

## 001 - THE INTRUDER

Island Unknown: For My Safety, of course, but It doesn't Stop the Nightmares from Finding Me.

P R E S E N T.

1,871 Words

My mind was split in half, half at war, half not my own, or as the best Brights would suspect, very likely haunted.

I mean, all the basic brain functions work. I think.

*Where am I?* I asked myself. A test.

*The manor*; was the automatic reply. Yes, so not completely insane. It helped that the place was filthy and smelled of musty rain as this abandoned, outroughish outcrop near the cliffs of the island had been our shelter from the dismal weather. The senses kept me grounded. For now.

It was the finest house we'd come across yet and I had found the perfect hideaway, even if it was only a small tired door between me and the rest of the house. It frowned at me in a low arch which meant I had to duck to crawl in here. This room had to belong to a Trablican at some point.

I would have a slight advantage against a bigger, broad-shouldered beast as bloodthirsty Alcapes were known to hunt this island, and all others. It was doing a fine job of giving my bodyguard and I some much needed time apart.

But it wasn't enough to snuff out the threat of silence. Every spoke of loose floorboards, of the harsh winds that shook the house, threatening it over the cliff's edge, the lightest water leak dripping in the hall, shot through my body like static. I listened to everything, attempting to remember my training. Knowing the odds of surviving this place, they would eventually be needed. Even now, which each impending drop of water was the click of a countdown, to danger? An Alcape finding its way inside, breaking through the glass. *A pillager?*

Chances were they'd be after the owner's abandoned valuables and miss this little door in the corner. *Right?*

Nothing happened. No one was there, but I could see it, hear it like this Alcape had developed the gift of movement in silence, the feeling so real I could almost hear it picking at the lock on my tiny door. *An Intruder.*

*You are the intruder.* My hands fluttered with pricking urgency. *And you're running late, Jatzuri.*

*For what?* I couldn't remember, couldn't move, lost to the panic. The quiet. The walls of the mansion fell away and my mind flooded with old voices:

*"You are destined for greatness. You are the daughter of the king, I know it. And now you must prove it to him, this day. You must!"*

*"Is that her? Truly, is that the daughter of the blood?"*

*"That's what he says, that's what they're all saying."*

*Fight them, Jayx!*

"I'm...I'm trying," I admitted, but there was little I could do, my memories imposing their own will, latching onto me and forcing me back into the body of a mere 13 notch-old girl.

The owner of the voice shoved the younger me into the dark room, confined and walls enlarged with cold sheets of metal. The shadows reached for me, in an attempt to pull me. A greeting and protection I didn't recognize at the time.

*"How could so many place so much on the shoulders of a child?"* Someone asked, not sure who. They all wore long veiled masks, sitting around a semi-round table, leaning on their white-gloved fists. I could feel the power of their stern gazes despite the relaxed posture. This group of strangers would determine if this child, me, was fit for a life among the living or if I was better off lost in the oblivion promised in death.

Disappointing them was out of the question. I must prove to them that I was a daughter of the blood! That I was indeed the daughter of the king.

*Do not, little girl, I chastised my memory. Don't even try.*

But it was no use, watching helpless as my younger self reached out with both hands, fingers shaking.

*"You must relent some blood, young one,"* one of the masks bellowed. The rest of them chuckled. I looked around with wide-eyes willing myself to see it, the little dagger, right in front of me. There at last I fought for it, shaking afraid, I cut into my hand. It was a lot of blood. It hurt. Let's make this quick.

I threw out my hands again searching for the darkness. Somehow I knew what I was searching for but did not know then exactly how it was attached to me. It would strike when I wasn't asking it to, and detested following orders.

*"Are you there?"* my little voice pleaded, on the verge of tears. *"Are you listening to me?"*

*"Don't worry dear, you're not the first to fail,"* a voice came from the table.

*"And she was so determined I thought she just might be the one!"*

I wanted to scream. I threw out my hands again, eyes shut pleading with the world to do me one solid. Not like they made the rest of my life that great. But just maybe, with a little more effort...

They pulled that young girl from that room in tears, left to fall through the cracks of whatever backwater on the edge of the world decided to have mercy on her. When it really counted, when it really mattered... I had no gifts at all. I. was. nothing.

*Disappointing.*

I knew that anger well, it helped nothing to be repeated.

