with tension. He came to stand at the doorway as she spoke. "...but, if you need my help, I'd be better placed to offer it if I was better informed. Wouldn't you agree?"

Morghiad looked at the floor for a long, uncomfortable time, and she did not need her link to him to know his mind was working hard. "I will tell you everything soon," he said. "You have my word, and I will need you." He turned back to the bath to fill it from the giant brass taps.

Burn it! Artemi was just as frustrated and unenlightened as before. *Insufferable man! In many ways he was still made of rocks!*

She threw her legs out of the bed, wore her sourest expression, and landed with only a modicum of grace on the floor. Gazing out of the nearest window, she observed the sun had retreated behind a thick layer of heavy cloud. It was going to be a grey day to match her mood. Even the sprinkling of yesterday's snow had melted into a dark sludge on the dull stone.

Morghiad slid his hands across her while she studied the landscape beyond. His approach had been as silent as a panther's stalk. "I will upset a fair few people with what I am about to do, but it is for the best. I am sure of that."

"Are you worried it will upset me?"

He hesitated for a heartbeat, then said, "Yes." The word came out almost as a croak.

Artemi turned to him, wondering what in Achellon he really was planning. "I see," she said. "Well, it is lucky you have such a pretty face for a man. Otherwise, your punishment for upsetting me would be much worse."

He smiled thinly and kissed her forehead, before leading her to the garderobe behind him. The bath was full of wisp-root scented soap, cut through with limegrass perfume. They climbed into the hot water together, and began their somewhat lengthy ablutions.

Her personal guard was waiting outside by the time she had dried off and donned her green scarves. Her attire seemed such a normal part of the routine now, ridiculous as it was, though some of the soldiers would still tease her about it. Artemi hoped that would never stop, for fear she would lose grip on what *normal* truly was.

Morghiad embraced her only briefly before he left for his meeting, and his cloak swished behind him as he faded into the gloom of the hallways.

Artemi was glad to see that Neleum was amongst her men today. He was a sweet-humoured boy of eighty, with a naughty grin and glittering eyes to match. In truth, if it weren't for his very dark brown hair, he would have been the soulmate to Silar.

There were two other soldiers she recognised in her guard, and two unfamiliar faces. They introduced themselves as Cydia and Laothoe. Eupith was conspicuously absent from the group, since a lieutenant normally accompanied her, and it had been his turn, but Artemi thought little of it.

Neleum offered her a yellow snapdragon with a courteous, "My queen," and Artemi couldn't help but smile at it. Two years ago, she had made the mistake of mentioning that Morghiad was not the sort of man to give a girl flowers. She had not intended it as a jibe or complaint, since he found plenty of other ways to lavish her, but it had become a joke among the men to provide her with a flower every time they guarded her. A joke that was now years old!

She slid the snapdragon into her hair, and tried not to think about where such things could be found at this time of year, or how much they cost. "Let's head to the library, boys," she said.

The journey there was no great adventure, and soon they stood inside all of Calidell's knowledge. Brown, tan and beige-backed books arched over them like great fingers of ancient, wrinkled leather. The stacks stretched over two levels in the vaulted chamber, with a thin brass rail guarding the upper gallery, and apparently preventing the tops stacks from collapsing to the floor below.

Large fireplaces lined one side of the room, shedding their warmth upon the nearby flagstones. Metal gratings had been placed in front of these hearths to protect the books, but they gave the red flame-light a shuttered light that reminded her of paintings of demons. The smell was musty and thick, but then Artemi imagined the vents were not often opened here.

She wandered across the stones to the records section, where green-backed folders lay in disorganised piles about red files, and a waterfall of grey ones fell from the third shelf. The whole area appeared to be undergoing reorganisation.

Artemi picked up one of the tattered grey files, which detailed army reconnaissance from the first millennium PD, or post-diluvial, and contained nothing to do with city plans. She then flicked through the nearest green folder, which just seemed to contain lists and lists of names with their locations - probably some ancient census data or spy notes.

The red files held what she was looking for though, and they proved to contain layer upon layer of house plans and schematics. Artemi tried to make sense of the categorisation system, but struggled. *Thirty-four A...* She could feel her guards looking at her with curiosity, but couldn't explain what she was looking for until she read the contents.

