

Her childhood was sugar and honey, laughter in the darkness of the night, intoxicating melodies, and running through valleys of flowers, crystal clear streams, and days of eternal sunshine.

Tamzin's was a small world, closed in on itself like the idyllic landscape of a living room picture. Those who inhabited it wanted nothing more than to stay there with her: servants and private tutors, cooks and gardeners, all the souls who moved about the rooms of the Tower repeated it to her to the point of exhaustion.

"We are here for you, Miss Tamzin," one of the maids would hearten her when she found her crying over some nonsense. "Whatever you and your brothers want, all you have to do is ask."

It was a whirlwind of wonderful clothes, dazzling jewellery, and ever different, so many that she, Larkin, and Ide had never had to share them.

And why should they, after all? All they had to do was be good, not get into trouble, and commit themselves to the lessons, and then Meres would bring them new gifts. He returned every time the moon was half full, an occasion for which Tamzin and her siblings would organize small plays, write poetry, paint or prepared for increasingly complex dances.

If she thinks about it now, she feels sick.

She can see herself again, a silver-eyed child, helping Ide, a few years younger than her, to braid her hair, and in her ears echoes Larkin and a poem he seemed incapable of memorizing.

*And for the eternal summers, the drops of spring, and the winds of winter, the
heart warms with sweet anticipation, of golden gifts and blooming flowers.*

Meres arrived fully dressed, dragonfly wings folded under cloaks of a thousand colors, and sat down to the banquet prepared by the servants; before him towered trays of fruit and raw meat, berries so shiny they looked like precious stones and goblets filled with spiced wine.

His deep black eyes twinkled when the three young lordlings, as the people of the Tower called them, arranged themselves in the center of the room. He was there for all three, but Tamzin knew he would only look at her: she must she simply had to be the best.

It was not a conscious instinct, but the gaze of their beastly father was enough to trigger a visceral thirst for victory in her.

Ide began to play the harp, Larkin to declaim and Tamzin, her eyes closed, approached the first steps of a choreography he had called "Of the Veiled Flower": she had rehearsed it until her legs had surrendered to the weight of an overwhelming fatigue.

The petals unfolded, and the wind stirred the thin stem of a bud night shrouded in mist, struggling against a raging storm. At the climax of Larkin's poetry, when the harp was transformed into an echo of lightning thanks to Ide, Tamzin collapsed upon herself, her hands turned to the sky in a corolla of slender fingers open to the sky.

She only remembered looking up and seeing Meres' smile, red-stained pearls, and then hearing his applause, a symphony of tapering phalanges and claws perpetually on display.

That night he had given her a book that did not come from his private library: it had been written on the outside, he said, and he would soon have to learn as much as she could about the world beyond the Tower.

Knowledge without limit.

*

It had been just one of many books that Meres would bring from the outside.

Books filled with horrible deeds: war, torture, violence, betrayal, blood, hunger, and suffering, but they fed Tamzin's curiosity like few other things.

If none of this existed in the Tower, and it never would, it seemed that evil was the order of the day in that world of beauty and terror that she had named the Other.

She, Larkin, and Ide began to recreate scenes from some of the bloody war chronicles recounted in those dusty pages and became fearsome executioners for the frogs, which they captured to dissect. From their soft bellies emerged the same organs illustrated in the tomes of anatomy and biology tomes that they now knew by heart. The next day, in any case, each creature would come back to life and forget who or what had ended its existence.

Magic began to fascinate Tamzin as soon as Meres placed in her hand a treatise on conjuration and the study of the Weave: he had only offered her a similar gift, and had recommended that she make it a secret with Larkin and Ide.

"I do not want you to quarrel on my account, little bird," his large hand wrapped her cheek in a caress. "But you deserve something more."

Yes, she deserved it.

A conviction that during her teenage years would have nourished her with an abrasive and icy pride, sometimes so ruthless that she forgot how much she loved Larkin and Ide.

The three lordlings soon turned into young adults hungry for life.

The rivalry that united and spurred them had made their life in the Tower a tireless drive to excel: Larkin's compositions were always more and more dramatic, his hunting parties more and more successful, and his smile more and more cocky. Ide was more and more beautiful, her fingers more and more graceful against the strings of any instrument, and her voice more and more sweet. Tamzin was more and more graceful, her tongue sharper and sharper, and her lust for knowledge endless.

Shocking, then, was to see herself changed in an ever-identical Tower.

As she grew, her physique had tapered into the elegant shape of a dancer's muscles and delicate feminine curves. She was different from Ide, who had grown florid, soft, and gorgeous in her canary-coloured robes, and she was different from Larkin, agile, sharp, and snappy, a bundle of muscle and arrogance.

Evolving bodies, hatching chrysalises, and desires too great to remain within the well-defined confines of Meres, who now watched them with new untranslatable expectations.

If Tamzin thought back to that creature's gaze, she could not help but vomit.

