

# Tearforged

*By Clarity*

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# CHAPTER 1

## *From the Fog*

A horn sounded, echoing through the morning fog, and Datch's spear began to tremble in his hands.

"Does that mean they're going to attack?" Datch asked. He turned to Hein, who stood beside him on the castle wall. Around them, other Scythari soldiers shuffled in their blue tunics, all murmuring quiet prayers to the Giant.

Hein let out a sigh and scratched at his grizzled red hair. The veteran showed no signs of excitement or nerves on the eve of battle, and his usual frown seemed more distant than usual.

"You have parents, lad?" Hein rasped, holding his own spear with an iron grip.

"Of course." Datch nodded. "My father is a baker and my m-"

Hein waved a dismissive hand, silencing the blond boy. "Did they ever tell you that there's no such thing as a stupid question?"

Datch paused in thought. It was a rather common phrase. Had his parents ever used those words, though? He stared at the grey sky, sifting through his memories. Back when he was apprenticing in his father's bakery - when the blasted war was still being fought in the distant Kadian mountains - Datch was fairly certain that he'd heard those same words.

"I suppose so."

"Then they lied," Hein stated flatly, and pointed his blocky chin toward the ground below.

Out of the mist, a lone figure emerged, marching toward the wall. That figure was soon joined by another, then another...until an entire row of black-clad soldiers came

into sight. The ranks of enemies soon stretched as far as Datch could see in either direction, and more emerged with every passing moment. The spear in Datch's hands resumed its shaking. After years of war and centuries of hostility, the Kadian army had finally arrived at Old Arbor, the heart of the Scythari Kingdom.

Hundreds of bows twanged in unison as a volley of arrows was released, raining down upon the marching foes. Unfortunately, most of the Kadians had their shields raised, and only a small handful of them toppled to the ground. Datch was no military strategist. In fact, he'd never even witnessed combat before, but he still sensed that this battle wouldn't be won with bows.

"Warriors of Scythar," came a nasally voice from behind Datch. "You will be tested on this day, but fear not. These walls have been battered for a thousand years, and have always held true."

Instinctively, Datch snuck a glance toward the voice and spotted its source: Prince Delvaran. The prince stood atop a rise along the wall, with the self-important posture that only nobles seemed to possess. Shoulder-length black hair, amazingly dark, billowed behind the prince. He was clad in a gleaming suit of cobalt blue armor, but it seemed far too bulky for his thin frame.

"I am blessed by the ancients themselves," the prince said, gesturing toward the towering statues that lined the walls. "Fear not, for I will strike down the Northern hordes!" He cleared his throat. Then he paused, as if he was unsure if he should continue his speech or simply leave it at that. "So...fight! Fight for me!"

If the prince had intended his words to be inspirational, he had failed. Many of the soldiers around Datch rolled their eyes, and some even covered their ears. If this Prince Delvaran fellow was really their commander...perhaps Hein had reason to look so solemn.

"Prick," Hein snorted, then nudged Datch with an elbow. "Eyes forward, kid. Remember the first rule of battle?"

"Never drop your guard." Datch returned his gaze to the advancing foes.

"At least something got through that thick skull of yours."

The Kadians continued their march. Eventually, the prince's meandering speech was drowned out beneath the calls of enemy soldiers, as they organized a series of ladders. The ladders were massive, and seemed to rise a few feet higher than the city wall. Were the Kadians really going to climb those contraptions? They probably would, although Datch couldn't be sure. He'd never defended a wall before. He hadn't even been a soldier until the previous week.

Closing his eyes, Datch wrapped a hand around the locket hanging from his necklace. The brass locket was the most valuable object that he had ever owned, a gift from Risara.

Risara, Datch thought, with a dreamy smile. Once all of this war nonsense is said and done, I'll be holding her in my arms.

Risara was his betrothed, back in the village. She was also the kindest woman Datch had ever known. Pale skin, bright red locks, and enchanting eyes. By no small margin, she was the prettiest girl in the village, and only the grace of the gods had caused her to settle for an unremarkable fellow like him.

Her name was etched into the locket, above a miniscule drawing of the two lovers. Datch tightened his grip. He had to survive this battle, for her sake. When he was first drafted into the army, Risara hadn't wanted him to go. She'd tried to convince him to run away with her, and avoid this farce of a war, as she called it. Just good Ralli boys dying while the black-hairs clink glasses.

In the barracks, Datch had heard frightening rumors about his old village, a place so small that it hadn't been given a name. Those rumors said that bandits had hit the town while the Scythari army was otherwise occupied, and had left no survivors. Datch didn't believe any of that, though. He couldn't believe it. Not if he wanted to retain any sanity, or...

Datch's reverie was interrupted by a chorus of fearful shouts from the soldiers around him. Something large and fast slammed into the wall near Datch, and he - along with several other defenders - toppled to the ground. His shoulder met the hard stone with an impact that he immediately knew would leave a bruise, and his heart thudded, but - after a moment or two on his back - he realized that he was fairly unscathed. What had just hit them?

Stumbling to his feet, he saw the culprit: the Kadians had launched a series of grappling hooks at the walls. They'd done so with staggering efficiency, and were already beginning to use the hooks as pulleys, raising ladders into place. Datch's fellow defenders were in full panic. Around him, soldiers slashed at ropes and hooks, trying to stop the weighty ladders, all to no avail. Kadian warriors had already begun their ascent, and at least a dozen were scaling the ladder nearest Datch.

"Hold at the ladders!" Hein commanded the nearby soldiers with a growl. "If any one of you lets a single northern bastard past our lines, I'll skin your corpse."

Datch didn't doubt the threat, and stepped forward with Hein. He tightened his grip on his spear, training it at the top of the ladder.

“Boy,” Hein said. Somehow, his voice carried above the shouts of battle, the twang of arrows, and the clang of steel. “Stay near me.”

The first Kadian soldier to crest the ladder was a young man, only a bit older than Datch’s eighteen years. The enemy’s teeth were clenched, and his hands were wrapped around a sword. He had a mop of light hair atop his head - much like Datch’s own hair - but the man’s leather armor was black with gold trim, far from Datch’s Scythari blue.

Atop the ladder, the young man hesitated for a split second, fear glinting in his eyes. Then, he dove toward Datch. He let out a guttural cry, which caused Datch to shy backward and almost drop his spear. The attacker swung in a wide arc with his sword as he fell, and the blade whistled through the air. Datch closed his eyes and prayed to the Giant. Why couldn’t it all just...stop? Maybe, if he pretended that he was back in the quiet village, the battle would simply dissolve. He’d be free to hold Risara in his arms...

A piercing scream brought Datch back to reality, and his eyes shot open. The enemy soldier lay bloodied on the stones. His legs were sprawled in an awkward position. He did not breathe. A deep spear wound split through his chest, causing a small pool to form, filling the ruts of mortar between stones.

“Snap out of it, kid!” Hein barked, clutching his bloodied spear.

Datch stared numbly at the body. That poor bloke could have been him, dying on a stone wall for no good reason. He drew a shaky breath, and patted the locket on his chest. Survival. That had to be Datch’s only goal.

\* \* \*

AFTER THAT FIRST soldier scaled the wall, the battle ensued at a breakneck pace. Kadians swarmed up the ladders like ants. They died by the dozens but succeeding in their efforts of pushing Datch and Hein away from the ladders. Datch had shaken off his pre-battle jitters, but he’d also learned of the chaos that came with a close quarters battle.

Tens of thousands of men fought in the confined space atop the city walls, slashing and hacking at both friends and foes. There were no organized ranks or battle formations. Those had been abandoned long ago. In the madness, Datch and Hein had been separated from their squad, but the youth made sure to stay near Hein’s side.

The pair stood back-to-back at the center of the wall, and jabbed desperately at passing Kadians. They had cut down a few attackers, but most of the Kadians simply avoided the pair, choosing instead to pursue easier, more solitary targets. To Datch’s

dismay, as the battle progressed, the black-armored enemies around him began to outnumber the defenders. It would only be a matter of time before the attackers decided to slay the isolated pair.

Just as his stomach began to sink with dread, a peculiar sight caught Datch's eye.

Further down the wall, there was a statue on the rampart and...was it moving? Datch's eyes widened. The statue was about ten feet tall and was clad in a noble robe, with a sculpted crown atop its head.

The statue walked gingerly through a swath of black-clad Kadians. The statue was alive! In one wide motion, the stone monster swept its arm across the mass of Kadians, sending them flying from the wall.

"The old kings of Scythar fight by your side!" came Prince Delvaran's whiny voice. Datch craned his neck and caught a glance of the prince. He marched beside the statue, with a retinue of royal guards surrounding him. "Do not back down!"

Datch had only heard stories of such magic, of the ones they called 'Shapers'. The Prince himself was a Shaper, supposedly, and that particular rumor appeared to be well-founded. Datch's eyes widened. That annoying dandy of a prince was actually a Shaper! For the first time since the battle began, Datch's heart jumped with hope.

"Hein, look!" Datch called, pointing toward the nearby spectacle. "The statue..."

Datch never finished the sentence. Sharp pain shot through his neck. He blinked, and brought a hand to the source of the pain. Blood coated his fingertips. He blinked again. Blood? Why blood?

He turned slowly, and stared up into the eyes of his assailant. A regal black coat billowed behind the man, almost the exact same shade as the man's dark hair. A nobleman, no doubt. Unlike his Kadian comrades, this noble wore exquisite plate armor which shone in the morning light, and carried a razor-thin black sword, dripping with Datch's blood.

The Kadian nobleman readied his sword, aiming it toward Hein's back. Datch's eyes went wide.

"Hein," Datch fell to his knees. The world began to blur around him. He tried to shout the veteran's name, to scream out and save the man, but he could manage only a hoarse whisper. "Hein!"

Hein reacted just in time. He spun around and parried the nobleman's black sword with the butt of his spear. The Kadian nobleman bounced back quickly, however, and prepared to launch another attack when the advancing statue caught his attention. The man paused, then backed away from Hein.



“Form up on me! Form ranks!” The man bellowed, his vowels chopped by a thick Kadian accent. “They’ve got a Shaper!”

Hein took advantage of the break in combat, and knelt by Datch’s side.

“I’m sorry,” Datch whispered. His vision swam once more, and he laid down his head in a pool of his own blood. “I’m so sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for, kid.” Hein grimaced, and lifted Datch from the ground. “I’ll get you out of here.”

Hein carried him through the melee, dodging past friends and foes, rushing toward the distant stairs.

“Am I gonna die?”

Hein didn’t reply, but Datch already knew the answer. It was a stupid question. He could feel the blood gushing from his neck and soaking into his undershirt. The wound was mortal.

“Risara”, Datch whispered, drawing an unsteady breath. I’ll never see her again.

With his waning strength, Datch reached inside his tunic and grasped the locket that Risara had given him. He brought it to his lips, and kissed the cold brass.

Merciful Shadow, Datch pleaded, as the world began to slip away from him. Please. Tell Risara. Tell her that I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to die.

*What's the meaning of this? I don't understand."*

*Young woman, blonde of hair. Case fifty four. Outcome: minimal*

# CHAPTER 2

## *The Fall of Old Arbor*

Prince Delvaran surveyed the carnage from a high point along the city wall. He was not as angry as he'd anticipated. No fury stirred inside him, no wrath, no rage. Only...emptiness.

For the first time in over three millennia, Old Arbor's castle bells rang in four long tones, signalling retreat. Large stretches of the wall had fallen to the Kadian invaders as the sun climbed higher, and the battle seemed lost. Soon, the fighting would spill into the cobbled streets.

"Fall back to the castle!" Delvaran ordered the six remaining members of his honor guard. The words left a stale taste in his mouth. However, thanks to chapter seventeen of Ostlau's Principles of Human Anatomy and Behavior, Delvaran knew that this 'taste' was likely a mental response to...

The prince's thoughts were interrupted by a stray throwing axe, which zipped by him and narrowly missed the silver crown atop his head. His small force was almost entirely surrounded by Kadians, but the enemies were scattered, without true fighting lines or any discernible organization. Delvaran's honor guard, on the other hand, formed a tight circle around him, cutting through enemies and driving toward the nearest staircase.

Every step for Delvaran was a struggle. Over the course of the battle, he had expended more of his power than ever before, and with that expenditure came exhaustion. It was the sort of exhaustion that weighed heavy on his eyelids, and caused his lungs to strain with every breath. Marching forward, he fought through the fatigue. If he was able to return to the castle before the Kadians stormed the city, his

escape plan remained possible. Thousands of his Scythari troops had already fallen, for which Delvaran felt a small pang of regret, but he would not be among them.

Wisely, many of the Kadians shied away from Delvaran and his seasoned crew. Some did not. They were either too consumed by bloodlust to consider the prince's power, or they realized that they had an opportunity to become prince-slayers. Delvaran wasn't too familiar with how Ralli progressed in the Kadian Kingdom. However, he suspected that if one of those lowly Ralli soldiers did manage to kill him, they'd probably ascend from slavery. They'd still be Ralli - hair color was rather difficult to alter - but they could earn the coveted right to own property.

Over a dozen idiotic warriors in black leather armor held at the top of the stairs, blocking Prince Delvaran's retreat. They showed no signs of dispersing, and began slashing at Delvaran's guards, trying to break through the ring of defenders.

Delvaran let out a weary sigh, and gripped his Totem. It was a golden sun, which hung from a chain around his neck. It'd been his sole Totem, ever since his powers first manifested six years ago, on his thirteenth birthday. The Totem was the channel for his powers, enabling him to amplify his Shaping abilities and accomplish the unimaginable.

However, in what could only be a cosmic joke, Delvaran's trusted Totem had decided to crack mid-battle. A deep gash ran across the midsection of the sun, and Delvaran could feel the power leaking from it. The Totem was still usable, but its effects were weakening. To Shape any more objects, Delvaran would have to tap more of his internal power reserve, which was already near-drained thanks to hours of temporarily Shaping statues into living beings.

"Soldiers of Scythar," shouted a black-clad nobleman with a clipped Kadian accent, from a nearby stretch of wall. "Lay down your arms! No innocent Ralli will be harmed by Kadian hands. Your families are safe! If you do not take up arms, you too will go unscathed."

"Bastards," the prince muttered.

Kadians were known to be people of their word. Of course they would use that against him, in his time of need. How many of his cowardly soldiers would take the Kadian offer? A glance around his own lines confirmed that the Kadian plea hadn't fallen upon deaf ears. Even on his own portion of the wall, men were laying down their arms.

Grinding his teeth, Prince Delvaran released the Totem and opened a pouch on his belt. He grabbed a handful of sliced marbles from within, and brought them to his lips. He didn't enjoy killing, but the foolish light-haired soldiers gave him no choice.

Three enemies pushed one of his guards out of the way, and jabbed their weapons forward, toward the prince. Delvaran eyed his assailants. The trio were all Ralli, two blond and one red-haired. Their pupils were dilated, most likely due to their heightened adrenaline, and they were advancing quickly.

The prince drew in a deep breath. Faint blue wisps of power entered his mouth, flowing from the sun Totem on his necklace. As expected, the stream was weak, and the broken Totem proved to be almost entirely worthless. All of the power came directly from his own pool, with no amplification. Even so, he was able to draw power. Not much...but enough.

"Become," Delvaran breathed. Power poured from his mouth and curled over the cut marbles in his fist. He envisioned the marbles growing small sets of wings, and their shiny surfaces transforming into the glossy carapaces of beetles. At first, nothing happened. Then, the marbles began to change, fitting his mental image.

Due to the marbles' general shape and composition, the Shaping required only a small amount of Delvaran's waning power. That, of course, was thanks to the first principle of Shaping: the more similarities between your original inanimate object and your animated end-product, the easier the Shaping.

The beetles, with marble swirls on their wings, paced impatiently on Delvaran's palm. They were waiting for a command.

"Attack eyes," Delvaran whispered to the marbles, while eyeing the approaching soldiers. It was a simple command, as most commands were. That corresponded with the second principle of Shaping: the more complex the command, the more power it required.

The beetles obeyed. They darted out of his palm and hurled themselves toward the three Kadians, who were almost within sword-range. The beetles paid no heed to the enemies' swords, leather armor, or visorless helmets. The insects split into three swarms and zoomed straight into the attackers' eyes.

Three screams cut through the roar of battle. The trio were on their knees or backs, and their swords clanged against the stone. The beetles soon followed, transforming back into marbles as they toppled to the ground. Delvaran hadn't imbued them with much power, just enough to achieve their goal. Many of the attacking Kadians looked on with horrified expressions, and backed away from Prince Delvaran. As much glory as slaying a prince would bring, the soldiers quickly realized that the risks were not worth the reward.

The Kadian squad that had been holding the staircase fell apart. They dashed past Delvaran's group, seeking the company of their allies up above, who had mostly conquered that stretch of wall.

"Merciful Shadow," Delvaran whispered. He marched down the steps with trembling legs, and prayed that he would arrive at the castle before it was too late.

\* \* \*

DELVARAN STRUGGLED UP the castle's spiral staircase toward his study, using the bannister for support. He had no time to waste. The Kadians would be pounding on the castle doors within minutes or hours, depending on how thoroughly they decided to loot the city.

The prince's troops had been outnumbered and outmatched. It came down to a tactical mistake, really, and was no fault of his own. Delvaran's father had insisted upon leading a large force to assault some of the Kadian mining villages in the northern foothills, leaving the capital exposed. The foolish king had initiated the war with his petty raids, then he'd done everything in his power to ensure his own kingdom's defeat.

Delvaran's lips were drawn in a thin, frustrated line. How would he be remembered? As the prince who let Old Arbor fall to the vile Kadians? As a failure, who doomed all of Scythar?

Candles flickered in the study when Delvaran arrived, casting a long shadow over the sheepish servant who sat atop the table. Her posture was lax and her legs dangled childishly in the air, swinging back and forth as if the girl was bored.

"Auri," Delvaran greeted her with both urgency and a tinge of disapproval.

She had too much spunk for a Ralli slave. Too much flair. At twenty one years, Auri was two years older than Delvaran, a willowy girl with angelic features and wheat-colored hair. The blue maid's dress served her well, hugging tight to her figure and complimenting her eyes. She'd been a servant to the royal family for much of her life, and - despite the girl's habit of insubordination - Delvaran trusted her more than anyone else in the city. There was a rare intelligence about her, which glinted in her sapphire eyes when they met his.

"Highness," Auri returned the greeting and hopped down from the table. Her usual smile was somewhat faded. "The bells...we've lost, haven't we?"

Delvaran gave a subtle nod, and ran a hand through his black hair.

He passed Auri with three long strides, then sunk into his leather reading chair.

"That's interesting." The girl pursed her lips. "What about the statues, Highness? Before the battle, you said that th-"

"I know what I said," he snapped in reply, his patience waning. "Now's not the time, Auri. Don't test me. We were outnumbered almost ten to one, and Shaping isn't a simple matter..."

Delvaran considered explaining some of the finer details of Shaping to the girl, but he knew it would be a waste of breath. She was light-haired, after all. A Ralli. She was practically a different species, and she knew nothing of his art. While it was possible for a Ralli to be born with one of the Three Powers, it wasn't a common occurrence. A Ralli Shaper would have been especially outlandish, as Shaping was both the rarest of the Three Powers and the most useful. The other powers - increased speed and increased strength - were mere novelties compared to Shaping.

Auri shot Delvaran an annoyed glance, the sort of expression that should have earned the girl a beating.

You're too lenient on her. His father never tolerated insolence from Ralli maids, nor did Marsa, the castle's Head Maid. Sometimes, Delvaran wished that he'd selected a redhead as his personal maid. Gingers were generally more tame than blondes like Auri. They sold for a premium, but Delvaran figured that the investment probably would have been worthwhile. A redheaded maid would have certainly given him less headaches.

Of course, that was all trivial in the grand scope of the world. His kingdom was collapsing, and - if his desperate plan did not work - he wouldn't be alive to see its end. As long as Auri had completed the task he'd given her, a few flashes of disobedience could be forgiven.

"Did you find one?" The prince fought through his weariness and leaned across the table, fixing Auri with a hard stare. "Tell me you found one."

"I...I think so." The girl sifted through the small side-pocket of her blue maid's dress, and produced what appeared to be a necklace with a small metal oval attached. A new Totem. "It was on one of the lads in the infirmary. A soldier."

Delvaran gently lifted the object from Auri's grasp. As soon as the cold brass touched the prince's palm, he drew a sharp breath.

"Your instructions, master," Auri continued. "They were...difficult to follow, but I'm sure that the lad cared about this thing. It's got a woman's name in it. A wife or a lover, I reckon."

"I assume the soldier was Ralli?" The prince inquired, wrinkling his nose.

"Yes, Highness."

Delvaran sighed, but did not press the issue any further. In these circumstances, any Totem would do, even if it had been tainted by a Ralli's ownership.

"And is the man still alive?"

"No, Highness. He had a nasty neck wound from the battle. Passed away before I left."

The beginnings of a weak smile graced the edges of the prince's lips. "You've done well, then." His backup plan was falling into place.

He tightened his grip around the locket. Despite the fact that the previous owner had been Ralli, power still pulsed from the locket. Delvaran could sense it, like the beat of a heart. He couldn't determine exactly how much power came from the locket, but the steady thump was undeniable.

"Auri," Delvaran said. "Take this." He reached inside of his wooden desk drawer and produced an envelope. It carried the House Scythar seal: a lion stamped into hardened blue blood. The seal was unmistakable, and as old as time itself. Although many people over the centuries had attempted to forge the Scythar seal, their efforts were never fruitful. Only direct members of House Scythar shed blue blood, and Delvaran and his father were the only living Scythari royals.

His mother hadn't carried the trait, only his father. Cruel blue. That was what a great many people called it. That was how the old song went: Cruel blue, for red is spilled for you.

The content of Delvaran's sealed letter was simple: a plea for vengeance, addressed to the Lisanai Empire. He had written the letter more out of hate for the Kadians than love for the Lisanai. They were a fanatical people, after all, and didn't even worship the Great Giant. Still, the Lisanai had a larger army than Kadia, and they were Prince Delvaran's only chance at achieving any sort of justice. If Delvaran's father - King Chessarion 'Icevein' - decided to march his army down from the foothills, the Kadians would be blocked from retreat. Certainly, the Lisanai could see the wisdom in striking when Kadia was weak from years of war.

"If I don't survive," the prince said, fixing Auri with an even gaze, "ensure that the Lisanai receive this letter."

Auri hesitated, then curtsied, accepting the letter and stashing it in her dress. "Of course, my lord."

Delvaran nodded his approval, then let out a long sigh. "Oh Rodmahein," he muttered. "I can't believe I'm about to do this."

The prince yanked the golden sun Totem from his necklace and grasped it in his left hand. He held the soldier's locket in his right. The old and the new. He closed his eyes.



A few minutes passed. Delvaran and Auri sat in near-silence. The primary sound was the faint stomp of advancing Kadian boots, which grew louder with every passing minute. In between the bootstomps, however, Delvaran whispered impatiently to himself. Why was the process taking so long? When would he be safe to use the new Totem? In his mind, he nudged the new Totem toward his internal pool of power, but the Totem was taking its time, falling into his control at its own speed.

“Highness?” Auri interrupted the quiet with the softest of tones. “May I ask you a question?”

“You already have.” The prince frowned and opened his eyes, still gripping the two Totems in either hand. Part of him wanted to send the girl away, but he fought that compulsion. If he couldn’t trust her to protect his interests, who could he trust?

“What is the meaning of all of this, exactly?” Auri asked, somehow interpreting Delvaran’s answer as permission to speak. “Don’t you have more important things to do, like...I don’t know...running away? The enemy is coming, Highness...”

“I’m aware,” the prince snapped. He glanced up from the Totems, and met Auri’s worried eyes. Fine. If the girl really wanted to know about Shaping, he could enlighten her. He had nothing better to do at the moment, after all.

“The strength of an individual Shaper,” Delvaran began, “is really a mix of his internal power, plus the power of his Totem.”

“Do you have to use one?”

Delvaran chuckled, recalling the three men that he’d just killed, all without a working Totem. “Generally. With a weak or missing Totem, a skilled Shaper might be able to do something small, like Shape a rope to resemble a snake and give it muscles and a mouth, but he’d lose control of that snake after a short time, and it’d become a rope again. It’s hard to maintain constant control.”

“So if you had a really strong ‘Totem’ thingy, you’d be able to make even more of those fighting statues?”

“Perhaps. If I had enough power in my reserves, or a strong enough Totem...” The prince tightened his grip on the Totem, his knuckles turning white. Why was the process so slow? Why hadn’t this been included in the literature? “It’s complicated, Auri. There are a lot of factors at play.”

“And both of those are ‘Totems’?” Auri tilted her head, gesturing at the objects in the prince’s hands.

Prince Delvaran nodded. “I think so. I sent you on your task because this old thing,” he glanced toward the sun necklace, “took a blow from a hammer during the fight.”

“What makes something a Totem?” Auri was resting her elbows on the desk, eagerly leaning forward to study both Totems. She was a curious one, indeed. Too curious. This knowledge was all useless to her, as people who had one of the Three Powers were always born with that power. However, seeing her interested eyes and perked ears, Delvaran could not bring himself to withhold the knowledge from the girl.

“A Totem can be anything, as long as it’s made of metal and it’s Tearforged.”

“Tearforged?”

“Tearforged. The object has to have meaning. It has to evoke an emotion in someone, somewhere. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the Totem.”

“That’s silly. So you don’t have to care about that pendant at all, as long as someone else ‘Tearforged’ it.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to work, I think. Honestly, I’m not entirely sure. I’ve never used another person’s Totem before, so I don’t have much reference. This,” he eyed the locket. It was finally beginning to accept his power, and his heartbeat quickened. “This is going to be new.”

It wouldn’t be easy to say goodbye to his old Totem. The sun medallion had been a gift from his mother, before her ‘disappearance’. Those who ran afoul of Delvaran’s father had a bad habit of either ‘disappearing’ or succumbing to Icevein poison. It was said to be a slow poison, ending in the most painful death imaginable.

“Then...why aren’t you doing anything?” Auri studied the prince, who still sat calmly in his leather chair.

“I am. I’m almost done bonding.”

“Bonding?”

“It takes time to switch between Totems.” Delvaran tightened his grip on both of the cold objects, feeling the familiar sun Totem grow more and more distant in his mind.

“How much time?” Auri asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve only read about it.” He nodded toward one of the room’s many bookshelves. “In theory, this should only take a few minutes, and then I’ll be bonded with this Totem for years...so it’d better not break.”

“In theory,” Auri muttered to herself. She spun away from the table, crossed the room with grace, and began securing all three deadbolts on the study’s door. “And what do you plan to do, when the Kadians come storming in? What’s your plan? To make the desk grow legs, and fight off an entire army?”

“Not at all,” the prince drew an uncertain breath. “I’m going to Shape myself.”

“What?!” Auri’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

Delvaran hesitated. "In theory. Shaping, in its most basic form, is just the rearrangement of pieces. I'm able to bring statues to life because their pieces are basic, just a block of stone, and I can add joints and muscles wherever I please. Other living creatures are too complex for that. Even if I spent a lifetime studying a squirrel, I wouldn't understand that squirrel well enough to Shape it. Trust me, I've tried. However, because the Power that I'll be using originates from within me, it should understand how my body works...hopefully. That's what I read, anyway."

Delvaran glanced toward his bookshelf, which lent a small amount of comfort. He'd always loved books. He loved the smell of worn pages, and the kernels of ancient wisdom held within. There weren't too many books on Shapers in existence, likely due to the rarity of Shapers themselves, but Delvaran had read them all, multiple times.

Even so, he still wasn't entirely confident in his plan. So many factors could go wrong, but it was his only chance to escape Old Arbor alive. If the Kadians caught him, they'd string him up before the week was through. "Any mistake could be disastrous. If the books are to be believed, you can only Shape yourself once..."

A loud crash echoed through the castle, which made Delvaran flinch. The castle's front doors had been battered open. He'd posted his honor guard outside of that door, with orders to surrender as slowly as possible when the Kadians broke through. Hopefully, that would stall the attackers for a few moments...if they didn't just kill the surrendering soldiers outright. Delvaran wasn't quite sure what to expect from the invaders. Would they sack the city, and kill everyone in sight? Most likely. His father would have done so without batting an eye, and Delvaran had heard some terrible stories about the Kadians.

Prince Delvaran closed his eyes and, with added urgency, guided his power toward the new Totem. Was it bonded? Was it ready? The locket felt ready. In fact, it felt like an extension of his body, just as his old Totem had. In contrast, his old golden sun medallion was heavy in his hand and no longer flowed with power. The prince clenched his teeth in anticipation, and let the new Totem become a river for his tiny pool of Power. Energy surged up his arm, into the Ralli locket.

"Highness," Auri hissed. Boots were pounding on the staircase, growing nearer. "Highness!"

Prince Delvaran widened the stream of power. Rather than directing that stream to marbles, a statue or a desk, he focused it back on himself. He let the visible wisps of power, which rose from his body like mist, settle on his black locks and cold skin. The power touched every fiber of his being, and Delvaran harnessed every ounce of his concentration.

Ever so slowly, Delvaran began working his craft, using the scant remnants of power that he hadn't expended in battle. The prince drew a hesitant breath, and took a moment to wish goodbye to Prince Delvaran of Scythar. He would create a fantastic disguise for himself. As always, Delvaran had a plan, and this was one was rather brilliant.

He would alter his appearance, and masquerade as a noble merchant from the distant land of Jakos, only visiting Old Arbor to negotiate a trade deal for exotic goods. 'Tradelord Zentos' would be his name. The plan was already set in motion. He would sweet-talk the invading Kadian army about all of the wonderful goods he could bring them, then - as soon as they permitted - he'd leave the city and pick up his stash of hidden gold. With noone the wiser, he'd retire to a beautiful seaside villa and live in peace. A sure plan.

Who's the fool now, father? Delvaran thought with a smirk.

Then, he began to weave his power around his own body, linking each fiber of his being with mystic threads.

As it turned out, altering details on his own body was not drastically different from working with any inanimate object. He didn't need to reshape his entire body or breathe life into himself. All he needed to do was make himself appear Jakosai, and alter his face a tiny bit...perhaps make himself even more attractive. It couldn't hurt, could it?

The prince strengthened his jaw line and played around with his eye color for a bit, before settling on hazel. As Delvaran worked, he did his best to be careful. He knew that the moment he broke this stream of power, his form would be locked forever. What other tiny, subtle shifts could he make, to appear like a mere merchant, rather than a notorious prince?

Just as Delvaran added the final touches to his nose, a force emerged from deep within the prince's heart, something he'd never felt before. It planted an urge in the back of his mind, telling him to look inside the locket, to complete the bonding. It was a compulsion, a need. He had to understand his Totem if he wanted to use it, didn't he? He fought that urge for a moment, before eventually prying open the golden clasp and looking inside.

A small drawing smiled up at him. It featured two young, light-haired lovers. A redheaded girl sat happily in a blond boy's lap, in the foreground of a pastoral scene. Hands interlocked, the pair looked as if they were on the verge of giggling. The soldier and his lover, Delvaran thought to himself with a grimace.

The locket also displayed a name, etched below the drawing.

“Risara,” Delvaran read, then eyed the small drawing of the girl. “Risara, Risara, Risara.” It was an exotic name for a Ralli, and had a strange ring to it. He imagined the girl. The name seemed to suit her, though he didn’t understand why.

The locket pulsed a stream of angry red light, then began to rumble with power. Delvaran gasped. The Totem was no longer acting as a river, or a tributary. Instead, the locket in his clasped hand took on a life of its own. Power surged directly from the new Totem, and he dropped it to the table, eyes wide. What in the world? Delvaran wondered, his heart thumping in his chest.

Dropping the Totem changed nothing. The Shaping was already in progress, and the brass locket had stolen all control from Delvaran. He desperately tried to snap the mental stream of power, to end the Shaping...but to no avail.

“Highness?” Auri’s voice sounded distant, but was full of worry. “What’s going on?”

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Totems weren’t supposed to work like this. They were mere tools, they didn’t have minds of their own.

Even so, Delvaran couldn’t deny reality. The power began to grow unbearable, causing his head to spin, and his vision to darken. The weave of power spun around him, wrapping itself around his skin and leaving changes in its wake.

“Auri,” he managed to say, but the voice that came from his mouth was not his own. It was loftier.

The room around Delvaran began to melt into darkness, and his eyelids grew heavy. A gentle hum entered his mind, clearing his thoughts and steadying his breaths, until the tranquil bonds of sleep claimed him.

# CHAPTER 3

## *Rise and Shine*

Prince Delvaran stirred in his chair. “Rise and shine, darling”, Auri giggled. That girl’s laugh was like a burst of fresh air. Light, lovely, and trilling. Delvaran could have recognized her laugh anywhere. The tone of her voice and her word choice, however, were peculiar.

“Darling!?” His eyes shot open, and he frowned. Auri was staring down at him with a smile that could best be described as mischievous...or perhaps even sinister. “Have you forgotten your place, wench?” the prince growled.

“Have you forgotten yours, Daila?” Auri knelt beside him and ran the back of her hand against his cheek. “I love what you’ve done with your hair, by the way,” she continued, a smug grin on her lips. Auri had always been a bit insolent, but Delvaran had never seen this downright devious side of her before. “It suits you.”

Delvaran slapped away her hand and sat upright, fixing her with a glare. “Don’t test me, girl,” he spat.

Auri replied with another round of giggles.

“A less generous master would have you drawn and quartered without a...”

His lecture trailed into silence. Something was off. His voice was softer. Higher, too. “Shadows,” he cursed, only to shiver at his voice’s pitch. It was that of an adolescent girl. His eyes widened with realization. “The Totem...the Shaping...”

With a gulp, he looked down to survey his new form. His body was pale and slender, without a muscle in sight. Two small feet poked out from the bottom of his...blue dress? He wiggled his toes in shock. He was...he was a girl.

He brought a hand to his temple, shaking his head. The Totem! That cursed Ralli locket! It had taken on a life of its own. It had ruined his Shaping, but how?

Upon shaking his head, a swath of fire-red hair entered Delvaran's vision, which he instinctively brushed away. He froze. Red hair? He had red hair? He reached up with a shaky hand, and pulled the locks back into his vision. Wavy red hair extended all the way down to the small of his back. There was no mistaking it...yet it couldn't be. It must have been part of a wig...perhaps Auri was playing a trick on him.

He tugged on the locks, but they did not budge. He redoubled his efforts, tugging harder until his scalp began to throb with pain.

"No," he said, his voice halfway between a whisper and a whimper. "It can't be real..."

"Oh, little Daila, it's very real," Auri cooed. Hopping onto the table in front of him, she reached out and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Daila?" he asked numbly. Goosebumps coursed up his skinny arms. "Daila?" He struggled to put his horrified thoughts into words.

"It's a pretty name, isn't it? I picked it for you when you were napping. Do you like it?"

He stared up at Auri with parted lips, unable to voice a response.

"Just try to think positively, hun," Auri assured him with a pat on the shoulder. Her hand felt intimidating on his frail shoulder, and the force of her pat made him flinch. "The Kadians took the city, but they aren't hurting anyone! All is good and well. They're even going to let us stay in the castle. Plus, you're a pretty one, now. Want to take a look?"

Without waiting for an answer, Auri raised a mirror and held it in front of him.

"Oh Rodmahein," the prince murmured, eyeing the shocked ginger Ralli in the mirror.

Auri was not wrong. He was pretty, for a Ralli girl. He was also...innocent, almost pathetically so, with a narrow nose, a delicate jaw, and two large blue eyes. A light dusting of freckles graced his nose and the tops of his cheeks, almost invisible in the room's dim light.

Then, realization struck him: he was a spitting image of her. Risara. The girl from the locket.

"No, no, no," he shook his head. The action only served to remind him of the red locks, which bounced against his shoulders. "Auri, fetch me the locket."

"Get it yourself, wench," Auri replied. She giggled again, jestfully poking Delvaran's cheek with her index finger.

He rolled his eyes and fought the urge to snarl. She thought she was so damned witty, didn't she? She thought this was just hilarious. Did she have any respect for him at all? Perhaps he should have been harsher on her when she tested his patience, like Delvaran's father had always suggested. The king never tolerated nonsense from Ralli.

Sighing in resignation, Delvaran tried to rise to his feet. He stumbled almost immediately, and Auri's waiting arms eased him back into the chair. The movement had brought his dizziness back in full force, reminding him of his fatigue. Of course, Auri found his struggles to be nothing short of hilarious. Grinning, she sauntered to the opposite side of his desk and fetched the Totem.

She dangled the brass locket in front of Delvaran just out of reach.

"Hand it over," he ordered, lifting a hand to snatch at the locket.

Auri pulled the locket away and clicked her tongue.

"What do you say when you want someone to do you a favor?" she taunted. "What's the magic word?"

Delvaran furrowed his eyebrows. He glared at the blonde maid.

"Hand it over." The prince then sighed, but he maintained his glare. "Please."

"Better."

She dropped the locket into his waiting palm, and - in his exhaustion - he only barely managed to catch it. His whole body felt rather limp. For the first time in his life, he couldn't even sense the well of power within himself. Had the self-Shaping really been so taxing? His Shaping power would return...wouldn't it?

Delvaran eyed the locket and exhaled a high breath that sounded almost like a whimper. If he could access the same power in the locket that had transformed him, it might be able to change him back. He wouldn't be stuck in this disgusting body. It was a long shot, and he couldn't recall any of his books mentioning the possibility of a sentient Totem...but it was his only chance.

Opening the locket, Delvaran stared at drawing of the redheaded girl. "Risara," he whispered, tightening his grip on the locket until his fingers trembled. "Risara, Risara, Risara."

The Totem pulsed weakly. Then, nothing.

"Risara, Risara, Risara!"

Not even a pulse, this time.

"What are you doing?" Auri asked, tilting her head. She looked genuinely concerned, as if she was studying a madman. "Are you okay?"

"No!" Delvaran shrieked, then hurled the locket toward a bookcase. "No, I'm not okay! How could I possibly be okay?!"



He planted his elbows on the desk, and buried his face in his hands, allowing bright red locks to cascade between his fingers. Valthus' On Shaping and Other Sympathetic Systems had been quite clear: all self-Shaping was permanent, and could only be performed once. However, that useless text had failed to mention anything about Totems hijacking the Shaping process, nor had it mentioned anything about the apparent disappearance of his internal power.

"How did this even happen?" Delvaran asked nobody in particular. From his new lips, the question sounded like the whining of a petulant girl.

"I dunno."