Artemi located thirty-three A and thirty-four B, but no thirty-four A. Perhaps Morghiad had purely wished to tease her about it, and the damn thing did not even exist. She had not detected any mirth in him when he had said it though, which was peculiar.

"Can anyone see a thirty-four A?" she asked aloud.

The men might as well have something to occupy them, she thought, and so the six of them trawled the racks for an hour without success, even checking to see if it had been misplaced amongst the other folders. Then, Artemi scanned the nearby tables, and found it was not there either. She glanced to her left, where, at the end of the stacks, a diminutive man with long, pale hair stood. His light blue eyes spoke of millennia, truly the oldest eyes she had ever seen - older than Koviere's.

He bowed before her, which was more than odd; no one outside the army bowed to benay-gosa!

Irritatingly, Neleum nodded with approval at the man's salutation. "Can I help, my Lady Artemi?" he asked, and his voice sounded like old wood rasping on stones.

"Do you know where we might find thirty-four A of the red files?"

The man gave her a small but knowing smile. "I'm guessing the kahr sent you looking for that. I keep it in my... special collection. If my lady and her attendants would follow me?"

The soldiers certainly wouldn't appreciate being called that, she thought as she looked between them for signs of irritation. But there were none, and so she followed the old man through a shadowy labyrinth of shelving. "Might I know your name?" she enquired, almost tripping over a pile of giant leather-bound tomes.

"Dorlunh, my lady," he said as he walked unfeasibly quickly for his stature.

They reached a small, enclosed cave of dusty books in which the man apparently lived. “Good lad, that kahr,” Dorlunh said as he dug through a pile of papers, “Keen eye for detail.”

Artemi heard Cydia blow through his moustaches behind her.

Dorlunh pulled out the missing red file and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Dorlunh,” she said. “May I take this to read in the main chamber?”

He nodded. “If my lady could bring it back to me once she is finished?”

“Of course.” She worked her way through the stacks to a huge, well-worn table cut from a single oak. Her guards spread themselves around the bay, looking relaxed in spite of their readiness.

The file flopped open before Artemi, and a collection of grey, broadsheet plans had been folded and layered on top of each other within the cover. There did not appear to be anything remarkable about them at first glance, but Artemi opened the top sheet out across the desk anyway. There was some notation across the top in old Calidellian, which she did not understand terribly well. One of the words was ‘tenshigha’ which Artemi recognised as ‘exit.’

The other words were a mystery, and she whispered them aloud in the hope that the sound would elucidate their meaning: “Gorans te an’h tenshigha fullun n’awbroth.” A stomach-wrenching headache hit her with full force, causing her to hiss in surprise. Some of the men jumped as if she had been hit by some unknown missile. “It’s just another blasted headache. I’ll be alright,” she said, waving her hand at them.

Images of men in strange, purple uniforms flashed up before her eyes, running with their teeth gritted and their lips snarling. There was a vast waterfall behind them, taller even than the walls of Cadra, and then there were swathes of mud in heavy rain, but the landscape was the same as the plains outside the city.

The pain began to subside slowly with the visions, but she was no closer to knowing the meaning behind them. At least these ones had been less frightening than others she had endured over the last month. In some of them it was almost as if she had died, but in different ways, and always horribly. In the near distance, she felt Morghiad begin to relax and breathe again. The poor man had to suffer through these attacks whenever she did, no matter what tasks happened to occupy him at the time. He was lower down in the castle now, practicing with his sword... *That wasn’t right - what sort of council meeting involved sword practice?*

Artemi pushed the images aside, and thought to ask him about it later. She had to focus on whatever this ridiculous pile of plans was supposed to reveal to her, and then she would be in a position to interrogate him. The main drawing showed a circular structure within a square one, and along the edge of the square were cross sections of what Artemi supposed were walls. The thickest wall curved very gently on one side, while the other ones seemed to be marked out for windows and doors.

Seated squarely in the middle of the thickest wall was an arrangement of machinery and levers, either side of a gate. It was a plan of the castle's entrance courtyard, she realised, and it demonstrated how much broader the open area had once been. The circular structure within it was unknown to her, and perhaps it had never been built, or had since been removed.