Those very eyes haunted nightmares and visions, opium delusions, and hunger pangs: the very eyes she had once gazed upon with devotion and that she wished would always look at her, are now for her nothing more than two beacons of pure fear.

One of the last books Meres had brought her was a collection of illustrations that made of those bodies an interweaving of positions and interlocking as if they were dolls to be posed and maneuvered at will.

"This is what mortals do to feel themselves dying little by little," he had whispered, brushing her bare shoulder.

"At your age, it is normal to have an appetite for it."

"Do immortals do it for another reason?" she had asked, without realizing it.

She could not stop staring at a beautiful snake-like woman wrapped around a boy with golden hair, who seemed to be in pain but who, yet, exuded an unknown and mysterious happiness.

Meres had laughed, a mournful echo of broken glass, and his nails merely scratched her. "Immortals do this to remind themselves what it's like to live, little bird."

That same evening, she flipped through the pages of the book until an unexpected warmth (unnatural, conditioned, but this she would discover too late) invaded her lower abdomen and dried her lips. She imagined she was the snake-like woman and then she dreamed of being her victim, in her mind she found herself surrounded by invisible hands and mouths bristling with fangs, which touched her with gentleness and desire.

Soon she found herself looking at the images in that book and wondering why Meres had shown it to her.

She fled from her room in her dressing gown, only to end up along the shores of the lake. She should have been cold, but she felt herself burning. The air was warm, heavy and a scent of roses, which she had never smelt before, was filling her lungs until her head was spinning.

Larkin and Ide appeared beside her as if by magic. They were as hungry as her.

They had devoured each other without thought, joining into a new three-headed creature with a single living, pulsating body. It would become a habit for them from there on.

"You were beautiful," Meres would confess to her years later before he consecrated her to mortality forever.

"The whole court looked at you without making a sound. I think of it every time I smell that wonderful perfume."

*

One day Ide had stopped playing, eating, or drinking.

Locked in her room, her beautiful Ide rotted among silk blankets colorful silk blankets, embroidered pillows, and stained-glass windows. The servants were desperate and spent their days crying in front of her door, begging her to at least taste a pastry or indulge in a few drops of water.

They talked about how Master Meres would kill them if she fell ill, and how the whole Tower would collapse on itself in pain, but no plea seemed to move her.

Tamzin held her close to her chest when she could sleep with her, a concession that the pale, delicate creature seemed to reserve only for her. The human's chocolate-coloured hair, now wrapped in disordered knots, covered her moonlit face and seemed to want her to disappear in a blanket of gentle dark clouds.

“What happened?”

She did not give her an answer for a long time. Then, she whispered in her ear:

“Larkin told me terrible things.”

Tamzin tried to hide how annoyed she was that the cause of Ide's pains was Larkin himself. “You know he exaggerates and provokes you”

“No, this time is different”, she stared at her with a seriousness that did not belong to her before looking around and speaking even more softly to her. “None of that is true, Tamzin. Larkin said so. They are watching.”

A hysterical cry had shaken her shortly after. Tamzin could do nothing but kiss her forehead, hold her, and promise that it must have been a terrible and cruel joke, but this did not quiet her cries, nor did it help her fall asleep.

In truth, she found the scene ridiculous: Ide had always been sensitive and delicate, a delightful doll to be protected. Love and hate stirred in Tamzin every time she looked at her, but at that moment, a strange pity overwhelmed her and convinced her to spend the night with her.

Poor sweet Ide, she thought, so foolish to believe such a lie.

Years later, she would curse her arrogance.

*

She found Larkin with his arm immersed in the belly of a freshly killed deer. The beast's brown eyes, docile and lifeless, were wide open in eternal victim's terror. There was blood everywhere as if a pack of rabid dogs had surrounded the animal and torn every fragment of exposed flesh down to the bone. The arrow piercing the prey's neck seemed almost superfluous in that massacre.

"What did you say to Ide?"

Larkin looked up at her, his mouth reduced to a thin, graceless line. His handsome face had become a mosaic of scars and wounds, making him more like an ancient, feral creature, like Meres.

It was Master Meres who had reduced him like this, for reasons Tamzin had never fully understood.

"What she needed to hear," he stood up, wiping his hands on his leather tunic. "And what you don't want to listen to."

"Stop it," Tamzin exhaled, getting closer to hitting him. It wouldn't have been the first time. "Do you enjoy seeing Ide in such a state? Do you think hurting her makes you look braver?"

Larkin shook his head. "You are the deceiver here, Tam. Not me. I am always very honest, and my face shows it. Should I remind you of the punishments our dear father inflicted on me?" a sigh loaded with frustration. "That monster probably kidnapped us or got us in exchange for some stupid favour."

"Meres saved us" Tamzin grabbed his shoulders and felt him tense up. "Larkin, we were chosen to inherit the Tower and its powers."

"Do you believe that crap?" he pushed her away, almost making her fall onto the deer's carcass. "Daddy's silver tongue is well-trained. It licks like a charm."