Of course Auri didn't know. She was a stupid, ignorant Ralli girl. She probably couldn't even read. Perhaps, if she had been competent, she could have warned him not to perform the Shaping, or somehow interrupted the process. It was all her fault.

"Well," Auri hummed. She returned her hand to Delvaran's head and ran it through his hair again. "At least you're not dead. You can thank me for that, by the way. I changed you out of that armor, before the soldiers came through. As far as they know, you're our newest maid. Your name is Daila, and you fainted in terror when they broke into the castle. I had to burn that letter of yours, of course, before the soldiers found us...aren't you going to thank me?"

Delvaran sighed, and looked down at his cobalt blue dress. It was a simple garment, and fit him fairly well. The dress hugged tightly to his whole body in a no-nonsense manner. Unlike the dresses of noblewomen, the maids' outfit had no frills or ornate tassels.

Auri followed his gaze.

"It's one of my old ones." She nodded at the dress, with that thin smile of hers. "Reckon I grew out of it when I was fourteen."

"Thanks, I suppose," he said. His voice was just above a whisper, but he couldn't keep the poutiness from his tone. His plan was ruined. He couldn't retire to a seaside villa, regardless of how much gold he recovered from his stash. He was a light-haired woman. He couldn't own property. He was property.

While Ralli men had the opportunity to purchase their own freedom and become craftsmen or traders, the women had no such luxury. The only way a light-haired woman could rise from slavery was if her husband paid for her release. Even then, she'd only become her husband's property, never truly free.

A lone tear streaked down Delvaran's cheek. He looked up, meeting Auri's eyes. Her mirth seemed to have faded into sympathy, and her smile disappeared.

“It could be worse, you know?” Auri said. “Most girls would love to work in the castle. It’s a whole lot better than the streets.”

The prince wrinkled his nose, but nodded. Auri was right. The street-dwellers were somewhat free, but they did not lead enviable lives. They begged and stole to survive, and slept in muddy alleyways, or under the branches of the Great Tree. He’d seen many of those homeless Ralli in Old Arbor, though they were supposedly more common in the Lisanai Empire. Regardless of location, that would be among the worst possible of fates.

Auri laid a gentle kiss on Delvaran’s head. “Alright, hun. All of the castle staff will be summoned this evening to take new oaths. You have a thing or two to learn before then...actually, more than a thing or two. As a ginger, you’ll be expected to be even more obedient and proper. Don’t worry, though. I’ll show you the ropes and -”

“Shadows...” Delvaran interrupted the girl. The Kadians hadn’t brought their own maids. The vile invaders assumed that they would re-use the Scythari maid crew, because...why not? The maids were light-haired. They were Ralli, and Ralli were docile. Ralli never defied or betrayed their masters.

The faintest of smiles worked its way across Delvaran’s lips. The redheaded body was a curse. His powers didn’t seem to be working, and he’d lost his nobility. However, the changes also provided an unique opportunity. If Delvaran chose to stay in the castle and pose as ‘Daila’, he’d have unfettered access to the Kadian royals: that tyrannical king who destroyed Delvaran’s life, and his spineless children. The Kadians would never see a redheaded slave as a threat. Not until it was too late.

“Very well,” Delvaran said, doing his best to disguise his excitement. Auri couldn’t know about his plan. As much as he trusted the girl, he couldn’t afford that risk. She was already keeping enough of his secrets. “What do I need to know?”

\* \* \*

“MY LORD,” DELVARAN SAID, in the feathery tone that Auri had insisted he use. He approached the desk and curtsied, gently holding the edges of his dress. Auri sat in his old reading chair, analyzing each of his movements.

“Girl,” Auri replied with a dismissive hand gesture. She pretended to be engrossed in a book, but her fingers tracked each letter with care, as if she was struggling to decipher their meaning. “Fetch me some wine.”

“Yes, my lord,” Delvaran replied in that same sweet tone. He walked to a nearby bookcase and lifted an imaginary pitcher of wine, attempting to sway with grace as he

moved. He knew that his movements were a bit clunky, but this was a new body and he was trying his best.

Auri continued to feign literacy as Delvaran poured imaginary wine into an imaginary cup.

“Girl!” Auri cried, leaping from her chair and glaring down at Delvaran. The willowy girl stood almost half a head taller than Delvaran, and the prince fought the urge to gulp in fear. “You clumsy fool! Clean it up!”

“I’m sorry, my lord!” Delvaran replied, glancing up at Auri. How unfair...the wine wasn’t even real. He was a prince. A prince! Who was she to treat him like that, even if she was simply pretending for the sake of practice?

“No!” Auri clicked her tongue, and slapped her hand against the desk. “No eye contact, and don’t raise your voice! Not when you’ve made an error. Keep your head down and speak softly. Let’s try it again.”

The prince bit back a slew of insults and returned to the door. They’d been at this for hours, and he was beginning to suspect that Auri enjoyed these training exercises.

“My lord,” he repeated, gritting his teeth as he curtsied.

“No! Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. If you address a nobleman with that tone, Madam Marsa will beat you until you can barely walk.”

“You addressed me like that, just a few hours ago,” Delvaran shot back with a glare.

“Context is important. You’re a redhead, Daila. If you don’t want to raise eyebrows, you’ll need to be absolutely perfect.” Auri fixed him with a hard stare. “Plus, do you remember the first rule of being a maid? Understand your masters. Every master will treat you differently than the last, and they’ll all have a different level of tolerance for mistakes.” She nodded sagely, approving her own words. “You can learn a great deal about a person, based on how they treat their maids.”

Delvaran stood quietly for a time, rubbing one of his pale arms. “Was I a good master?”

Auri tilted her head, as if surprised by the question. They held each other’s gaze for a moment, then Auri snapped her fingers. “Again. We don’t have much time, and you’ve got a long way to go.”

*“I’ll gut you. Take your hands off him, or I’ll gut you.”*

*Man, blond of hair. Case sixty three. Outcome: moderate*

# CHAPTER 4

## *Beneath the Moon*

**L**iral crouched barefoot on her favorite rooftop. Night had finally come. She watched in silence as fog rose from the rocky shore, and began to meander through the city's streets.

Most folks in Trisal saw the fog as an annoyance. Most folks in Trisal were also downright evil. They wanted to take Liral's food, steal her pendant, and ransack her hard-won clothing stash. They wanted to hurt her. The fog was Liral's only shield. Her cloak. It hid her from the glares of guardsmen and the prying eyes of other urchins. When those swirls of grey billowed over the rooftops, Liral was free.

With an excited breath, Liral leapt from the roof. She fell a distance that would have broken most folks' legs, but landed soundlessly and broke into a sprint. Her dirty blonde hair streamed behind her and her copper amulet bounced against her chest as she ran, weaving through the Harbor district's alleyways. The fog was thick. Thicker than usual. She could only see twenty paces in each direction, but that didn't stop her from bounding at full-speed. Why would it? In the fog, she could see better than most folks, and the alleyways were so familiar that they felt like extensions of her own body.

"I say we put 'em down," came a slurring voice, just ahead. "Kadians. Scythari. They're dogs, the whole lot of 'em."

Liral dropped into a crouch and inched forward, until she spotted the outlines of two guardsmen. They stood outside one of the Harbor's many taverns, clad in faded Lisanai armor. By their postures, they appeared to be rather drunk, struggling to hold each other upright.

“Mate,” replied the other guard. “You’re a right...a right genius. God knows ‘em savages can’t run a kingdom.”

“Too busy dicing up babies for that dead giant of theirs.”

The pair let out hiccuping laughs.

“Aye. And once we whip ‘em, they’ll all be working the mines.”

Liral tiptoed around them. With a delicate, practiced touch, she snatched both of their coin purses. Her fingers felt through the cloth, and detected the ridges of about two dozen holed coppers. It wasn’t a large haul, but it was enough for a nice steak dinner.

She began to salivate, then swallowed and pursed her lips. No, she couldn’t afford to be so frivolous, not when she had so little. The Redcloaks had found her stash of coins only a few weeks prior. Almost fifty silver wheels, three years of progress, all gone in a blink. She’d thought it was well-hidden, stowed within a ruined chimney near one of her rooftop sleeping spots. She’d been wrong. Now, if she wanted to survive the winter, she’d have to dedicate herself to restoring that stash, just so she could rent a room at a cheap inn when the icestorms came.

Trisal was a terrible place, but it was also a place of wealth, the prize jewel and capital of the Lisanai Empire. Brilliant buildings marked the city center, and many dark-haired nobles had built their manors on the city’s steep hills. There were even a fair number of wealthy Ralli in the city. However, that prosperity did not reach everyone. Most of the Ralli in Lisanai were slaves, and others - like Liral - had been utterly forgotten by society.

It wasn’t society’s fault, though. Liral had brought all of this mess upon herself. In any given situation, Liral always made the worst possible decision.

You’re a ruiner. You ruin everything. That’s why Mum left you. Liral repeated the mantra within her head. Maybe it’d be better if you braved the icestorms. If you were a corpse, you wouldn’t be able to cause any more pain.

Liral’s shoulders slumped and she ducked inside the tavern.

The place was busy. Too busy for most folks to notice the barefoot teen, as she meandering through the laughing, drinking crowd like a snake. This tavern was part of her regular circuit. It was one of the better establishments in the Harbor district, an underlit wood-logged building, close enough to the sea-side to hear the crash of waves.

The tavern wasn't nice enough for the blackhaired folks. However, it was more than sufficient for free Ralli sailors, keen to empty their bulging coinpurses before sailing for the Bits.

As Liral brushed through a group of drunken sailors, her small frame came in handy. She moved like a ghost, and pocketed two dangling coinpurses. She could have stolen every purse in the establishment. Most of the tavern's patrons were bold with their purses, only a leather string or two connecting the pouches to their belts. However, Liral had been picking pockets since her seventh birthday. She understood that three or four missing coinpurses was a minor ordeal, and would likely go unnoticed. If her thefts grew more rampant, however, the local businessmen would call in the Redcloaks to hunt her down.

Content with her haul, Liral turned around, preparing to head to her next tavern. Mid-turn, a sparkle caught her eye. She froze in her tracks.

Most folks wouldn't have spotted the coinpurse, dangling from the belt of a fairly young man who sat near the back of the tavern. They wouldn't have spotted the coin that only barely protruded from that purse. A gold crown. Liral couldn't remember the last time she'd seen one, but its markings were clear. The aged grooves on its edges, the way it laid its weight against the mouth of the coinpurse...it was a real gold crown!

Her heart began to pound. A gold crown could change her life. She could buy food for a year, or maybe even purchase a room at one of those housing quarters. If the man's whole purse was full of gold coins, he wouldn't miss one or two...would he?

Liral licked her lips, and padded toward the man's table, careful to avoid eye contact. He was a tall man, even when sitting, and his strawberry blond hair was carefully managed. He wore a fancy coat, without even a single hole or patch. Was he some wealthy trader from the Bits? A lucky man who came from a well-off family within the city?

He appeared to be deep in conversation with the blushing woman beside him, his stark eyebrows rising and falling animatedly as he spoke. He was boisterous, clueless, and distracted. He was the perfect target.

"Aye," the man said with a booming laugh, eyeing his companion's bust. The man spoke with a loud voice that seemed to carry above the surrounding chatter, and reverberated off the walls. "That's the thing people don't realize about the fog: it goes all the way in-land, through Scythar. That's over a week away, on a good horse. Fog covers all of it. Every. Single. Night. How's it do that? Seems mystical, doesn't it?"

"It does," the woman murmured, raising a hand to cradle the back of the man's neck.

"Makes you want to go and explore, doesn't it? To see what's out there? Trisal's great, but...I've already found this city's most beautiful treasure." The man massaged the woman's hand, with a deviously smooth grin.

Liral fought the urge to vomit. She skirted around the table, and lowered a deft hand toward the man's pouch. Her fingers darted forward in a blur and snatched the coin, almost too quickly to be seen by human eyes. The coin was cold, weighty, and genuine. She'd done it! She'd really done it! Suddenly, that steak dinner became a real possibility. She turned from the man and began to meld back into the crowd.

A hand locked around her arm. She froze.

"Come with me," commanded a deep voice.

Liral glanced behind her, and saw the well-dressed man from whom she'd stolen the coin.

"Pickpocket!" The blushing woman squawked, directing an accusatory finger at Liral. "The girl's a pickpocket!"

Liral's eyes widened. She could barely remember the last time she'd been caught in the act. She tightened her fist, clutching the gold crown as if her life depended upon that small circle of metal. In a way, it did.

"I won't hurt you," the man insisted, intensity in his green eyes as he loosened his grip. "I just want to talk. If you hear me out, I'll get you food and a place to stay. I promise. Please...trust me."

No. Not again. She couldn't let it happen again. Even if the man's promise was genuine, he'd eventually try to hurt her. They always did. She closed her eyes and pictured him cutting her arm open with a knife. Her mum had warned of men like him, before she abandoned Liral to die in the streets of Trisal. She couldn't trust anyone, and she certainly couldn't trust this sort of man, with his fine clothing and eager eyes.

Liral twisted out of the man's grasp in a blur of movement, and was dashing through the crowd before he could react. She burst out of the tavern's front door and ran past the two guards, who had collapsed into drunken heaps on the cobblestones.

"Wait! Please!" called the fancy man, in pursuit.

The man was fast, much faster than Liral had anticipated, but nobody was as fast as Liral. Her bare feet sprung her across the stones in a leaping gait, covering almost a dozen paces with each step.

Liral considered ducking into an alleyway, but thought better of it. The man who hunted her was likely part of a group, with henchmen waiting to grab her in the alleys. If she wanted to get to safety with the gold crown, she'd have to take a more creative route.

Drawing a determined breath, Liral sprinted toward a nearby building and sprung herself into the air. She soared upward, into the fog, and fought the urge to smile. She



could have climbed up the side of the building without incident, but she opted for the more immediate route. She was being chased, after all, and it'd be an easy jump for Liral. The building was only two stories high. In her years of experimentation, she learned that she could clear four stories, five on a good day.

Mid-way through her jump, something caught Liral by the leg. She let out a surprised gasp, and felt herself being dragged back toward the ground. The culprit was a rope, knotted tightly around her thigh. She barely had a chance to cry out in panic before her back slammed against the cobblestones, and the breath shot out of her lungs.

"Why'd you have to run?" the fancy man sighed. He held the rope in his hand, and began to loop it around Liral's wrists. "I really hope you didn't break anything."

Liral only groaned in reply.

Alright." The man casually lifted Liral from the ground, as if she weighed no more than an injured bird, and slung her over his shoulder. "Let's get you somewhere safe."

# CHAPTER 5

## *The Pastry Girl*

Liral sat in the corner of a candle-lit room. Her hands were snugly bound with rope, and her ankles were tied to a wooden chair. Ignoring her thrashing and clawing, the fancy man had carried her out of the Harbor district and brought her to this large flat, above a pastry shop. Throughout the journey, Liral hadn't made a sound. Calling out for help could have drawn the attention of the Redcloaks, and she couldn't afford to take that risk.

The flat was a perplexing place. Couches and mood candles lay strewn about, suggesting that the place belonged to some ambitious bachelor, but the walls were lined with shelves. Atop those shelves were an assortment of wigs, glass vials, crumpled outfits, and folded maps. The man was clearly not a Redcloak...but what was he, then? Some sort of traveling actor? An alchemist, maybe?

"For the record," the fancy man said, pulling up a chair to sit across from Liral. He'd since changed out of his posh outfit, and wore a pair of trousers with a plain white shirt. In the well-lit room, she could better analyze his features. He looked older than she'd first thought - about thirty or so - and he had a prominent nose.

"I was trying to avoid putting you through all of this. I apologize for the bonds, but you have to understand my dilemma. I can't have you running off before I have a chance to explain myself."

Liral spat at his face. Her attempt fell short, and landed on the man's pant-leg. Her shoulders slumped, and she stared at the wooden floorboards.

You can't even manage to spit on him. You can't even do that right. Ruiner. Mum was right about you.

Liral's Totem, the round copper pendant, sat on a table on the far side of the room, too far distant to channel her speed. She ground her teeth in frustration. If she slipped her bonds, she'd have to snatch the Totem while she made her escape. Without it, she'd still be inhumanly quick, albeit a tad slower than usual...but she couldn't give up that Totem.

"Okay." The man flashed a devilish smile and nodded. "I guess I deserved that." He cleared his throat. "Allow me to introduce myself. The name's Cross, and we have a lot in common."

Liral raised her head, and met the man's eyes. She spat. This time, her attempt traveled a bit further and landed on the man's chin.

"Should've seen that one coming," Cross muttered. He wiped away the spittle with his sleeve. "Look, I know what you are."

Liral tensed.

"You're a Dasher. A good one, if my little birdies are correct."

She released a steady breath.

"I always wanted to meet a Dasher. It must be amazing, huh? All the jumping and running?" There was no fierceness in Cross's expression, just childlike wonder. "Do you ever feel like a bird?"

Liral tilted her head, confused. He was acting so...friendly. It had to be a trick, an attempt to gain information. After that, he would certainly hurt her.

"I'm an Ironskin, myself," he continued. An Ironskin. That made sense, Liral supposed. Ironskins were faster than most other folk, which would have let Cross stay within range of her while she was escaping, and hit her with that rope. However, Ironskins weren't really known for their speed, but for their absurd strength, which would explain how her efforts to wriggle out of his grasp had proven so futile.

"Sometimes I wish I was a Dasher. Seems like the most fascinating of the Three." He eyed Liral, and flashed a line of brilliant teeth. "When I first heard about a mysterious Dasher near the docks, I got a bit excited. When I heard you were a thief, it seemed too good to be true. All these years, I thought I was the only thief in Trisal with a Power."

"You're a thief?" Liral blurted the words, eyes wide. The man had acted so prim and proper back in the tavern, almost like a dark-haired.

"So she does speak, after all." His smile returned. "Yes. I'm a thief. A different kind of thief, but still a thief. I go after bigger targets than coinpurses in Harbor taverns...and I want you to join me."

She bit her lip, and fought the urge to ask questions. It was a trap. It had to be. "Let me go." Liral's voice wavered.

“Let you go? But I haven’t even told you about the heist, yet. Plus...” Cross rose from his chair and strode to the loft’s small kitchen. He returned with a plate of raspberry pastries, each baked to an enticing shade of gold, with cream poking through the edges. “How am I gonna finish all of these by myself?”

For the second time that night, Liral’s mouth began to water. She hadn’t eaten all day, having foregone her meal in an effort to save more coin. In case her hunger wasn’t apparent, her stomach chose that precise moment to begin its low rumble.

“Alright,” Cross said with an endearing smile, offering her the plate. “How about this: I’ll cut your hands loose, and I’ll let you have as many of these as you want.” He nodded toward the pastries. “In exchange, I want you to promise that you won’t try anything foolish, and that you’ll listen to my whole offer. I didn’t spend three weeks tracking you down, just so you could run off on me. Does that sound like a fair deal?”

Liral frowned. He was tricking her. She knew that he was tricking her, and yet...she nodded. So near to her nose, those pastries smelled other-worldly.

Cross made good on his word, and cut free her wrist-bonds. Liral wasted little time. She snatched two pastries off of the plate and practically inhaled them, her eyes widening as the delicate flavor graced her tongue.

“Impressive.” With a chuckle, Cross scratched his head. The movement brought Liral’s attention to a thin silver bracer on his wrist. The bracer pulsed when she looked at it, and leaked a nearly-invisible blue light. Liral lifted an eyebrow. Her own Totem pulsed like that, from time to time, and as silly as it sounded, that blue light from Cross’s bracer seemed to be...happy. “So, do you have a name, or am I just gonna have to call you ‘pastry girl’?”

She chewed over the question, and considered whether or not to tell him her true name. “Liral,” she eventually said, before reaching for another pastry.

“Liral,” he replied, as if testing the name on his tongue. “How old are you, Liral?”

“Sixteen.”

“Huh. You don’t look it.”

That earned him a glare. Liral knew she was scrawny. It was unavoidable, really, when she had to save coins for the winter. Food was a luxury that she often could not afford.

“So, you like these?” Cross pulled a gold crown from his pocket, as if reading her mind, and flicked it toward her. She caught it with lightning speed, and studied it in her palm. Slightly faded in the center, it was the same coin that she’d lifted from his pouch, only an hour or so before. “Keep it.”

Liral looked up in disbelief, and nearly dropped her fourth pastry. He would let her keep a gold crown? Was he insane?

"If our heist works out, we'll be wealthy enough to use those as fishing lures. Liral, we're going to rob the Colosseum."

Yes. He was totally out of his mind.

The Colosseum was the soul of Trisal. Every week, about half of the city folk walked through the Colosseum's doors, to see slaves fight for their freedom versus seasoned warriors. The slaves seldom won, but that didn't stop the dark-hairs and thousands of Ralli spectators from watching the fights with glee.

"I know, I know," he said, apparently registering Liral's dismay. "It's ambitious, but it's so ambitious that they'd never see it coming. Do you have any idea how much gold the dark-hairs bet on the fights?" His voice quickened with excitement, like a young boy who'd just discovered chocolate. "It's enough to buy a duchy, Liral, and the winnings don't get distributed until the following week. So, thousands of gold crowns just sit in a lockbox for six whole days. They're practically begging for us to rob them."

Liral's lips parted, but no sound escaped. She tried to identify exactly how she was being manipulated, but the man seemed so genuine. As he waited for her to reply, Cross even knelt down and removed the ropes binding Liral's ankles.

He couldn't seriously be considering such a robbery, could he?

Still contemplating the offer, Liral rose to her feet and padded toward Cross's table. Without her full Power, she felt as if she was wading through molasses. Her necklace sat on the table, atop a detailed map of the Northern Mine, complete with meticulous notes and markings. Liral raised an eyebrow. Was Cross a budding cartographer? Liral had never seen much use for maps, herself. She never traveled outside of Trisal, and she'd studied the city from enough roofs to know its general layout.

With a sniff, Liral fastened her necklace back in place. She gasped when the cold metal touched her skin, and she failed to contain a fleeting smile. With that small circular pendant back in its rightful place, her speed returned, and she had to restrain herself from sprinting toward the window and jumping into the night.

"Well?" Cross asked. "Are you in?"

His voice caused her to flinch. Liral hadn't noticed that he had followed her to the table. In fact, lost in the power of her Totem, she'd forgotten about him entirely. When he was not speaking with his hideously loud voice, Cross could make himself fairly silent. Liral was quick to recover, however, and stared up at him with furrowed eyebrows.

"If I agreed to do this..." Liral bit her lip. "There'd have to be a good plan."

She'd only been to the Colosseum once or twice. Both times, it had been crawling with Redcloaks. If she did sign onto this job, she would have to leave the planning to Cross, and she would need to have full faith in his capabilities. Liral had no delusions about her own intelligence. She probably would not be able to outrun an organized force of Redcloaks, and she certainly could not outsmart them. Her life was a tale of tough circumstances and horrible decisions, and her continued survival was the stuff of pure luck.

"Of course." Cross grinned. "I do have a plan, and you're going to love it. With our skills, this'll be the easiest fortune ever made."

"What skills?"

Cross chuckled at the question. How was he so...cheerful? "I can pick almost any lock, and you've got more potential than you think."

"Potential?"

"You'll see." He winked. "You'll see. So, what do you say? Are you in?"

Liral held the man's gaze for what seemed like an eternity. He promised more crowns, and he had given her pastries. Nobody had ever given her a pastry before. She always had to steal pastries, or haggle with disdainful shopowners. There was no disdain in Cross's eyes, just hope, as if he actually wanted her to join his silly plot. Liral chewed her bottom lip, then gave a hesitant nod.

"Fine."

She'd done it again. She'd made another one of those horrible decisions, hadn't she? That familiar sense of dread began to settle in the bottom of her stomach, and her mum's voice echoed in her head:

Don't take risks. Trust no one. One mistake, that's all it takes.

Liral shook her head. Where had that advice gotten her in life? Living on top of a roof in the Harbor district might have been a survivable fate, but it was far from enjoyable. Cross, if that was his real name, was giving Liral a chance to escape all of that...a second chance at living a secure, pleasant life. A happy ending was so unlikely, but for the first time in years, it seemed possible.

"I know it's getting late," Cross's voice interrupted her thoughts, "and I assume that you don't have a place to stay."

"I do," she countered, crossing her arms.

"An indoor place to stay?"

She scowled.

"Feel free to take my bed," he nodded toward the plush mattress in the corner of the room. "I'll take the couch."

Liral furrowed her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Absolutely. Though, I’d prefer if you used the bath first.” He winced, then pointed toward a small door in the far side of the room.

“I can use your bath?” Her voice was soft and her eyes wide.

“No, you will use my bath, if you want to use the bed. I’m sorry, but you’re the dirtiest child I’ve ever met. Have you seen your own feet? Filthy.”

Liral looked down, inspecting her toes. Cross wasn’t wrong. A few weeks had passed since her last swim in the ocean, and a modest layer of dirt and mud lined the bottom of her feet. She’d grown accustomed to the layer of grime, though. It helped keep her feet warm at night, and aided her calluses when she ran barefoot through the city. Even so, she understood Cross’s displeasure. Mum never liked when Liral tracked mud indoors, while they were bouncing from home to home in Liral’s youth.

“I need to take a bath myself, after carrying you. I’ll probably have to throw out my coat, too.” Cross sighed, and cast a mournful glance at his fancy outfit. It lay sprawled across his dining table, as if the coat was a body, and the table a slab in the morgue. “It was a Valestino. Autumn collection. Still in season,” he clicked his tongue. “By far my most effective nobleman costume. Do you know how much money I’ve made, thanks to that coat?”

Liral shrugged, wiggling her toes. “Enough?”

“Nope.” Cross’s smile returned, though sadness lurked in his eyes. “Nowhere near enough.”

\* \* \*

Liral’s mind was still swimming while she took her long bath. She let her hair fan across the water’s surface. Bubbles collected around her, and she took delight in popping some of the larger ones. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d taken a real bath. It’d been months, at the very least, possibly even years.

Dirt fled from her, leaving her skin far paler than she’d expected, and her hair turned a cleaner shade of blonde. A few bruises were now revealed on her skin, but there were no signs of scratches, cuts, or scars. That was the most helpful part of being a Dasher. With quick movement came quick healing, and nobody was faster than Liral.

Floating, she stared at the ceiling. What was she doing? What was she getting herself into? She’d been abducted by a strange man, and then agreed to help him with some wild heist? Had she forgotten all of her mother’s lessons? All of the scoldings?

Liral sighed.

There was something genuine about Cross. She wanted to trust him. Maybe it was because he was a thief, too. Maybe it was because of the way that his bracer had pulsed, and the emotion that it seemed to show. Or...maybe it was because she just desperately wanted to believe that all of the lessons she'd ever learned were wrong, and that someone in the world actually wanted her.



*“Why? Why? Why?”*

*Elderly man, blond of hair. Case ninety three. Outcome: moderate*

# CHAPTER 6

## *Crime and Punishment*

**D**elvaran and Auri rushed down the hallway. They were on their way to take oaths of service to Kadia, and they were almost running late, despite the fact that they'd been walking as swiftly as possible in their restrictive dresses. Apparently, maids weren't allowed to run within the castle. It was just another one of the silly rules that Delvaran had learned during their brief training. How had he not known that beforehand? Had he really paid such little attention to the life of the castle's staff?

"Hurry up!" Auri hissed. "Shadows, you're slower than a herd of snails."

When they reached the two wide doors to the maids' assembly hall, Auri grabbed the prince's upper arm and spun him to face her. She took a moment to study his index finger, and double-checked for any signs of bleeding.

They had been delayed by their experimentation with Delvaran's blood. He had been curious to discover if his blood still had the unique blue shade of the Scythari royalty, despite his new appearance. It did. Unfortunately, that testing pin-prick went a bit deeper than anticipated, and they'd spent the better part of an hour trying to quell the bleeding, until it finally stopped.

"Remember what we practiced," she whispered down at him, patting his hand. "Head down, nothing but 'Yes, Madam' and 'No, Madam'. Let me do the talking for you. Got it?"

Delvaran nodded.

Madam Marsa had first been given her post ten years prior, by Delvaran's father. Although rumors of her cruelty had spread to Delvaran's ears, he'd paid them little

heed. Delvaran was, above all else, a fantastic judge of character, and Marsa struck him as a well-intentioned woman. Plus, the Madam was useful to the castle. Invaluable, even. She ran a tight ship, and always kept her maids in line. As long as Delvaran played by the rules, he would have nothing to fear.

The pair entered the hall just as Madam Marsa rang her bell. Upon shuffling inside, Delvaran realized that he'd never been inside the maids' assembly hall before. It was a long room with low ceilings, no windows, and no obvious decorations. Two lengthy tables spanned the center of the room, likely for eating meals, but all of the assembled maids were standing along one of the walls, facing Madam Marsa.

Over three dozen pairs of eyes turned toward Delvaran and Auri, including the Madam's own.

"Ladies," Marsa addressed the two of them, her voice dripping with disgust. "Nice of you to join us. You'll both be on latrine duty tomorrow."

Auri let out a quiet groan, and Delvaran tilted his head in confusion. Latrine duty? Did that mean physically cleaning the latrines that the guardsmen used? Didn't the castle have other people to do that? Latrine boys or something?

Recalling Auri's advice, Delvaran lowered his head and filed into line.

"You," Marsa called, striding toward Delvaran with long steps. "Who are you?"

Delvaran gulped, then met the woman's eyes. She stood at around the same height as Delvaran, above average for a woman, and she wore a perpetual scowl. Her brown hair gave her unofficial authority over all of the light-haired maids, and her title as Madam made that authority official. The middle-aged woman carried herself with a demeanor that exuded nobility, as if she truly believed that she was a full dark-haired. This noble presentation was enhanced by the white gloves that she wore, which reached all the way to her elbows, and were reminiscent of those sometimes worn by noblewomen.

Wide-eyed, the prince didn't have to feign his petrification. Everybody was staring at him. He opened his mouth to reply, but Auri silenced him with a not-so-subtle elbow to the stomach.

"She's Daila," Auri said with a shrug. "New girl. The lads brought her in this morning. Imagine that...first day on the job and the whole city falls."

"Servant Auri." Marsa eyed her testily. "If I wanted you to speak, I would have asked you to speak. Understood?"

"Yes, Madam." Auri cast her eyes down, then shot Delvaran a grin.

Marsa approached him and seized his chin with a gloved hand. He flinched. The Madam angled his head to one side, then the other, and leaned in to study his hair. He

felt like a show-horse, or one of those fighters in the Trisal Colosseum, each of his physical traits coming under intense scrutiny.

“Good. We could use another redhead. Servant Auri, I trust that you’ll bring the novice up to speed?”

“Yes, Madam.”

Marsa nodded, satisfied. “Very well, then. You two will share Auri’s quarters.” She leaned in, until her lips were almost upon Delvaran’s ear. “Stay in line,” she whispered. “If you defy me, I will destroy you. Understood?”

Delvaran’s hands were trembling, and he realized that he had stopped breathing. “Yes, Madam.”

With that, Marsa walked back to her position in front of the maids. Had she always been so...intimidating? Delvaran had often used her as an ‘enforcer’, when his maids were misbehaving, but the Madam had always seemed like a pleasant, motherly woman. The woman who stood before him now was terrifying.

Perhaps Madam Marsa did not deserve to be regarded with such fear. Maybe the fear was all internal for Delvaran. After all, according to Kesmat’s Theorem on the Nature of the Self, humans possessed the remarkable ability to project their emotions onto their perception of others. Maybe Delvaran saw the woman as terrifying because he still couldn’t tap into his Shaping ability, despite the fact that his new Totem still dangled from his neck, and thus he felt exposed. Or, alternatively, he could just be overthinking things. It was entirely possible that the woman deserved every ounce of his fear.

Marsa wasted little time. She had the girls recite a long passage in unison, about how they dedicated themselves to the service of the Kingdom of Kadia, and to its king, queen, princes, and nobility. Breaking this oath, according to the oath’s own words, would result in death. Delvaran had never heard the exact oaths that the maids had sworn in service of Scythar, but he assumed that the words were similar.

He was surprised by the simplicity of the ordeal. All he had to do was speak a few words, and he had officially become a maid in service of the Kadian royalty, one of the few select individuals who would have unmitigated access to the lives of the evil Kingdom’s leadership. A devious grin flashed across his lips, but he managed to suppress it.

“We’re lucky,” Auri whispered.

Marsa was still speaking to the group of maids, something about post-battle cleanup and upcoming duties.

"We've got a good deal of security here. They won't be getting rid of any maids, I think, but Marsa might be getting the boot."

"Huh? Why?" Delvaran murmured in reply.

"She's got brown hair and too much power. Reckon the Kadians might think she's up to something. You know...halfbloods are known for being..."

"Conniving?" Delvaran fetched the word for her.

"Aye, and she's an odd duck. Comes from a little town in the foothills, they say. My friend Mili knows some folks who passed through the place, a few years back. Ghost town, they said. Not a lad or lass in sight." Auri giggled. "We reckon Madam Bitch ate the whole village, before she--"

"Servant Auri!" Madam Marsa snapped, and again marched toward the pair. "Remove your tongue from the novice's ear."

"Yes, Madam," Auri squeaked, eyes cast down. She made herself look as small as possible, despite her height.

The Madam glanced between the two of them, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Ice grotto for both of you. Five counts each...and no rations tomorrow. Servant, you should know better. Novice, you're about to learn the consequences for insubordination."

Madam Marsa strode away. "And if any of you try to whisper next week, during the Selections, I'll make the ice grotto your new home."

Delvaran wanted to ask Auri about the ice grotto or the 'Selections', but he thought better of it. Instead, he waited in silence until the Madam dismissed most of the other maids. Then, Madam Marsa and another maid escorted Auri and Delvaran down a winding staircase at the rear of the room.

The other maid was presumably Marsa's assistant, and the Madam had called her 'Visre'. She was tall and blonde like Auri, but did not have Auri's willowy figure. She must have weighed twice as much as Delvaran in his new body, and most of that weight appeared to be muscle. In a pathetic act of imitation, Visre wore the same long white gloves as Marsa, and carried herself with the same nobler-than-thou demeanor.

The ice grotto, as it turned out, was true to its name: an underground cave beneath the maid's quarter of the castle. If the circumstances had been less frightening, Delvaran might have gawked at the incredible sight. Torches marked the grotto's walls, illuminating one of the Great Tree's massive roots, which ran along the ceiling. Some books claimed that the Tree's roots ran all the way to the Kadian foothills, from its position at the center of Old Arbor. Delvaran did not doubt those claims. After all, the

Great Tree was holy, blessed by Rodmahein the Giant himself, and the root on the ceiling was thicker than the city wall.

A small pool marked the center of the grotto, covered by a layer of ice.

“Welcome to the ice grotto, little Daila,” Marsa announced, coming to a stop. “After today, you’ll be praying to Rodmahein that you never return here.”

Marsa’s words proved true.

The two girls were instructed to strip down and kneel atop the ice. They obliged, and Delvaran removed his dress, shoes, and Totem. The prince blushed, and he struggled to cloak both his breasts and his nethers.

“No use covering it up,” Marsa stated. “I doubt you’re hiding any surprises under there.”

Delvaran grudgingly obliged, and crossed his arms beneath his breasts, trembling nervously in the chilly cavern.

The Madam did not dally. She pushed Delvaran onto the ice, and he fell to his knees in the middle of the frozen pool.

Auri knelt beside him, looking uncharacteristically solemn. There was no hint of a smile on her lips and no fire in her eyes.

Whispering at an assembly. It was such an Auri thing to do, he wasn’t even particularly surprised. She bent rules, until they broke. That was why he’d sent her to Marsa, on so many occasions. To break her. To punish her. Clearly, that tactic did not work. After a number of years, he had grown to understand how Auri worked. Though her light had been snuffed, she would recover quickly, and she would continue to whisper at assemblies, out of pure defiance.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, staring at her reflection in the blue ice. “I didn’t think she’d nab you, too.”

“It’s no worry,” he replied.

The ice grotto couldn’t be that bad, could it? It was just water...

Without warning, Visre raised a foot and stomped on the top of the ice. Where her foot landed, the ice imploded. Cracks fanned out, and the ice beneath Delvaran gave way, plunging him into the water. Upon contact, he gasped in surprise. He’d felt cold water before, but this was a whole different kind of cold. A cold that he’d never thought possible.

Before he could draw another breath, a hand grabbed the top of his hair and shoved him down, into the chilling water. Initially, he struggled against the hand, but he eventually realized that this was part of the punishment. They were meant to be

beneath the surface, struggling against the jarring temperature and the lack of oxygen.

Under the water, he opened his eyes and found himself face-to-face with Auri. She too had a hand atop her head, pushing her down. She reached out and grasped his hand, squeezing it and flashing the weakest smile he'd ever seen. Unfortunately, Delvaran couldn't replicate the expression. He was too cold. He couldn't even feel his face, and he feared that his fingers would snap in two if he moved them.

It seemed like an eternity before Madam Marsa relented, and they were allowed to reach the surface and gasp for breath.

Auri's teeth were chattering, but Delvaran was in worse shape. He was so cold that his teeth couldn't chatter. He could barely move his jaw at all. Delvaran tried to speak, but only managed a whimper.

Count Brekland's Conditions of Death came to the forefront of Delvaran's numb mind. An entry on Page 279, in particular: After fifteen minutes spent in below-freezing water, unconsciousness can be expected. After this interval, chance of survival drops precipitately.

They'd only completed the first count, and had four more to endure. He was going to die. How sad would that be? How pathetic? A prince who accidentally changed himself into some servant wench, only to be killed for improper whispering. How could the world be so cruel to him?

"Okay," Marsa said, wiping off the water from one of her gloves. "Collect your breaths. That's count one of five. While you're down there, I want you to consider your actions. What could you have done to avoid this punishment?"

The respite didn't last long. It seemed like they only had a few moments before Marsa and Visre pushed them back into the depths.

How had Delvaran convinced himself that this woman was a good Madam? Why had he turned a blind eye, when he'd heard guards and lesser nobles whispering about the Madam's cruelty to the slave girls. He'd been a fool. A complete and utter fool.

Madam Marsa treated the pair with no leniency. She had named the punishment as five counts underwater, and each of the counts seemed to last forever. By the time Marsa judged that the fifth underwater interval was over and their punishment was complete, Delvaran was hanging to consciousness by the thinnest of strings. He couldn't walk or speak, and he could barely form coherent thoughts. It'd been so cold...so incredibly cold...and it'd lasted so long.