Artemi moved on to the next plan, which described an elevation of the courtyard walls and floor. There appeared to be some manner of ramp descending from underneath the courtyard, and it led to a high-ceilinged tunnel. Upon opening the next plan, Artemi realised exactly what she was looking at - a hidden escape tunnel.

The entrance was now somewhere inside the buildings that lined the courtyard, but the exit must have been several miles into the plains. And it was not a narrow tunnel, either, but wide enough to fit seven horses abreast. She replaced the plans in their folder and closed it, before wondering if now would be a good time to find the secret tunnel and even make use of it...

Dorlunh took the file back with barely contained glee, and Artemi was not sure if he appreciated having someone to share the secret with, or if he was simply fanatical about having his *special* collection returned to him.

Before long, she was treading the halls with her personal guard again, out of the warm embrace of the library and into its surroundings of cold, hard stone. She did not tell the men about the tunnel she sought, and they were well-trained enough not to ask. For some reason, Morghiad had striven to keep it secret and she did not want to be the one to break his security unless it was strictly necessary.

The group reached the ground floor of the castle, heavily shaded at this time of day, and Artemi asked, "Could you check that the nearby halls are clear?"

All men nodded and immediately took up their positions, eyes alert and ready. They knew her words meant she was about to wield. Artemi leapt into the flames, but was stopped short of embracing them.

Neleum had grabbed her by the arm, and he whispered, "The king approaches."

The other men immediately circled around her once more, and whilst still out of sight of Acher, she made as if to walk to the left corridor. The soldiers quickened their pace with her. The last thing she wanted was a conversation with that man leering at her throughout, and claiming that it did not matter whether he or Morghiad sired her children. She shuddered at the thought.

A noise behind them made the men pause, and Artemi had no choice but to turn her head to investigate it. *Dratted king!* However had he caught up with them upon such stubby, waddling legs?!

Artemi had no other option available to her now, for she would have to stop and bow and be polite in their exchange.

Several women in red followed closely behind the king, and as much as the other benay-gosa had grown to dislike her and she them, she was relieved that they were present.

“Good day, Artemi,” the bearded king growled.

She curtsied deeply. “My king.” And she would be glad not to have to honour him with that title for much longer.

But Acher smiled back at her in a way she did not like. “I have need of your guardsmen to accompany me. Apparently there has been word of an eisiel in the city.”

She could sense the men becoming anxious around her from their tense silence and shifting shoulders. If there was an eisiel, she needed to get to her sword quickly. “Of course,” she said, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cydia’s whiskered mouth tighten. “Which of them will you take with you?”

“Oh, I’ll have them all, girl.”

Neleum grunted quietly, and all of the men maintained their positions. They had sworn to protect her, after all. Then again, Acher was their ward just as much as she was, and they could lose their heads if they refused. “As you wish, sire. I’m sure I will have no trouble finding replacements.” She said that more for the soldiers’ benefit than his.

Acher suppressed a small smile – it was there only for a breath, then gone. “That won’t be necessary. And I’m not blind to my son’s affection for you. Why don’t you have my most trusted man, Hegard, take you back to your rooms? He is a very good swordsman, I assure you.”

The ponytailed soldier, who possessed a body like a twisted tree trunk, stepped forward and inclined his head. Artemi was not sure why Morghiad had taken such an immediate dislike to the man. True, his expressions were somewhat sneering and derisory, but no worse than any she had seen from Jarynd. She smiled in acceptance of her new protector.

Hegard was soundless as they stepped briskly up the stairs, so she tried to engage him in a manner of conversation. “I understand you hail from Forda?” she began

He raised his eyebrows a little. “A small village called Hamarr, close to the border.”

That name tickled something in her memory, and she felt another headache coming on. Artemi gritted her teeth in spite of it.

“But I have travelled all over since then,” he continued. “Are you alright?”

Searing daggers of pain seemed to penetrate every part of her skull. “Fine,” she managed to squeeze out between breaths.

Concern tinged his voice, and it was so genuine and sweet. “You do not look fine.” You should rest. Come.” He led her into one of the nearby guest rooms and shut the door with deliberate care. Hegard led her to the window so that he could observe her more closely.