"I should have realized," she murmured after getting back on her feet. "Jealousy has made you pathetic. No matter, you'll get what you deserve," she silenced him before he could interrupt. "When Ide and I are the ladies of the Tower, I'll lock you up to sleep with the dogs: you'll eat with them, hunt with them. Without your pretty face, you're only useful as a bastard for the game."

Now Tamzin doesn't remember Larkin's face. She remembers his voice, the rough and low laugh, the calluses on his hands, and the smell (white musk, earth, dew); however, she cannot forget the look the half-elf gave her before watching her walk away.

A look of eternal terror.

*

Meres came to take her that very night.

He woke her by touching her face with his long, thin claws, then squeezed her throat in an iron grip.

Tamzin woke up gasping and unable to move.

"Little bird," whispered the Lord of the Tower. "Don't struggle. There, that's right. You don't want to forget how to breathe now. I've been informed of an unfortunate situation and I'm curious to know what you can tell me about it." He motioned for her to nod, and when Tamzin's head barely moved up and down, he continued speaking. "Do you want to kill me?"

Her blood froze in her veins. She shook her head furiously, her eyes stinging from tears and tension; she tried to speak, but Meres's grip was too strong and her body still seemed paralyzed in an almost corpse-like pose.

"Of course not," he commented with a smile. "I figured it was lies. Why they came from your siblings, however, I can't understand."

She would have liked to feel anger, but instead, a piercing pain, so deep it felt like part of her body, pierced through her like a dagger. They couldn't have put her in such a position, they would never have been so cruel.

Meres stroked her cheek with a claw, loosening his grip around her neck and allowing her to breathe. "Oh, my dear. I don't want to see tears," he watched her as she inhaled as much air as possible, breathless, and only when she seemed better, he resumed speaking. "Such a clumsy trick can't disturb my heir."

"Your heir?" she looked at him in confusion, but in his gaze, she only saw her reflection. "Master Meres, have you chosen me? Isn't it too soon?"

"If your siblings are plotting against you, I'd say not at all."

Tamzin hesitated before answering, but in the end, the sense of loyalty and love she had for Ide and Larkin won out. "Master Meres, this seems madness to me. My siblings would never harm me. They are confused, it's true, something must have frightened them."

He interrupted her before she could continue, a disturbing grin crossing his silvery face. "Are you saying I'm a fool?"

"No, I don't think you're a fool," Tamzin hurried to reply, and instinctively grabbed his hands, wounding herself on his claws. "But I don't want to think that they could have accused me of something like this."

Meres brought his face close to hers and, for the first time, brushed her lips with a barely restrained kiss. Something slipped from his mouth into Tamzin's throat, and she had to hold back from choking: it tasted bittersweet. Today, she knew it had been a hallucinogenic toxin marking the end of her life of honey, power, and immortality.

"Sweet little bird," his voice became a mirage and Tamzin's senses seemed to weaken. "I'm afraid Larkin and Ide have decided to cut you out of the game. They want the Tower for themselves, you see? They knew I would choose you. Unfortunately, they don't truly love us and aim to destroy us both." At that point, he grabbed her face and brought his mouth close to her ear. "You will kill them for us, won't you? To become the Lady of the Tower. For the infinity and all the power it can give you."

A dagger appeared in her hand, a sapphire-tipped masterpiece of interlaced vines and flowers. Meres closed her hand around the blade, smiling. "May your blood stain our Promise and agree to give me that of your kin. A sacrifice for the victory we have chosen to bestow upon you. Do you accept, Tamzin?"

A faint yes, that was enough for her body to leave the bed and head to Ide's room.

A faint yes, and that neck she had kissed opened in a fan of blood and muffled screams; cascades of dark curls torn by a blade, and an echo of childish laughter ripped from eternity.

A faint yes, and she was straddling Larkin, plunging the blade into his skull. A melodious scream destroying the silence of the Tower, the chill of a body that had always welcomed and warmed her.

A faint yes, and then nothing more.

*

The final stab evoked a series of enthusiastic squeals in the living room.

The Unseelie court sipped goblets overflowing with purple liquor, wrapped in fine silks and surrounded by marvelous works of silver, amethysts, and night flowers.

A fairy with large butterfly wings placed a pearl pierced by tiny screaming souls in Meres's palm.

"Well played, Lord Meres," she commented, coquettishly. "I'm almost sad it ended this way. Two thrilling centuries, no doubt about it."

"We can always start again," Meres replied, rolling the pearl between his fingers. "Faerûn is full of naïve and desperate parents. And children brimming with potential."

The Lord of the Tower lingered to watch the scene now filling the theater stage: his Little Bird falling to the ground, crying desperately, confused by the terrible clarity left by the poison. Sending her back to the world was truly a waste, but now the illusions of the Tower would no longer affect her.

His little Tamzin, he thought, had won.

And now she deserved to wake up.