Delvaran didn't remember being carried up to Auri's quarters. In fact, the world had become a blur until he found himself wrapped in a wool blanket in Auri's bedroom, kneeling before a fireplace.

"It's okay, hun," Auri cooed. She had pulled his hair back into a ponytail, and held a chamberpot to his chin as he retched up his breakfast. "I know. I know what it's like," she muttered, hugging him close. "It's always hardest the first time."

Delvaran hadn't noticed at first, but he was crying. Bawling, really. Tears streamed down his cheeks, as if some colossal floodgate had been opened behind his eyes.

Auri rocked him back and forth, and planted a kiss on his forehead. His face was so numb that he barely felt her lips.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his tongue struggling to form words.

"You shouldn't be." Auri lowered the pot and grasped one of Delvaran's hands, guiding it toward the fire's warmth. "I should've known that the witch was looking to discipline the new girl. I was a fool."

"No. I'm sorry," Delvaran repeated, then he coughed up another bit of breakfast. "I didn't know it was like this."

"Being a maid?"

Delvaran nodded. "And the...punishments. How often does she use the grotto?"

Auri turned Delvaran's face, until he was looking up into her eyes. "About once every couple of weeks, I reckon."

"How many times have you gone through it?"

She bit her lip, and looked toward the ceiling. "In my whole life? 'Bout a hundred counts or so."

One hundred counts. Delvaran wanted to vomit again, but he managed to collect himself. He licked his frozen lips. "How many were because of me?"

Auri didn't answer. Instead, she tightened her hug and stared into the fire.

"That's in the past now, hun. That's all in the past."



# CHAPTER 7

## *Into the Trenches*

**L**atrine duty was about as unpleasant as it sounded. If not for Auri's idle chatter, the fruitless scrubbing, foul stench, and the rumbling of his stomach would have driven Delvaran mad.

Even so, latrine and ration punishment seemed like child's play when compared to the ice grotto. The tips of Delvaran's fingers were still grey, and he felt weaker than ever before. Those five counts in the grotto had changed him in ways that he still struggled to understand. Three or four times during his underwater torment, he'd been absolutely convinced that he would not survive, and he'd questioned every action that he'd ever taken as prince.

Delvaran and Auri knelt side-by-side near the latrine. Clad in black Kadian maid dresses with white trim, they did their best to keep their new uniforms intact while they scrubbed. Delvaran was shocked at how smoothly the castle operated, only one day after the fall of his kingdom. Marsa still had a firm grasp on the maid crew, and - as Delvaran had discovered the day before - the Madam took an almost sadistic pleasure in demonstrating her authority.

Even beyond Marsa's maid crew, however, the castle was beginning to fall back into its old routine. The guard corps had been replaced when the city fell. Instead of the familiar Scythari guardsmen who had greatly respected Delvaran, the halls were now patrolled by foreign invaders. Kadians. He couldn't even think about that dreadful conquering kingdom without becoming disgusted. They hadn't looted Old Arbor, as Delvaran thought they would, but they were a vile people regardless, and they

certainly weren't worthy of conquering the Great Tree, which still swayed at the city's center.

"Ladies," said a guardsman, in a brisk Kadian accent. He stepped up to the lengthy latrine, and decided to stand uncomfortably close to Delvaran and Auri. "Don't be shy, you can look," he chuckled, unfastening his pants. "I was wondering: why's all of the tail in Scythar have to be so damn timid. You lot are Scythari girls, yeah?"

Auri paused her scrubbing and fixed the man with a hard stare, ignoring his exposed member. "Aye, we are. And we were wondering why all the Kadian lads have such tiny cocks. Or it just you?"

The man sputtered, taken aback by Auri's...Auriness.

"And for the love of the Giant, at least try to aim at the trough. For the sake of your friends, I hope they never let you shoot a bow."

"Tree-licking witch," he eventually muttered, before finishing his business and retreating to the guard quarters.

"Yeah, scamper off," Auri called after him. "And don't come back!"

Delvaran couldn't help but grin. Auri's sharp tongue and feistiness had been infuriating back when Delvaran was her master, but now it was a ray of sunshine in his life. How would he have reacted, if Auri hadn't been there? He probably would have just kept his head down and tried to ignore the man.

All of this was a brand new world to Delvaran. Back when he was a prince, he wouldn't have ever found himself being harassed by a guard. People had acted respectfully around him, fearing the power that he had possessed. He'd never really had to deal with people, or manage confrontations.

"You ever peed in a latrine before?" Auri asked offhandedly. She had returned to rubbing her sponge against a particularly stubborn black stain.

"Nope." Delvaran wrinkled his nose. A one-word response like that would certainly kill the conversation, but Delvaran didn't want Auri to stop talking. He enjoyed her company. What would Auri say, in reply to herself? "How about you?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow. "I've seen horses pee in troughs, and you're tall enough to pass as a thoroughbred."

Auri giggled, then slapped him on the cheek with her gross sponge.

"Bitch!" Delvaran squealed. He dove at her, tackling her to the ground. Thankfully, they missed the trough and landed on the stones.

"Sponge-face, sponge-face, Daila's a spongeface," Auri teased, sticking out her tongue.

"You're the worst." Delvaran sat up and began washing his cheek with water from the cleaning bucket.

"It's better than your old nickname."

"My...old nickname?" Delvaran asked, furrowing his brow. "I had an old nickname?"

Auri's eyes widened, and she returned to her scrubbing.

"I've said too much."

"Auri, please tell me..."

"Nope. My lips are sealed."

"Tell me!" Delvaran pleaded.

"It's best if you didn't know."

"I swear to the Giant, if you don't tell me I'll...I'll..."

Crossing her arms, Auri fixed him with a smirk. "Fine. We called you the Ass. You know...like a donkey."

"The...Ass?"

"Aye, we figured you were similar enough."

"Who is we? Did all of the maids call me that, behind my back?"

Auri nodded, laughter in her eyes.

"I did not look like an ass."

She shrugged. "You certainly talked like one."

"How is that even possible?! Asses don't talk!"

"Aye, but they whine and they bitch." Auri shrugged again. "It seemed like a decent enough nickname...if it makes you feel any better, you sounded like an intelligent ass. Almost like an ass and a book had a child, I reckon."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Delvaran asked.

He clenched his jaw until it hurt. Tears welled in his eyes, but he battled them back. As much as he tried to conceal his emotions, Auri's words had cut to his core. He'd always considered himself a beloved prince, a leader of men, the kind of person who was admired by all the people of Scythar, both light-haired and dark. Had he really been so blind?

Auri winced, and her deviousness seemed to vanish.

"Don't pout, hun." Auri paused her cleaning and gave Delvaran's shoulder a light pat.

"You don't have to worry about any of that. Like I said before, it's all in the..."

"Edwin!" called a firm voice, from the guardsmen's bunk room around the corner.

Auri and Delvaran flinched in unison, then shared a glance and returned to scrubbing. Delvaran didn't need to be a lifelong maid to understand that the shout came from a man with authority. A man who got his way. Knowledge from his brief

training session with Auri kicked in, and Delvaran lowered his head, fixing his eyes on the latrine.

The deep metal trough looked much cleaner than it had before the pair began their work. It was likely cleaner than it had been in years, nearly spotless. Delvaran smiled. As pathetic as it was, Delvaran couldn't help but feel a sense of pride about the work that he and Auri had accomplished. They'd been cleaning the latrine all day and they'd poured their hearts and souls into the project, scrubbing until their elbows grew sore.

He had to work twice as hard as a normal maid. Auri had explained that fact on several occasions. Guards were scouring the castle and the army was searching through the entire city, all looking for Delvaran, and he had to be a convincing redheaded maid. He had to display all of their famous industriousness, if he wanted to avoid suspicion and have a chance at vengeance.

"Edwin?" the man called again, this time from the latrine's entrance. A pair of boots sounded against the stones, as the man approached. "You are...not Edwin," he said with a dry chuckle. "Hello ladies."

Auri, still on her knees, turned to face the man. Delvaran followed her lead. The mischief and sass that Auri had displayed with the guardsmen were nowhere to be seen. Instead, she wore an utterly blank expression, and trained her gaze on the man's black boots.

"Highness," Auri bowed her head even further. She lifted the edges of her dress from the floor, in a miniature curtsy.

"Highness," Delvaran mimicked Auri's gesture. Highness? So this was one of the Kadian princes? How had Auri figured that out?

Curiosity defeated Delvaran's training, and he raised his eyes.

The Kadian prince stood tall before them, scratching his jet black hair. If Delvaran's memory served him well, this was Folston, the eldest son of the Kadian King. They'd only met each other once or twice back in their childhood, and they hadn't seen each other for years, due to deteriorated relations between the two kingdoms. The reason for that deterioration had been simple: Delvaran's father wanted land, and Kadia had plenty to spare.

Folston wore a tailored black cloak with white trim. It matched Delvaran's new dress. An ornate insignia was stitched into the left side of Folston's chest, marking his royalty. His head was slightly tilted, and his bright green eyes stared down into Delvaran's, studying him with the faintest of grins, like a curious child who was appraising a new toy. For Delvaran, it was hate at first sight.

Auri tugged at Delvaran's sleeve with a subtle hand, and he returned his eyes to the floor. However, Folston had already noticed Delvaran's gaze. The damage was done.

"What's your name?" the prince asked, approaching Delvaran. That direct greeting gave Delvaran permission to look up at Folston, but Delvaran kept his eyes trained at the ground. He couldn't look at the prince's face again. There was something about Folston's eyes - a fourth power, perhaps - that made Delvaran's thoughts scatter.

Over the years, Delvaran had found that some men seemed to possess that interesting power, which made Delvaran's heart race and his cheeks flush. Their power stirred something inside of him, making his hands sweat and consuming his thoughts. Every time it happened, Delvaran clenched his jaw and tried to clear his thoughts. He never shared this information with anyone else, even Auri, as nobody else seemed to notice the peculiar magic, and they'd likely think him mad. Delvaran's father would have gladly taken it as an excuse to hang him, if he even ran afoul of the king.

A memory of Folston's face planted itself in Delvaran's mind. His heartbeat quickened, and he stumbled for words. "Daila. Daila, sir...master... Highness." Gah. He'd heard the proper word so many times in his life. Every servant in the castle had addressed him as 'Highness', yet Delvaran somehow managed to bungle the word.

Prince Folston surprised both Auri and Delvaran. Rather than scolding Delvaran for botching his title, Folston knelt beside him, resting a knee on the clean stones. Folston pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and reached toward Delvaran's face.

Delvaran had to fight against his instincts, which all told him to flinch, to pull away, to run. He trembled, but kept perfectly still as Folston wiped a spot of dirt from his cheek. Folston's fingertips lingered near Delvaran's chin, and brushed against Delvaran's skin for the briefest of moments. Rage and excitement battled within Delvaran. The man's touch was delicate, and left a warmth in Delvaran's core, yet...the man had the gall to touch him! To treat him like some sort of wounded dog!

"What's wrong? Has someone hurt you?" Folston asked, in a low, quiet tone.

"No, Highness." Delvaran blinked, and chanced another glance at the Kadian prince. There was intensity in the man's eyes, and it sent goosebumps up Delvaran's arms. Just looking at the man made Delvaran's cheeks flush. Folston was a monster. Delvaran could see it in those green eyes, which seemed to bore into Delvaran's soul.

"If someone's hurt you, please tell me. Nobody in this castle should ever fear for their safety, no matter their hair color."

“Highness,” Auri piped, in the sweetest tone Delvaran had ever heard from the girl. “The mark on her cheek was only from a sponge. Daila’s not hurt, she’s just nervous. She’s a novice...I don’t think she’s ever met royalty before.”

“My deepest apologies, then.” Folston rose to his feet and backed away. “I did not intend to startle you, Daila. Nor you...”

“Auri,” she introduced herself.

“Auri,” he repeated, with a faint smile. Then he cleared his throat and glanced around the room. “Good work, you two...do maids always clean the latrines? Seems like something that the guards ought to do themselves.”

“It’s our punishment, Highness,” Auri said.

“Punishment?” Folston asked.

“Aye. Madam Marsa’s orders,” she bobbed her head. Unlike Delvaran, she met Folston’s eyes.

“What did you do? Wait...don’t tell me.” His gaze settled on Delvaran. “Let me guess: the old witch was jealous of your beauty.”

Auri giggled, but Delvaran’s blush deepened. He wanted to punch Prince Folston in his stupid jaw. No, he wanted to slit the prince’s throat in the dead of night.

“Well, I apologize for delaying your progress. Oh, and if you see my brother, please let him know that I’m looking for him.”

Folston turned on his heel, and departed the room, leaving the two maids in silence.

“Prick,” Delvaran whispered, his jaw trembling.

Auri raised an eyebrow. “Prick? Why? I thought he was quite nice. He has the hots for you, I reckon.”

Delvaran rolled his eyes. “Did someone hurt you, little maid girl?” he mocked Prince Folston’s embarrassing, insufferable line of questioning. Folston had made Delvaran feel like such a useless thing. Folston was just so...so...Delvaran couldn’t find the right word, so ‘prick’ would have to suffice. “He’s a prick.”

“At least he cares,” Auri shrugged. “You haven’t had to deal with a bad master, yet. Once you do, you’ll start counting your blessings. You’re lucky, Dai, if he likes you enough, I reckon he might even pick you at the Selections.”

“The Selections?”

“Aye. You’ve always had a good chance of getting chosen by someone, though. You’re a pretty redhead and you don’t look like you could hurt a fly.”

Delvaran ignored Auri’s...compliment? He couldn’t be sure. “What are the Selections?” he asked.

Auri gasped. “Did you not listen at all, during Madam Marsa’s assembly?”

“No. No, I didn’t. It was hard to pay attention when you were blabbing in my ear the whole time”

“Excuses, excuses, excuses,” Auri tiskied. “The Selections are the week after next, hun. The Kadian royals and nobles are going to be choosing their personal maids.”

“Sounds like hell,” Delvaran muttered.

“Hey, I was your personal maid,” Auri shot back. “And it’s much better to be a personal maid. You barely ever have to deal with Madam Marsa, unless your master requests a punishment.”

Delvaran fought back his guilt, then nodded. Perhaps becoming a personal maid would be useful. It’d certainly give him more access to the royals. A smile graced Delvaran’s lips, and he resumed scrubbing. Under his breath, he made a solemn oath: when he murdered the Kadian royalty, Prince Folston the Prick would be the first to go.

*“Have I won a prize?”*

*Young boy, red of hair. Case one hundred fifty two. Outcome: minimal*



# CHAPTER 8

## *A Slippery Slope*

**L**iral fixed Cross with a glare. Defiantly, she snatched another clam shell from her plate and inhaled its contents. Clam and eggs were a Trisal staple and one of Liral's favorite dishes...although, come to think of it, most edible dishes were among Liral's favorites.

"Slow down, or you'll cough it all up!"

Cross sighed, and rested his elbows on the table. He massaged his temples with the tips of his fingers. "We'll have to work on that," he mumbled.

Liral sent him another glare, then slurped down her plate's final clam. Work on that? What did that even mean? Everyone in the Harbor knew that there was only one proper way to eat a clam: with a firm grasp and a quick slurp.

Cross had been eyeing Liral all day long, studying her like some sort of caged animal. She certainly felt like a caged animal. For the first time since last winter, she had spent the entire night indoors, sleeping in Cross's comfy bed. She had snoozed without incident, and hadn't woken up until late afternoon. That was for the best, Cross had said, because they had a big night ahead of them.

"Boots on, socks on, cloak on." Cross nodded his head toward the three articles of clothing, which sat by the door. "Then, we get to work."

"Boots." Liral spoke the word as if it were a curse. She hadn't worn shoes in years. They were cumbersome, they'd given her blisters as a child, and they were far too expensive.

“Boots. If you want to work with me - if you want to see any more gold crowns - then you’ll have to follow my rules. First off, you’ll always leave this house with shoes on your feet, because I refuse to parade around the city with a gutterling.”

Frowning, Liral wrinkled her nose. What choices did she have? Money would be nice, and this man hadn’t turned on her yet...although he would. Everyone did, eventually. Cross didn’t yet understand that Liral was a ruiner, unworthy of charity, kindness, or anything of the sort.

Liral sighed, slumped her shoulders, and donned the shoes.

“See? That was easy!” Cross’ stupid grin made Liral want to shut her eyes. How was he so...happy? It frustrated her. Did he have some deep understanding that she couldn’t possibly grasp? Was he holding a joyful secret? Likely so. After all, Liral was keeping secrets, and it was only reasonable to expect that Cross was doing the same.

Once again, Liral reminded herself that she couldn’t trust this man.

“Follow my lead and stay close. Try not to make any sound,” Cross said. Liral rolled her eyes at this, fastening the nondescript cloak around her neck. Cross saw her eye roll but didn’t seem to react. Instead, he maintained that same white-toothed smile, and continued: “Are you ready to piss off some noblemen?”

The question made Liral’s eyebrows shoot up, and she gave him a single nod.

Liral’s thoughts on the dark-hairs were...complex. Even so, she’d been on the receiving end of dark-haired cruelty more times than she could care to remember, and she wouldn’t be opposed to a bit of revenge.

\* \* \*

Cross led Liral through the city at a boring pace. The fog had set in a few hours prior, and the city lay in dark silence. They wound through narrow corridors and alleyways, and eventually found themselves in one of the posh neighborhoods.

Liral grew uneasy. The houses, spaced more generously than homes in the Ralli districts, all had ornate columns. Their roofs were gentle and sloping, perfect for roof-hopping, but Liral had too many bad memories in neighborhoods like this to fully appreciate its beauty. The Redcloaks patrolled around these parts, and a run-in with the Redcloaks spelled sheer danger.

Redcloaks were not like normal city guards. They did the Emperor’s dirty work, serving as his personal guard, elite street patrollers, and - if rumors were to be believed - assassins. They were Dashers and Ironskins, often Ralli. If they captured Liral, they would force her to join their ranks, and make her get one of those disgusting tattoos on

her forearm. Then, inevitably, they would hurt her. They would try to kill her, or simply leave her to die.

She did not voice her wariness to Cross. That would have been unnecessary. As they paced more quickly through the alleyways, she noticed that Cross's shoulders had tensed, and his hand rested close to the knife on his belt. He knew the risks associated with the dark-haired neighborhoods.

Venturing through one particular alleyway, Liral almost lost her footing on the cobblestones. To her dismay, Cross caught her mid-fall. Liral corrected her balance. She fought to keep the blush from her cheeks. She'd spent a lifetime dashing through Trisal, and she couldn't even manage to do that properly. Her cloak had almost come undone during her fall, and Cross moved to fix it, but stopped upon receiving a harsh glare.

"Careful," he explained. "They've started coating some of the alleyways with oil, in these parts."

"Why?" she hissed in reply. What kind of imbecil would slick an alleyway?

"The homeless can't sleep on oil, and pickpockets like you won't be able to get away without tripping. Black-hairs never use these alleys, anyway, so it's no loss to them."

Such harshness was to be expected from the nobles. Even so, the persistence of the ruling class never failed to astonish Liral. Guards regularly patrolled these areas, beating up beggars and jailing the homeless, but the nobles still felt as if they needed an additional layer of defence from Ralli folk.

Liral scowled, then followed Cross with renewed conviction. She hadn't seen a shred of kindness or good intention from dark-haired folk in years. At least other Ralli pretended to be good people, before showing their true colors. She would rob the dark-hairs, and do it with glee.

The pair made their way through another alleyway, then arrived at a fountained square. Cross held up a hand and came to a stop. They were close to the Coliseum, only a few blocks away, and its broad rim poked over the tops of nearby buildings.

"This is the place," Cross said, in what he probably considered to be a whisper.

'The place' was a home overlooking the square. It was four stories tall, larger than many of the surrounding houses, and two guardsmen stood out front. The men were only barely visible through the fog, and they leaned against the house's front columns, their hands nowhere near their sword-hilts.

"See that window?" Cross pointed toward a stained glass window on the house's third floor. The window was small and circular, and the room within appeared to be unlit.

Liral nodded.

“Take this.” Cross thrust a hand toward her, and Liral recoiled. Had he finally turned against her? Did he realize what she was?

She felt foolish when Cross opened his palm and revealed two white slips of paper.

“I want you to get through that window. Inside, there should be a black box.” Cross furrowed his brow and estimated the size of the box with his hands. “It’s got an opening on its top. That’s where you’ll put the papers. Do not, under any circumstances, touch anything else in the room.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

Liral glared.

“I’ll explain everything later, I promise.”

Sighing, Liral ran a hand through her blonde locks. She paused. Her hair felt nicer than usual, soft from her long bath. A few stubborn knots still lived in her waterfall of hair, but they were few and far between. Cross had shown her kindness. He’d allowed her to take a bath at his home, given her a place to stay, and even fetched clams for her.

“Okay,” Liral eventually whispered. Her voice only barely carried above the distant crash of waves.

“Great. I’ll distract the guards, while you’re up there.” Cross flashed a devious grin. Donning a pair of unreasonably large spectacles, he pulled back his cloak. Four rows of vials were fastened to the cloak’s inner lining, each filled with the same clear liquid. “Let’s see if either of those lads are interested in purchasing a ‘miracle cure’.”

With a wink, Cross fastened his cloak and approached the house.

“Good evening, gents! I have a question for both of you. Have you ever wondered what you’d accomplish if you were better endowed?”

As Cross began to educate the two guardsmen about the potential held within those vials, Liral wasted little time. After nearly a decade on the streets, she knew how to seize an opportunity.

Liral dashed across the square, careful to stay hidden within the fog. These guards, being normal folks without any Powers, would have no chance of spotting her, although she could see them clearly. She ran to the side of the house, and then began to climb, using window sills and grooved decorations as handholds.

She could have jumped up the building, but that might have resulted in a sound when she landed. Her climbing was both silent and tedious. If she’d been able to go barefoot, the climb would have been far easier. She scowled. How did people imprison

their feet in shoes, every single day? How did they live without the wonderful feeling of cold tiles against their toes?

With more effort than usual, Liral reached the stained glass window. It didn't want to open at first, but grudgingly gave way when Liral shoved with all of her weight. The opening was narrow. Too narrow for Cross, and likely too narrow for most folks...but Liral wasn't like most folks. She slid through the window, landing on her feet in a dark, quiet room.

She had to squint to locate the black box. It sat atop a table in the center of the room, resting beside a scattering of papers, ink, and quills. Liral licked her lips when she eyed the two ink bottles. If she found a generous fence, those bottles could purchase sizeable meals for nearly a month. She patted the gold crown in her trousers' back pocket. Between the ink and the crown, she could survive fairly well. It'd be so easy, wouldn't it? To just run back to the Harbor, and leave Cross behind?

No. Liral clenched jaw, and slid the two papers into the black box. If Cross's mysterious plan came to fruition, then Liral would be swimming in gold. Cross had said it himself...and, for some reason, she wanted to believe him. In the back of her mind, a dangerous question lingered: What if Cross wasn't like the others?

Grasping the medallion around her neck, Liral cast the last of her worries aside. She would stick with Cross...for now.

Liral tiptoed across the room, and exited through the circular window. She clung to the window's edge, scanned the area for Redcloaks, then began her descent.

"Fantastic!" Cross' booming laugh echoed through the courtyard below. "And you. Has your headache subsided?"

"It has..." One of the guards replied, his voice thick with wonder.

"And you feel stronger, too, don't you?"

"I do! What's in this stuff?"

"That's a secret for Emperor's ears, alone."

By the time Liral reached the ground, Cross had already sold half of his vials to the pair of guardsmen. She dashed across the courtyard while Cross made his final transaction, and waited for him in the mouth of an alleyway. A minute or two later, Cross sauntered over with the world's cheesiest grin.

"Water." Cross chuckled. He opened his palm, showing a pile of coppers and silvers. "It really is a miracle, of sorts. A liquid that supports all living things, and keeps the blood flowing through our veins. Can't survive without that, can we?"

"Suppose not," Liral answered, crossing her arms.

"Is it done?" The edges of Cross's lips fell, and - for a brief moment - his cheriness fled. His tone was grave. Serious. It took Liral off-guard.

"Yes."

Then, Cross did something terrible. Something unforgivable. With the fog swirling around them, Cross stepped forward and hugged Liral. More accurately, he tried to hug Liral. She spun away from him and lashed out with blurring speed, punching him in the jaw.

Though Liral had thrown the punch with all of her strength, Cross barely reacted. To him, that punch probably felt like a light slap. He was an Ironskin, after all, and Liral was just a starved teen. Her abilities as a Dasher made her quicker, but quickness did not equal power. The weakness of her attack only made Liral angrier, and she snarled like a wild animal.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

Liral's Totem chose that moment to pulse against her chest, beating urgently, like a second heart. It was a warning sign. Nervousness mounting, she backed away from Cross. He was going to hurt her, she sensed it. She was in serious danger...she had to run.

"My mistake," Cross said. "I won't ever try it again. I promise." He held up his hands. "I just...that's great. You did amazing, back there. The way you climb up walls...it's something..."

Cross's voice trailed off, and his eyebrows shot up. He was no longer staring at Liral. Instead, he was looking past her, over her shoulder, and he drew a sharp breath.

"Liral," he said, his voice wavering. "I want you to stay absolutely calm."

Her stomach tied itself into a knot, and she turned around.

Three figures approached them, striding through the fog. Two men and a woman. They walked with authority, holding their chins up high, and the daggers on their belts shone in the softened moonlight. All three wore scarlet cloaks. The cloaks shrouded most of their bodies, but ended just shy of the elbow. Tattoos marked their exposed forearms: three black circles, all interlocked. The rings were stark and chilling, a symbol as old as the Lisanai Empire itself. They symbolized the goal of continental unity, the destiny of the Lisanai to rule over the western Kingdoms, and every member of the Emperor's specialized guard were marked by that same tattoo.

Redcloaks. Liral's heart pounded against her chest, and she stole a nervous glance at Cross. Was this all a set-up? Was Cross secretly working with the Redcloaks? No. There was fear in his eyes, and his breathing was heavy. He understood the danger that three Redcloaks posed.

“What business do you have here?” The Redcloak woman asked, coming to a stop in front of Liral. She was around Cross’s age. The two other Redcloaks appeared to be following her lead, flanking her with wary frowns. A white scarf was wrapped snugly around the lead woman’s neck, just below her hood. Strands of blonde hair poked through the scarf, only a shade darker than Liral’s own.

“We’re simple merchants!” Cross said with a wide smile. He slowly opened his cloak, revealing the remaining vials of ‘miracle cure’. “Would you like to test our wares?”

The Redcloak woman lifted a vial from his cloak and gave it a sniff.

“Give it a try.” Cross’s smile tensed, and a pulsing vein became visible on his temple.

“I don’t think I will,” the woman answered in a flat, deadly tone.

“As you wish. Feel free to keep that as a sample. My colleague and I,” Cross nudged Liral in the shoulder, “must be on our way. We have some very important b-”

“I’ve watched over these streets for fourteen years. Do you know how many ‘simple merchants’ I’ve found peddling wares past midnight?”

Cross was silent for a moment, then let out a nervous chuckle. “I haven’t the faintes-”

“None. Ever.” The woman’s stoicism was giving way to disgust, and she furrowed her eyebrows. “Only dealers of contraband, enemies of the Emperor, and fools. Which are you?”

“Well, then. I suppose we’re a couple of fools.”

“Then tell me, humble merchant.” The Redcloak’s hand began to drift to the daggers at her belt. “Do fools regularly hide battle knives beneath their cloaks?”

Cross balled his right hand into a fist, and Liral’s stomach began to sink. If it came to blows, this was not a fight that they could win. Those three Redcloaks had Powers and decades of training. Liral had never even drawn blood in a fight. She always ran away, long before it came to that.

“You must think us daft,” the woman sneered. “You must truly believe-”

Cross swung his fist at the lead Redcloak. It connected with the side of her head, and sent her scarf flying from her neck. She toppled backward and let out a howl of pain when she thudded against the cobblestones. Growling, the woman struggled back to her feet. She was an Ironskin. She had to be. The blow would have killed anyone else.

“Run!” Cross yelled.

His command wasn’t necessary. Liral was a runner. She failed at almost every other aspect of life, but she was born to be a runner. So, with Cross on her heels and three angry Redcloaks in pursuit, Liral ran.

# CHAPTER 9

## *A Slippery Slope*

Liral sprung across the cobblestones, her bare feet spending more time airborne than grounded. She'd kicked off her boots over three blocks ago. They were troublesome, confining things and she ran much faster without them. She ran so quickly, in fact, that she had to slow down at the end of every street, and wait for Cross.

"Dasher!" screeched the Redcloak woman. "She's a Dasher!"

"C'mon," Liral muttered under her breath, tapping her foot impatiently at the end of a wide boulevard. The Redcloaks were still trailing Cross. Thankfully, all three appeared to be Ironskins. Unless more Dashers arrived, Liral was in no immediate danger of being captured. Cross, on the other hand, was not blessed with as much speed, and showed no signs of being well-conditioned. If they didn't lose the pursuers soon, Cross would be a prisoner before the night was through.

Liral couldn't let that happen. Whether Cross was poised to betray her or not, she could not let him fall into the Redcloaks' hands. They didn't tolerate unbound Ralli with Powers. If rumors held any truth, Cross would wither in a tiny cell after his capture, beaten bloody and tortured until he either agreed to join their Order, or he perished.

Panting heavily, Cross sprinted at an uneven pace. Wisps of strawberry blond hair clung to the sweat on his brow. He no longer resembled a poised thief, and he certainly didn't look 'fancy', as he had when they'd first met. Instead, his eyes were wide, like those of a frightened boy, and his cheeks were red with exhaustion, puffing with each of his wheezing breaths.



“We...need...to...” Cross struggled for words, stumbling to Liral’s side.

Liral ignored him, and took off down a sidestreet. The Redcloaks were still on their trail. They had no time to spare on planning or conversation. Behind her, a tired groan and the clunky thud of boots confirmed that Cross was still following.

“Stop running!” One of the Redcloaked men shouted, rounding the corner in pursuit. “Stop! By order of the Emperor!”

Liral knew what she had to do. She’d been chased countless times over the years, by drunk soldiers, roaming bands of thugs, fellow urchins, and city guardsmen. More times than she could even remember. During those chases, she’d learned that the easiest way to evade pursuers was to run faster than them and, if that wasn’t possible, she knew the next best method: using her surroundings to her advantage.

She scanned each alleyway that they passed, searching through the fog. They’d passed about half a dozen alleys before her eye caught a glint in the moonlight. It was a small thing, just a shimmering trickle between the cobblestones, near the entrance to a tight corridor. Most folks would have overlooked the line of black liquid, but Liral recognized opportunity when she saw it.

Grabbing Cross’s forearm, Liral sprinted into the alley. As soon as she felt the slick oil on her toes, she paused for a moment and helped Cross maintain balance. Then, she rushed onward, moving as quickly as she could without slipping. Even so, she and Cross both stumbled once or twice, leaving their hands black with oil.

Every second mattered. Liral wasn’t much a planner, and this was her only real strategy. Silently, she prayed to the Giant that she and Cross would cover enough ground to make a clean escape.

As expected, the three Redcloaks came barreling around the corner behind them. They shouted and ran down the alleyway at full speed. Liral pressed onward. She didn’t even turn around to gloat when she heard the Redcloaks let out gasps, and hit the oil-slicked stones with resounding thumps. Part of her wished that she had. She would have liked to see their stunned faces, as they struggled to their feet with black-stained cloaks.

Instead, Liral continued into the night. She did not stop when she reached the end of the corridor, and emerged on a hilly street. Stopping meant Redcloaks. Stopping meant death. She tried not to leave Cross too far behind, and limited her speed to an impatient jog. Still, she zipped past shops and homes, heading for the safest place in all of Trisal.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Cross’s feet dangled over the edge of the wharf building’s roof. It was Liral’s favorite roof. “You live here?!”

Liral shrugged. “It’s a good roof.” It was a safe roof, too, far away from the typical Redcloak patrol routes. There was another reason for her affinity to the wharf roof, though. That reason ran much deeper, and almost brought her to tears. Nine years prior, on the same rocky shore beneath the wharf building, Liral had first learned that she was a ruiner.

Beside Liral, Cross was still panting from their long run. He winced with each breath, staring out at the ocean. In their efforts to escape the Redcloaks, they’d covered well over half of the city on foot. In fact, they’d traveled all the way from the Colosseum to the Harbor district. Such a trek would have taken most folks over two hours of walking, but Liral and Cross made the journey in a handful of minutes.

“Don’t the birds ever bother you?”

Liral raised an eyebrow, then glanced up at the silent gulls that circled overhead. The fog was already fading, and more birds would emerge when the sun rose.

“No.”

The birds kept to themselves, unless she paraded food in front of them. She liked to think that they understood her situation, and didn’t wish to steal from a fellow scavenger.

“Just the rats,” Liral added.

Cross grimaced, and they sat in silence, listening to the waves.

“Good thinking back there, with the oil.” Cross managed a smile, then he began to fish through his cloak. “Here.” He produced a small flask, and offered it to her. “A bit of whiskey. Think of it as a victory swig. It wasn’t exactly a smooth mission, but it was a necessary one...and you did good, kid.”

Liral narrowed her eyes at the flask.

He wants to poison you. He knows your secrets. He hates you. He wants to hurt you, ruiner.

Her fingers trembled, and she fought the urge to scoot away from him.

“Fine, suit yourself.” Cross sighed. His smile disappeared, and he brought the flask to his lips. He took a long sip. “Look. Ta-da. I’m not dead.” Once again, he offered her the flask.

This time, Liral hesitated, then accepted. Silently cursing herself, she took a swig. Her eyes went wide, and she stifled an ugly cough. Her eyes had begun to water, and her whole throat felt as if it was on fire. The stuff was disgusting. She’d never been

much of a drinker, but she'd sipped a number of beers in the past, and none of those had prepared her for...whatever this was.

"Easy. Just breathe. In and out, deep breaths." Cross moved to pat her back, then thought better of it.

"It's terrible," Liral rasped.

Cross only laughed. "It's an acquired taste."

Liral shook her head, and made a silent pledge to never attempt 'acquiring' that particular taste. She stuck out her tongue and tried to give the poor appendage some much-needed air.

"Taste? I don't think I'll be able to taste anything, ever again."

"And you're witty, too! Witty, Clever, and you move like a creature from western fairytales. You're something special. How does a girl like you even end up on the streets?"

She wiped the lingering tears from her lashes and fixed him with a flat stare.

"I'm serious," Cross continued. "You're-"

"Stop." The word was harsh, and hot with whiskey. She couldn't let him think of her so highly. That would only make him more upset when Liral inevitably ruined everything. It would make his betrayal hurt even worse and cut to Liral's core, just like Mum's betrayal, on that bright-mooned night when Mum gave her that sad smile before she...before she...

Liral was shaking. She had to change the subject. "You said you'd explain everything."

"Huh?"

"You said you'd explain everything later. I want to know, right now. Why'd you make me put papers in some...box? How does that help us rob the Coliseum? What's your plan?"

"Ah." Cross's eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement. "The plan, yes. I suppose there's no better time to tell you. You need to swear to me, though, that you won't tell a soul. Nobody. Ever."

Liral tilted her head, then nodded.

"No, I need you to say the words."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I swear."

It was an easy enough promise. After all, who would she tell? She'd gone out of her way, during her time on the rooftops, to ensure that she had no friends or confidants. Aside from off-handed conversations with shopkeepers and the occasional urchin, Cross was the first person she'd actually spoken to in years.

“Do you know of the Petrax family?” Cross asked.

“Course. They run the Coliseum.”

Everyone knew of the Petraxes. They were one of the most powerful families in the city, with a pure black-haired lineage that stretched back to the dawn of the Empire.

“That they do. They arrange the fights, track the betting, watch over the prize money, and throw parties for the noble spectators. They are so deeply tied to the Coliseum, that they even live within its walls. There’s only one detail of the Coliseum that the Petrax family doesn’t control.”

“What’s that?” Liral’s furrowed her eyebrows, and Cross grinned at her curiosity.

“The guest list. Any commoner can enter the Coliseum. However, only a few hundred of the most noble dark-hairs receive invitations to the Coliseum’s Golden Wing. You’ve seen the Wing, no doubt, but you probably don’t understand its importance. The Wing is not just a pretty decoration. Nor is it a simple viewing platform. It’s where deals are struck, fortunes are made, and grand bets are wagered. A single invitation to the Wing can lend a family legitimacy, and elevate them from struggle to glory.”

“So the Emperor doesn’t let them choose the guests,” Liral whispered.

Cross nodded excitedly. “And that’s where Magistrate Elion Jeresh enters the fold. The Magistrate, by order of the Emperor, chooses the attendees. He sends out the invitation letters, then puts the receipts for those letters in a black box, which he leaves in a room on the third floor of his home. Those receipts are transported to the Coliseum on the morning of the fights, and re-written into a guest list by the Petrax scribes. It’s woefully inefficient, but I assume that comes down to the Magistrate’s pettiness. He’d do anything to irk the Petraxes.”

“How do you know all of that?”

Cross shrugged. “It’s what I do. You jump around on roofs and pickpocket, while I choose to research my targets.”

Liral bit her lip. “So...I just broke into the Magistrate’s house?”

“Correct.”

“And I added someone to the guest list?”

Cross grinned. “Two someones. You and me.”

“Wait...what?”

“We’re going to be posing as minor nobles from the Outer Reach. Brother and sister.”

“Why?!” Liral suppressed her anger, along with her desire to run away. “This...this is...”

“Necessary. It’s the only way, Liral. I can break most locks, but the prize room has a vault door. There are only a few keys to that vault, and they all dangle from the necks of the Petrax family. My target is Perresenda, the eldest of the three Petrax children. Yours will be the Petrax heir. Sionel Petrax. He’s a few years your senior and he’s known for being a bit of a fox, so you may have to become...intimate with him, in order to steal his key.”

Liral balled her hands into fists. “I knew it.” Her lower lip trembled, and she fought back tears. “Intimate? You want me to...to...” her voice trailed off.

How had she been so foolish? Why had she even contemplated trusting Cross. He was probably just as bad as the rest of the folks in Trisal. He only wanted to use her, like some sort of animal. What would he do, when he learned more about her? Would he sell her to the highest bidder? Would Cross abandon Liral like her mum had years before, leaving her to die in the height of an icestorm?

“No, don’t be ridiculous. I don’t,” Cross began, then sighed. “I don’t want that. I want you to earn his trust. That’s all.”

Staring at her dangling toes, Liral gulped past a lump in her throat.