“It’s nothing,” she began, “Just—”

Hegard grasped her throat, and she felt fire course violently through her skin from his fingers. By instinct, she reached out for The Blazes before he could get to them, but her headache had dulled her reactions, and he took hold of the fires first. None of her muscles would move in her efforts to fight him. She was paralysed completely, she realised, but then he started to *pull* on something inside her. It hurt so much, it sent the pain from her head into a dull, background whine, and it felt as if every organ in her body were being torn out, one by one, with his bare hands. Artemi wanted to scream, to cry, but she could not even move her lungs to breathe, or her mouth to make sound.

Calm. She had to stay calm. Morghiad had sensed her pain and was coming for her now, and she could feel his urgency. Hegard was a kanaala of considerable strength, but he did not match Morghiad even closely. If she could overpower him, then this man should not be much trouble at all. Artemi pushed her pain aside, and poured all of her reserve and determination into taking control of The Blazes.

His eyes widened at her force, and she pressed harder towards the flames. She urged, *willed* them to come to her, but as she strove, they seemed to fade in intensity. Already her ability had been depleted, and the agony of having it ripped from her now came in a torrent she could not ignore. She fought back again, and this time a trickle of energy came through, but Hegard stamped it down immediately.

Morghiad was closer now. Artemi just needed to hold on, to fight and he would be here. Her vision started to blur, the world was turning scarlet. Something in her very being fractured, and she realised with horror that she could no longer sense her own power. He had sterilised her, but even then the pain did not stop. Hegard kept pulling great strips of life from her, and she could no longer hear anything but hiss. The room around her had paled to a brilliant white. Artemi had to accept that she could not resist the fate he had in mind for her, and Morghiad, she thought, would be very angry at her for this.



Chapter 17

Morghiad caught hold of her before she hit the ground. His mind was hollow, devoid of emotion. And devoid of her. He clamped his hand on the side of Artemi's face to search for something – anything. The Blazes echoed from her skin as they did from clothes she had worn, or pages she had touched, but there was nothing inside. Only a resonance. This body was now no more than a pretty shell, and so he set it down upon the stone tiles, red-gold hair pooling about its head.

“Beodrin,” he said shakily, “Stay here with the rest of the men. No one is to enter this room. Silar, with me.”

But Silar's eyes were glazed. He took a moment to register the order, turned to vomit in the corner, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he nodded slowly. His lips worked before he spoke. “I did not see *this*. I never saw *this*.”

At least Morghiad was thinking clearly. He needed that clarity now. Hegard could have done this independently, but it was Acher's fault that snake of a man had been obliged to do it. It was Acher's fault Hegard had been brought here in the first place! Acher had taken everyone Morghiad had cared about, every member of his family, *every person he loved!*

Unconscious steps had brought him away from the room where Artemi had been murdered, back to the vast marble corridors, where his feet thundered against the stone floor.

He clenched his jaw and let the heat of his fury fill every muscle and sinew of his body. Even the hallway air seemed to boil around him when it should have bitten in. He knew where to find the king, since every stationary guard who caught sight of his expression nodded to where they had last seen him. They all knew what was about to happen, what had been inevitable for so long now.

Morghiad approached the great Malachite Hall, where three of the guards he had assigned to protect Artemi were standing at the door. *Why? Why were they here? Those men should have given their lives protecting her!* Morghiad pushed past them; their punishment would come later.

He said nothing as he proceeded into the dull air of the hall beyond. The darkness of it swallowed him, ran through his heart and roused the river of anger within. He could feel the coldness of his sweat pressing against his skin, simmering against the heat of his fury. A crowd of nobles clustered around a central point - the throne. And seated upon it was King Acher.

Morghiad drew close enough to rattle their ears with his yell. "LEAVE."

The noblemen and women turned around in shock, but slowly began to disperse as he had commanded. Death was painted upon his features, and soon he would paint death upon the throne with his sword.

"What is the meaning of this?" Acher stuttered.