There was a heat that festered deep within my gut, burning up my spine and into my face. That last burst of thought had always, somehow forced its way in. *But it wasn't mine. It doesn't belong to me.*

*Are you sure?* That same intrusive voice dared to ask, like a breeze that tickled against the back of my neck, just over my shoulder.

"No," I admitted to the dark air, pulled out of the memory, again able to move, again back in the mansion. I glanced over my shoulder, already knowing there was no one there met with the musty smell and the cold stone brick wall.

A random tear slipped down my chin, I swiped it away more upset, catching myself fondling the medallion I wore around my neck. My mother's, I was told. Though no one, rich or otherwise had one of those.

"Don't," Brooks had said when he caught me fidgeting with it. "*Stop doing that, you're fidgeting is going to drive me insane.*"

I did, as if my bodyguard was in the room at that very moment telling me off, tucking a loose strand of unkempt, rarely tamed hair from my face. My hair was red, but this strand was black. The relevance? No idea. There were more important things to worry about.

Like the fact that I could trace every step of my boots from the night before by the amount of dust on the floor. We wouldn't be here long enough to warrant a good clean, and even if we were, clean spaces in the middle of nowhere were suspicious; unfortunately so were bootprints.

At least they can't get me for handprints, I thought, glaring down at the loose cuffs on my gloves. A necessary evil until Brooks bartered for a pair more my size. But finding a woman's size of anything on the open road was extremely rare. To see one, rarer still. *It's said most cling to the safety of the Cuff.*

"But who says?" I asked, again to no one. I lowered my head with a sigh, biting at the tension strings and rising to my feet. *Find them. Free them. Save them, Jatzuri Rose...*

The most unpleasant chill raced up my back, a new coating of sweat making the layers of my shirt and vest stick uncomfortably to my skin. And a notable pain pierced through my gut. I jerked up against the strings with a hiss, pulling the glove so tight, almost losing feeling in my fingers.

*Was I sick? Was it another "episode?"* Well what's the most common symptoms of those who slowly, painfully went insane? I asked myself, shaking the tension out of my glove and using my boot to scuff up the dusty prints from the floor. They'd see movement, but it's better they thought some animal got in here instead of the Alcape's more preferable prey: *me.*

I dropped to a knee and yanked open the bottom drawer to the abandoned dresser, grabbing at a meager pile of worn, folded letters. 23 of them, even if I knew, nothing would stop me from counting them again, just to make sure. They were the few clues I had received that the one person, besides Brooks, I cared about was still alive and he still needed me.

*How do you know he is not... um, dead?*

It had been weeks, cycles since his last letter. But the question sent my mind into a boil, insults and arguments coming at me all at once, trying to string together something clever to respond with, an insult just as damning, a thought just as deadly to snipe out the question. *An insult to throw against who, Jayx?*

*A good question. I have no idea,* I thought, looking down to my outstretched hand. Somehow in all the chaos, between the nightmare and these absurd allegations I had reached for my dagger at my belt. I wrapped my fingers around it as it slipped through them, clattering on the dirty floorboards, sending shockwaves of noise in every direction.

*What was the point of that? Are you trying to get yourself killed?*

"No," I hissed out, slowly dropping to a knee and listening to the echo of the metal still bouncing through the hollow halls of the manor. Alcapes had exceptional hearing, I'm told. And with the Chem taking most flee binding flesh from the streets, I'd make for easy prey.

I still hadn't mastered the skill of a quiet panic, my breath caught then released in fast succession, my hands shook as I attempted to continue my task, storing through each one of his letters, my closest travel companions. *Besides the elf who receives them. The protector.*

For what little that word could mean. He would protect me through my next meal sure enough, if an Alcape didn't find me before he did. So much for space.

I tucked the letters into my satchel and rose to my feet. I wasn't giving Brooks enough credit. Though painful, stubborn and incredibly impatient, he was the only constant I knew in life. *And he is annoyed.*

Not surprising.

*Anxious...*

*Okay.*

*He's itching to be on the move.*

"What makes you say that?" I asked, again to no one. But the voice in my head didn't take kindly to questions, whether it was a part of me or not. I glanced up where he had left my cloak perched on the doorknob.

*What did he see that made this place so unsafe all the sudden?* I thought with a frown, though to be completely honest, we'd proven that no place held any guarantee of safety and I had one thing yet to do, the one thing I should've done the moment TeFoli's first letter arrived. *Burn them?*

*No, I snapped back my head. Write him back.*