“If it makes you feel better, I’ll be doing the same. I know it’s a lot to ask, but this was the best plan that I could think up. Outside of fight days, the Petraxes are too well-guarded. Our only chance is to lure them somewhere quiet and steal a key. It’s the only way. Hopefully, I’ll be able to get Perresenda’s key before you have to approach Sionel. We have to do it, though. I wish we didn’t have to, Liral, but we do.”

There was a pleading edge to his voice. Liral hadn’t noticed it before. She turned and tilted her head, studying Cross. He was no longer looking toward the ocean, and instead gazed north. His shoulders were tensed, and he released a wistful breath.

“We need to,” he murmured.

Liral watched Cross for a handful of heartbeats, then spoke. “I don’t think I’ll be very good at this.”

“I agree,” Cross said. He broke his northern stare and met her eyes. “But you’ll be good enough. I know someone who’s well-versed in noble life. She’ll make you presentable, after a couple weeks of practice. It’s not like you need to be a princess, just a well-mannered girl from the Reaches.”

“What about my hair?” Liral ran her fingers through her bright locks.

“Depends,” Cross chuckled. “Do you prefer wigs, or dye?”

“I don’t know,” Liral whispered. Wigs? Dye? They were both highly illegal. Liral hadn’t even seen a bottle of dye in her life...what would she look like, as a dark-haired?

She shook her head in wonder, eyes trained toward the crashing waves. Her stomach fluttered. As much as she dreaded the idea of masquerading as a dark-haired woman, part of her bounced with excitement. It was the same part of her that dreaded the monotony of living on rooftops, and the part that urged her to trust Cross.

“Oh.” Cross reached into his cloak and sifted through the back pockets. “I almost forgot to show you my the best steal of the night.”

Grinning ear to ear, he brandished a white scarf before Liral. Much of the scarf was coated with mud, and only a few patches still retained their pristine white color, but it was unmistakable.

“You didn’t!” Liral squeaked. She tried to suppress her laughter, but failed.

“I thought you might enjoy it.” Cross winked. He tossed the Redcloak woman’s scarf to Liral.

“Oo,” Liral giggled. She fastened the scarf around her neck, and struck a pose. “Stop! In the name of the Emperor, I demand that you stop!” Liral mimicked the woman’s pompous tone, and they both broke down into a fit of laughter.

Wiping happy tears from her eyes, Liral smiled up at Cross. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed. It’d been years, certainly, and she didn’t think that she’d ever laughed with another person.

“Thank you,” Liral whispered up to Cross. She nuzzled into her scarf, until her nose was covered from the morning chill. “Thank you.”

Her Totem chose that moment to pulse against her chest. Not an angry pulse, or a warning pulse, but a happy pulse. Green light, almost invisibly faint, drifted through her cloak before wisping into nothingness.

*“I always wondered what you folks were keeping down here.”*

*Girl, blonde of hair. Case one hundred seventy nine. Outcome: minimal*

# CHAPTER 10

## *Revisions*

**D**elvaran stood uneasily at the helm of the assembly room. He held a bowl of lamb stew in his palms and scanned the room. Was he doing this wrong? Was there supposed to be assigned seating? Because of his rations punishment, he hadn't yet eaten breakfast with the others maids, and was generally directionless. Upon seeing Auri's beckoning hand, Delvaran brightened.

He scurried to join her at the end of a long, wooden table.

"Daila!" Auri chirped. "Welcome, welcome." Then, she gestured at the girls sitting on either side of her. "Mili, Kess. This is Daila, she's the one I've been telling you about."

Delvaran lifted an eyebrow and managed a weak smile. What had Auri been telling them, exactly? She hadn't revealed his true identity, had she? No...the two other girls studied him with pleasant smiles, showing no signs of mischief or retribution.

Mili was the more petite of the two girls, with rosy cheeks and the same wheat-blond hair as Auri. She looked younger than most of the other maids. Fifteen or so, if Delvaran had to guess, although her pig-tails made her appear even more juvenile. If memory served him properly, Mili had been brought in as a maid when she was but a child, and had served a number of the Scythari noblewomen at Delvaran's court. There was a sadness about her. On several occasions, Delvaran had caught her dallying mid-way through meal deliveries, staring out of a window with a forlorn look while her master's food grew cold.

Of course, he had alerted Madam Marsa and had the girl punished for insubordination. Delvaran gulped. Why had he been such a fool? Why hadn't he asked Marsa about what each 'punishment' entailed? About the horror of the ice grotto?



Delvaran already knew the answer. He hadn't cared enough to learn more about the lives of the maid staff. For years, he'd considered the maids' punishments to be a Ralli triviality, conducting upon light-haired girls at the hands of the brown-haired Madam. The harshness had been no matter to him.

Fighting back his guilt, Delvaran greeted the two maids.

"Well met."

"Well met?" Mili rolled her eyes. "Shadows, girl. What do you think you are, some kind of noblewoman?"

Delvaran's heart skipped a beat. They couldn't possibly suspect...could they? He wracked his mind for an appropriate response, praying that he hadn't just blown his cover.

"Don't tease her, she's a bit slow," Auri said, studying her nails with a devilish grin. "I did warn you about that."

Delvaran's cheeks burned, and he fought back the urge to unleash his tongue. That girl. She just loved to irk him as much as possible. However, she had been loyal to him, even when she didn't have to be. He no longer had any power - mystical or political - and Auri would have been greatly rewarded for turning him over to the Kadians. All it would require was a small cut, a mere trickle of blue blood, and his identity would become apparent. But she had protected him, instead. As much as he hated her at times, she was now his mentor and protector in the world of servitude, and he sometimes thought of her as his only friend.

"You're a funny one," he shot back, trying to keep his tone dry and even. "Absolutely hilarious." He dropped onto the bench, across from Auri. She stuck her tongue out at him, which earned her another glare. "How do you two even spend time with her, without dying of laughter?"

"We manage," Kess said with a smile, her vowels long and sonorous. Her smile faded, and she reached across the table to take Delvaran's hand. The gesture surprised him, and he almost yelped in surprise when he felt her soft hand against his. "Child, we're all so sorry...the grotto on your first day, and without a warm meal..." She paused to send Auri a glare of her own. "It gets better, I believe." Kess nodded back at Delvaran. "Working here is not easy. You arrived at a wild time, a time of change, but these Kadians cannot be any more cruel than the Scythari. That would not be possible, I believe. Each day will be easier than the last."

"I hope you're right," Delvaran replied, flashing a smile. "Thank you."

He studied the girl. Kess was perhaps a few years older than Auri, in her early to mid twenties. Unlike Mili, he'd shared little contact with Kess. Her bone-white hair and

olive complexion easily identified her as a islander from the Bits, and one of the few maids in the castle who was not Scythari. As such, she'd never been fully trusted by the nobles of Delvaran's court, and had certainly never been selected as a personal maid. He'd rarely seen her about, though he knew that she worked in the dueling arena, fetching towels and water while the other lords of the castle practiced combat. Delvaran had never seen the point of honing his sword or knife techniques. He was a Shaper, after all, and shapers had no use for such nonsense.

Kess's status seemed unlikely to change. With the castle's new Kadian rulership, an islander from a far territory of the Lisanai Empire would never be trusted, especially with the tense political climate between the Empire and Kadia. War was on all of the guards' lips. They talked of both the on-going war with Delvaran's father's army in the foothills, and of a potential Lisanai invasion. The latter was a sensible fear. The Lisanai had a long and storied history of trying to invade their western neighbors. With Kadia and Scythar both weakened from war, Delvaran had no doubt that the Lisanai's 'Immortal Emperor' was readying his troops, and preparing to strike.

"Right," Auri clicked her tongue. "One whisper, and all of the sudden I'm the villain. Not my fault the Madam's a -"

Delvaran widened his eyes, and stared past Auri, as if the Madam was hovering over Auri's shoulder. Auri was petrified, her mouth half-open as fear glinted in her eyes.

Behind me? Auri mouthed.

"Nope! Your face, though..." Delvaran giggled like...well...like a maid girl. He brought hand to his lips, in an ineffective attempt to stifle his laughter. The other two girls joined his laughter, probably more out of relief than joy.

"You witch!" Auri hissed. She reached across the table and slapped Delvaran on the wrist. She wagged her finger at him like a stern instructor. "You'll pay for that!"

Delvaran wolfed down a good bit of his stew. The lamb wasn't tender, but it was edible. He giggled between spoonfuls, fully aware of Auri's scowl.

"Mili, Kess," Auri began. There was no shortage of vindictiveness in her tone. "What did you think of the old prince? You know...Delvaran."

He froze mid-chew. Time seemed to slow, and his spoon trembled in his hand. He met Auri's eyes. She shrugged, then her lips curved into a devious grin.

"Him?" Mili snorted. "Spineless twat. An ass, too. Hope he's found a nice ditch to die in. Always knew he'd run off, while good lads died for this city. If he's somehow still alive...how's he even live with himself?"

Delvaran's heart sunk. She couldn't really believe that, could she? He knew that he wasn't perfect, but...

“He was not a good prince, I believe,” Kess nodded in agreement. Her accent made her sound twice as wise, and caused the words to sting even deeper. “Though I did not know him well. His actions were not as cruel as King Icevein’s, but he was known to be selfish, and his people did not respect him. Perhaps, with time, things could have been different. He was young, and likely had some potential. He was handsome, too. Remember, Auri? You said that you liked being his personal maid because-”

“No,” Auri interjected sharply, her cheeks red. “I’ve never said anything like that.” She spoke the words too quickly, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. “Nonsense. Absolutely nonsense. I wanted to be his personal maid because it’s a high post. No other reason. The prince himself was disgusting and stupid and...and...”

Delvaran smirked. It seemed that Auri’s little jab had backfired. Had she really been attracted to him? He shook his head in wonder, studying the lanky blonde. His smirk gave way to a frown. He’d always been intrigued by her striking figure and her...remarkable personality, but he had never felt lustful toward her...or any other woman.

He gulped back his fear, and let out a low, calming breath. He tried not to dwell on that fact. It was both dangerous and terrifying. There was something wrong with him, that much was clear. There had always been something wrong with him, but he’d never mustered the courage to discuss it with anybody. How could he have possibly approached that...horrible topic?

“Not sure how you could even spend a day with him,” Mili scoffed. “How long were you his fake little princess? Ten years, almost? Reckon I’d rather die.”

Delvaran grimaced. Before Auri could again defend herself from the accusations, a shrill voice caused all four of them to turn.

“They got him!” an unfamiliar maid announced, panting against the doorframe. Her forehead glistened with sweat, as if she’d just run across the whole castle grounds. She spoke loudly, like a herald, for the whole hall to hear. “Heard it straight from the generals: they finally got the bastard! King Icevein’s dead!”

\* \* \*

Around Delvaran, the assembly hall erupted with chatter. A small crowd grew around the heralding maid. Elsewhere in the room, maids shared hushed stories about the old king, told in whispers, while others - like Mili - boldly proclaimed their hatred for the late king.

Delvaran did not utter a word. His father was dead. For all of the man's faults, his father had been...his father. They were of the same blood, the same spirit. They were Scythari. They were family. The former prince felt as if his stomach had been yanked out, and he barely even moved, aside from the trembling of his hand. More information about the death traveled through the assembly hall like ink through water, hopping from table to table, from maid to maid. The details varied, but the main story stayed the same. King Chessarion 'Icevein' had lost his horse in a brutal ambush in the Kadian foothills. He'd been captured, then hung, and the Kadians had mounted his head upon a pike.

However, most exciting to the other maids was news of the feast. The Kadians, being barbarous mongrels, had scheduled a feast to celebrate the death of Delvaran's father, and the end of the war. The feast would be a few days before the Selections. It'd double as an audition, of sorts. The maids would be on full display, working as servers, cleaners, and entertainment, so the nobles would have a better idea of which maids they wished to select.

"You'll have to practice hard," Auri said, reaching over to hold Delvaran's hand. There was pain in her eyes, though she couldn't voice her sympathy in public. "Can't have you being clumsy, aye? Not if you want to get selected."

Delvaran nodded numbly, his eyes trained at the nearest wall, his heart thumping in his ears.

"Aye," he whispered.

He'd be the hardest-working maid in the castle, if it meant that he would be selected by one of those vile Kadians. The higher ranked, the better. If he excelled, he could even be selected as a personal maid to the Kadian king. Such a rank would grant him limitless opportunities to Shape a rope into a strangling snake...or, if his powers still refused to cooperate, merely jab a dagger in the old man's neck.

The death of his father would not go unavenged.

# CHAPTER 11

## *Remembrance*

**A**nd how would you address a landed nobleman from a minor family?" Auri asked, unruffling the hem of Delvaran's freshly cleaned dress as she spoke. "Sir or Master. My Lord, as well, if he's a direct vassal of the crown."

"Good." Just as the word passed Auri's lips, she tightened Delvaran's dress, drawing a gasp from the former prince. "Keep all of these lessons in mind and please, please, please don't drop anything. Remember: you're on serving duty, not dropping duty. This feast is important and if the Madam notices any mistakes...we wouldn't want that. Got it?"

"Aye." The word came out before Delvaran could catch it.

Aye. It was a Ralli word, not a noble one, and he'd been using it far too often over the past week. That made sense, he supposed. There was no real cause for alarm. Each day, he'd been surrounded by Ralli maids, sharing every meal with them and scrubbing floors together, so it only made sense that he'd begun to adopt their manner of speech.

"To the feast, then. You'll finally get to see how much preparation goes into this nonsense."

\* \* \*

Like usual, Auri was not wrong. The few dozen maids who had been designated for serving, Delvaran and Auri included, scurried about the feast hall for hours. Long before the guests had arrived, the crew of light-haired maids had turned the barren room into an intriguing vision, with black and white Kadian banners - each fairly battered - lining the walls, towering above the four ornate dining tables which

stretched across the broad room. Newly cleaned suits of armor shimmered in the hall's corners, and all three of the fireplaces held a strong blaze, lighting the room with an orange hue.

Flagons of mead and pitchers of wine were placed strategically throughout the table. The silverware was positioned more perfectly than Delvaran would have thought possible, had he not placed a few of the forks himself. At each of the hundred-odd seats, the maids had set down steaming appetizer plates, which gave off the most delicious scent and threatened to make his stomach rumble.

By the time the front doors were opened and a stream of nobles entered, all of the feast's serving maids stood at attention against the walls. The Kadian nobles flooded in like the barbarians they were, laughing, bragging, and speaking far too loudly. Some were already drunk. The women wore frilled dresses which put Delvaran's to shame, while the men wore stylized leather armor, engraved with Kadian insignias. They slid into their seats, then began downing even more wine and digging into the beautifully prepared appetizers without even a passing 'thank you' for the maids who'd brought the wine, or the cooks who'd prepared their food.

They were so jovial, so cheerful, all because they'd managed to kill Delvaran's only kin. All because they'd taken Delvaran's city. In due time, they'd learn not to celebrate prematurely. The war was not yet over. Scythari loyalists still fought in the foothills, burrowing themselves into tough defensive positions and ambushing Kadian forces, and the invaders had failed to capture one key member of the Scythari royalty.

That lesson wouldn't be learned at the feast, though. It would be learned in the privacy of a bedchamber, where Delvaran would slice through Kadian royals in their sleep.

Soon, all of the seats were filled. Delvaran had to force himself not to glare at the end of the longest table, where the Kadian royal family chattered. Prince Folston sat beside one of his personal knights, only a few seats removed from the king, a bearded man who shared Folston's emerald eyes. King Braum was the bastard's name. The king of Kadia, and the bane of Delvaran's existence. Both Braum and Folston seemed to be rather reserved, neither ecstatic nor inebriated, and Folston studied the room, his eyes even venturing toward the line of maids.

"Lords and Ladies," King Braum spoke. His booming voice drowned out all other conversation, and even the drunkest nobles in attendance trained their eyes on the king. "This is not simply a victory feast," he declared, his tone solemn. "This is also a remembrance feast. The sixteen banners that fly above your head," he motioned up at the black and white banners, hanging from the walls. "Those are the same banners

that each of our sixteen regiments carried into battle, when taking this city. Men fought beside those banners. Men died beside those banners. Five thousand died, just so that we could sit at this table. Eight thousand, if you count the Scythari. Eight thousand. Eight thousand fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers. Eight thousand men with hopes and dreams, and five thousand who made the ultimate sacrifice because they believed in Kadia. Because they believed in our cause, because they wished to stop the terror of the Icevein, and wished to end the corrupted line of blue blood. Most of the fallen were Ralli, that is true, but a life lost is a life lost. We are not like the Scythari. We do not simply throw lives away and forget. We honor their sacrifice, and recall that we are blessed by the Giant to be here, today. He made these lands and stomped upon evil, just as we stomped on the Scythari tyrants. We must swear to remember the cost of this justice, and pray that the Giant guides the fallen, lifting them as he lifted the mountains.”

The king raised his goblet, and stared toward one of the tattered banners. All traces of glee had disappeared from the gathered nobles, and some of them shared guilty looks.

“We remember,” King Braum said.

“We remember,” echoed the rest of the room, Delvaran included.

How many lives could he have saved, had Delvaran simply surrendered the city? Possibly eight thousand, if the king’s count was correct. Eight thousand lives, all lost because of his own damned stubbornness. His pride. He’d failed to face the fact that he’d already lost, that he’d been outmatched, outmaneuvered, and outnumbered. He’d ordered those men to their deaths.

A knot formed in the back of his throat. While the feast continued and other maids began to scurry around, he bit his lip and stared blankly at the nearest banner. Would he have even made a good king? By all accounts, he hadn’t been a good prince...

Sighing, Delvaran turned to follow the other maids when he caught someone staring from across the room. It was Prince Folston. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment, then Folston glanced away. Delvaran cocked his head. How long had Folston been staring at him?

He would have dwelled on the question, but Auri tugged on his sleeve.

“Come on,” she hissed. “We’ve got to bring out the entrees. Do you want to go to the ice grotto, or something?”

\* \* \*

Delvaran held the plate of grilled fish, just like he'd rehearsed. He balanced it along his arm and took evenly paced steps. He wouldn't drop the plate. He couldn't. If he did, he'd be sent to the grotto for embarrassing the Madam, and he wouldn't be chosen at the Selections, and he'd probably never be allowed to enter a royal's quarters. That would ruin everything.

By the grace of the Giant, he managed to reach the correct spot and eased the plate onto one of the tables, in front of a stout balding man. If the man had lost any more hair, his eyebrows would be the only evidence of his dark-haired status. He was in the middle of telling a story to the woman beside him, an outlandish tale about how he personally tracked down a direct descendent of the Giant in the Kadian Alps. It was typical tavern nonsense, and Delvaran fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"Excuse me, slave." The man looked up at Delvaran through his spectacles.

Slave. Delvaran used to address Auri in that manner when she'd angered him. He hadn't understood how hurtful that word could be. From this man's mouth, it felt as if he was using the word to address a stool, or a bale of hay, something so far from human that even the most powerful Shaper would have no chance of molding it into humanoid form.

"Does this fish happen to be fralefite, from the Mesin River?" He leaned over to his companion's ear. "I caught dozens of those, back when I was adventuring. Difficult fish to reel in, for most men."

Delvaran blinked. That story seemed unlikely. He hated men like this, braggarts who were so full of hot air that their link to the truth was nothing more than a sliver.

"No, Master."

If Delvaran had been more courageous, more prideful...if he'd been the man he used to be, he would have continued that thought. He would have explained that fralefite were a saltwater fish, so they couldn't possibly inhabit the Mesin River. He'd also point out that the fish on the plate was clearly dendrin, a much darker fish which anyone with any fishing experience whatsoever could identify.

Tame as it was, Delvaran's answer did not please the man.

A single red vein popping against the man's neck. Delvaran bowed his head and backed away. Really? He'd spoken only two words, and they'd been proper words, two of the safest words that he could say to a noble. Would this man actually punish him for telling the truth?

"We'll see about that," the balding man grunted, scowling at him. "The Giant knows I've caught enough fralefite in my day to know the taste."



Delvaran shied away from the man's glare, anxiously clutching his arms across his stomach. Why would this man even go out of his way to lie about a fish? How could a human being possibly be so petty?

With that, the man tore into the fish with his fork, and gulped down a large bite.

He paused for a moment, fork in hand. Then, he dropped his utensil. It clanged against the stone floor, and Delvaran scurried to recover it. Unfortunately, the noise was loud enough to startle some of the nearby feasters, and draw their attention.

The balding man's eyes were wide, and his face grew red. His hands shot to his own throat.

He rasped only one word, but it seemed to carry across the entire room.

"Poison!"

Delvaran's lips parted, but he couldn't seem to produce any words. He held the fork in his trembling hands, and began to back away from the balding man. No, no, no, no, no. Not like this. Poison? Delvaran's cover would be blown, and he'd end up in shackles. They'd sentence him to death, rightfully so, and he'd swing from a noose before the week had ended...and for what? For the death of one annoying man?

"Shadows!" the woman beside the man screeched, pointing an accusatory finger at Delvaran. She'd begun hyperventilating, her eyes were practically popping out of her head. "She's a...she's a...an...an assassin!"

Murmurs spread throughout the room, a mixture of fright and confusion. Nobles dropped their forks mid-bite, backing away from their plates as if their food had suddenly become a teeming den of snakes.

Rough hands grabbed Delvaran's upper arms, holding him in place. The hands belonged to two castle guards. They each breathed down Delvaran's neck, and squeezed him so tightly that Delvaran whimpered. Not like this. It couldn't happen like this. Tears glistened in his eyes, then began to meander down his cheeks.

All the while, the balding man was hunched over his plate, wheezing and coughing. After a few more coughs, his face began to return to its normal shade, no longer redder than a tomato.

"She tried to poison me!" he said, wiping beads of sweat from his brow. Great. Delvaran would die, and this vile man wouldn't even meet his deserved end. "She's a poisoner! A Scythari slave bitch! Kill her! Kill her, now!"

A direct order from a Kadian lord. A kill order. Delvaran's stomach churned. Forget dungeons, forget hangings, forget courts and justice. As far as the guards were concerned, a noble had just ordered the death of a slave, thus Delvaran would not leave this hall alive.

“No!” screeched a familiar voice from across the room. Auri. Her eyes brimmed with tears, as she tried to push past guards, struggling to reach Delvaran. “Let her go! Let her go! She hasn’t done anything wrong!”

The guards holding Delvaran ignored Auri’s pleas. One of the guards drew his sword from his scabbard. The sound of metal sliding against leather sent goosebumps up and down Delvaran’s arms. This was it, then. The end of the road, and for an attempted murder that he hadn’t even planned.

He wanted to plead, to protest, but he couldn’t even form words past the lump in his throat.

Then, he spotted Folston. The Kadian prince approached the table, a blur of speed, and met Delvaran’s gaze. Delvaran did not speak, but pleaded with his eyes, the sword-tip inches from his neck. This was not Delvaran’s doing. Folston had to believe him... someone had to believe him.

Folston’s brow furrowed, and anger flashed across his eyes.

“Stop!” Folston shouted, pointing at the guards. “Stop this, at once! What madness is this? You idiots...you wish to spill blood during a feast? Put away your weapon.”

The guard complied more swiftly than Delvaran thought possible, and the man’s cheeks reddened.

“Highness.” He bowed his head to his prince in apology. He maintained his grip on Delvaran’s arm, though it was a much softer hold than before.

Folston studied the balding man, glancing between the man and his plate.

“Lord Lekri,” Folston said, coldly. The hall had fallen so silent, his words - though quiet - carried all the way into the kitchens. “You threaten the life of a loyal maid...because you do not understand that fish have bones.”

Sure enough, a solid chunk of fish sat atop Lord Lekri’s plate, with a thick rib-bone running through its center. During his coughing, he must have coughed up the culprit of the ‘poisoning’.

Lekri’s anger faded, replaced by embarrassment, and he tugged at his collar.

“Highness, I...” Lekri began his explanation.

“Save your excuses,” Folston interrupted. “And don’t try anything like this again.”

Turning on his heel, Folston marched toward Delvaran.

The guards had already released Delvaran from their grip. Seeing Delvaran’s fresh tears, Folston sighed. Folston looked as if he wanted to reach out and wrap Delvaran in a hug, but he refrained, instead choosing to place a gentle hand on Delvaran’s shoulder.

“You’re unhurt?” Folston asked, his voice soft and low.

Delvaran bobbed his head numbly. “Thank you,” he managed to whisper.

“Take the rest of the day off. Tomorrow, too. I’ll let Marsa know. That’s an order, alright?”

Delvaran nodded again. Too many emotions were swirling through Delvaran’s mind to fully process what had just happened. Part of him wanted to hate Folston, to butcher the prince and watch the man’s blood trickle into the grooves between the floor’s stones...but part of him wanted to fall into Folston’s arms.

Slowly, he began to wrap his mind around Folston’s offer. A day off. He could use a day off. He needed to strategize for his mission, after all...but how could he plan to assassinate the same man whose kindness had granted him that free time? A man who might have just saved his life?

He averted his gaze from Folston. No. He couldn’t let emotions get in the way of his revenge. He couldn’t forget what the Kadians had taken from him.

*“Let her go. Let Saja go. Take me instead. Why her?”*

*Young woman, red of hair. Case three hundred twenty two. Outcome: strong*

# CHAPTER 12

## *Paint it Black*

**R**emember,” Cross said. He strode two paces ahead of Liral, marching through the Westside, one of the nicer Ralli districts. Well-dressed for the occasion, his fancy cape billowing behind him. “Cooperate with her while she’s doing her work, but don’t let her walk all over you. She will, if you let her. She can be a bit...pushy.”

Liral bit her lip, and followed at Cross’s heels.

The past week had been rather boring. After that terrifying Redcloak chase, they had lain low in Cross’s apartment, where Cross filled Liral’s head with mundane knowledge about lords, ladies, and noble customs in both the Outer Reach and Trisal. She hated those lessons. Teaching was not Cross’s strength, and he alternated between treating Liral as if she was some dullard who knew nothing of the world, whilst diving into other topics with absolutely no context.

On the positive side, Cross’s apartment was directly above a pastry shop. Cross went out of his way to put food in Liral’s belly, saying that she needed to look less skeletal to pass a noblewoman, so she ate dozens of pastries every single day. It was heavenly. Each night, she’d sunk into the welcoming cushions of Cross’s couch in the height of a food coma, so bloated that she could only smile dumbly and mentally recite the day’s lessons.

She had gained more weight than she thought possible in such a short span of time. Rather than emaciated, she now looked skinny. Lean, even. Her ribs no longer protruded from her sides, her curves looked a bit more distinct, and her face had

softened with the addition of some needed fat, transforming into a visage that almost looked...pretty.

Liral frowned. She wasn't sure how to feel about that. She'd always been of the belief that people put far too much value on appearance. Shadows, her whole life would've had a strikingly different trajectory, had people not been so caught-up with little physical details.

They came to a stop beside a glass storefront, where five noble-looking dresses were on display. Kellory's, read the cursive lettering on the window.

"You'll be staying with her 'til the end of the week. No leaving unless she tells you to leave."

"No pastries?" she whispered.

"Unless she tells you to get pastries, no. No pastries."

Liral's frown deepened.

"She knows about my chosen profession, so you needn't lie to her. I'd recommend against lying to her, in general. She's got some high expectations, always has, and she'll make you sorry if you fall short."

With that, they entered the shop. Dresses lined the walls, mounted upon mannequins, and rows of hanging dresses filled the remainder of the vast room. The dresses were fancy beyond words, the sort of dresses that Liral never could have afforded, even if she'd hoarded all of her earnings for a hundred years. This was the sort of shop that dark-haired folk frequented, without a doubt. At the back of the shop sat a check-out counter, beside a staff door and a staircase to the flats above. Would that be her new quarters?

"Crossinar!" a voice called, only moments after they'd entered. "How wonderful of you to visit! I was worried that you'd forgotten to stop by...again."

"Mother," Cross winced, then forced a smile. "For the ninth time, I'm sorry about that. You won't ever forget about it, will you?"

Cross's mother was even shorter than Liral. She had the same honey blonde locks as Cross, and they shared the same prominent nose. Her eyes were much bigger than Cross's, however, and seemed to dart from one place to the next, constantly inspecting everything in sight.

The woman waved her hand dismissively, her eyes settling upon Liral.

"This is the girl, then?"

"She is," Cross nodded.

Liral forced a faint smile and waved.

“By the Emperor, lad,” Cross’s mother murmured. She walked right up to Liral and grabbed a handful of Liral’s yellow locks, which made the girl flinch. “You aren’t making this easy for me. Could her hair get any blonder?”

“You could always cut it off and give her a wig...”

“A wig?!” his mother shrieked. “Don’t be daft. She’ll need dye anyway, for those eyebrows of hers. They’re golden, Crossinar. Golden. How many noblewomen do you know who have golden eyebrows?”

Cross began to protest, but his mother interrupted.

“Ugh. Look at her posture. Disgusting. And she’s so thin! I’d be astonished if there was single dress in my shop that would fit her.”

Gulping, Liral crossed her arms across her stomach, and tried to stand a bit taller.

“Of course she’s thin. I told you she’s from the streets,” Cross shot back. “Do you think the Redcloaks were feeding kids caviar on the rooftops? I’m sorry she’s not perfect enough for you, but we need her to be ready, there’s no other way! Do you really want-”

“Is that any way to speak to your mother? I ought to clean your mouth out. Why do you always do this to me? You make these wild demands, like I’m some sort of Shaper, and you expect me to just drop everything and...”

The bickering went on and on, until they finally shared a testy glare. Liral had shied away during the argument, and nervously shuffled her feet. Under her breath, she thanked the Giant for the fact that no customers were milling through the shop, though perhaps Cross and his mother wouldn’t have argued so openly if there’d been customers present.

“Fine,” Cross’s mother sighed, throwing her hands up. “Fine.” She eyed Liral again. “I’ll see what I can do. Now, shoo.” She flicked her hand at Cross, ushering him out of her shop. “I can’t get any work done with you in my hair, pestering me like a crow. Don’t come back until the end of the week. She’ll be ready by then, and it won’t do to have you seeing half-done work. And Crossinar,” she paused, just as Cross passed through the front door. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Cross replied with an amused, unsurprised smile, just before his mother slammed the door in his face.

“So much potential, my Crossinar,” his mother sighed, pressing a hand to the closed door. “And yet he chooses to run around thieving. I understand why he does it, I just...what mother wants to see her son become a petty criminal? What kind of son brings in a street girl and asks his mother to ‘make her a proper black-haired’, no questions asked?”

Liral gulped. Was that a rhetorical question, or was she supposed to answer?

Eventually, the woman turned around and fixed Liral with a more sympathetic stare than before.

“He’s not taking advantage of you for some foolish scheme, is he?”

Liral hesitated, licking her lips, then murmured “No, Ma’am.”

Was he taking advantage of her? Perhaps. Well...yes. He was taking advantage of both her poverty and her Dasher abilities, but Liral had agreed to this plot, so she was far from blameless.

“Kellory,” Cross’s mother allowed a faint smile, and gently patted Liral’s shoulder. “The name’s Kellory. And you are?”

“Liral.”

“Liral,” Kellory repeated, lifting an eyebrow. “Peculiar. Can’t say I’ve heard that one before. Is ‘Liral’ your full name?”

“Aye.”

Kellory stared at Liral for a long while, then accepted her answer with a nod.

“Not anymore, lass. If I’m to pass you off as a noblewoman, you’ll need a noblewoman’s name. Something more exciting, like...”

“Liralyne,” Liral said automatically, her voice soft. Distant.

Kellory tilted her head, and the left corner of her lips turned up in a pleased half-smile.

“You’ve already been thinking about it, eh? About what it’ll be like, being dark-haired and pampered?”

Liral’s heartbeat quickened, but she managed to disguise her unease with a shrug.

“It isn’t everything it’s said to be, lass,” Kellory sighed. “I don’t know how long you intend to masquerade as a noble, but...I know more unhappy dark-haired women than I could count. They’ve got problems, just like we do, and there’s always someone who’ll look down on you, even if your hair is as dark as the night. That’s how the world works, dear.”

She put a gentle hand on Liral’s shoulder and guided her past the beautiful dresses to a small room in the back of the shop. It was a prep-room for wealthy women, apparently, with numerous mirrors lining the walls in front of leather chairs. Dozens of torches shone bright in the room. They illuminated the small room even more thoroughly than the shop itself, shedding light upon the seemingly infinite bottles, vials, and containers that sat in front of each mirror.

Liral hadn’t actually been inside of such a fancy prep room since childhood. It brought back memories of her mother sitting in a similar leather chair. Snow had



swirled outside, and Liral's mother had been fitting a loop through a round copper pendant while a kind woman dressed her gorgeous hair.

Tears stung the edges of Liral's eyes but, thankfully, Kellory didn't seem to notice her reverie. At the older woman's command, Liral sank into one of the waiting chairs and stared blankly into the mirror.

"Your hair is an absolute mess," Kellory groaned, holding up a few of Liral's locks. "Crossinar wasn't joking about you being plucked off of a roof, was he? Heavens, child. Have you ever been to a salon in your life?"

Sighing, Liral shook her head.

"Not to worry, you'll learn from the best. I want you to memorize everything I tell you, today. I'll help you with your hair and makeup today, and by the end of the day, you won't even recognize yourself. But I'll never help you with any of this again, so you'd best listen hard. Do you understand, lass?"

Again, Liral sighed. Beauty lessons? What had she signed herself up for, exactly? Well...she didn't have much a choice, did she? She'd already committed to this silly scheme, even if she'd been partially coerced by pastries. Recalling the mouth-watering smell of freshly baked goods, Liral nodded.

"Excellent. The dye will only stay in your hair for one or two weeks, so you'll have to pay close attention to how I apply the solution. I expect nothing short of perfection." Kellory eyed another lock of Liral's hair and clicked her tongue in disgust. "First things first, you need to learn about the wonders of shampoo..."

\* \* \*

Five hours later, Liral stared into the mirror, wide-eyed.

"You'd better not forget any of those steps, if you want to pass as a black-haired. The black-haired are a proud bunch, and they take their hair seriously in Trisal. Even if you're supposed to be an Outer Reach noble, a single braid out of place will make people raise their eyebrows. Next thing you know, you'll have Redcloaks knocking on your door."

"Aye," Liral agreed, numbly.

The person in the mirror wasn't Liral. It couldn't be. Her face was too elegant, too smooth. Her lips were pouty and dark red, and her blue eyes seemed to glow behind thick lashes. Long black braids waterfalled down her back, and a few strands cascaded down the side of her face, striking a hard contrast with her pale skin and complimenting her arching black eyebrows. She wore a red dress of noble cut,

exposing her collarbones and hugging tight to her figure, before billowing into frills around her calves.

“Mum,” Liral whispered, too softly for Kellory to hear. She reached toward her reflection, and her palm met the cold metal. “Mum,” she whispered again.

She was a spitting image of her mother, although her mother would never be caught in a red dress. Blue had been her color. Blue was made for Liral’s mother. For her eyes and her spirit, it’d been a perfect match.

Tears pooled in Liral eyes, but she fought them back. Liral had paid attention during Kellory’s lesson. She knew that crying would ruin all of the work that Kellory had perfected around her eyes.

“Your eyes are just gorgeous, aren’t they? You cleaned up nicer than I thought you would, to be honest,” Kellory said, with a hint of pride.

Was she proud for Liral, or just proud of her own handiwork? Liral couldn’t be sure, but she suspected the latter.

“Thank you,” Liral said, her voice light and distracted. “Thank you for everything.” Over the course of the makeover, Kellory’s tone had softened and she’d tossed a few compliments Liral’s way...which was a rarity, for Liral. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten a compliment from another woman. It’d been years, no doubt.

“That was the easy part for you, lass. Now you’ve got to make sure you don’t say anything foolish when meeting other nobles. Come help me prepare some food, and we’ll have a bit of a rehearsal dinner. Every time you do something foolish that would give you away, you’ll have to write a detailed description of what you did wrong, until your hand hurts. Understood, young lady?”

Liral grimaced, but she couldn’t hold the expression, and it turned into a lopsided smile. Both Kellory and her son had been so kind to Liral. Despite her best efforts, it was impossible for Liral to be angry or sad, not when she could see that there were good people in the world. People who seemed to care about her. Eyeing the proud delight on Kellory’s lips, three rare questions nudged their way into Liral’s mind:

What if she wasn’t truly a ruiner?

What if it hadn’t been her fault?

What if she hadn’t actually killed her mum?

The amulet around Liral’s neck pulsed and a faint wisp of blue light rose from her chest, before fading into the air.

# CHAPTER 13

## *A Pinch of Friendship*

**F**or Liral, the next few days were brutal. Every single waking moment, she'd been forced to wear shoes. Shoes. They weren't practical shoes either, like the boots that Cross had forced upon her, but rather noblewomen's shoes, inconvenient prisons for her feet. Heels were the worst. She could barely run on the three-inched spikes that Kellory had insisted that she wear. The straps were too tight, the leather material irritated her feet with every step, and she'd had to fight back the urge to kick them off during Kellory's 'noblewoman' lessons.

Meandering around Kellory's dress shop in heels was bad enough. Traveling two whole city blocks, to the even fancier street, was absolutely terrible. According to Kellory, the trip had been a necessity for Liral, since Kellory's own dress shop didn't attract the highest tier of noblewoman.

So, Liral stood outside what felt like the millionth shop of the day, on the corner of a broad courtyard. It was even fancier than the courtyard outside of the Magistrate's house. A giant fountain marked the center of the pristine square, a spiral marble sculpture that carried water down its twisting swirls, almost like a slide. Redcloaks patrolled the area, their eyes peeled for pickpockets, assassins, and beggars, and they didn't give Liral a second glance.

She eyed two noblewomen exiting a nearby shop. Their shopping bags were full and their hair was somehow even more pristine than Liral's. Liral scowled. The pair chatted aimlessly, laughing and giggling, unaware of - or not caring about - the suffering in their own city, only a few districts away. Liral drew a deep, calming breath

and clutched her handbag with gloved fingers, smoothing the sky-blue dress which clung tightly to her figure.

“The mission,” Liral whispered to herself. “Just focus on the mission.”

It wasn't as daring as the mission that Cross had given her, over a week prior. Kellory's task was simple: shop amongst noblewomen, observe their behavior, talk with them, and don't buy anything pricey. Simple enough. Judging by the dark windows and the tattered 'Books' sign on the shop before her - out of place on the otherwise pristine street - Liral assumed that this shop wouldn't be too pricey. After all, they were selling books, not golden Totems.