Morghiad drew his bloodied blade. "Men, you are dismissed," he said to Neleum and Laothoe. Perhaps the king purposefully taken them away from her, but it did not matter, either way. The soldiers did as they were told, and went to stand behind him. "Before I finish your twisted and selfish excuse for a life, I want to know *why*." Morghiad felt his voice crack, but he could not hope to control it now.

Acher heaved himself up from the throne, and drew his own sword from its rusted scabbard. Acher may have been unfit now, but stories told of how he had been a bladesmaster in his youth. He would not be an insignificant challenge. "You are too weak to kill me, boy," he said.

Morghiad shook his head slowly, his anger surged, and the black river of hate inside him was overflowing, seeping into his veins. "Why did you kill them all?"

A smile split Acher's face in two, and he began to laugh. "You truly remember, then? Or did someone have to tell you about your pathetic little half-breed family? *Why?*" he said in jest. "*Why* did I kill them? Because I could. I thought you might be useful, but you're just as feeble as your father. A failure."

Morghiad channelled all of his malice into his muscles, and they fed off it hungrily. He said through his teeth, "I bet you hated that he was the one bedding my mother when you weren't able. You are the failure: unable, even, to produce an heir of your own blood."

Something flashed in Acher's eyes. He growled, "You know nothing of Medea! She cared for me more deeply than you could comprehend." He stepped towards Morghiad, lip curling. "Every night she spent with your father, she spent thinking of me."

"A woman cannot endure the company of a man she does not love. You should know that by now." There was silence while Morghiad threw his sword to the other hand, then continued, "And why – why Artemi? She did nothing to harm you." He wanted to mourn her now. He wanted to howl and tear down the entire building, and cut Acher from his feet and stuff his head on a pike, but he had to hold it back just a moment longer.

Acher's grim face broke into a smile again briefly, but it was weak. "I don't like witches in my city, boy. She was a nothing, an irritating little fly that needed swatting."

Behind him, several blades were drawn, but Morghiad only focussed on his next movements. In complete silence, he stepped once, twice and swung his weapon. The king ducked awkwardly but managed to block the strike. Pure fury escaped from the very depths of Morghiad's soul. It was vengeance; it consumed him entirely, and he wanted to dispense with the sword *entirely* so that he could tear Acher's head off with his bare hands.

Where Acher might once have been a strong fighter, it took only three swift strikes before the man was weaponless before Morghiad. He thrust his elbow into Acher's face, sending him sprawling to the marble floor. He did not even consider the final blow; it came as part of a string of movements fed by his emotions, and as he watched, Acher's head rolled away from the platform, still grinning inanely.

Morghiad tried to drink his vengeance deeply, but it felt... hollow, like a nothing opening up inside him.

Silar approached to inspect the body of the former ruler while he was locked in thought. He knew better than to say anything.

"Is Artemi...?" Neleum's voice echoed through the hall. "Is she really...?"

Morghiad felt his legs weaken with those words, and so he slumped into the throne, unable to stand any longer. She wasn't there in his head - none of her fire-bound emotions, or words of love, or wit - only a cold vacuum left by her flame. He wanted to answer Neleum's question, to say the words, but he could not bring himself to do it. Morghiad buried his face in his hands, and wept. All of his plans had been for nothing, and Calidell would fall without her to rule it.



Nestled deeply amongst a crowd of green-stone buildings lay a dark urchin of a castle, its spine-like towers clawing at the sky for escape. Darkness pervaded this fortress in both aspect and mood, but from the dim passages strode a giant of a man. His grim face was a cut square of granite, and his eyes appeared made of glass. He was a man in reflection, for he considered the words spoken to him by a famous warrior many years previously, "We are all fires in a gale. Some of us are quickly snuffed out, others are temporarily fuelled by the torrent of air. And the rest? Well, they are the ones who are blown from one place to another. They are the ones that never go out." Koviore smiled to himself, and took a deep breath of the air that fed him.

THE END

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Volume 1 of *The Fireblade Array*

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About the Author

H.O. Charles was born in Northern England, but now resides in a white house in Sussex.

Charles has spent many years at various academic institutions, and really ought to get on with writing a PhD, but frequently becomes distracted by writing fantasy fiction instead.

Hobbies include being in the sea, being by the sea and eating things that come out of the sea.

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