The shop had attracted Liral's attention only after she'd spent hours perusing more fancy establishments than she could count, each peddling astronomically priced wares. In some of the fanciest shops, a single shoe cost more than Liral had scrounged in years of thievery. Liral clicked her tongue, and strode into the shop. Who would spend that much money on a darned foot-prison?

Upon entry, Liral braced herself for the usual greeting. In every other shop, either an assistant or the shopkeeper themselves - all Ralli - showered Liral with compliments. These, of course, were intermixed with thinly veiled attempts to sell her a host of useless items. Liral despised it. She hated the groveling, the disingenuous words of praise, and the forced smiles. Those same posh Ralli shop-owners would have summoned the guards to hurt Liral, if she'd stumbled into their shops a few weeks prior, back when she'd been coated with mud and dirt rather than fancy clothes. The guards would have made her bleed, and the shop-owners would've watched the display without a drop of remorse.

Liral shivered at the thought.

In the bookshop, thankfully, nobody greeted her. The place was bigger than it had first seemed, and there was no shopkeeper in sight. She lifted a suspicious eyebrow and began to poke her head down each row of shelves. The shop was dimly lit, and only a few other nobles - some men, some women - were browsing the rows, or reading books by candlelight. Liral licked her lips, and her heart skipped a beat. It'd been years since she'd read a book cover-to-cover, though her mother had equipped her with a good bit of scholarly knowledge.

Choosing an empty aisle, Liral ran a hand along the bookshelf on her left, studying the passing spines. She traveled about half-way down the aisle before pausing, and reaching for a red-spined book. The Religious History of the Lisanai Empire. Biting her lip, she flipped open the unreasonably large book and held it beneath the nearest candle.

The book was frighteningly long and the writing style was beyond dull...but the subject matter had always fascinated Liral. Trisal could be a bizarre place. Like the rest of the Empire, they worshipped their Emperor as if he was a deity, believing that the next Emperor was always a reincarnation of the previous Emperor. How, then, did the current Emperor play into their religion? He had been ruling for over eighty years, and was said to still be a youthful man. Was he a reincarnation of himself? Many folks in Lisanai seemed to think that he'd discovered the key to eternal life. Was that possible?

Liral flipped to the end of the book, and was disappointed to see that it concluded about one hundred years before the current Emperor's birth. What had Liral been expecting, some magical answer to all of the world's questions? A book that would tell her whether or not the whole Lisanai Empire was just a delusional cult? Wrinkling her nose, she moved to put the volume back in its place.

"Funny, isn't it?"

The sing-song voice made Liral jump, and she almost dropped the book. Spinning around, she found herself face-to-face with another girl in the narrow aisle.

"Everyone around here seems to think that because the Emperor is alive, he's obviously a legitimate god. In the kingdoms, they see that as a sign that he's not a god, and they knowingly worship a giant who's been dead since the dawn of time. What do you think?"

The girl smiled. Her smile was lovely, a slightly lopsided grin that accentuated the small dimples in her cheeks. Long black hair meandered over the girl's shoulders and twirled down her back in intricate braids, a similar style to Liral's own hair. She appeared to be around Liral's age. Maybe a year older. Unlike Liral, the girl's nose had only a couple of freckles, and sat between two big, brown eyes. Her dress was just as ornate as Liral's but the hem was trimmed scandalously short, just above her knees, giving the girl an enviable degree of maneuverability.

"Huh? Me?" Liral asked, dumbstruck.

"No, I was asking the shelf," the girl snorted, then inched closer to Liral and lowered her voice. "What do you really think? They can't all be right. Someone has to be a heretic, don't they?"

"I...I don't know."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "Me neither. My sister says they're all wrong, and that there aren't any gods at all, but she's..." her voice fell to a whisper, so Liral leaned closer, "a bitch."

Liral's eyes widened. Kellory had told her that a proper noblewoman never swore...this girl must be a lower noble.

"I'm Zarellia," she said, and her charming grin returned. "But most people just call me 'Zare'. And you are?"

"L-Liral," she stuttered. "Liralyne. I'm Liralyne."

Zarellia lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Are you sure about that? Sure you're not an evil imposter?"

Liral gulped, her eyes widening. Had she just been caught? Already? On one of her first outings as a noblewoman? Gah...of course she had. Like usual, she'd failed. She couldn't even pretend to be a noblewoman properly. She was just one big waste of everyone's space, time, and...

"Just messing with you," Zarellia winked. Then, she snatched the book from Liral and returned it to the shelf. Liral figured that Zarellia would step away from her after taking the book, but the girl only stepped closer, until Liral's eyes were frighteningly close to Zarellia's chin. "Your hands are shaking," she stated matter-of-factly. "Not much of a people person, are you?"

Liral hesitated for a moment, then shook her head.

"Good. I could use a quiet friend. Senn always says I talk too much for my own good but, like I said earlier..." Zarellia mouthed the word bitch. "It's a wonder that we came out of the same hole, but of course she always tells me that I'm adopted." Zarellia sighed, and met Liral's wide eyes. "I'm not, though. She just likes to get on my nerves. She's the worst. The worst. She's even worse than my mother, and - trust me - it's hard to be worse than my mother. Do you know what Mum said to me, when she saw my new dress?"

"I...uh..." Liral murmured. "I don't know." Her mind was still trying to process everything that Zarellia had just said. A friend? Had she misheard? This Zarellia girl actually wanted Liral to be her friend? Was that how friendship worked? You just told someone that they were your friend, and they became your friend?

"Well, she didn't actually say anything, but she looked at me like I was some Harbor district whore. Meanwhile, my brother goes around screwing anything that moves and he doesn't even get a scolding. Unbelievable, isn't it? I hate my family so much. They're stupid and controlling and strict and...sometimes, I wish they'd just die." Zarellia finished her rant with a long sigh. "What's your family like?"

A lump formed in the back of Liral's throat. "They..." Liral began, then an image of her mother flashed before her eyes, and she drew a sharp breath. "They're alright." Liral paused, struggling to remember her rehearsed backstory. "I grew up in a small fief in the Outer Reaches, with one older brother, and my parents, and...err..."

“A country girl!” Zarellia giggled, then lifted a hand toward Liral. Liral froze, despite every muscle in her body wanting to flee. “I should’ve known! No wonder you’re so cute,” Zarellia ran her fingers through Liral’s hair, and Liral made a silent prayer that her dye wouldn’t rub off.

Evidently the Giant heard her prayer, and Zarellia’s hand moved away from Liral’s hair, untainted. Zare’s fingers trailed over Liral’s cheek. Then, she gave Liral’s cheek a quick pinch. Liral let out a fearful yelp, but thankfully Liral’s yelp was more due to surprise rather than pain, as Zare hadn’t pinched too hard. Certainly not hard enough to break Liral’s skin. The tips of Zare’s fingernails then grazed across her skin. Liral held her breath, goosebumps rushing up and down her arms, as Zare’s other hand wrapped around Liral’s until their fingers were interlocked in a snug grasp.

“So,” Zarellia chirped. She tugged at their held hands, pulling Liral down the aisle. Her grip was surprisingly firm, and she dragged Liral without much trouble. “What kinds of books do you usually read? Religious texts? History? Poetry? Comedy?” She paused and looked back at Liral, lifting a devious eyebrow. “Romance?”

“Just books,” Liral said, but the words trailed upward in tone, and sounded more like a question. “Regular books.”

“Regular,” Zare smirked, still leading Liral through the aisles. “I’m not familiar with that genre. Is it part of the new artistic movement? You know, the one that’s been giving us all of those shitty sculptures of the Emperor?”

Liral frowned, then told Zarellia the truth: “I don’t read very much, to be honest.”

Zarellia stopped in her tracks. She turned to face Liral, looking far more serious than Liral expected. “That’s because you haven’t read the Proposal yet. Once you do, it’ll change everything. Everything.” Zarellia nodded, as if she was fiercely agreeing with herself. “Everything.”

“The...Proposal?” Liral asked, uneasily.

“I’ll get it to you, don’t worry. You’ll see. I’ll bring it with me next time we meet up. In the meantime, do you want to slide down the fountain?”

“What? I don’t...”

“Just say yes. It’s the only fun thing to do around here...besides the bookstore, of course.” Seeing Liral’s skepticism, Zarellia added: “Come onnn, Liralyne. You country girls come to the big city to break out of your shells, don’t you? There’s really no reason to be a worrywart, I ride the fountain all the time. The guards don’t even bat an eye anymore. What do you say?”

Liral bit her lip. Sliding down a spiral fountain? Could a noble really so childish? So outgoing? She had no idea who this girl was or what she wanted...but Zare had called

her a 'friend'...and she seemed nice enough. When was the last time someone actually wanted to be friends with Liral? It'd been years.

“Okay. Let's do it.”



# CHAPTER 14

## *Blameless*

So that's why your hair is wet? You slid down a fountain?" Cross asked with a wry grin. He sat beside Liral on her balcony, dangling his legs over the street below. Night had already fallen, and the city was cloaked in fog. The fog brought warmth to Liral. Happiness. She hadn't gone out in the fog for over a week now, and she was beginning to desperately miss the chill night air and the little droplets of water on her skin.

"My friend thought it'd be a good idea." Liral nodded, absently running a hand through her soaked black hair. Though hours had passed since her dip in the fountain, her hair had only just begun to dry. The moisture from the fog wasn't expediting the process, but the fog's comfort had proved too alluring.

"You're lucky the dye didn't wash out. My mother must have been absolutely delighted."

Liral snorted. "She was thrilled. You should've seen the look on her face when she saw my dress, all wet and tattered."

Thankfully, Kellory had an abundance of clothes, so Liral hadn't needed to stay in her wet dress all evening. Instead, she wore a plain black nightgown. According to Kellory, Liral had to re-earn her privilege to wear light, stainable colors after her fountain escapade.

"Oh, I'm sure I've seen that look before. Mouth open, cheeks red? Like she wants to strangle you on the spot?"

"That's the one."

Cross sighed, his breath forming a little cloud in the air. "And you made a friend, huh?"

Liral blushed, looked away from Cross, and gave a quick nod.

She recalled the utter joy on Zare's face as they slid down the spiralling fountain, holding hands. Zare was...incredible. Liral had never met someone like her before. When they'd first met, Liral had been prepared to hate Zare for her nobility and privilege, but such disdain seemed impossible in hindsight. Zare was so funny, so spunky, so care-free, with those eager hazel eyes and a smile that could charm serpents.

"Look at you. Less than a week as a noblewoman and you're already blending right in. I knew you'd be good at this. That's what I told Mum, back before I introduced you to her, but she didn't believe me. Typical. She's been a bitter witch...ever since..."

Liral's ears perked up. "Ever since what?"

She hadn't missed the tension that hung in the air between both Cross and his mother. The darkness. Cross tried to hide behind his smiles, winks, and his shield of confidence...but she'd always been able to see through that. Liral knew that Cross and his mother were keeping secrets from her, just as she was keeping secrets from them. While she had no intentions of divulging her own secrets, she did want to learn theirs, to sate her curiosity if nothing else.

Liral stared intently at Cross, until he finally met her eyes. She wouldn't pressure him to tell her if he didn't want to, but...she'd rather understand Cross's life. He'd treated her kindly. She trusted him more than anyone else in the world, but she still wasn't entirely sure that his motives were pure, so she couldn't put her full faith in him.

"I suppose you've got a right to know."

Liral's heart skipped a beat, and she leaned forward, urging him to continue.

"How much do you know about the Northern Mine?"

"Some..." Liral replied. The Northern Mine? She had seen maps of the mine in Cross's flat, but she'd written them off as irrelevant. Folks seldom talked about the mines, preferring to ignore the dark pit just north of Trisal. "It's a work mine."

"A work mine." Cross let out a humorless laugh. "More like the Emperor's pissing ground. Every slave-owner puts a buyout price on their Ralli slaves. If they're a reasonable slave-owner, they'll price their slaves at a few silver each. If they're a particularly cruel bastard, they'll price their slaves as fifty silver, maybe even a gold crown."

Liral rubbed her arm, uncomfortable with the topic. If she was ever taken by slavers, she wouldn't last long. They'd beat her, they'd bloody her, and they'd ensure that she met a swift end.

"My little brother is in the Northern Mine." Cross let the words hang in the air, and goosebumps crept up Liral's spine. "Tannon's his name. He took out a loan to open up a butcher shop in your neighborhood, near the docks. Three different gangs hit his shop within the first week, and he couldn't pay to restock the shop. His lender was some dark-haired filth, the unforgiving type. When he defaulted on his loan, the prick put shackles on him, gave him a pickaxe, and sold him to the Empire. Ever since then, Mum's been...difficult to manage. Can't blame her, exactly, her favorite son is a state-owned slave now, grinding away in that mine. I've tried everything to get him out. I repaid some of his debts and met with the quartermaster. Do you know how much the dark-haired bastard demanded for him?"

Liral sat in silence. She recognized his rhetorical tone, and winced at its bitterness.

"Three hundred gold crowns." Cross clenched his fists until his knuckles began to turn white. "Three hundred. Gold. Crowns."

Liral furrowed her eyebrows. "Three...hundred? Why?"

Before she met Cross, three hundred gold crowns would have seemed like the most far-fetched sum imaginable. Liral could have picked pockets in the Harbor district for millennia and fail to acquire three hundred gold crowns. Even a high-end thief like Cross would never see such an amount...unless they pulled off the Colosseum job.

"Because the Emperor's a spiteful piece of shit. All of the miner slaves are priced like that. Bloody dark-hairs, they'll pass up a healthy profit just to prove a point." Cross shook his head. "Look, I don't want riches. I just want my brother back."

"But," Liral objected, licking her lips and tasting her still-unfamiliar lipstick. "Why are we robbing the Colosseum, then? Why can't we just break into the mine?"

"Oh, no good reason...aside from the hundred-odd Redcloaks guarding the place. More guard-posts than slaves. If we tried to break into the mines," he shook his head, "we'd just end up joining the miners."

"Why so many guards?"

"It's the Emperor's mine, remember? The Emperor doesn't like losing his slaves. Probably makes him look weak, and he's as vain as they come."

"Do you think they'll actually return him, if you pay that much gold?"

Cross's expression darkened, and he shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not." Liral could sense that this question had irked him for some time. "What other option do I have?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "But won't they find it suspicious? The Colosseum's prize chest gets robbed and you just happen to show up at the mines with three hundred crowns?"

"Fuck's sake, girl," Cross snapped. "Don't get testy with me. By the Emperor, sometimes I wish you were still the quiet little mouse that I plucked off a rooftop." Liral's heart sunk and she shied away from him. Her hands trembled. Was this it? Had he realized that she was a ruiner? Would he hurt her? Cut her? Damage her?

Liral slipped her feet halfway out of her heeled shoes. At a moment's notice, she was ready to bolt across rooftops and disappear into the fog. If he just made one more movement, she'd bolt. She'd dash. She'd run and run and run, without ever looking back, she'd...

No. She wouldn't run, because Cross would never hurt her. He cared about her. With concerted effort, Liral calmed herself and re-fastened her heels. If she couldn't trust Cross, she couldn't trust anyone...and she didn't want to go back to that paranoid state.

Cross didn't seem to notice her internal debate. Instead he grimaced into the fog, and a moment of quiet passed between them. "Sorry. It's been a stressful time. I'm glad you're...branching out. You know, you're a fantastic woman beneath all of that fear and street muck."

Liral sniffed and her cheeks reddened, unsure of how to deal with a compliment like that. A pang of guilt rose in her chest. How could she have possibly questioned Cross's integrity? He'd been always been a friend to her, sharing his plans and revealing his true self, although she'd done little to deserve that loyalty.

"No worries," she eventually whispered.

"My plan is to get my brother out of the mines before they realize that we've hit the Colosseum, so we'll have to work fast. Fast and flawless." Cross managed a smile, far weaker than his usual grins. "Nobody said it'd be easy."

"Do you think I'm ready?"

Cross met Liral's gaze and gave her a slight nod.

"More than ready. Next fight at the Colosseum, you'll be there." He winked. "Mark my words: you'll have Sionel Petrax eating out of your hand by the end of the week."

"Gross," Liral rolled her eyes, but couldn't cloak her grin. "Shadows, I'd rather have a roof rat eating out of my hand than a nobleman."

"Shadows," Cross repeated in a thoughtful tone, studying her carefully. "Shadows."

Liral paled. Idiot. She was an idiot. The world's biggest idiot, in fact. How had she possibly let that slip? How could she be so careless, so stupid? Why did she have to

ruin everything? Her Mum's life, her own life? Everything. She was utterly hopeless, and she couldn't even keep her own secrets.

"I talked with a traveling priest, once upon a time," Cross continued. "A western priest. You know, the ones with the long black outfits and the beards? This was back when I was posing as a carriage-driver...but that's a different story. Anyhow, the man and I had a long conversation about various religious curse words, and it was rather eye-opening. Most people in the Empire, you see, think that westerners curse with the word 'Shadows' because they're afraid of the dark. But, according to the priest, that's not true. 'Shadows' is just the shortened way of cursing 'Rodmahein's Shadow'. The Giant's Shadow. It has nothing to do with fear of the dark. Instead, it refers to the shadow of the Giant's foot, just before he stomps down and crushes his foes. Quite a power to swear by, isn't it? Invoking the power of an ancient god to flatten everyone you don't like?"

Cross chuckled, holding Liral's frightened gaze. "Well, I found it to be rather beautiful. More interesting than swearing 'By the Emperor', that's for certain. But, of course, you already knew the curse's origin. You're a westerner."

Liral stared at him, trying to decode his reaction. He didn't seem angry. It didn't seem as if he'd hurt her.

"So, are you Kadian or are you Scythari?"

She ignored his question.

"You look a bit Kadian," he said with an easy smile.

She gulped, then whispered: "How long have you known?" Her lips wavered, and she tensed all of her muscles, preparing to escape. No. She could trust Cross. He wasn't going to hurt her.

"That's not a good question, but I'll answer it anyway. I knew as soon as you spoke your first sentence to me. Most people wouldn't notice, but you pronounce your 'R's wrong. They're a bit too sharp. Want to hear a better question? Why are you so damned afraid of admitting that you're from the west? You know it's not a crime, don't you?"

"My..." Liral gulped, then mustered enough courage to speak the partial truth. "My mum told me never to tell anyone."

"Why would she do that?" Cross barked a laugh. "Was she mad?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"She...she did kill herself."

A dark silence passed between them. "I'm sorry," Cross eventually said. "How old were you?"

"Young." Liral bit her lip. How much did she want to tell him? She sighed. All of her secrets had been weighing down upon her for years, like chained cuffs. Perhaps she'd benefit from telling Cross about her past. She'd never before had the opportunity to tell her story...to open up with another person, someone who actually wanted to listen.

"We moved to Trisal when I was a girl. I didn't see her much, back when we lived in the kingdoms, but she always seemed happier there. She hated being here with me, in our little flat in the crafting district. She'd always complain about the city, the people, how she missed the mountains. She liked the ocean, though. Every morning, just as the fog rolled back, she'd go for a swim out near the docks. I always watched from my rooftop and she'd wave to me just before she went into the water." Liral managed a sad smile, and her voice dwindled to a whisper. "She fell ill, over time. Sickly and sad, always breaking down in tears. Then, one evening, she'd cried even more than usual. The next morning, she waved and swam out into the fog...but she didn't come back. I waited and waited, until the fog had come and gone, praying to the Giant that she'd return." Liral gulped. "She did return, of course. Three days later, her body washed up on the rocks, white as a sheet."

"Shit," Cross matched her whispering tone, his lips forming a grave line. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "No child should have to go through that."

"No," she murmured. "Don't be sorry. I'm the only one who should be sorry. It's my fault, after all. I ruined everything. If not for me, Mum would have never had to move to Trisal. I drove her to madness." She looked up to meet Cross's eyes, tears welling in her own. "I'm a ruiner, Cross. I can't do anything properly, and I destroy anyone stupid enough to get close to me. It's what I do."

Cross's smile fled. He scooted closer to Liral, until their dangling feet were nearly touching. She fought against all of her instincts, and let him wrap his arms around her, then draw her into a hug. In his arms, she felt secure. No longer alone. She rubbed her eyes against his shoulder, drying her tears on his shirt. She'd ruin him, too. It was destiny.

"No," he said in a low, firm tone. He tightened his hug. "Don't be a moron. Is that why you're so glum all the time? You're blaming yourself for no good reason? Stop it. Liral, it's not your fault."

"You don't know that," she hissed back.

"Nonsense. I know everything."

Liral snorted, an odd noise which Cross quickly mimicked. Hearing his snort, she couldn't help but smile. By the Giant, he knew how to cheer her up, even when she was in the darkest of moods. She tried to return to her dark, self-loathing mood, but failed. She couldn't muster enough anger. Instead, she sighed, and allowed the age-old questions to tempt her mind: What if it wasn't actually her fault? Cross had quickly come to the conclusion that she was blameless, though she hadn't actually told him the whole story. Maybe he was right.

Blameless or not, she was glad that she shared most of her story with him. She leaned into Cross's hug, resting her damp hair against him, and felt a tremendous weight lift off of her shoulders.

*“Can’t even hear the crowd from here, I reckon.”*

*Boy, blond of hair. Case five hundred twelve. Outcome: minimal.*



# CHAPTER 15

## *The Selections I*

**T**here will be no slouching,” Madam Marsa announced, her tone so sharp that it could have drawn blood.

She paced across the throne room as she spoke, surveying the gathered maids. They were standing along the walls of the throne room, over one hundred in number. Truth be told, Delvaran hadn’t realized that Marsa managed quite so many maids, though he suspected that some of these women worked and lived in other areas of the castle’s sizeable grounds. The stables, perhaps, or the barracks. The large group brought an unsettling realization. Undoubtedly, this would lower Delvaran’s chance of being chosen by a member of the royal family. He would be able to achieve his goals without that degree of access, but it wouldn’t be as easy.

That being said, the vile prince seemed to have taken an interest in Delvaran...but did he really want to be selected by that man? No. No, he didn’t. Prince Folston made his mind wander into...concerning places. Delvaran prayed to the Giant that he’d be chosen by the King, instead. He had to be selected by the King.

“There will be no insolence, no crying.” Marsa paused, coming to a full stop in front of Delvaran. Reaching out with a gloved hand, she locked Delvaran’s upper arm in a powerful grip. “And no whispering. This is the Selection ceremony, not the fairgrounds. You are to be proper and obedient, or I will make you pay. Understood, ladies?”

“Yes, Madam,” Delvaran said with an unintentionally meek voice, joining the chorus of maids. He gulped, then stared at his toes to avoid the Madam’s insidious glare. Over the past week, he’d done his best to avoid Marsa’s ire. As terrible as she was, Marsa had

been relatively understanding about the incident at the dining hall, mercifully deciding not to send Delvaran to the ice grotto. Instead, she'd complied with the prince's instructions and had allowed Delvaran a couple days of rest before he'd returned to cleaning duty.

He understood that this didn't make her a decent person, but he couldn't shake the inkling of loyalty that he felt toward her. She was a harsh Madam, but she was his Madam. Plus, that harshness was a double-edged sword, and - though he had no evidence - he'd come to suspect that Marsa would fight for her loyal maids. So, that was what Delvaran had strived to be, as of late: a rather loyal maid.

"Some of you already know the drill. We've had Selection ceremonies in the past, though never quite as large as this one. By the end of the day, every nobleman and noblewoman in this castle will have chosen a new lass. A new personal maid. I expect half of you girls to have a new master, who you will serve with the utmost obedience."

Delvaran's eyes widened and he shared a glance with Auri. The blonde was trying to disguise her nervousness behind her knowing smile, but Delvaran knew her well enough to see through the guise. Everyone wanted to be a personal maid. A 'lass', as the Kadians called them. It was a poor term, though, since people in Scythar used that word to refer to any girl. Personal maids were a rank higher than normal maids. This came with all sorts of freedoms: the ability to give orders to other maids, to take hot baths, to travel outside the castle - with justification, of course - and to be the first to hear all sorts of interesting gossip.

"However, just because you gain a new master does not mean that you shed an old one," Marsa continued. "You will still be mine. Mine to command, and mine to punish." She drew her lips into a thin line, her voice quickening. "Do not refuse your masters, regardless of the order. It may be tempting to let your new-found privilege go to your head, but you are still Ralli. You are still worthless. I could pluck a girl from the market and have you replaced within the hour."

There was a stillness among the girls. A few of the newer maids drew sharp breaths. They had to do everything their masters wanted? Delvaran had always known that this was standard practice, but on this end of the equation, it seemed...dangerous. Delvaran gulped, only to be reassured when Auri squeezed his hand.

"Now," Marsa said. "The King will come shortly to make his Selection. Followed, of course, by the rest of the royal family, then the castle nobility. So, backs straight! Legs together! Hands in dignified positions!"

The maids complied. Marsa scoured their ranks for a few minutes in cold silence. She sniffed, and approached Delvaran. Thankfully, Marsa was focused not on

Delvaran, but on the girl to his right: Mili. With her white-gloved hands, Marsa straightened the girl's dress. For all of her bravado in the dining hall, Mili stood pale-faced and trembling, evidently nervous about the Selections. Delvaran tried not to judge the girl, though. Instead, he reached down and gripped Mili's hand as gently as he could. More likely than not, his face was just as pale as hers, but that didn't mean he couldn't lend her some strength. Their fear was rational, of course. A great deal was at stake, and the room sported an unsettling amount of competition.

Unfortunately, youth wouldn't be on Delvaran's side in these Selections. Most of the hundred-odd maids in the room were only a few years older than Delvaran, mostly blondes with a few light brunettes and about half a dozen redheads. According to Auri, Marsa had barred many of the older maids from the Selections, since they had served Scythar loyally for decades upon decades. Somehow, Madam Marsa had come to the conclusion that the newer maids would be the least dangerous. Oh, the irony.

Beauty wouldn't be on Delvaran's side, either. Delvaran was pretty, he knew that, but he was far from the prettiest. His light freckles, his big blue eyes, and his startlingly red hair were all interesting, but not necessarily alluring. Was that what the nobles were searching for, though? A girl like Delvaran? If the king was simply looking for a good, loyal maid...Delvaran could be a top pick. He was red haired and he'd been publicly vindicated at the feast hall.

He shuddered, recalling the awful fish-bone incident. What if he was overestimating his own worth? What if the nobility didn't trust him, because of his time in the spotlight, with a sword shoved against his throat? What if he ended up falling far enough down in the Selections for that horrible balding 'Lord Lekri' creature to choose him?

A loud creak from the throne room's door interrupted his wandering thoughts.

King Braum had finally arrived. The man strode into his throne room straight-backed, confidence radiating from him with every step.

A retinue of guards surrounded the king. They wore the normal black Kadian livery, and marched with flawless precision, scanning the room for potential threats. They were massive, with broad shoulders and arms that bulged beneath their tunics, capable of snapping Delvaran like a twig, in his current form. Delvaran recalled the guardsman's grip on his arm during the feast when he'd been suspected of assassination. He shuddered. He'd have to plan carefully, if he wished to survive the aftermath of one of his real assassinations.

Auri's elbow bumped into Delvaran's side, and he almost yelped. After a glance around the room, however, Delvaran noticed his mistake and bowed his head like the other women in the room - Madam Marsa included.

"Your Majesty," Marsa said. "Welcome. We've gathered your finest maids for Selection."

Her voice was tame and kind, the same tone that she'd used to address Delvaran back when he'd been a prince. That seemed like a lifetime ago. He'd forgotten that she was even capable of such apparent pleasantness, after seeing the hardness beneath.

"Excellent," King Braum replied, marching up to the line of maids. "At ease, ladies."

'At ease' was a military phrase, not a command for maids, but the women understood his intention. Delvaran straightened from his bow and trained his gaze on the king's boots, just like he'd practiced.

"Marsa," the king barked. "Why are they all staring at my feet?"

"Majesty. That's been the standard practice in this castle. A tradition..."

"A Scythari tradition," he growled. "Shadows, Marsa, you have these girls too well trained. It's so...eerie. I'll have none of it."

"Excuse me, Majest. Where would you like my maids to look, instead?"

The king sputtered. "Wherever they damned well please! Why does it matter? They're people, not livestock. If they want to stare at the sun, that's their decision." He raised his voice, so it boomed off the throne room's walls. "Stop staring at my feet."

So they did. For the minutes that followed, the maids shared awkward glances amongst themselves, desperately trying to avoid looking at the king's boots as strode up and down the line. He'd pause every here and there to share words with a handful of maids, all of whom looked terrified and overwhelmed. When the king came within three girls of Delvaran, the former prince's heart began to pound in his ears. This was it. His chance. Drawing a deep breath, Delvaran tightened his grip on Auri's hand and prayed.

King Braum came to a stop in front of him. The king stood so close that Delvaran could have reached out and touched a few of the most unkempt strands of the man's grizzled beard. Delvaran trembled. King Braum was staring at him. Where should Delvaran look? Should he meet the man's gaze? Should he try to avoid looking at the king? Would that be taken as a sign of disrespect?

Consumed by panic, Delvaran's training kicked into effect. Like so many maids before him, Delvaran lowered his head as submissively as possible.

"Majesty," he whispered.

When Delvaran looked back up, the king had already moved on. What? Delvaran had done everything right...just as Madam Marsa had insisted. He stared dumbly at the king, who had come to a stop before Auri.

The blonde was taller than some men, but not the king. King Braum looked down at Auri, eyebrows furrowed. Auri met his gaze, and smiled. It wasn't a small, excited smile, either. Instead, she grinned ear-to-ear, her rows of teeth on perfect display.

"Hey Majesty," Auri said, warmly. "I'm Auri." Then, she did the unthinkable: she winked. She winked at the king of Kadia.

There were no audible gasps in the throne room - the maids were too well trained for such an exclamation - but every pair of eyes widened. This went against everything maids were taught to do when greeting a noble. Shadows, it went against everything Auri had taught Delvaran herself...yet she'd done it. What was that girl thinking?

"Pleasure to meet you," the king replied. "You've got some spirit, huh?" Was he...smiling? Yes, he was. An amused half-grin graced the king's lips, as if he was actually pleased with Auri. Surely he was going to punish her, though.

Auri shrugged, nonchalantly.

"Marsa," the king barked without taking his eyes off of the tall blonde. "Does Auri ever give you a headache?"

"Yes, Majesty," Marsa said, from beside King Braum.

"I do what I can," Auri agreed, her eyes sparkling.

Marsa frowned at this. She stepped closer to the king and lowered her voice to a near-whisper. "She may not be the best selection for you, Majesty, from what I've seen. She's a rather...difficult girl. Worse yet, she may not be completely loyal, as she was formerly the pers-"

"That's no matter," the king waved a dismissive hand. "Auri, how would you like to be chosen as my attendant?"

"I'd like that a lot, to be honest."

"Wonderful. Let's get started, then. I've got plenty of work for you. Our bedroom is a mess, and my wife's been complaining about it for days. That woman..." King Braum cut his rant short and offered a hand to Auri, which she quickly took, then began to lead her out of the room.

Delvaran stood dumbstruck. When Auri turned around to give Delvaran a goofy smile, he only managed a limp-wristed wave in reply. What in the world had just happened? Why had the king chosen her, of all people? Auri was stunning, sure, but she was...she was Auri. She wasn't particularly refined or well-behaved, despite having

been a maid for much of her life. In some ways, she was a bit of a lost cause...but what had the king said about her? That she had 'spirit'?

He shook his head, slowly. Spirit. Perhaps that was why Delvaran had originally chosen Auri to be his personal maid. Spirit. Auri had acted even more Auri-like than usual, during her brief chat with the king. More defiant, more quirky. How could she have known that the king would respond well to that sort of behavior? It seemed as if she'd taken a massive risk, and it'd paid off.

"Wait! Majesty, you may want to reconsider! There are plenty of other wonderful girls, and-"

"Nonsense, Marsa," the king chuckled, as the pair disappeared down the hallway. "I have no doubt that your entire staff is excellent, but I've made my decision."

Marsa stopped her pursuit at the front doors, and her shoulders visibly slumped.

The girls glanced among themselves, a bit surprised to see their iron-willed leader act so defeated over something that truly should not have bothered her. Why should Marsa care about who the king selected? Auri would still have to report to Marsa for punishments, after all...but perhaps Marsa didn't trust Auri. Auri was a factor of randomness, a wild girl who Marsa could never fully control...but was Marsa really so desperate for control? Yes. Yes, she was. If she wasn't, she wouldn't have to throw girls like Delvaran into the ice grotto in an effort to build obedience.

Delvaran shuddered at that memory, but was quickly distracted when Kess leaned over from beside Mili, a shocked look on her face. The expression looked out of place on Kess. His caramel-skinned friend had always seemed so composed and unflappable, incapable of surprise. He knew that he couldn't afford to voice a reply, so he simply mirrored her raised eyebrows and stunned grin.

Though he hadn't been selected, this was far from the worst outcome. Now, regardless of who selected him, Delvaran had an insider in the king's chambers. If he was crafty enough, he may even be able to trick Auri into assassinating the king, without her ever knowing. A dollop of poison on the back of her dress, perhaps, or on her polished nails. It'd be simple, if he managed to find the right poison. More likely than not, his father had hidden some icevein poison in the castle, for that was the kind of man that the old king had been. He'd never been far from his deadly tools. If Delvaran dug through the royal suites for a few weeks, he'd likely find the poisonous treasure. His heartbeat quickened. He could see it in his mind's eye: King Braum's veins slowly turning white, the agony, and the brutal knowledge that there was no cure.

His excitement was replaced by a bitter coldness. Icevein? Was he truly going to follow in his father's footsteps, after all of the terrible deeds his father had done? After

all the times that his father had...hurt him? The father that had 'disappeared' his own wife?

Delvaran was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed the page who stood uncomfortably before the Madam. He was a young messenger boy, no older than twelve, and - having just delivered his message - tensed with each venomous word the Madam spoke.

"Late?" she squawked, as if tardiness was the most offensive concept she'd ever encountered. "He's late for the Selections?!"

"Y-yes, ma'am," the boy stuttered. "I-"

"But he wishes to reserve a certain maid?! That's preposterous. It's utter absurdity! How dare you?"

"I don't...Ma'am, he's the prince...and he only wants one girl reserved: Daina, I think her name was. The redhead with the funny necklace."

Delvaran gulped, and all eyes turned to him. Ever so slowly, he lowered his eyes to the brass locket, which sat atop his breasts. It was his Totem...and it was undoubtedly a 'funny necklace'. He ran the shaky fingers of his free hand along the necklace's chain. The prince wanted...him. Delvaran wanted to be surprised, but deep down he'd always suspected that this would be the case. Ever since he saw that flame in Folston's iris, when their eyes met.

Mili nudged him. "You?" she mouthed.

Delvaran nodded numbly.

Everyone was still staring at him. The moment seemed to last forever, hanging in time. Then it ended, abruptly.

Marsa slapped the boy across the cheek, and every maid in the room flinched - Delvaran included.

"There will be no reserving of maids. Not here. Not in my Selections."

"Ma'am," he said, rubbing his cheek. It had already begun to turn red. "Prince Folston didn't mean to be late, he's just busy. He's been helping rebuild the well. You know, that broken one in the south city."

"And I've been helping to whip countless bratty whores into shape. Trying to make them half-decent maids. Yet here I am. I haven't neglected the Selections, have I?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Now go back to your prince. Give him my sincere apologies and tell him that - while I would have loved to let him reserve a maid - the rules of the Selections are clear. Such an act would be unfair to his fellow nobles." Marsa scowled. "And do mention my pleasant tone."

# CHAPTER 16

## *The Selections II*

**N**ext up at the Selections was Prince Folston's younger brother Rennon, who paced through the line of maids for a good while before making his selection. Rennon had the same wavy black hair and thick eyebrows as Folston, but seemed to lack that indescribable characteristic which made Folston...different.

Having gleaned a lesson or two from Auri's success, the other maids batted their eyelashes, smiled, and tried to appear as human as possible, lowering the veneer of utter obedience that Marsa had drilled into them. Delvaran did not bat his eyelashes, however. He just fidgeted, dreading Folston's inevitable arrival, dreading the idea of Folston striding into the throne room with that other-worldly smile of his and hauling Delvaran away like a prized calf. The notion scared Delvaran...but it also excited him. That, in turn, terrified him.

Eventually, Rennon chose a gorgeous blonde who Delvaran hadn't yet met, and escorted her out of the room in a careful, gentlemanly fashion. Good for her, Delvaran thought, scratching his arm uncomfortably. As long as she doesn't get in the way of my plans.

Next was the queen. She was a composed woman, who needed only an eyebrow to silence Madam Marsa's empty compliments and feigned civility. She wore a long, black dress which tassels on the hem and looked like a vision of death, moving through the room with purpose before she chose a redhead. A redhead who was objectively far more beautiful than Delvaran. He frowned for a moment, then caught himself.

"Why do I even care?" he muttered to himself.



As the next few selectors - all nobles of high stature - came and went, Delvaran became increasingly tense. His grip on Mili's hand had tightened to the point that the girl would have yelped in surprise, had she not been squeezing back with equal force.

Delvaran did not want to be selected by Prince Folston. The Kadian prince seemed to have some unsettling power over him, which robbed Delvaran of his self-control. At the same time, however, he did not not want to be selected by Prince Folston. If some random lord came in and chose him, he wouldn't have nearly as much access to the royal chambers. Additionally, the knowledge that he'd been so close to being selected by the prince but hadn't been...that would be enough to irritate Delvaran for months to come.

With every nobleman and noblewoman who came and went, pressure mounted in Delvaran's chest. Each breath became quicker, every heartbeat more urgent. Three other redheads had already been selected, and more than a handful of nobles had paused to give Delvaran a close inspection. Surely, he wouldn't last another couple of rounds. Where was the prince?

Delvaran borrowed a habit of Auri's and bit his lower lip, nervously eyeing the doorway.

"Alright, alright, alright," came a chuckling voice from the hallway beyond.

It was a man's voice, deep and smooth. Folston? No...Folston's voice wasn't quite so...condescending. From that repeated word, Delvaran knew that the voice belonged to a man who was not well-acquainted with the word 'No'. The speaker walked past two uneasy guards and entered the room as if he owned the place. He was a personification of pluck and sheer confidence, perfectly styled black hair atop his head, with bangs falling just above his hungry eyes.

"Lord Aradon," Marsa greeted him, curtsying.

Lord Aradon was not dressed like the other lords had been. In fact, his outfit was rather scandalous. He wore a pair of rugged, worn boots and tight combat trousers, so tight that they betrayed the man's...excitement. Those two simple articles were all that Lord Aradon wore. His chest was bare, sculpted from years of dueling and exercise, and his skin was absolutely flawless, as if the man spent his nights in a pool of moisturizing oils. His skin was also coated in a layer of sweat, which made his tight muscles glisten in the room's natural light. Delvaran's cheeks burned, and he turned away from the spectacle of a man.

"My apologies," Aradon said, without the slightest hint of remorse. "I came straight from training." He adjusted his golden earring and, in doing so, not-too-subtly flexed his left bicep. "We're at war, after all. Have to stay prepared."

“Of course, my lord,” Marsa said, unimpressed, before diving into her usual presentation.

Aradon half-listened to her, busy surveying the gathered maids.

“Lucky me,” Aradon muttered, once Marsa had finished. He began to prowl the room. “All these beauties, all for me. You’ve outdone yourself, Marsa.”

His eyes moved from one pair of breasts to the next. Had anyone ever told the man that breasts couldn’t form a proper reply? He traveled in the opposite direction as many of the other nobles had, humming to himself. The reactions he received were...mixed. Some of the girls swooned, leaning toward him with awe-struck smiles, desperate to serve such a colorful lord. Other girls hadn’t strayed from their training and bowed their heads in submission, hoping that Aradon prized obedience over all else. Others, including Delvaran, shuffled uncomfortably and exchanged wary glances.

Lord Aradon seemed so...fake, so over-the-top. So disingenuous. Delvaran shook his head in wonder. How could so many other girls not see that? Kess, usually so wise, stood proudly and bit back a smile. Even Mili, who had seemed so frightened at the beginning of the proceedings, bounced on the soles of her feet, eagerly anticipating Lord Aradon’s inspection.

“Wonderful,” Aradon grinned, when his eyes met Kess’s breasts. He’d already covered much of the room and, judging by the fact that he hadn’t yet made a selection, Mili and Kess had grown even more excited.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said, eagerness creeping into her flat tone.

Delvaran fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“My pleasure.” Aradon leaned forward and grasped Kess’s olive hand. Meeting her eyes, he brought her hand to his lips and gave it a soft, disgusting kiss. He had only done this with one other maid. “What’s your name?”

“Kess.”

“Kess,” he repeated. “Such a pretty name. You know, it’s rare to find a beauty like you so far from the islands. Do you miss home?”

“Yes,” Kess murmured, tilting her head ever-so-slightly as she succumbed to the man’s fourth power. “Dearly, I believe.”

Aradon rubbed her hand. “Maybe we could sail there, some day. I’ve always wanted to visit. Would you like that?”

“I...” Kess’s voice caught. Her eyes were peering into his so yearningly...perhaps she had already fallen into his spell. Did this man possess the 4th Power, like Folston? For a moment, Delvaran considered reaching over Mili’s shoulder and shaking Kess out of it,

but - after recalling the horrors of the ice grotto - he couldn't muster the requisite courage. "Yes. I would love that, I believe."

"Good," Aradon murmured, laying another gentle kiss on her hand, just above her wrist. "Good."

For Mili, Aradon's inspection ritual was more abbreviated. He gave the girl a once-over and flashed her a grin, then moved on to Delvaran. Though Delvaran knew that the man was a dolt, he still gave Mili a reassuring hand-squeeze. The poor girl was visibly frowning, her lips rolled together to fight back tears. Mili's youth wouldn't count in her favor for a man like Aradon, but Delvaran had no doubt that the girl would be chosen by the day's end. Mili was both pretty and kind...though she did not always have the longest attention span. For the umpteenth time, Delvaran cursed himself for having Mili punished, back when this was his castle.

"You," Aradon said, finally arriving on Delvaran. He glanced at Delvaran's breasts for only an instant before meeting his eyes. The lord was so large that he blocked Delvaran's view of the door and made him feel utterly trapped, despite the room's vastness. "You're the one that Fols has been eyeing, aren't you? Daira, isn't it?"

How had word of Folston's reservation passed so quickly? Even with half of the castle's maids trapped in the same room, the rumor mill still seemed to operate at maximum efficiency. And how had his name been so badly communicated? It was not Daina or Daira...it was Daila. How hard was that to remember?

"It's Daila," Delvaran corrected stiffly, then scolded himself for responding so disobediently. "It's Daila, my Lord."

"Shadows, girl, are you scared? I didn't think you could get any more pale! You look like you've just seen a ghost. You Scythari, always so damned...I don't know...Scythari." Lord Aradon shook his head, then his eyes lit up, as if a brilliant idea had just occurred to him. "Say, how angry do you think Fols would be, if I chose you right now?"

Delvaran's eyes widened, and fear seized his heart. "My...my Lord, I...I..."

Delvaran opened and closed his mouth, no more words coming forth. No. He couldn't be chosen by this man...he'd rather die than serve some headstrong ladies' man who was too narcissistic to wear a damned shirt to the Selections. Why would Aradon want to steal him away? Was this man Folston's enemy? Would he hurt Delvaran, just to spite Folston? Delvaran's father certainly would have killed a maid, if he knew that doing so would upset a rival.

"Can you imagine the look on his face?" Aradon broke out a wide grin. "Gah, I can see it now..."

“Aradon, you bastard,” said a firm voice from over the man’s hulking shoulder. Upon hearing the voice, warmth settled into Delvaran’s stomach. He let out a long, unintentional sigh of relief. “I hope you’re only telling her about how kind and wonderful I am. Surely, you have no other reason to chat up my lass?”

Aradon barked a laugh, and turned to greet Prince Folston. The men met in a tight, almost violent embrace. It was as if the two athletic nobles were hosting a contest to see who could squeeze hardest. Certainly, their hug would have been sufficient to crush Delvaran’s ribcage, if he had been the recipient. In the end, however, the pair appeared to be unharmed, and ended their hug by exchanging a few slaps on the back.

Folston, unlike Aradon, was fully clothed. The state of his clothing, however, was rather surprising. He wore the same kind of sleek black tunic that seemed fashionable among the Kadian noblemen, but the fabric was covered in a thin film of dust and splashes of mud. The grime was so thick that, from a distance, the tunic didn’t even appear to be black, and their hug left a few streaks of dirt on Aradon’s chest.

Aradon did not seem to care.

“Put a shirt on,” Folston said, eyebrows raised in amusement. “If you hadn’t noticed, there are ladies about, damnit.”

“I don’t think they mind.”

“They don’t? Did you take a vote?” Folston asked.

“A vote?!” Aradon grinned that too-perfect grin of his. “You and your ‘votes’. No, I didn’t take a bloody vote. But you don’t mind, do you, ladies?”

He faced the girls, who had all become an audience to this strange spectacle, and lifted an eyebrow. Many of the girls just smiled, then murmured a series of ‘No’s, and Delvaran wrinkled his nose when he heard Mili and Kess join that chorus.

“Oh, shush,” Folston said. He rolled his eyes, then settled his gaze on Delvaran for the first time since that tumultuous feast. He paused and his expression softened, a brief moment of silence wherein he seemed to peer inside Delvaran’s soul. Folston drew a sharp breath, and time seemed to resume. “He wasn’t bothering you, was he?”

Delvaran began to reply, but Aradon was quicker.

“Just teasing her, nothing ‘bothersome’.”

“In my experience, teasing can be pretty bothersome,” Folston shot back. “They aren’t mutually exclusive, you know?”

“Fine. You win, you win,” Aradon moaned. “I don’t want to debate against you. I’ve been having a rather nice day, and I wouldn’t want it spoiled. Nothing worse than listening to you blathering on and quoting some bloody nobody from eight hundred years ago. I’ve had my fill of that.”

“A wise decision, from the least dignified loser I’ve ever known.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you shouldn’t complain so much. Now apologize to the girl, Aradon.”

Aradon grudgingly nodded, then brought a hand to his heart. He stared at Delvaran, his chiseled jaw fixed directly onto her, and he lifted that cocky eyebrow of his. Delvaran shuffled uncomfortably.

“Dearest maiden,” he said, in a deep, carnal tone which he had no doubt practiced for years. “You’re an absolute vision, a beaming ray of sunlight through the clouds, an enchantment crafted from the Giant’s own breath, worthy of eternal love. A woman as stunning, as wo-”

“I asked for an apology, not a stage performance. Cut to it.”

Aradon sent Folston a superficial glare, then flashed Delvaran a smile. “I’m sorry,”

Folston snorted. “That’s more like it. Now we’ll get out of your way, so you can continue whatever shirtless circus act you were busy with, before I arrived.”

The Kadian prince approached Delvaran, so close that Delvaran caught a whiff of dust and hard work. Folston reached down, and Delvaran’s heart leapt. Why was his heart beating so hard? Pounding against his ears? Folston grasped his free hand, the hand that had previously been locked through Auri’s fingers. Folston’s hand was nothing like Auri’s. Hers had been smooth and rather thin, but Folston’s hand, which was wrapped around the back of Delvaran’s, felt like an encompassing glove. Pressing his thumb into the center of Delvaran’s palm, Folston slowly guided Delvaran forward, out of his position amongst the other maids.

Mili’s hand slipped away, and he turned to meet his friends’ eyes. Both Mili and Kess offered encouraging smiles, and Kess even gave her a subtle thumbs-up. Their reassurances provided a degree of comfort, but Delvaran still couldn’t stop himself from shaking with fear.

On their way out of the hall, Folston paused near the center of the room, beside Madam Marsa.

“Highness,” Marsa said, warmly. “I see that you’ve made a lovely selection. Truly a beautiful, loyal, docile choice. You couldn’t have asked for much else.”

Her words dripped with false intentions, and Delvaran shied away from the Madam. He still wasn’t comfortable with being so close to her, and goosebumps spread across his arms, as his body recalled the chill of the ice grotto.

Folston faced the Madam and leaned close, so that only the three of them could hear him speak.

"I do not care that you disrespected my wishes, due to some contrived ceremonial rule," he said, his voice hard and commanding. Behind them, Lord Aradon had continued his boorish display, ensuring that few of the gathered maids would notice Folston's exchange. "I do not care that you were rude to my messenger, but you crossed a line. The boy was just delivering a message. You had no right to hit him, and you had no right to be outright cruel to the lad. You call yourself a leader? A woman who 'whip bratty whores into shape'?"

Marsa's lips twitched with a flash of suppressed anger.

"You think he wouldn't tell me? Kindness begets loyalty, Madam, and if you're thinking of punishing the boy because he's castle staff, think again. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Highness," Marsa said, smiling coolly, fully confident in her ability to quell the prince's disgust. She brought a gloved hand to her cheek and let out a concerned, practiced gasp. "This must be a terrible misunderstanding..."

Folston carried on as if he hadn't heard her protest. "Don't do it again. Just because someone's less powerful than you doesn't mean you have free reign to bully them around. I know that my father favors you and prizes your efficiency, but you are not immune. You are not invincible. Is that clear?"

Delvaran's lips stood parted in shock. He hadn't expected such assertiveness out of the prince, especially when dealing with a powerful woman like Marsa, who Delvaran struggled to even look in the eye. To his own dismay, Delvaran noticed that he'd taken a step back during the exchange, and stood slightly behind Folston, as if the prince was somehow shielding him from Marsa's wrath.

"Highness..."

"Is. That. Clear?"

Marsa paled, but maintained both her composed posture and her charming tone. "Yes. Of course."

Folston frowned, but allowed a nod.

With that matter settled, he gently tugged on Delvaran's hand. Delvaran, still rather bewildered by seeing Marsa so humbled, automatically followed the prince's lead. Who was this man? Weeks prior, Delvaran thought that he'd understood Prince Folston: a cruel, handsome, barbaric Kadian who wanted nothing more than to destroy Scythar. When they'd met at the latrines, he'd added 'cocky' to that list. At the feast, Delvaran had noted that Folston was also a would-be detective, solving the fish bone mystery. But now...after seeing Folston defend the honor of a page boy...he didn't know what to make of the man.

Folston turned around to flash Delvaran another enchanting smile, this one a bit less joyous, then led him past the towering throne room doors and into the unknown.

# CHAPTER 17

## *The Lass in Black*

Prince Folston greeted everyone who they passed on the castle's spiral stairs, whether they be noblemen, guards, or simple messenger boys. He seemed to know many of them by name. When he did not, he'd perform a strange ritual. He would introduce himself with a broad smile and learn their name, then he'd mutter it under his breath for the next dozen steps.

"Hope the foot's feeling better, Gannon."

"Of course, Highness," the buck-toothed soldier nodded with a proud grin, then limped past Delvaran and down the stairs.

"Almost there," Folston said. He still held Delvaran's hand, leading his 'lass' up the stairs.

There was something gentle in his touch, his fingers wrapping around Delvaran's like a comfortable glove. He tugged at times, but did so with care. All the while, Delvaran had to hold up the hem of his dress to keep it from trailing on the steps, as he'd practiced numerous times over the past few weeks. Too many dirtied dresses could result in a beating or a visit to the grotto, even for a chosen maid.

"And here we are!"

'Here' was a door, positioned on the far end of the royal floor. The door had been coated with shiny black paint, but an engraved depiction of the Great Tree was still visible underneath. Delvaran knew this room well. It had been his for the better part of two decades, before...before that one wild day.

Folston swung open the door.



“So this is the place. My humble abode.” Folston shot Delvaran a helpful grin. “It’s a little drafty, but I quite like the bedroom. I hope you’ll like it, as well...not to mean that you’ll be sleeping here. You’re a maid, of course,so you’ll sleep in your maid’s quarters...but you’ll certainly be spending some time in here...because I live in here.”

“Yes, master,” Delvaran replied numbly, too preoccupied with the state of his old quarters to pay any heed to Folston’s awkward words or demeanor.

Everything about the room was wrong. The bedding had been painted black, the cabinets rearranged, and the formerly bare walls had been covered with a sickening variety of decor. Worse yet, the room was an utter mess. Clothing laid strewn across the stone floor and the bed was unmade, chain mail and swords, and a notebook laying atop the ruffled black sheets. Delvaran’s eyes drifted toward the sword. It was still mostly in its scabbard, but a sliver of black metal poked out, the suggestion of a sharp edge that could cut through flesh like butter.

Delvaran trembled. That sword...how many poor Ralli boys had fallen to swords like Folston’s, all because of Delvaran’s blasted pride? All because he refused peacefully surrender the city?

“Are you feeling well? Are you upset? Did I do something wrong?”

Delvaran spun, lips parted in surprise. Somehow, lost between the spectacle of his old room and the sword, he’d forgotten all about the Kadian prince.

“No. I’m...I’m well. Splendid. Perfectly fine.”

Folston lifted an eyebrow. “If you say so,” he mumbled, then surveyed the room himself. “I know the suite is a bit of a mess. You see, my father wanted everyone to get settled in before we invited any maids up here,” Folston explained. “Or else I would’ve invited you here, earlier. To clean, I mean...I tried to reason with my father, but he can be a bit stubborn.” Folston coughed, tugging at his sleeve. “Would you mind cleaning it up a bit, while I take a bath?” He gestured up at his dusty hair, grinning. “Fixing wells is messy work.”

“A-aye,” Delvaran replied. He crossed his arms across his stomach. “Aye, master.”

Folston shuffled his feet, forcing a laugh. “Right. ‘Master’. Hah. I...ah...I’ll be on my way, then.”

With that, the Kadian prince dashed to the bathroom. The solid granite bath and matching countertop were only visible to Delvaran for a mere moment before Folston slammed the door shut. Then, an indistinct vocalization came from the bathroom, a mutter or a whisper, too soft for Delvaran’s ears. Was Folston talking to someone?

Against his better judgement, Delvaran tiptoed up to the closed door.

“Idiot!” Folston’s voice hissed, from the other side of the door. “Idiot, idiot, you stuttering idiot!” With every word, an audible thump came from the granite countertop. “You’ll certainly be spending some time in here...because I live in here,” he mimicked himself. “Shit.”

Folston let out a loud, tired sigh, and then any further sounds were drowned out by the steady rush of hot bathwater.

Delvaran scratched his head. Had the prince really been worried about embarrassing himself in front of Delvaran? In front of a lowly maid? Perhaps Lord Aradon and Auri hadn’t been teasing in their observations...perhaps this prince truly had taken a particular interest in Delvaran. At the mere thought, Delvaran’s heart leapt, and he had to fight back the fluttering butterflies in his stomach. Why him?

Folston couldn’t truly care for him. This was not love, not in the slightest. It was sheer lust. Physical attraction, and nothing more. Folston barely knew him, they shared nothing in common, and Folston certainly knew nothing of Delvaran’s past. If he had, Delvaran’s head would already be planted firmly on the end of a pike.

Folston was a fool. A handsome, well-intentioned fool.

Delvaran strode to the black sword sitting atop the bed. It was a fierce weapon, far from the training weapons that Delvaran had seldom used. This blade was forged by the famous Kadian craftsmen for the sole purpose of ending lives. How easy would it be for Delvaran to wield this sword, march into the bath, and slice right through that foolish prince’s neck?

Delvaran gulped at the thought.

He reached for the sword, and tried to lift the hilt. Too heavy. He could lift the sword a bit, but he wouldn’t be able to swing it with any sort of force. Gently returning the sword to its stand beside the bed, Delvaran frowned. He’d never been a muscular person, and he had always been a poor swordsman. Perhaps using a sword wasn’t the most rational assassination plan.

If only he could find a stash of his father’s Icevein poison. It was undoubtedly hidden somewhere within the castle. Now that he had access to the royal wing of the castle, the prospect of finding some sort of poison seemed infinitely more likely, given his father’s passion for the stuff. He could end the royal family without actually having to do the messy business himself, which seemed like a more pleasant route.

Sighing, Delvaran put Folston’s armour into a crate conveniently labeled ‘armor’ and went about fixing the prince’s bed. Prior to maidhood, Delvaran had never made a bed. However, before the Selections, Marsa had sentenced him and Auri to a few days of bed-care in the soldiers’ quarters, and he’d gotten quite efficient. For Folston’s bed,

Delvaran prioritized style rather than speed. Perhaps out of duty, or perhaps out of his own perfectionism, Delvaran went out of his way to ensure that he had neatly tucked every corner, flawlessly placed each pillow, and twisted the bed's two hand-towels into small pieces of artwork that resembled the Great Tree.

That last bit was a trick which Auri had taught him, during their time sharing a bed. He couldn't hold back the proud smile tugging at the corner of his lips upon completing the Great Tree towel art.

Dutifully, he went about fixing the rest of the room. He worked mindlessly, falling into his efficient rhythm. He righted crookedly placed paintings, tossed dirty clothing into hampers, and scrubbed the already-dirty stone floors. He only stopped when he came across the only object in the room that hadn't been changed under Folston's ownership: Delvaran's weathered oak desk.

The desk sat beside one of the room's oval windows, perfectly situated to have the most possible natural light. He'd used that desk every day, reading science journals on its surface and jotting notes from books on Shaping, science, or medicine.

Now, a stack of loose pages sat atop the desk. They were disorganized - clearly out of proper order - and the inkwell beside the papers was mostly empty. Delvaran approached, furrowing his brow, and inspected the scrawling letters on the top-most page. It was Folston's handwriting, without a doubt, and the penmanship was hideous. Delvaran squinted, trying his best to decipher the repulsive scrawl.

"With this council", read the paper, on its most legible line. "stakeholdership will establish rule of law and lift the spirit for the common good."

Delvaran blinked, then shook his head. Disgustingly poor handwriting. Absolutely disgusting. If, as a child, Delvaran had ever written in such poor form, his father would have beaten him to a bloody pulp.

"So, what do you think?" Folston asked from just over Delvaran's shoulder.

Delvaran yelped in surprise. How had he not heard Folston exiting the bath? Shadows, he'd been too occupied trying to decipher the man's terrible handwriting.

"Well, master" Delvaran said, slowly turning around. "It's a touch..." He faltered when his eyes fell upon Folston's bare chest, still shining from its fresh cleaning. "...illegible," he whispered.

Folston was more muscular than Delvaran had ever been. However, the Kadian prince was not a mound of brawn, and had an athletic leanness to his build. Water dripped from Folston's still-wet hair, but Delvaran couldn't pull his gaze from the man's arms. Two identical veins rose from each of his upper arms, right along the bicep, and his abdomen was shielded by a layer of hardened muscle.

Folston was standing so close to Delvaran. Close enough to reach out and touch, to caress. His mind swirling with the magic of that blasted fourth Power, Delvaran bit his lip. Folston spoke some words, but Delvaran was too entranced to decipher any meaning from them.

“Huh?” Delvaran eventually asked, shaking himself back to focus.

Folston smiled with a bit of uncertainty, raising an eyebrow. “I asked where you learned how to read. Aren’t you...uh...you Ralli in Scythar usually barred from schooling?”

“Y-yes,” Delvaran searched his mind frantically, trying to come up with a good explanation. Gah. How had he been such a fool? To have forgotten one of the most basic elements of his supposed identity as Daila. “My mother taught me?” Unfortunately, Delvaran’s tone was anything but convincing, sounding more like a question than a statement of fact.

“Your mother,” Folston nodded. “Of course. I’d love to hear about her...I don’t know much about you, do I?”

Delvaran furrowed his eyebrows. He was treading on dangerous territory. “No, Highness.”

“And I can call you ‘Ralli’, right? That’s not a rude term, is it? I use it in my writing, but I don’t think I’ve ever asked a Ralli about using the word.”

Delvaran shrugged. “It’s fine, I think. Highness.”

“Good. That’s very good. Wouldn’t want to have to re-write any of my work on account of a single word, would I?”

Folston’s smile was big, broad, and infectious. Despite Delvaran’s best efforts, he couldn’t help but return Folston’s grin.

“No, master.”

“Fantastic job cleaning the room, by the way,” Folston said, finally noticing my work of the past hour. “Everyone always talks about how redheads are the best in the business, but you’ve outdone yourself.” He squinted at his bed, on the far side of the room. “Shadows, Daila, you turned my towels into artwork!”

“Thank you, master.” Still, Delvaran wore his grin, but it had swelled with pride when Folston praised his handiwork.

Folston nodded thoughtfully. “Say, have you ever shaved a man before?”

“Aye, master.” Delvaran looked up at Folston, falling into the man’s sparkling emerald eyes. He had to shake his head, just to keep his mind from wandering into dangerous places.

“Great. I haven’t shaved in a few days and, as you can see, I don’t have the world’s steadiest hand.” He nodded toward his sloppy journal, then winked at Delvaran. Delvaran’s breath caught.

“Come along,” Folston beckoned, heading back toward the bathroom.

Delvaran’s cheeks burned and he nodded, following the prince with hesitant steps.

Folston perched on a tall wooden stool near the bathtub, then faced the nearest mirror. He took a long, deep breath, running a hand through his unruly black hair.

“Cream should be there,” Folston nodded to the countertop nearest him. “Right next to the razor.”

Delvaran stumbled, but managed to save himself from falling to the tile floor. A razor...of course. It glinted on the countertop, a straight sharp edge the length of Delvaran’s hand, with a wooden handle. He stood over the razor, eyes fixed on that thin metal edge.

“Is everything alright?”

Delvaran flinched. “Yes, master.”

Doing his best to ignore the lingering razor, Delvaran coated his hands with shave cream. He situated himself in front of Folston. Because the prince was sitting on his stool, Delvaran stood a hair or two taller than Folston, and didn’t have to reach up to spread the white cream. Ever-so-slowly, Delvaran brought his hands to Folston’s cheeks.

The Kadian prince was staring up at Delvaran, and Delvaran couldn’t help but stare back into those emerald eyes. Folston’s skin was rough thanks to the bristle of facial hair, which tickled Delvaran’s fingers as he spread the shave cream. The sensation was...funny...and Delvaran had to fight off another grin. He’d been grinning too much. Shadows, he was Delvaran. Prince Delvaran of Scythar. He should not be so happy while spending time with the man who had destroyed his family. Well...the man who had destroyed his father, more accurately.

“I think you’ve been thorough enough,” Folston said with that devilish smile of his.

“Oh!” Delvaran squeaked, pulling his thumb away from Folston’s lower lip. It left a bit of shave cream there, in its place. “Sorry! So sorry, master!” Gah, how long had he been rubbing the prince’s face? Massaging it like some sort of pathetic fangirl?

“No worries,” he said, his tone gentle, soothing, and more than a little amused. His smile looked a bit silly with all of the shave cream skirting his mouth. “And please don’t call me ‘master’. Not when we’re alone. I don’t like that word. Just call me ‘Folston’.”

Delvaran lifted an eyebrow, puzzled. He didn’t like the word ‘master’? How strange.

“As you wish, Folston.”

After washing his hands, Delvaran fetched the razor. He handled it as carefully as he could, taking every precaution to ensure that the blade never pierced his own finger and revealed his true identity. That would be the sort of brutal, pathetic death that befitted him. Caught in his enemy's bedchamber after he accidentally stabbed himself. Perhaps he deserved to die like that, after sending so many men to their deaths.

Fortunately, he did not immediately cut his hand open upon taking the razor. Gripping the wooden handle in his fingers, Delvaran's heartbeat quickened its pace. He reached Folston, and his hands had already begun to shake. He took his position behind Folston and held out the razor blade, only a few inches from the Kadian prince's neck.

How easy would it be to cut right through the man's jugular? Delvaran stared into the mirror, eyeing Folston's neck. It would be so easy, so simple...but the thought left a bad taste in his mouth. What if Folston didn't die immediately? What if he had to watch Folston's disenchanted face, as his life dwindled into nothingness? What if he had to see the look of disappointment in Folston's eyes, when he realized that Delvaran was his killer?

Slowly, Delvaran raised his eyes until he was staring at himself in the mirror. No, he did not stare at himself. He stared into the terrified blue eyes of a Ralli girl with fiery red hair, a dusting of freckles, and a pair of trembling lips. Her clothing style marked her as a maid, and the black color of her dress marked her as property of Kadia, property of Prince Folston. No, that girl couldn't slash the prince's throat, nor would she ever want to do such a horrible, bloody deed.

“Are you sure you're alright?”

Delvaran released the breath that he only just then realized he'd been holding.

“Are you nervous?”

He nodded, uneasily.

“I've found that only two things can calm me down: long baths and talking through my problems. Discussing my life, my worries, everything that's on my mind. What's on your mind, Daila?”

“My...mind?” Delvaran shook his head. That was territory which he could never let Folston explore.

“You mentioned that your mother taught you how to read. Tell me about her. What's she like?”

Delvaran frowned. He'd never talked much about his mother. Not with Auri and certainly not with his own father. What was she like?

"I only had a few years to know her. But, she's wonderful in my memories. She cared about me. She wasn't particularly funny or clever or soft-hearted, but she protected me. People who knew her only talk about how beautiful she was, but I was too young to even notice. To me, she was a hero." The words had just slipped out of him effortlessly, before he had a chance to stop them.

"She sounds lovely. What happened to her, if you don't mind my asking?"

Delvaran shrugged. There was no sense in lying about this question. "The king happened. King Icevein. He decided that she needed to die, so she did. He 'disappeared' her."

"I'm sorry," Folston said, softly. "I can't imagine how hard that was for you. How did your father cope?"

Delvaran met his eyes, via the mirror. "He went about life, and acted as if it never even happened. Like he didn't even care. Then he died."

"Maybe her loss hurt too much for him to recognize."

Delvaran laughed. It was a dark laugh, the sort that held no traces of humor. "Doubtful."

Interestingly, he noted that his hand was no longer shaking. Maybe there was some merit to Folston's strange advice. With a small shrug to himself, Delvaran lifted the razor blade to Folston's neck and began to slide it upward, slicing off little black hairs along the way.

"I don't think my upbringing was too similar to yours," Folston admitted. "I've always had castles, butlers, and whatnot. I've never had a maid lass of my own, though. The royal maids back in Kadia are a bit pushy and there aren't too many of them, so they'd go about the castle as they pleased. My father doesn't like how timid you lot are, but he does like how efficient you ladies are. He's always been like that. He tries to be just, but he's too occupied with efficiency. He's always getting on my case for being late."

"As he should," Delvaran nodded, continuing to shave the prince. Delvaran despised being late. He still resented the fact that Auri had made them both late for his first maid assembly.

"What?! Are you serious?" Folston chuckled.

"Aye."

"Oh, don't get all fussy just because I was late to the Selections. I'm not usually that late."

"You'd better not be," Delvaran said, pursing his lips. "Master," he added for good measure.

"I'll try. You have my word." Folston grinned at Delvaran through the mirror.

Delvaran shaved him silently for a while, until a thought popped into his mind. It was a question that only another prince could answer.

"Do you ever feel like you weren't meant to be a prince?"

Folston raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth for a quick answer, then seemed to reconsider the question.

"That's a fantastic question. You're rather insightful, though I don't think you realize it." Folston said the words with such a genuine tone that Delvaran couldn't help but believe the prince. Did he really think that Delvaran was insightful? "There were times when I think that other people would do a better job than myself," Folston admitted. "And there are many more times when I've thought that I'm not doing enough with the power that I have."

"What do you mean? Doing enough what?"

"Enough good! I'm a prince, Daila. As such, I have a responsibility to at least try to change the world for the better. To marginally improve people's' lives. Right now, in Kadia, there are over half a million Ralli living in slave-like conditions. It's even worse down here, thanks to those Scythari royals...the ways that they punished their subjects." Folston clenched his fists, and any hint of a smile faded away. "Terrible. They were terrible leaders. So, my goal as a prince is to be the exact opposite, and I'm not doing enough."

Delvaran frowned. No. Delvaran hadn't been a good prince, had he? He'd allowed his father to carry out atrocities on a daily basis, without ever raising a hand to challenge the man. He'd been a useless prince, especially when compared to Folston.

A tear streaked down Delvaran's cheek, but he wiped it away before Folston noticed.

With that, Delvaran made the final touches on his shave and cleaned the remaining cream from Folston's smoothed cheeks.

"There you go," Delvaran smiled hopefully. "Do you like it?"

"Of course." Folston rose from his stool and looked down at Delvaran.

Folston took one of Delvaran's hands in his and brought it to his lips, placing a single delicate kiss. Goosebumps prickled up and down Delvaran's arms, out of excitement rather than fear, and he had to bite his lower lip to keep himself from saying anything foolish.

"Thank you, Daila. To be completely honest, I chose you because I saw how guarded you were, when we first met...and your beauty didn't hurt. I wanted you to open up. I wanted to see the real you. From what I've seen so far, you're an incredible girl who's hiding too many talents."



“Highness,” murmured Delvaran. He wanted to argue or chastise the prince, but his words had sounded far too genuine to question. “Thank you. You...” he drew a deep breath “...you’re the best prince I’ve ever known.”

# CHAPTER 18

## *Unleashed*

Please,” Delvaran begged for the hundredth time. “Please. Just work.”

He sat on the floor of his former study, his legs tucked beneath him. Candlelight danced on the brass locket, which he clasped against his chest. Delvaran growled, frustrated. His eyes were puffy and his freckled cheeks were marked with the paths of dried tears. He’d never felt so conflicted before. So confused. Even in the days after his mother had ‘disappeared’, he’d still mostly understood himself, and he’d still had access to his power.

Folston had selected him and Delvaran couldn’t control himself around the man. Though he’d survived his first day as Folston’s lass., he failed to keep his tongue from uttering disgusting phrases like ‘you’re the best prince I’ve ever known’. By the Giant’s shadow, he couldn’t even keep his own thoughts in check, and that truth was beginning to horrify him. How could Delvaran assassinate the man, if he had all of these pesky thoughts? All of these fantasies that were so embarrassing, he couldn’t even admit them to himself?

It was all the Totem’s fault. Everything was. The stupid Ralli body, and his apparently lack of Shaping ability.

After milling about in silence, shut away in the empty study for the better part of an hour, He could almost feel the Totem suppressing his power, stifling it like a wet rag on a torch. How had he failed to acknowledge it before? He must have gotten too occupied with sweeping hallways, cleaning latrines, and doting on his conquerors to notice the obvious truth. His powers hadn’t fled, and they weren’t busy recharging. Instead, they

were being suppressed by a force within the Totem. Each time he tried to summon his own power, that blasted locket moved to stop him, pushing its power against his.

But he needed his Totem. That was, he had decided, the only way that he'd ever kill Folston. He certainly couldn't stomach stabbing the man. Shadows, he hadn't even been able to kill the man when he'd been holding a razor to Folston's neck, and poison would certainly be too painful a way for the good, handsome prince to die. However, Delvaran knew how to kill with Shaping. To him, it was automatic, just a swarm of summoned beetles or the bite of a rope-snake. That was it would take to kill Folston, and Delvaran wouldn't even have to watch the horrific aftermath and see beauty destroyed.

This outcome, however, seemed increasingly unlikely. He'd scanned through every book in his study. The only object of interest was a sloppily bound book that had been left unattended on the study's thick desk. Delvaran hadn't read too much of the book, but it was written in Folston's unmistakable, illegible scrawl, and bore a proud, sloppy title on the cover: 'The Proposal, Volume One.'

Delvaran hadn't even bothered flipping through the book. He knew it'd be more indecipherable gibberish, with no useful knowledge about the Powers. Even if it had been readable, it would not have provided any insights into why his new Totem had decided to wreck his life and imprison his powers. Shadows, he hated that Totem. Delvaran considered just taking a hammer to it and leaving it as an empty husk, just like his original sun pendant, but he knew better.

He shook his head, and dabbed away another tear with his sleeve. It was all pointless. If he bashed the Totem, he'd be in an even worse situation, powerless and unable to bond a new Totem for over a year.

"I hate you," he hissed, tightening his grip on the blasted Totem.

The locket pulsed, emitting a flash of green light. The light made him think of...laughter. It was as if the Totem was teasing him, and relishing in his pain.

"What in the world?" he whispered.

He raised the locket to the dwindling candle beside his feet, eyes wide. It had returned to a simple brass device, and every trace of that green light had fled. His old Totem had pulsed from time to time, but only as a warning when danger lurked nearby, or occasionally to lend the warm light of comfort. Never like this. This green light was brighter than anything he'd seen from a Totem, as if the locket was on the verge of bursting with power.

"Give me my power back," he hissed at the locket. "What do you want?! What more can you take from me? Just...just..."

As soon as he processed the words that had left his mouth, he felt silly. What was he doing? Threatening an object? Did he actually expect it to answer him?

His shook his head, and slumped his back against the wall. He'd gotten so caught up with the blasted locket that he hadn't even notice the study door open.

"Daila," Auri's voice lofted from the open doorway and made Delvaran flinch. "Why are you in here? I've been looking all over. Is it true that Prince Folston selected you? That's what Mili told me and...are you okay?"

He looked up at her and parted his lips to respond. He didn't know what to say. Was he okay? In the end, Delvaran let out a sigh, then shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Auri knelt beside him, taking his hands in hers. "Did something happen?"

Delvaran didn't know how to tell her about his struggles, without sounding like a whiny little girl. He'd gotten to know Prince Folston, and they had more in common than he'd like to admit. Put in such simple words, the day's events didn't seem nearly as jarring...but they had been jarring. He sighed. Why would Auri care about Delvaran's side of the equation, though? Why would she show any sympathy for his secret cause? His plan to assassinate the prince?

He met Auri's concerned blue eyes and sighed.

"Aye."

If he didn't tell her what was on his mind, she'd pester him about it until the Giant's return. With that realization, he caved. Auri settled on stone floor across from him, and he told her the whole tale of his assassination plans, the shaving, and his quest to find a solution to his troublesome Totem.

He spared no details, and Auri - to her credit - held her sharp tongue and let him tell his tale uninterrupted. She just fixed him with a stare. It was a hard, flat stare, with no trace of her usual humor. Doing his best to ignore her eyes, he powered through and ended his story on an empty, directionless note.

"I don't know what to do, Auri."

Auri fixed me with a disappointed frown. "You wanted to kill the Kadian royals? You're a fool. No, you're worse than a fool, you don't have a grain of common sense in that damned head of yours," she snarled, then added, muttering, "and to think I fancied you."

Delvaran gulped, then raised his hands in a helpless shrug. "They took my city, Auri. What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know," she snapped. "Maybe not try to kill the first just, competent leaders we've had in this castle for centuries. You still wanted to kill them, even after you met Folston?"

Again, I shrugged. "I don't know. I...I..."

"It's pure silliness. Aren't you the one who's always bragging about his 'rationality'? Killing good rulers doesn't seem all too 'rational', to me."

"You're the authority on all things rational, now? You can't even read," Delvaran shot back.

He regretted the words when he saw Auri's eyebrows furrow, as if she'd just been stung by a bee.

"Sorry," he mumbled, avoiding her eyes.

She pretended to ignore his insult, and didn't acknowledge his apology.

"It's not rational because...what was your goal, back when you were Delvaran? Back when you were the heir to Scythar?"

"I don't know," I ran my hand through my hair, unfazed by its long, wavy texture. "I supposed I wanted to be King."

"And why did you want that?"

"Because," Delvaran bit his lip. "Because I knew I'd do a better job than my father."

"How? How would you be better than him?"

"I don't know..."

"You don't?"

"I...I guess I wouldn't poison people, or beat my servants, or start unwinnable wars, or be a..." Delvaran grimaced. "I wouldn't be a cruel father."

"And do the Kadians do any of those things?"

Delvaran met her eyes for the shortest of moments, just in time to see that all-knowing glint. She knew she'd won the argument. She was too smart for her own good. He used to believe that she was smarter than a Ralli slave ought to be, but now that was a ridiculous thought. She was Auri, and she was just as smart as any Auri had a right to be.

"No. They don't."

"They don't," she agreed. "And your people are better off under their rule than under your father's. Probably under yours, as well, aren't they?"

Numbly, he nodded. He hadn't wanted to admit that to himself, but it was true. King Braum wasn't perfect - he still tolerated Marsa's iron rule over the maids - but he hadn't been the one who sacrificed thousands of men's lives for no reason. That had been Delvaran's decision, and nobody else's.

“Well,” Auri shut her eyes, then let out a melodramatic sigh. “I reckon I’ll have to tell the king about your plans. About who you really are.” She began to rise to her feet, as if she was planning to walk out the door.

“What?” Delvaran’s eyes shot wide open. “No. Wait! Auri, please.” He licked his lips, and noticed that his throat had suddenly gone dry. He scrambled to his knees, then reached up to grasp her wrists, holding tight. “No, no, no. Please, Auri. Don’t. They’ll kill me. They will. You know they will. Auri…” his voice trembled, and tears began to moisten his lashes. He met her eyes, doing his best to control himself. “Please. I don’t want to die. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” Auri asked. She looked down on him with the hint of a smile, and lifted one of her golden eyebrows.

Delvaran nodded.

“Good. I need you to promise me that you will not hurt any member of the Kadian royalty. No more plots, no more evil plans, no more nonsense. You will protect them with your life.”

He began to object, but she cut him off with a raised finger.

“That’s my offer. If you don’t agree to it, I’ll go to the king and sing like a bird. He’ll know everything. So, what do you say?”

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Delvaran slumped onto his butt.

“Fine,” he said. “You win.”

“Repeat it for me.”

“I promise,” he sighed, “that I won’t hurt any of the Kadian royals.”

“And?”

“And I’ll protect them with my life.”

“Wonderful.” Auri’s usual demeanor returned. She broke into a grin, cheerfully taking a seat beside Delvaran on the study’s floor.

Delvaran pursed his lips.

“You weren’t ever going to tell the King, were you?”

Auri snorted. “Of course not. Just thought you needed a bit of motivation.”

For some reason, that brought a thin smile to Delvaran’s lips. “First time I’ve ever felt relieved to be manipulated. For a second there, I thought you were serious.”

“It was longer than a second,” Auri countered with a click of her tongue. “You should’ve seen your own face. On your knees, begging with those big innocent eyes and everything. Gah, I reckon you’re the most gullible girl I’ve ever met. Not an ounce of common sense. Of course I wasn’t going to tell the king. Do you think I’d actually put you in that sort of danger? Use your head, Dai.”

Delvaran's cheeks reddened, but he brushed off her teasing with a flick of his wrist.

"So be it." Again, he bit his lip. "This was probably all pointless, anyway," he admitted, gesturing around the room. "I don't think I was ever actually going to assassinate them. It was just...that goal was all I had. The assassination. It was all a silly fantasy...but it was the only thing keeping me afloat, keeping me from admitting that I'm a Ralli slave. Shadows, I'm a maid in my own damned castle, Auri. I suppose I needed something to cling to, to help convince me that I was more than just a maid."

"Aw," Auri cooed, wrapping her arm around him and squeezing. "You're more than a maid. You're a personal maid."

He rolled his eyes, sighing, and rested his head on her shoulder. "Such a colossal difference."

"At least it's something," she shrugged. "Most Ralli girls are married off to soldiers and peddlers, or sold to the brothels by the time they're our age. You should be proud to be yourself, Daila."

"I suppose you're right," Delvaran said, his voice soft. "All of this has just been a bit jarring for me, I reckon."

"You reckon?" Auri asked, giggling. "Nice to hear you talking like a proper Ralli!"

"Shush." Delvaran shot back, smiling, his head still resting in the crook of Auri's neck. He was becoming more like them. More like the other maids. Long ago, the thought would have shamed him, but he felt nothing.

Auri took a moment to fix a strand of his red hair, which had fallen out of place, and gave him a light kiss on the forehead.

"You know," Auri said, after a long silence. "You used to spend far too much time in this room." She eyed the study's towering bookshelves as she spoke. "If I had a magical necklace and exciting powers, I wouldn't have wasted those powers studying books, searching for ways to become even more deadly. Always practicing how to summon creatures that can only hurt people. It's sad, really."

He lifted his head and fixed her with a frown. "Wasted my powers? And what would you do, if you were a Shaper?"

She looked at him as if he was an dim-witted calf, incapable of even eating food from its trough.

"I'd have fun! I'd...I don't know, turn leaflets into butterflies, or...I don't know...try to make a dance troupe of wooden turtles, or organize a firefly show."

"That," Delvaran began, then paused to scratch his eyebrow. "That actually does sound rather entertaining. I don't think I've ever used my powers for anything so innocuous before."

She shot him a quizzical look.

“Harmless, I mean,” he corrected himself.

Auri nodded her approval. She’d gone through a lot of effort to make him speak less ‘like a book’, as she deemed it. Over the past few weeks, he’d come to terms with the fact that he used those words despite knowing beforehand that other people wouldn’t grasp their meaning. It was his way of asserting his superiority, a trait gained from his father. Gritting his teeth, Delvaran swore to work harder to rid himself of that habit.

Delvaran grimaced, but tried to quell the dark thoughts that rose every time he thought of his father. He managed to clear his mind by reflecting upon Auri’s earlier suggestions about whizzing fireflies.

“If I could use my powers,” he eventually said. “By the Giant, I swear this Totem was forged to torment me.”

“Have you tried asking for its help?”

By her tone, Delvaran sensed that she was joking. Even a maid girl like her knew that inanimate objects couldn’t be sentient, or have agendas. That was the conventional wisdom...though conventional wisdom was occasionally proven wrong, once new information came to light. That was the nature of scholarship, and Delvaran fancied himself a scholar of sorts. Rather, he had fancied himself a scholar, before his world turned upside-down.

“Yes, actually.” He produced a weak smile, fighting back bitterness. “I was doing just that, right before you came in. Talking to a blasted locket. I have this feeling that it’s blocking my powers on purpose....like it wants me to suffer.”

“Have you tried asking nicely?”

Delvaran rolled his eyes.

“If only it were that simple,” he sighed. “It would nice to use my powers for something kind, though. Something fun, or harmless. Something that doesn’t result in Ralli lads losing their lives. But, I suppo...”

He trailed off. His Totem...it was vibrating. It bounced up and down against his chest, as if something was trapped inside, beating on imaginary walls within the locket, struggling to escape. His hands trembled and he fumbled with the locket. What in the world? What in the name of Rodmahein?

Auri seemed oblivious to all of this, all the while.

“Aye. You’d do better using your power like that. The Giant knows if you followed through on that plot of yours and tried to kill Prince Folston, you’d just get lost in his dreamy eyes and muck up your little plans, anyway. Oh, Folston,” she mocked with an



erotic coo. "Oh, Folston! Take me away from my little maid girl life! Make me your princess!

She giggled and giggled, until her eyes fell upon Delvaran.

"Auri," he whispered, petrified. He was afraid to raise his voice, out of an unfounded suspicion that doing so would cause the locket to stop vibrating and return to its sad, dead state. "It's...it's alive."

With trembling hands, he cupped the brass locket - the Totem - and held it up. White light seeped from locket, in the crease between its two closed halves, so bright that Delvaran was forced to squint.

"Open it!" Auri hissed. "Do it!"

He bit his lip, then looked at her again for reassurance.

She nodded earnestly.

How often had he refused to heed Auri's advice, back when he was a prince? How many times had he doubted her, for no reason other than her standing in life? How many times had he let her down?

"Oh, Shadows, please don't let this be the last thing I do," Delvaran whispered.

With that, he opened the locket.

Light flooded the room. Delvaran had to squint, and held up a hand to block the glow. It was everywhere, all at once, filling every corner of the room at once. However, the brilliant glow lasted for the briefest of moments before it retreated, causing the candles to flicker in its wake. The light rushed back toward the locket. No, not toward the locket...toward Delvaran.

"What?!" Delvaran managed to squeak, before the white glow formed into a concentrated ball of white energy, and settled near the center of his chest, just below his breasts.

"What's happening?!" He knew that Auri was just as clueless as he, but that couldn't stop him from asking the question.

Wide-eyed, he stared down at the orb of light.

"Shadows," Auri said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Then, without warning, the white orb began to press against Delvaran's skin. The room's white glow did not disappear. Instead, the source of that light was transferred from the orb to...to Delvaran himself, as the orb melted into his body. He was glowing. Every inch of his skin was glowing.

"Auri, I thin-"

Before he could finish the thought, his eyes shot wide open and he let out a high, shocked gasp.

Power rushed through him. That gently rippling lake within him - that wonderful source of magic - had finally returned. It felt as if he had been wandering through a desert, and had just tasted his first sip of water in months. It was incredible, intoxicating, beautiful, and it made him shiver with excitement.

"I take it that wasn't in any of your books?" Auri asked, too dumbstruck to muster her usual cheeky tone.

Delvaran nodded dumbly. He blinked at Auri, then studied his pale skin, from which the unnatural white glow was already fading. Then, finally, his focus settled onto the open locket in his palm.

There she was: the image of Risara, in all of her glory. Risara and the nameless Ralli soldier, laying in each others' arms, immortalized in the locket...realization dawned on Delvaran.

"This was your doing, wasn't it?" he whispered to the Totem. "Risara?"

The locket pulsed, and a few wisps of green light slid into the air before disintegrating into nothingness.

Delvaran smiled.

"Risara," he said again, more firmly. "Thank you, Risara!"

"Daila, look!" Auri nudged Delvaran's shoulder and pointed at the small candle by Delvaran's feet, her eyes as bright as ever.

Delvaran's eyes widened. "By the Tree," he whispered.

Above the candle, whose wax was already beginning to melt, dozens of tiny fireflies danced. They moved in lazy, care-free loops, up and down and all around the flickering candle. Gently, Delvaran reached out and cupped one of the fireflies in his hand. He studied it closely, squinting his eyes. Wax, he suddenly realized. The firefly was made of wax.

"Risara," he whispered again. "You did this, didn't you? You used my power to do...that?"

The locket pulsed, though more weakly than before.

"Ask her something else!" Auri hissed, still sitting beside him.

Auri was right, of course. Delvaran's heart pounded. This was the most incredible of discoveries, especially in a field as undocumented as Totems. Somehow, however, a force deep within Delvaran told him that Risara's time was limited, and she was fading fast.

"Did you interrupt my self-Shaping, to turn me into this?"

A single green pulse.

"And you locked away my powers, after I tapped them dry?"

Another pulse, so soft that Delvaran couldn't quite distinguish its color.

"Because..." he bit his lip, then drew a sharp breath, as if he'd just been punched in the gut. "Because you hate me?"

Another pulse.

"The soldier. The man whose locket this was. The one holding you in the etching, beneath the tree. I got him killed, didn't I? He died in my stupid battle?"

The brass locket gave out a weak, final pulse. Its power was temporarily spent. Whatever realm Risara was in, she could no longer project herself into the corporeal realm.

"Shadows," whispered Delvaran, a tear streaking down his cheek. "I'm sorry, Risara. I'm so, so sorry. I..."

Unable to control himself, Delvaran clasped the locket shut in his hand and crumpled into Auri's arms, clinging to the taller girl like a tree-squirrel.

"I'm evil, Auri," he whispered, sniffing back tears. "I'm a horrible, evil, murderous idiot. I'm...I'm..." he trailed off.

"Shh." Auri took a moment to push a few strands of Delvaran's red hair away from his path of tears. Then she hugged him tight, until his cheek pressed against her neck.

"Let it all out, you adorable dunce. You aren't that person anymore. Just close your eyes, take a deep breath, and put all of that behind you. Aye, you're a maid now, but you can still make people happy, you can still right your wrongs. Who knows, maybe someday you'll even manage to grow some common sense."

Through his tears, Delvaran smiled. His whole body felt like it was buzzing with tranquility as his heartbeat steadied.

Like usual, Auri was right. 'Prince Delvaran' was gone. Had there ever even been a 'Prince Delvaran' or was that just a construction, an identity that he'd crafted out of a foolish desire to appease his father? He'd certainly never felt natural as 'Prince Delvaran', the cold, hard leader who made 'tough' decisions like refusing to surrender a city and sacrificing the lives of thousands.

He wiped away his last few tears. That old identity would no longer weigh him down, plague his thoughts, or tempt him into any assassination nonsense. He was a new person, now...or perhaps he had always been this person, and only Auri's kindness and his new perspective had allowed his true self to float to the surface. Either way, Delvaran knew one fact for certain: as a delicate redheaded maid, he felt happy and right, two emotions that he had never experienced in all his years of princehood.

“I know what you need: a nice long bath. Just you, all alone with some bubbles, some fragrance,” Auri’s tone grew a bit devious, “some fond memories of Folston shirtless. How does that sound?”

Daila smiled. Pulling out of the hug, she looked up into the eyes of her best friend in the world.

“Lovely. That sounds absolutely lovely.”

*God, I am sorry. God, I am sorry. God, I am sorry. What have we done?"*

*Young woman, red of hair. Case seven hundred seventy three. Outcome: strong*

# CHAPTER 19

## *The Golden Wing I*

**B**y the Giant,” Liral muttered. “When we find these noble kids, they’d better have keys ‘round their necks.”

She strode beside Cross through one of the nicest neighborhoods in Trisal, nearing the Colosseum. Weeks ago, she would have never set foot in such a place in daylight and if she had, she would have done so at a dead sprint, dodging to avoid guards and the sneers of noble folk. Much had changed, since then. Her pace was frustratingly sluggish thanks to her blasted high heels, and they walked in line with the crowd, all heading to the same place: that rounded stone behemoth at the city’s center.

“Doesn’t make much sense, does it?” she continued. “If the keys really are so valuable - if they’re actually the keys to the prize chest - then why would the Petrax family keep them in plain sight like that?”

Cross only smiled. “All this preparing and pretending, but you still don’t understand the sheer pride of dark-hairedes. The greed. See, the Petraxes are just like every other noble family, and they understand those other families. The prize keys have always been around the necks of the heirs, and changing that tradition would be a sign of weakness. Does that put their children at danger of being kidnapped or killed? Of course, but the Petraxes don’t care. They’re more worried about maintaining their illusion of strength, and that’s going to be their downfall.”

Cross nodded knowingly, causing a strand of his freshly blackened hair to drape down over his eye. The hair made him look silly, but perhaps that was because Liral had grown accustomed to his trim blond locks.

“Not all of the dark-haired folks think like that,” Liral countered, recalling Zare and her bright puppy-like smile. Then, Liral recalled the terrified face of her own mother. No. Not all dark-hairs were so motivated by such vanity.

“It’s what people do when they get power. They fear what’ll happen when they lose that power. That’s how the world works. And stop using the word ‘folks’. We’ve been over this.”

Liral crossed her arms and pouted.

She maintained her silence until they finally reached the special Golden Wing entrance to the Colosseum. The entrance open doorway, flanked by hedges, with a golden arch overhead. The doorway seemed to look to a spiralling stairway in the giant building’s side, and Liral had to force herself not to peer around the two guardsmen to get a better look at what laid ahead. Without a doubt, this was the smallest entrance in the whole Colosseum, reserved for only the most well-connected nobles in the whole of Trisal.

Guards flanked either side of the doorway, clad in remarkably shiny armor. One held a guest list in his hands, a list that had undoubtedly come from a black box within the Magistrate’s home.

“Crossander and Liralyne Ashden.” Cross’s introduction was sharp, and he did not even spare the guard a glance, instead surveying the front of the Colosseum like a harbormaster overlooking his docks.

“Let’s see,” murmured the guard. As he thumbed through the long script, Liral’s heartbeat began to quicken. What if he knew? What if her hair wasn’t correct, or her dress was off, and the man arrested her on the spot? What if... “Ah,” the guard eventually said, nodding as he pointed a fat finger at a line on the parchment. “Crossander and Liralyne. Brother and sister. Of course.”

Liral tried not to show her immense relief as they strode past the guards and up the spiralling steps to the Golden Wing.

The Wing itself was like nothing Liral had ever before seen. She’d seen the Wing from down below - it was hard to miss, a big golden platform hanging over the a quarter of the Colosseum - but the interior had always been a mystery to her. When they finally reached the top of the stairs, they found themselves in a huge gallery. Glass windows lined either side of the seemingly endless room, peering down on the center of the Colosseum on one side, while the other set of windows provided vantage over the entire city. Ornate chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the floors were decorated by beautiful rugs and more statues than Liral had ever seen in her entire life.

They were all statues of the Emperor, though she wouldn't have guessed that if she hadn't recognized the thick banded crown atop his head in each depiction. They varied in age, of course, with some of the older statues displaying him as an old man, while the newer ones showed a ruggedly handsome young man with a dimple in his chin, much like the Empire's freshly minted coins. He was the immortal Emperor, after all. To the Lisanai people, he was a god in human flesh, with no worries about aging.

"That's enough gawking," Cross muttered, nudging her. "You're a country noblewoman, not a Ralli farmgirl."

Liral nodded, following him into the gallery.

Nobles milled about. The women were clad in fancy dresses while the men wore fine coats and tunics. They stood in small groups, talking amongst themselves like high-class friends at a tavern...though they were all undoubtedly higher-class than anyone Liral had ever seen in a tavern. Every now and then, she'd catch some of the nobles staring in her direction, and she wished she could just disappear.

"Now we split up. I'll find Perresenda Petrax, and you'll find Sionel. Best case scenario, we both snatch keys."

Liral gulped and nodded. Her hands were trembling.

"We practiced this," Cross reminded her, giving her an encouraging pat on the back. "You're exciting, you're outgoing, you're gorgeous. You can do this."

With that, Cross meandered through the chatting nobles with all the confidence in the world.

"Shadows," Liral whispered, wrinkling her nose. Sneaking she could do. She could handle stealing or running or...well...anything. Anything but this. Yes, she had practiced for days and she knew what to expect, but that practicing had taken place in Kellory's dress shop, and - while she had ventured out in public as a noblewoman - the Golden Wing was an entirely different beast. She had never been comfortable in these sorts of social situations. How could other people have fun with so many other humans around, all being loud, laughing, and talking simply for the sake of talking?

Liral drew a deep breath and refocused, delicately accepting a wine glass from a passing Ralli waiter. Everyone else had a wine glass, after all. She could do this. Her dress was gorgeous and blue, crafted by Kellory's steady hand, and her hair was as black as anyone else's. She belonged here, she had been born for ballrooms like this. It was in her blood.

Standing up straight and tall, she scanned the room.

Sionel. She had to find Sionel Petrax.



There were at least a couple hundred nobles milling about, with servants scurrying in between. She narrowed her eyes. Cross had told her about Sionel, and she knew who to look for: a handsome young noble who regularly wore golden vests. Liral frowned. There weren't any golden vested lordlings in sight.

"Unbelievable. Seems like they just let in any common harlot, these days," said a snarky voice behind Liral.

She spun far too quickly, and found three black-haired girls brushing past her. They were around Liral's own age, but each was taller than her, and everything about them seemed...more. More beautiful, more jewelry, more intricately embroidered dresses.

"Oh, darling. We weren't talking about you, of course," said the center girl, who had a red flower woven into her hair. Her tone was thoroughly unconvincing. "Your dress is so...quaint. Is it homespun?"

Liral's stomach dropped faster than she thought possible. Homespun? Kellory was a professional, and she'd slaved over that dress for days.

"No," Liral murmured.

"Oh," the flower-haired woman said, sharing a smirk with her friends. "It does a great job of covering up the fact that you weren't exactly blessed by the Emperor." She demurely gestured at her own breasts, which were easily thrice the size of Liral's.

Then, as if she had more important things to do than destroy Liral's confidence, the girl lifted a hand to flag down the nearest Ralli servant girl.

"Slave!" she called, until the servant scurried to her and curtsied. "Slave, I asked one of your friends to always keep my wine glass above half full. Does this look half full to you?"

"N-no, my lady," replied the straw-haired girl.

"So why aren't you filling it?"

The servant hastened to do just that, fetching the nearest wine jug. Her hands shook as she struggled not to spill any of the red liquid.

"Go and tell your mistress or master or whoever you report to that you're to be beaten tonight. Six lashes. No, seven, because your curtsy was mediocre at best. Now thank me for my generosity, it could've been eight."

Liral walked away before the poor girl delivered what would undoubtedly be a tragic, forced apology.

She seethed, hands clenched, her lips drawn into an angry line. Maybe Cross had a point. Maybe there was something corrupting about dark hair, and the two kind dark-haired women who Liral knew were mere exceptions to the norm. Or perhaps that trio of three witches were the real exceptions. They were certainly vicious, just as vicious

as dockside thugs - minus the stabbing and slashing, of course - and most folks in the Harbor district were not dockside thugs, so maybe most dark-haired weren't like those girls.

Sipping from her cup, Liral weaved her way through a small crowd. She replayed every moment of the mortifying confrontation in her mind. This was precisely why she'd dreaded attending such a fancy social function. She just knew that the worst group in the whole place would find her and know immediately that she was a ruiner, destined to do everything wrong and deserving of every bit of their scorn, despite her black-dyed hair.

What would they say to Liral if they knew that her true hair was blonde? They'd probably mock her, then have her killed for impersonating a noblewoman. That'd be a rather ironic way to die. Liral grimaced. She'd never fully grasped the danger of her situation, perhaps because she had kept deadly secrets her entire life. What was one more secret that could get her killed? One more mask to wear? One more charade? One more reason to run back to the comfort of her rooftops?

Liral gritted her teeth and refocused. No. She was stronger than that. She couldn't run, not when the heist relied upon her, not when Cross needed her. Lifting her chin, Liral scanned the room, pausing only when she saw the glint of a golden vest.

Sionel Petrax. She'd found her mark. A few years older than her, he was tall and - obviously - black haired, with thick eyebrows and lashes so thick that they gave the illusion of mascara. He stood surrounded by a group of young lords, all barking out laughs and clinking their wine glasses. They were an intimidating lot and Liral fought the urge to shy away from them.

No, you spineless ruiner, she chastised herself. Just go over there and talk to him. Do you want Cross's brother to die because of you? Another death on your hands?

Trembling ever so slightly, she approached the laughing noble with the golden vest. She tapped him on the shoulder and he turned, fixing her with a curious expression.

"Yes?" he asked.

Peering down at Liral, he sounded as if he'd just been interrupted from a serious business dealing, despite the fact that he'd only been having a laugh with his friends. He didn't look pleased and he dwarfed her in size, with arms as thick as tree trunks and brutish hands. Cross had referred to Sionel as a 'fox', some sort of heart-throb nobleman, but Liral's heart did not throb for him. His face seemed to be rather geometrically even, and his features weren't repulsive, but...how did other girls find him to be 'attractive'? To Liral, the man's appearance was threatening, and his brown

eyes were calculating. Predatory. Terrifying. She should run. She should sprint away and...and...no. Not anymore. She wouldn't run anymore.

"Hello," Liral said, raising her chin. "I'm Liralyne Ashden."

"Ashden?" Sionel tested the word on his tongue. "What's that? No, let me guess: some backwater Reach house?"

She eyed the gold chain around his neck. It trailed down beneath his shirt, where - if Cross's information had any merit - a key would be found dangling. Staring into the cloth, she identified the key's precise location...but she couldn't just snatch it. Not while his shirt was still on. She was a talented pickpocket - one of her few actual skills - but she wasn't a magician.

"Yes I'm from the Outer Reaches." Liral forced a smile and inched closer toward Sionel, trying to feign affection. If he was going to steal the key, she'd have to at least convince him that she was interested, despite the fact that she wanted nothing to do with the man. "This is my first time in the capital. I arrived with my brother just a few days ago, and it's been overwhelming."

"Overwhelming," he repeated half-heartedly. "It would be, I imagine."

"Absolutely," Liral said, trying to sound as posh and noble as possible. "Everything about Trisal is incredible: the food, the music, the architecture. Though, I wish I had a guide."

She shuffled another step closer and, hating herself, brushed her hand against Sionel's, letting it linger there for far too long. Kellory had shown her that trick. Apparently, that was supposed to let Sionel know that she had feelings for the man. It was all part of her carefully constructed plan to woo him, a plan that she had devised with the help of both Kellory and Cross. A rather good plan, she hoped.

"You can find one of those for a few coppers in the nearest market," Sionel said, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Not like that, silly." She giggled high and shrill, trying to imitate the way that Zare had giggled when they'd slid down the fountain together. Liral could be flirty and fun like Zare...she had to be, to succeed. To help Cross. To gain enough coin to survive. "I mean a guide. Someone to show me everything the city has to offer. All of the best shops, all of the most beautiful statues." She wrapped her hand around his, and went on her tiptoed to whisper near his ear. "Some of the more...private rooms in the Wing."

For a moment, he seemed to consider her offer. Then he paused, eyed her up and down, and shook his head. What was wrong with him? He was supposed to be a 'fox'. Why wasn't he interested in her?

"If I took you to one of those 'private rooms', I fear I'd accidentally break you. You're so tiny..." He narrowed his eyes. "How old are you, if you don't mind my asking? A bit young for a door-knocker."

"I'm seventeen," she answered, her voice wavering. "And...and what's a door-knocker?"

"Still a bit young, same age as my little sister," he muttered. "And 'door-knocker' is slang for a girl like you. A girl who comes to the big city and sleeps with every man in every Great House. You never see her again, until she's knocking on your door with a bulging belly and she wants you to wed her."

"What?!" Liral squawked. "No! That's not it at all, I just..." She scrambled for words, but - like usual - she couldn't find the proper ones. "I...I..." she stuttered.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," he said, shrugging. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, your parents are the ones to blame. I can always tell when a poor girl is being forced to act like she's smitten. You don't really fancy me, though."

I parted my lips, but he waved me to silence before I could protest.

"It's no matter. You can tell your parents that you slept with me, if need be, and I won't object. I can't go through with the act, though. Not when I know that you're pretending."

Liral gulped and she had to fight back wetness at the corner of her eyes. This plan was supposed to work flawlessly. How had it gone so tragically awry? That familiar hopelessness returned to her, a terrible sinking feeling that dimmed every color in the room.

Just when she thought that her plan couldn't go any more poorly, a snickering laugh came from behind her.

"Is this one bothering you, Sio?" said the harsh, mocking voice.

Liral didn't have to look. She knew who it was: that same woman from before, who had been cruel to that poor Ralli girl.

"Not at all."

The woman disregarded Sionel's stiff tone and laid a hand on Liral's shoulder.

"Are you pouting?" she asked. "Let me guess: you tried to sleep with Sio and he turned you down, so you started crying like a little princess? Did you actually think that you deserved a man like him?"

Liral's cheeks hadn't been wet before that woman began her barrage of insults, but they certainly were after the fact. Tears meandered down to her chin, ruining her makeup along the way. Ruin, ruin, ruin, ruin, ruin. She couldn't get the word out of her

head. The most important task of her life, and she'd ruined it. Why had she ever believed herself capable of succeeding?

"Leave her be, Torra," Sionel said. "Liralyne, you should go. Mingle and make friends." He lowered his voice. "And stop listening to your parents. You don't have to. You're an adult."

Still unable to fetch words, Liral managed a nod and hastened away, trying and failing to wipe her most recent failure from her memory.

# CHAPTER 20

## *The Golden Wing II*

**I**diot,” Liral hissed under her breath. “Idiot, idiot, idiot.”

She was a fool for believing that this plan would work, and Cross was a fool for putting her up to it. In what universe would a man like Sionel want anything to do with her? He carried himself with such grace. The Petrax boy was by no means ‘alluring’, but he had the sort of poise, nobility, and confidence that had been trained out of Liral years before.

She didn’t belong. She never had. The Golden Wing was a world of socialites, designed for and by girls like ‘Torra’, with their perfect looks and their pompousness. Again, Liral had to fight the urge to run, to kick off her heels and dash across the rooftops, never turning back.

“I’m a ruiner.”

She’d let Cross down. What if Cross didn’t succeed in his wooing, either? What if his brother died, all because of her? She just wanted to curl up into a ball on her rooftop, and pretend like this foolish escapade had never happened.

“Don’t let her get to you,” a piping voice said from just behind her.

Liral spun and found herself face-to-face with Zare.

“She’s one of Sen’s friends, and Sen’s friends are all the same. They’re all a bit...” Zare lowered her voice to a sharp whisper. “Bitchy.”

Zare looked as beautiful as ever, an irresistible ball of energy wrapped in a red dress. Her dark hair was tied into a swirling bun, held together by fancy pins. She wore two sets of golden necklaces - likely worth a tidy sum - which both disappeared beneath

her neckline. The corner of her glossy lips perked upward to form the light-hearted smirk that Zare seemed to have mastered.

“Zare!” Liral managed to say. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, and had to bite back a grin of her own. The despair circling inside of her head - the anger, the hopelessness - had scattered in mere moments, leaving behind warm fuzziness. How was it possible that Zare could lift her spirits with a mere twitch of the lips?

“I didn’t know that you’d...” She paused, taking in Zare’s snug dress, her perfect curves, and her surprisingly toned arms. “That you’d be here.”

“Oh please,” Zare snapped. “Stop pretending to be such a doe. Of course I’d be here. It’s one of my ‘obligations’, just like my bloody training. By the Emperor, can you imagine what my parents would do if I skipped out on this?”

Liral shrugged. “I don’t know. What would they do?”

Before Zare had a chance to detail the terrible injustices that her parents would have wrought upon her, a booming horn echoed through the Colosseum. At the sound, the nobles began their slow migration to the edge of the gallery’s railing, all trying to get the best view of the action below.

The battles had begun. A deafening roar rose from the crowds below, and the stadium trembled as over a hundred thousand spectators stomped their feet.

Liral winced. She fought the urge to cower away from the noise, so loud and cruel. People were fighting below, at the center of the Colosseum. She did not know how many people fought, or what they fought. Desperate Ralli folks fighting each other to win freedom? Brave warriors fighting beasts? It made no difference. In the end, people would die, and they’d leave bloody marks all over the arena’s sands.

Blood. Goosebumps popped up along her arms. She hated the sight of blood. She always had, ever since she was too young to understand why she hated blood.

“Look at them,” Zare sighed. “What a load of cocks. So excited to see some poor lad get butchered, and we still have the gall to say that the westerners are the ‘barbarians’.”

Liral looked up at Zare, surprised. She’d thought that she was the only person in the city who didn’t care for the games and tournaments. “Aye,” Liral began to say, before she caught herself and transitioned the word into an awkward, “Ay-I know.”

Zare nodded, eyeing the other nobles. They were all peering over each other’s heads to steal a glance at the action below. Sionel was among them. The rude girl, too. What was her name? Tossa? Tessa? It was no matter. All of the spectating nobles were equally clueless. They were all so...robbable. If Liral wanted, she could have strode through the crowd and emerged with the best single-day haul of her pickpocketing

career. But she couldn't. It was too risky, and there were no escape opportunities. One wary onlooker and she'd be as good as dead.

When Liral didn't answer for some time, Zare ran a finger along the back of Liral's forearm, releasing butterflies in Liral's belly.

"What're you thinking about?" Zare whispered.

"Well," Liral shrugged. "I...I don't know." She glanced back toward the gathered crowd. "Blood, I suppose. I don't like blood. Never have, and I don't think I ever will. Just seeing it makes me shiver." The words left Liral's tongue freely, without the thinnest of filters. Something deep within her told her that she could talk to Zare. That she could trust this girl. "Mum always said it's best to keep blood where it belongs."

"Sounds like she's not a bloody idiot, then. Can't say the same for the rest of these mindless gawkers. Come." Zare locked her fingers through Liral's and began to march away from the crowd. "There's a lounge around the corner. It's the only place where you can hear a damned thing, once the fighters start dying. Let's find ourselves a table."

"Wait," Liral protested. She tried to tug Zare to a stop, but the taller girl didn't even seem to notice until Liral tugged with all of her might.

When Zare stopped and fixed Liral with a raised eyebrow and that gorgeous smirk, Liral sputtered for words. Why had she told Zare to 'wait', again?

"What's the matter?"

"I...uh...the..." Liral stammered. She gazed into Zare's marble-like eyes. They were so bold, so daring, and yet so...concerned. For some foolish, misguided reason, Zare seemed to genuinely care about her. Liral licked her lips. Eventually, her words fell into place, but they did so in a shaky whisper. "My brother. I think he'll be looking for me. Wouldn't want to run off where he wouldn't find me." She forced an awkward laugh, for no particular reason.

"Oh," Zare nodded, lifting a skeptical eyebrow. "That makes sense."

It was only half of the truth. Cross likely wouldn't be looking for Liral, unless something absolutely horrible happened...but Liral couldn't run off on Cross during a mission, however tempting the offer. What if Cross did need her help?

Together, they scanned the crowd, searching for him. Zare obviously did this more out of sympathy than for any logical reason, as Cross's appearance would be a mystery to her. Even so, the gesture warmed Liral's heart.

"That one looks a bit like you," Zare said, pointing to a random man who stood on his tiptoes to peer over the crowd. "He's got the same cute cheeks."



Zare accentuated the point by gently poking Liral's own cheek with her index finger. Liral squeaked but fought the urge to flinch away, then she did her best to contain a tiny grin.

"Stop that," Liral murmured. It was hardly a protest, a fact which her reddened cheeks and her thudding heart betrayed. Licking her lips, she reverted the topic of discussion back to Cross. "If he's not here," she said, thinking aloud. "Then where could he possibly-"

As if on cue, a loud smack echoed through the Golden Wing. It was timed so perfectly, in the lull between rounds of applause, that a good quarter of the Wing's patrons turned their heads in unison. Liral did, as well, and - when she saw the source of the noise - her heart sank.

Cross stood at the fringe of a nearby crowd of nobles, rubbing his cheek. Liral hadn't recognized him because his back had been turned, but he had since shifted to engage the noblewoman beside him...which appeared to have been a grave mistake.

"How dare you speak to me with that tone," snarled the woman beside him, loud enough for her voice to carry all the way across the room. The woman had to be Perresenda Petrax, Cross's target, because she certainly carried herself like the most important noblewoman in the room, her chin raised and her brown eyes defiant. Liral's stomach twisted into a knot. She had half-expected to fail her task, but Cross...Cross was so charming and funny, he was supposed to succeed. "You swine! You rule over peasants, for the Emperor's sake. Have you forgotten your place? Who do you think you are? Do you even know who my father is?"

"Is that your brother?" Zare whispered.

Liral could only nod in reply.

"Apologies, my lady," Cross said, raising his hands in surrender. "I meant no offence..." his tone dwindled beneath another roar of the crowd and - just like that - everyone who'd been watching the games seemed to lose interest in the slapping incident. The woman, however, was not so slow to forget. She stormed toward the nearest servant and demanded another drink in the most animated fashion imaginable, screeching her order above the noise of the crowd.

"See?" Zare said, smugly. "I warned you about her. Do you remember? Sen really is a...bitch. Nobody's even surprised anymore when she tells people off like that. Utterly embarrassing. Mum and Dad never told her 'No' in her whole blasted life, because she was just too perfect. Apparently, I'm the embarrassing one, according to them. Can you believe that? I'd say that your brother just dodged an arrow."

“Wait,” Liral murmured. She glanced between Zare and Perresenda, studying each of them. They had the same freckled cheeks, the same eyes, and the same wavy hair. “You’re a Petrax?”

“Zarellia Petrax, at your service.” Zare grinned that devilish smile of hers and curtsied more gracefully than Liral thought possible. “You seriously didn’t know? I thought everyone knew about me. About the ‘problem child’. Every time my mother goes out with friends, she whines and whines about me, so every noblewoman in the Empire knows that she doesn’t like my dress choices. Okay, I haven’t actually heard her say any of those things, but when her friends come back, they always look me up and down like I’ve done something wrong. Do you know what I mean?”

“Zarellia Petrax. Your parents own the Colosseum...” It was all Liral could say. How could she have been so blind? So stupid?

“It’s the worst,” Zare tsked. “The absolute worst. I have to attend all of these useless displays of cruelty, because apparently it’s my ‘duty’ to look pretty. Fuck that.” With a huff, Zare took Liral’s hand. “Come along, let’s give your brother some time to lick his wounds.”

Liral’s mind was too occupied to protest, and she allowed Zare to guide her to the lounge. They plopped down side-by-side on a leather loveseat. The lounge was secluded and rather dark, with no windows for the mid-day sun to shine through. Because the tournament was in progress, few of the other couches in the lounge were occupied, and only a few other pairs occupied the room, all sitting far too close to one another.

Two sets of golden necklaces. Zare wore two sets of golden necklaces. Of course. Only one of those was for decoration. Undoubtedly, the second would have a key swinging from it. A key to the prize winnings. A key to riches, to security, to free Cross from his pain.

“So,” Zare said, scooting closer to Liral. She smelled of tulips, the fine sort that the Harbor flower-women would sell to sailors who wished to leave their lovers with something pretty before they departed. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to talk about?”

“Ah,” Zare bit her lip. “People say I talk too much. That I should try listening more. Most of the time, I don’t care because I don’t want to listen to what those asses have to say. But I want to listen to you, Liralyne.”

“You...do?”

Zare nodded, then took Liral’s hand in hers and danced her fingertips across Liral’s palm. “I want to know everything about you. Every. Single. Little. Thing. Tell me.”

“Well, I’m from the Outer Reach. You know that already, though. And...”

“What’s your family like? Tell me about your mum. She’s bound to be better than mine.”

Liral’s lips trembled. “My mum. She’s...I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“It always is,” Zare agreed. “You know, Mum told me that she’d lock me in my room for two weeks if I didn’t come to this stupid tourney. Two full weeks. Unbelievable, isn’t it?”

“Mhm.”

“Where’s your mum, by the way? Is she still in the middle of nowhere? On your plantation?”

“She’s dead,” Liral answered. She almost gasped at how easily the words had slipped out. Ruiner. That wasn’t supposed to be part of her backstory...but she couldn’t lie to Zare like that.

“Oh,” Zare frowned. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. Do you want to talk about it?”

Liral shrugged, fighting back tears. “No,” she whispered. “I don’t.”

Looking like the guiltiest woman in the Empire, Zare wrapped a reassuring arm around Liral and placed a delicate kiss on her cheek.

“If you ever do want to talk about it, I’ll try my best to listen. I promise, Liralyne.”

Liral nodded. She tried to gulp, but found that a lump had formed in the back of her throat. “No worries...and please just call me Liral.”

“Gladly, Liral.”

They sat in silence for a while, with Zare rubbing Liral’s back in tiny circles.

“Did you ever get around to reading that book I recommended?” Zare eventually said.

“Book?” Liral asked, sniffing.

“Remember? The Proposal? The one I mentioned in the book store? It’s quite good, you should read it...but don’t go around asking people about it. You have to know who to ask. It’s...” Zare lowered her voice to a hushed whisper, but she still couldn’t hold back her excited tone. “It’s the sort of book that can get you into a whole lot of trouble.”

“Why? What’s it about?”

Zare pursed her lips, her eyes wandering thoughtfully toward the ceiling. “It’s about doing what’s right. Being good to people. Stopping wars and ruling fairly. Nobody knows who wrote it, and the handwriting on most versions is a bit hard to read, but it changes the way you see everything. Everything, Liral.”

“Wars,” Liral repeated. Funnily enough, she hadn’t dedicated much thought to the war in the west, between Kadia and Scythar. It was still ongoing, she’d heard. It’d

turned into a long, brutal affair in the hills, with the Scythari army still fighting for their dead king and prince. Liral shivered. She didn't want to think about any of that violence...perhaps that was why she'd avoided thinking about those poor folks for so long.

"Wars," Zare agreed. "That part is especially important, given how we're about to start another war. I'm not supposed to tell anyone about this, but I'm not very good with secrets...Father said that the Emperor is going to come to our next tourney and he's going to announce a march on the west. They'll halt any future tourneys because of the war, thank the Emperor, but it's going to be a bloody one. I think they're planning to take all of Scythar and Kadia, while those idiots are still busy fighting each other. Can you imagine the Emperor controlling the whole continent? Without anyone to oppose him?" Zare shuddered. "It's going to be bad, Liral, but I don't know what to do."

"You don't like the Emperor?"

Zare frowned. "He may be a god, but he's not a good one. And please don't tell anyone I said that." Her eyes darted around, checking for potential eavesdroppers. There were none. The few other folks in the room had departed, leaving the pair completely alone with a whole lounge to themselves. "There are other things that I could tell you, but...I think they'd hurt me, if I did."

"I won't let them hurt you." Liral's confident tone surprised even herself.

"Bold words from the mighty Liral," Zare said, with her contagious grin.

"Shush." Despite her attempts to keep a straight face, Liral descended into giggles, and was promptly joined by Zare.

"You know," Zare said, with a final giggle. "You aren't like the others. You're not cruel or judgy. You're just...yourself...and that's beautiful" She reached over and brushed a strand of Liral's dyed hair away from Liral's eyes. "Because you're beautiful."

Liral's heart skipped a beat. Her cheeks reddened and she tried to shroud her blush with the back of her hand.

"Zare," Liral whispered. "Thank you."

Her eyes drifted to the two sets of golden necklaces that Zare wore. Which one held the key? It'd be so easy for Liral to snatch the key from the necklace, given how close they were to each other. Zare's hand crept onto Liral's thigh, pulling her even closer. All Liral had to do was to create a small distraction, a feigned slip, a sneeze, and use that time to work her pickpocketing prowess...but she couldn't.

No. Absolutely not. Zare had put her trust in Liral, just like Cross had, and Liral couldn't betray that trust.

“What are you thinking about?” Zare murmured. Her lips were so close that Liral could feel her warm breath. Cherries. Her breath smelled like cherries.

Liral’s gaze drifted away from the necklaces and she met Zare’s gorgeous brown eyes.

“You,” Liral whispered, grinning.

Zare rolled her eyes. “Seriously? That is such an unbelievably stupid answer-”

Before Zare could finish, Liral brought a hand to Zare’s cheek. She leaned forward and - doing her best to fight back the swirl of butterflies in her stomach - pressed her lips to Zare’s.

Zare kissed back. The taller girl wrapped her toned arms around Liral, pulling her close with ease as Liral’s fingers trailed carefully along Zare’s chin. Zare’s lips were so soft and her tongue so graceful, Liral had to fight the urge to shudder with excitement.

It was Liral’s first kiss. Ever. And it was better than Liral could have ever imagined.

# CHAPTER 21

## *The Key*

Liral sat on her favorite rooftop. She rocked back and forth, brushing her fingers against her bottom lip, reliving every detail of the kiss. The way Zare's tongue had brushed against hers, as if it was egging her on. The memory gave Liral chills. She hugged her knees to her chest, biting her lip, and listened as wave after wave crashed against the rocks below.

She and Zare had spent hours together, snuggling tight in that secluded lounge, until the bloody nonsense had come to an end and they'd had to split apart for the victory ceremony. Even so, they'd held hands when the tournament's winner was announced.

"Some 'winner'," Zare had remarked, when they saw the last survivor of the melee. Even from the Golden Wing, the winner looked to be in poor shape: a man whose hand dangled freely from his arm, attached only by a taught flap of skin. He'd won his freedom. He'd never have to work another day in the mines. Aye. Some winner indeed.

Of course, after the event, Liral and Zare had split ways. They'd been in public, so they'd sadly departed with only a hug which had left Liral's lips yearning for six straight days.

During that time, she'd tried to keep focused and prepare for the next tournament. She'd told Cross all about her night with Zarellia Petrax. Cross had apparently recognized Zare as a Petrax immediately thanks to her big brown eyes. When Liral had returned empty-handed after so many hours in relative seclusion with the girl, Cross hadn't been angry, but he had been uncharacteristically quiet. Solemn, almost. In her

initial story-telling, Liral had left out the juicy bits of her time with Zarellia, of course, though Cross already seemed to know that she and Zare were more than mere friends.

“Everyone saw you holding hands,” Cross had told her. “They all think she’s just parading you around to make her father angry.”

That wasn’t true though...was it? They’re relationship meant more than that. It was real. But what was their relationship? What was Zare to her? A lover? An ally? Something special, that much was certain.

However, when Liral had reviewed the night’s events with Cross, he’d been more concerned with the less romantic information that Liral had grudgingly provided. Information that she had sworn to keep secret: the upcoming war in the west, and the fact that the next tournament would be Trisal’s last for months - perhaps years.

Though Cross was skeptical of Zare’s as a source, he had still acted on the information. He’d made fake copies of the key, and even mapped out locations where Liral could isolate Zare and commit her ultimate treachery. But Liral couldn’t concentrate on any of that. For the past six days, she’d only been able to think about the kiss, the smoothness of Zare’s cheek and the Petrax girl’s breathtaking smile.

With only one day left before the looming tourney, Liral’d had enough of the plotting and scheming. She’d dashed out into the night, away from Cross’s flat. She’d needed to clear her head.

So she sat on her roof, rocking back and forth, eyes shut, breathing in the sea. Most folks didn’t like the smell of the sea. That mixture of salt, kelp, and vast water. Liral lived for that smell. In the Harbor district, it was so strong that she could extend her tongue and taste it in the air, wrapping itself around her with the fog to form a beautiful, safe cocoon.

“Do you realize how hard it is to get up here, for someone who isn’t a Dasher?”

The question startled Liral. Her eyes shot wide open. For a brief second, she considered bolting from the roof, using all of her Dasher powers to clear the entire city block in a single leap. Then, she realized that she knew that voice, and her heartbeat steadied.

“Cross,” she murmured.

He sighed, then settled down beside her with a few wheezing breaths. “Gah, I’m never doing that again. I’d rather lift a house.”

Liral flashed him a lopsided smile. She hadn’t seen Cross use his other worldly strength too often, but she knew that it lingered there, just beneath his cheeriness and charm.

“Are you still thinking about that girl?”

“No,” Liral lied.

“I thought as much. You think that you like her, don’t you?” He smile was tense, halfway between amusement and disappointment.

Liral’s heart resumed its pounding and she instinctively wet her lips.

“Yes.”

She waited for another question, but none came. Instead, Cross just fixed her with a look that was halfway between amusement and pity.

“She’s not like the rest of them.”

Cross chuckled, then rolled his neck, looking up into the starless fog.

“Right, right. That’s what they want you to think.”

“Not everyone with noble parentage is a monster,” Liral shot back, scowling.

“No,” allowed Cross. “Just most.”

Liral had more to say on the matter, but she bit her tongue and a long silence settled between them. She watched the dew drops forming on the roof slats, little beads of moisture to which she’d grown so accustomed. Most folks lamented the dew, cursing about how they had to wipe it from their windows when the morning came. There was something inspiring about it, though. No matter how many times the cityfolk scrubbed the dew from their windows, it always came back and made those dreary glass windows a whole lot nicer.

“Nobody spotted you on the way here, did they?” Cross eventually asked.

Liral shot him a glare.

“Sorry,” he said with a chuckle. “I know you’re the best in the roof-hopping business. Just be careful...don’t forget about your hair. You’re out of place, so close to the docks.”

She sighed, then grabbed a handful of hair and inspected it. Though her rather pretty braid had fallen apart during her ‘roof-hopping’, her hair itself was still mostly black. Some of the dye had worn off, revealing a strand or two that glinted blonde, but they were hardly noticeable. The dye would probably last long enough to get the job done. She only needed it for one more night, after all.

“I’m out of place everywhere, I reckon,” Liral replied with a shrug.

Cross lifted an eyebrow. “I don’t know where you belong. Or if you belong here. Or if there’s anyone in the world who doesn’t feel out of place. All I know is that I’ve seen you smile more in the last few weeks than I ever thought possible.”

“Aye,” Liral said, biting back a smile. “It’s been a time.”

“It’s been a time,” he echoed.



Liral sighed, replaying their last few weeks in her mind. They hadn't been idly wandering about the city for those weeks, they'd been focused on their objective: the heist. Focused on saving Cross's brother.

"What's he like? You're brother...Tannon, was it?"

Nodding, Cross laid back on the roof tiles.

"If I had to choose one word, it'd have to be 'annoying'. Mom's always loved him, though...and so have I. He's even younger than you, just a kid, but he's as fragile as they come. If we don't get him out soon..." Cross gulped. "Tomorrow. We knew it'd be a stretch to snatch a key on our first Colosseum visit. Everything will go to plan, from here on out. We'll get the key tomorrow, we'll snatch the prize on the night after, and we'll get him out of that mine before the sun rises."

Liral bit her lip. "It'll be our last chance."

The war was coming. Liral still felt a pang of guilt for having betrayed Zare's trust. Zare had told her about the war declaration in confidence. Ruiner. Zare was one of the few people in the world who trusted her, and Liral had abused that trust. Now, she was about to abuse it again. You ruin everything.

"It will," he agreed. "All the more reason to get you home. Tomorrow is going to be a big day. A big, big day. Just...remember who you are, and who she is. You may think you can trust her. Don't make that mistake."

\* \* \*

Liral and Cross strode up the final steps into the Golden Wing, side-by-side. She wore a different dress than she'd worn the previous week. This one was dark. Almost black, with pink and white flower petals stitched into the stretchy fabric. Kellory had fussed over the dress for hours, until she'd been certain that every inch of the dress clung to Liral's underwhelming figure, and that the straps would not slide off of her shoulders.

Despite the good fit, Liral couldn't keep herself from fidgeting with her frilly sleeves. Their plan was rather simple: Liral would lure Zare into one of the dark back rooms with Zare which were built for the sole purpose of sex. Cross would cause a distraction and she'd use the opportunity to swap Zare's key for a fake. It'd be simple, clean-cut, and terrible.

Ruiner. You don't deserve friends, if this is how you treat them.

Liral's fidgeting, like everything else, did not last. Upon entering the Golden Wing's vast gallery, she surveyed the other attendees and stopped mid-fidget. Her eyes shot wide open and her lips formed a small, terrified 'o'.

Most folks only ever saw the Emperor at a distance. They'd only catch a glimpse of him when his carriage moved through the city streets, flanked by hundreds of guards. Most folks certainly would never come close enough to see the Emperor's thick eyebrows, his handsome face, nor the famous golden ring-like crown atop his night-black hair.

"Cross!" Liral hissed, just after entering the wing. "It's him...it's..." he stumbled for words.

The Emperor sat atop his throne, only a stone's throw away. The throne, which must have been set up recently, was positioned on a balcony overlooking the sands of the arena. Nobles had congregated near the Emperor, forming crowds and chatting, as if their proximity to the man somehow made them more important. From Liral's position, she could see a good half of the Emperor's face. He looked so young. Could he truly have ruled for a hundred years?

Liral gulped, and a chill ran up her spine. She'd been raised to believe in the Giant, not the Emperor, but she couldn't deny it: there was something non-human about this man.

Perhaps it was the way he held his back and shoulders rigidly straight. Perhaps it was the precise, deliberate way that he moved his head, as if he was instructing each individual tendon and muscle in his body. Or, perhaps it was his stare. He did not seem to blink. He just looked. He was engaged in a conversation with one of his lordlings and he smiled humorlessly, leaning forward on his throne and gazing into the nobleman's eyes.

It was enough to make her shudder.

Cross had been eyeing the Emperor, too. There was no fear in his expression, just raw anger. His jaw was clenched and he breathed heavily through his nostrils, no doubt thinking of all the different ways that he could punish the Emperor for enslaving his brother.

"Go find your girlfriend. You know the plan."

Liral nodded. They'd known that the Emperor would show up, but she hadn't expected him to be so early. Nor had she anticipated the extra guardsmen, who were peppered throughout the wing like rats around a gutter. They'd have to be painstakingly careful.

Finding Zare wasn't too hard. Liral could've spotted her bored posture, her loose bun, and her pouty lips from miles away. She was slumped on a couch beside a platter of prawns. She stared at nothing in particular, and popped the prawns into her mouth one-by-one without even removing the tails, just crunching through them with a sour expression.

"You know," Liral said, sliding onto the couch beside Zare. "They're easier to eat if you take off the tails."

Zare sighed and ran her hand through her hair. Or, rather, she tried to run her hand through her hair before she remembered that it'd been styled into a bun.

She sighed again.

"Yes. I know."

"Let me guess: you do it because it bothers your parents?" Liral asked, grinning.

Zare smiled, but her usual exuberance was nowhere to be found.

"Yes. Something like that."

Liral lifted an eyebrow. Zare seemed...off. She wasn't acting like Zare, at all. She wasn't even meeting Liral's gaze, for starters, and her lower lip was trembling, like she was nearing the point of tears.

"Am I bothering you?"

"What?" Zare finally faced Liral and blinked a few times.

"Am I bothering you?"

"No. It's just...no."

Liral frowned.

"Are you sure? Why are you acting like you barely know me?"

"I'm not," Zare shot back, more testily than Liral had anticipated. "Sorry." She drew a deep breath and softened her voice, then tried again. "I'm not. I just have a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

"I..." Zare glanced around, the slightest hint of fear in her large brown eyes. "I can't tell you. I'm just tired."

Those words stung Liral, though they shouldn't have. Zare was entitled to her secrets. However, this particular secret, whatever it was, seemed to be consuming the Petrax girl.

Frowning, Liral tugged Zare away from the other dawdling nobles. Not into one of the quiet back rooms...not yet...but to a back corner of the main gallery, still within sight of the gaudy throne but just far enough away to escape any eavesdroppers.

“Why not?” Liral asked. Despite the precautions, she’d dropped her voice to a whisper. Zare looked legitimately frightened, which Liral hadn’t thought possible when they’d first met. “What’s going on?”

Zare wet her lips and threw a glance over her shoulder.

Then, she spoke with a high, trembling voice. “Do you ever feel like you’re an ox, trapped in quicksand? And every day you wake up and the sand pulls you deeper and deeper?”

“Of course...”

“Nevermind,” Zare said, shaking her head. “I’ve already said too much.”

Liral opened her mouth, prepared to continue her line of questioning, when Zare nudged her shoulder and pointed

The Emperor had risen from his throne. He wasn’t a particularly tall man but he stood with the confidence of the Giant. Turning around, he faced the crowd of nobles directly with those wide, unblinking turquoise eyes.

Frowning, Liral took Zee’s hand and squeezed.

“Good people of the Empire,” he said. “You may in fact be wondering, in fact, whether I am simply here to awe you, or if I am here to make an announcement. Wonder. No. More. For I am here to change the world.”

There was something off about his voice. Something wrong. It was deeper than it should have been, and sounded as if it was being forced into its low octave. His voice was like a boat with a water-line too high, and the captain had filled with the hold with jugs of water to compensate.

“Here are the facts,” he continued. “My Empire is inarguably the strongest force in the history of man.”

Liral lifted an eyebrow and exchange a skeptical glance with Zare. She was no scholar, but what of the Murashi of old? What of the eastern continents, about which they knew so little?

“Fact: it is the destiny of my Empire to rule over all of the people of this land, from the highest mountain peaks to the furthest islands.”

He still hadn’t blinked yet, but that didn’t seem to stop him from pressing on.

“Fact: the people of the west, whether they anticipate it or not, will come to love my rule. They will love me. They will wonder how they ever survived without me.”

He smiled. It would’ve been a handsome smile, but there was an unsettling edge to it which Liral just couldn’t place. In her stomach, Liral’s stomach churned. She didn’t remember much of her homeland, but she did remember enough to know that her people would never kneel to this strange man.

“Fact: we will march on Old Arbor. We will march on Kadia, on Scythar. And we will be victorious!”

At this, the crowd of nobles, which had been largely silent, broke out in a bizzare sort of cheering. They didn't beat shields like soldiers or holler like sailors, they just clapped. Clap, clap, clap. How could they applaud this? Did they not realize how many people would die?

“The kingdoms,” he continued, once the thoughtless clapping had died down. He still spoke with that strange lower-than reasonable tone of voice, with the inflection constantly trending downward. “The kingdoms don't care about the facts. They make decisions based on their feelings. They feel that they deserve to be independent. My sources even tell me that the Kadians host tributes and memorials for dead Ralli, because they feel that the light-hairs are people.” At this, many of the nobles laughed. Zare didn't, though. Her face was pale, nearly as pale as Liral's own. “But guess what? Facts don't care about your feelings.”

The Emperor maintained his unsettling grin and adjusted the golden band atop his head. Zare seemed to flinch when he touched the band.

“Let's go,” Zare said in a hushed whisper.

Before Liral could protest, Zare grabbed her hand and they ducked out of the main gallery and into the dark hallway. Thankfully they'd already been in the far corner of the room, so nobody seemed to notice their exit aside from a couple of guardsmen. Nobody except Cross, that was. Liral was careful to catch his eye before Zare marched her past the open lounge and pulled her into one of the private rooms. He had to know where she was, if she wanted their plan to work. But did she want their plan to work? Did she really want to steal from Zare?

“I hate everyone,” Zare growled. She was pacing from one side of the small room to the other, her hands clenched. “Everyone ever. My mum is the absolute worst, my sister is a...” she lowered her voice, “bitch, and my brother doesn't even care about me. Sometimes I think my dad doesn't even know my name, and I don't even know if I want him to know my name because I hate him so, so, so much. You have no idea, Liral. The Emperor....you have no idea what's going on here. It's...” she shook her head, and tears welled in her eyes. “It's fucked. It's beyond fucked.”

“What's fucked, Zare?” Liral grabbed Zare, putting a stop to her pacing, and helped her onto the low bed. It was really more of a mattress on the floor, and an uncomfortable one at that...though, Liral wasn't one to complain. She'd lived for years without any true bedding at all.

Zare shook her head. A tear streaked down her cheek.

Great. Just great. Cheery, confident, sexy Zare had to choose today to have a breakdown. How was Liral supposed to grab the key, though, without getting intimate? Zare was wearing a tight emerald-lined white dress with sleeves, but Liral's fingers might be just dexterous enough to get the job done.

"That wasn't always our flag," Zare said. The odd remark took Liral off-guard and she lifted an eyebrow.

"Huh?"

"Golden band on a red background. That wasn't always the Lisanai flag. The Emperor changed it. It used to be a dove, I think. He changed it to the golden band, because he wears a golden band...and because of what it represents."

She wanted Zare to explain, but it'd be a waste of breath. Zare already knew what Liral wanted to ask, she just had an annoying way of not continuing until she was prodded.

Liral sighed, rolling her eyes. "What does it represent?"

"The Emperor is the beginning, the Emperor is the end." Zare sounded like she was reciting something. She stared blankly at the wall as she spoke, and her flat tone gave Liral chills. "The Emperor is forever. He is all-knowing. All-powerful."

"Zare..." Liral guided her to the bed, and sat down beside the trembling noblewoman. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She most certainly wasn't. What in the shadows had happened to Zare?

"He does things," Zare said, before her voice caught.

"Bad things?"

Zare nodded very slowly.

"Bad things," she agreed.

"Like what?"

Zare pursed her lips.

"Did he hurt you?"

Zare looked up sharply and met Liral's eyes. She seemed so innocent and vulnerable, unlike the sassy girl that Liral had met weeks before in the book shop.

Eventually, Zare answered: "Not me."

"Tell me," Liral pressed. She brought a hand to Zare's face and ran her fingers along the girl's cheek. Zare was far too pretty to look so sad. "Tell me what's going on."

Zare sighed. "I can't. But...oh, fuck it."

Then, to Liral's shock, Zare reached inside of her dress. She rummaged between her breasts and brought forth the two necklaces. Liral's eyes went wide. The key. It was there, dangling from one of the necklaces, so close that she need only reach out and

snatch it. But Zare wasn't even concerned with the key. She held out the second necklace, a circular silver pendant that looked like an heirloom.

"I didn't even realize that I had a Power, at first," Zare said, fingering the pendant.

"You...you're..." Liral gaped. She reached out and touched the pendant as well. Yes, she could feel traces of magic pulsing from Zare's pendant, ever-so-slightly. "You have a Power?"

Zare nodded, frowning. Then, she shut her eyes and took a long, slow breath.

Liral's heart skipped a beat. This was her chance. If she wanted to pull off the heist, she'd have to make her move. The key was dangling freely, swaying just above Zare's breasts. It was only inches away from Liral's fingers, which were already stroking Zare's cheek. It'd be such a simple matter.

She could do this. She could rob Zare. Zare was a dark-haired and she'd robbed countless dark-haired before, without a drop of remorse. But Zare was Zare. But Cross needed the money for his brother.

Liral gulped. Then, with a hand that trembled far too much, she snatched the dangling key. Ruiner. Ruiner, Ruiner, Ruiner. She cursed herself, even as she replaced the key with its fake counterpart. The fake was about a third lighter than the original, but Zare wouldn't notice that. Nobody ever noticed such minor details, not when they were preoccupied, and Zare was absolutely preoccupied.

Ruiner. You betrayed your best friend in her moment of weakness. Mum was right to leave you.

It was Liral's turn to shut her eyes. She hummed softly, trying to drown out her self-loathing thoughts, and only stopped when Zare spoke.

"I didn't realize until I was fourteen or fifteen. Then, when I found out, I tried to hide it. Mum and Dad were already stupid and annoying. I couldn't imagine how annoying they'd be if they actually took an interest in my life. So, I kept it a secret...but they found out."

"What power is it?" Liral asked, her voice distant. Ruiner.

"Strength," Zare said. She shrugged. "An 'Ironskin' I guess you could call me. It's not too useful. Not too useful for good things, I suppose. Once my parents found out, they made me join this stupid group. It's like a combat club. A terrible, idiotic training club. I swear, it's the absolute worst. They make me sweat so much, and after training I smell like a cow."

Zare flashed her a smile. A genuine Zare smile, not a forced one. It was infectious and, although Zare hadn't said anything particularly funny, it drew a soft giggle from Liral. Somehow, Liral had managed to cheer Zare up. She still wasn't sure how. She

hadn't said much, other than asking a few questions. Had that been enough? Had Zare just needed someone to listen?

Zare sighed contently, laying her head on Liral's shoulder, and all of Liral's worries started to flow away. For that brief moment, she forgot that she was a Ruiner. She forgot that she was a monster, a terrible friend, and a worthless fair-haired girl.

"I wish I could tell you everything," Zare said. "I really do. But I don't want you to get hurt." Her tone suggested a conclusion. This was her limit, and she wouldn't speak further on the topic of powers or what exactly was bothering her.

Liral allowed a silence to hang between them for a while, but curiosity got the better of her.

"Zare," Liral said, running a hand through Zare's ink-black hair. "Have you ever met a Ralli before?"

"Of course."

"I mean met one. Really talked with one, not just gone to a wealthy Ralli shop or ordered something from a servant."

Zare pursed her lips. She lifted her head from Liral's shoulder and hummed.

"I suppose not."

"Do you think you could ever be friends with one?"

"I don't see why not. It'd irk my mother, so I suppose it'd be worthwhile."

They shared another giggle, and she gave Zare a light peck on the cheek.

Zare bit her lip. "Why do you ask?"

"I...I don't know," Liral said, trying her best at a casual shrug. "I just don't think they're too different from us, you know?"

"You really should read the Proposal, if that's what you believe. I think the author would agree with you."

"Is that all you talk about? The Proposal?"

"Only when I'm with you," Zare grinned. "Because that's what's really on my mind...and because it could get me into serious trouble. I can't trust anyone as much as I trust you."

Liral gulped. "Right," she said. She had to bite her lip, just to stop herself from mumbling self-disparagements. The real key, wrapped in Liral's palm, felt like an iron weight. Why hadn't she at least tried to pursue Sionel with more vigor? Why had she decided to prey upon Zare? What kind of person was she? A Ruiner.

A knock at the door put an end to their snuggling, and Zare darted to answer.

As expected, Cross stood in the doorway, a smirk on his lips. He gave Liral a pointed look, and she nodded in silent reply. The job was done, and she'd never felt dirtier.



"Careful, you two," Cross greeted Zare, coolly. "If you go running off to private rooms so much, you might raise some eyebrows. And I don't think the Emperor takes kindly to this sort of," he paused. "Relationship."

Zare slammed the door in his face.

"Hey!" Cross called from the other side. "All I want is my sister. Our carriage is about to leave."

"The tourney isn't even over, yet," Zare shot back.

"We're heading back to the Outer Reach. Father wants her home as soon as possible."

This drew a small gasp from Zare. She glanced at Liral, then back at the door. There was, of course, no carriage to take Liral to the Reach. That didn't stop Zare from looking crestfallen, or make the tears in her eyes any less real.

"Give us a minute," Zare said to Cross. Then, she rounded on Liral. "You're leaving?"

Liral shrugged uncomfortably. "I suppose."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't know."

Zare rushed forward, and embraced Liral in hug that shot all of the breath out of the smaller girl's lungs.

"Zare," Liral wheezed. "Please."

"Sorry! Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to." Zare eased her iron grasp, then flashed another one of her beautiful smiles.

Drawing Liral close in a much gentler manner, Zare laid a tender kiss on Liral's lips. It was delicious, and it left Liral with the dumbest grin on her lips.

"You're coming back, right?"

"Of course," Liral murmured.

"How long are you going to be gone for?"

"I don't know," Liral lied. "Hopefully not long."

Forever. The answer was forever. Liralyne Ashden would be gone forever, because Liralyne Ashden was not real. Had Zare ever known the real Liral? Who was the real Liral?

Liral blinked, and - to her surprise - a tear trickled down her cheek. No, she couldn't get out of this situation so easily. She had feelings for Zare. And Zare hadn't fallen for some pretend 'Liralyne Ashden'. She'd fallen for Liral, and Liral for her.

There was a sinking in Liral's stomach, a dread of sorts. An emptiness. Or, more accurately, an anticipation of emptiness. She'd never be a dark-haired again. She'd never get to see Zare again. In a week's time, her dye would wash out and they'd be

complete strangers, like none of this had ever happened. Compared to that fact, the war seemed so minor, so inconsequential.

Sighing, Zare reached up and moved a few strands of Liral's temporarily black hair away from her eyes. The motion made Zare's sleeve roll back. It didn't roll back far, just a couple of inches, but those two inches were more than enough to reveal the tattoo.

Three rings, all linked, marked the underside of Zare's forearm. It was the mark worn by every Redcloak.

Liral had to stifle a gasp.

By the time Liral's mind began to process what she'd just seen, Zare had already pulled her arm away, and her sleeve fell back into place.

No. No, no, no. Zare couldn't be a Redcloak. She was too pure for that, too good, too loving, too kind. But she had the mark. And there was no such thing as a good Redcloak.

"Liralyne!" Cross called, knocking again. "We can't wait all day, come on!"

Dazed, Liral blinked a few times. She stumbled away from Zare, toward the door.

"Liral?" Zare asked, tilting her head.

"Bye," Liral mumbled, only trusting herself with one syllable.

She only turned around when she reached the door. The expression on Zare's face stuck with her. Zare looked stricken. Her eyebrows were furrowed and her eyes were full of concern. Just before she turned to go, Liral imagined what Zare would look like in a red cloak. That same expression, but wearing that evil uniform. The image burned its way into Liral's mind.

Everything was wrong.

How could Zare be a Redcloak? One of those vicious guards who had tormented Liral for years? They were all so vindictive, so abusive, they raided her rooftop homes for sheer pleasure. No...it couldn't be.

Defying logic, she questioned everything she knew about Zare. What if Zarellia wasn't even her name? Liral knew that Redcloak leadership was recruited from nobles with Powers, but...what if Zare had been sent to spy on Liral? What if Zare had no feelings for her, at all? What if Liral's treachery had caused Zare to join the Redcloaks? That was impossible, of course, but the knowledge of its impossibility couldn't prevent Liral from feeling guilty.

It shouldn't have mattered. What should have mattered was that she'd gotten the key. She'd completed the first stage of their heist. It was the most difficult obstacle to overcome. Now they only had to wait for sunfall and rob the prize chest.

Even so, Liral was so distracted that everything became an overwhelming blur. Cross escorted her out of the Golden Wing and, at some point, took the key out of her clammy fist. She recalled stumbling a few times, but Cross had caught her, preventing any embarrassing falls. Most of the folks there probably thought that she'd been drunk.

She only spoke when they'd arrived safely back in Cross's flat. Even then, she only spoke three words:

“Zare's a Redcloak.”

*I fought for you. I killed for you. I worshipped you. Please, please, please let her go.”*

*Elderly man, blonde of hair. Case eight hundred and twelve. Outcome: strong*

# CHAPTER 22

*With Ink and Quill*

A vote will be held to elect the said council,” Daila murmured, following the manuscript’s words with her finger. She sat in the castle study, legs curled beneath her in her former chair, her eyes narrowed in the candlelight. “Wherein the top twelve vote-getters - in contrast to earlier models of this Proposal, wherein a proportionally representative system was not employed - in a given nation or region are to be declared victors, and the...sanctity?...of these elections must be preserved for the prospect of a lasting state.”

“See? It’s not entirely illegible,” Prince Folston said. Though she couldn’t see his face, hunched over the parchment as she was, she could almost hear the devilish grin in his voice. He took some amount of joy in irritating her, she’d realized. “You’ve read it perfectly well.”

Daila grimaced.

She never should have agreed to review the newest version of Folston’s manuscript. The Proposal, as he liked to call it. A collection of pages filled with so many wild ideas that he had to release it anonymously, despite his royal power. According to him, he wasn’t alone in his ideals. His document’s first version had become popular among some of the more rebellious young nobles around the world, and dozens of copies had been illegally distributed. Why anyone would want to copy such an illegible document was beyond Daila’s comprehension, but Folston insisted that his work was truly popular...and, for some reason, she believed him.

Folston had the distinction of being both the most alluring and the most frustrating person that she had ever met. She’d been working as his loyal maid for weeks. At first,

she figured that both her negative and positive feelings toward him would dull, but that couldn't have been further from reality. Every time she shaved him, goosebumps ran up her arms. Every time he dueled in the training grounds, his muscles gleaming with sweat, she found herself licking her lips. Shadows, she could even feel her heart skip a beat every time she heard his voice.

Though she hadn't managed to control her emotions, she had learned a great deal over the past few weeks. For starters, she'd learned a great deal about Folston himself. The prince had a set of annoying habits, like brushing his hand against hers whenever they stood too near. It was never an aggressive gesture or an act of control, just a brush of his palm against the back of her hand. Did he notice how that contact always made her freeze like a doe? Probably, but that didn't seem to stop him.

Aside from Folston's habits, Daila had also learned how to be a rather adept maid. No, an excellent maid. She couldn't deny the pride that she felt after learning how to properly fold every piece of the prince's wardrobe, something that she'd never bothered to learn in the past. She'd also learned how to clean up wine-stains with brutal efficiency, and how to pretend that she didn't notice signs of the prince's rather obvious...arousal when she helped him dress.

Was that normal for most men, when they found themselves around women? Shadows, was she using the 'fourth magic' on him?

She couldn't be sure.

"It seems like a final draft to me," Folston remarked, snapping Daila's mind back to the matter at hand. "Don't you think?"

That was another of Folston's irritating traits: he was far too attached to the ideas in his 'Proposal' to realize that the document itself was an utter mess. His eyes lit up every time he spoke about his theories, and his vision for the future. It was intoxicating, in a way. He had so many intriguing ideas and his vocabulary far outpaced Daila's own...but that vocabulary was a double-edged sword. Folston was able to present his ideas well when speaking, but he was utterly hopeless when it came to piecing those words and ideas together in written word.

"Absolutely not!" Daila scoffed. "Beyond your bloody awful handwriting, that last sentence is a disaster. In contrast to earlier models of this Proposal, wherein a proportionally representative system was not employed." She crossed out the offending lines with a quill. "Why is any of that even included? Why do you always add this rubbish to your writing?"

"Rubbish?" Folston sat down on the edge of his desk, beside Daila. "It's not rubbish." He sounded a bit offended. "It's context."

"Is it necessary context?" Daila snapped back. She frowned, crossing off another few lines of needless drivel. "Your ideas in here...they're interesting."

In truth, they were more than interesting. Folston's ideas about people electing representatives had been stuck in her mind for days, bringing everything she'd ever known into question. She couldn't even think about the topic without spiraling into doubt, then the utter certainty that she'd caused irreparable harm in her previous life.

Daila gulped, then shook her head. "But we need to make all of this much more clear. For starters, if a sentence isn't establishing a new idea or reinforcing an existing one, it's worthless. Your contextual nonsense can go in a footnote or an endnote, but what you really need is an editor."

Folston chuckled. He laid a hand on Daila's shoulder, and she froze mid-letter.

"I have you."

What was that supposed to mean?

She began to object but he placed a finger to her lips, silencing her. It was only there for a brief moment, but the sensation lingered, as if he'd left some mystical imprint on her lips.

"You're as sharp as anyone I've ever met, and you sound like a scholar when you start critiquing my work. Makes me wonder how you learned so much."

Daila froze. Was he onto her? How much did he know? She had relaxed in her efforts to sound like a slave when she was alone with Folston. She couldn't help it. He was just so disarming, he would never judge her, and he already knew that she could read...but had that been a miscalculation? Was she in danger? Was this the end? She cast a nervous glance toward the door. Would guards come storming through? Shadows, how would Auri fare without her? She'd be so lonely and it'd all be Daila's fault.

Daila drew a sharp breath and scanned the table for weapons. The quill. She could Shape it into a...a venomous dragonfly, and send it darting toward Folston's face. Toward that daring, heart-stopping smile of his that seemed to be burned into her mind. Gah. She exhaled. What utter nonsense? She couldn't hurt him, not when she knew how disappointed he'd be.

"You must have stolen so many books," he said, chuckling. "Most noble children dread their reading lessons. They don't recognize how lucky they are to have that opportunity...you would've made a good noblewoman. What kinds of books do you usually read?"

"Uh, science," Daila answered. "Mathematics? History and such?"

Those were all partially true, but she'd omitted her most frequent genre of study: Powers. Shaping, specifically. She knew more about Shaping than almost anyone in the

world. Before the Kadians had restocked the study's shelves, they'd been almost exclusively about Shaping: its history, theories, advanced usage, et cetera.

"Science," he said, in the far-off tone that seemed to wander through the clouds, alongside his thoughts. "Science is the puzzle piece that doesn't fit the world, isn't it? Or...is it the world that doesn't fit science?"

"You're speaking like you write now. Stop that. What in the world are you on about?"

That made Folston laugh, a hearty sound that made Daila feel...comfortable. As if a storm was raging outside, and she'd just curled up in front of a fireplace.

"Powers, for instance. Why do people have Powers? There's no scientific explanation for Powers, is there? They're genetic, but not purely genetic, and they break all sorts of physical laws. How?"

He seemed genuinely curious. Eager. Sitting on the desk, his trousers were planted on the edge of a freshly inked piece of parchment. That was sure to leave stains, Daila knew. Yet...gah, how was he both so hopeless and so perfect at the same time?

"I don't know," Daila replied truthfully. "Not yet. But that doesn't mean that there's no explanation. It just means that someone needs to discover the answer. That's how science works."

"Fair enough. And the Scythari," Folston pressed on. "Growing up, I thought the 'blue blood' stories were nonsense. I know what people claim about their blood, how it comes from Giant's blood, but that's always struck me as nonsense. There's no specific reason for it to be blue."

"There's no reason for eyes to be blue," she shot back. Goosebumps pricked up along her arms. Did he know? How could he?

"Do you think their blood gives them special powers? We'll likely never find out, unless that Delvaran fellow comes to surface...but I imagine that he's thousands of miles away, by now. As gone as the spring geese. Anyhow, I've always thought that there's some truth to all of those old stories. Maybe they were descendents of the Giant himself. If so, then...then we've all witnessed the end of an era. These are shifting times, aren't they?"

She initially thought the question was rhetorical. However, when Folston paused and met her eyes, she realized that it was not.

"Aye," Daila squeaked, only then realizing that she'd been holding her breath for the entirety of Folston's rant. "Shifting."

"And now all of our advisors are saying that the Empire is preparing to strike. They've doubled the size of their army, fired up their forges, and they're readying



provisions for a journey west. Between that and the Scythari rebel army...I don't know, Daila."

For the first time, she detected a hint of doubt in his voice. He was worried about two armies. The Empire's and hers. Her lads still fought in the foothills like a headless serpent, loyal to a kingdom that no longer existed. Boys were still dying because of her. What could she do about that, though? Even if she snuck out of the castle, she'd have to travel hundreds of miles to reach her army, and - considering her track record as a leader - she'd probably somehow end up getting herself and others killed.

"A day may come when we're forced to retreat from Old Arbor, and leave Scythar to the Empire," Folston leaned forward and clasped her hands. She had forgotten how cold and clammy her hands were, until they were warmed by his. "It'll be terrible, Dai. The Scythari mistreated their Ralli, but the Empire is a whole different beast. The Emperor..." he shook his head, searching for words. "He's a monster. A tyrant like Icevein but more intelligent, more dangerous, more controlling. He forces people to worship him. He works his Ralli to death in his mines. Sometimes, they don't even mine for gems or metal. They just chop at rocks until they die, all for his sick pleasure. He tortures and assassinates those who stand in his way. I've heard other reports...I can't even say it, Dai. He's a monster."

"I've heard those tales," she admitted. Unfortunately, her father's spy network had been more focused on killing than informing, so she'd had no way to verify anything.

"Have you?" Folston lifted an eyebrow. "From what I hear, most people haven't, especially in Lisanai. The Emperor is rather popular there, you know? People think that they want an ironfisted ruler, a cruel leader, they think they want someone who will turn their country into a hegemonic power and defeat their foes. But that always comes at a cost."

A cost. Her father's rule had come with the cost of the Queen's life and an unwinnable war, and Daila's own command of the Old Arbor garrison cost thousands of lives. She'd been part of the problem, just another one of those cruel, dispassionate rulers. But that was before she knew what it meant to be lesser, to be forgotten, to be just like one of those light-haired soldiers who died atop the city walls in a pointless battle. No...they weren't soldiers. Those poor boys had been slaves. The army in the foothills fought out of choice, out of pride for their country, but those boys on the wall were garrison conscripts, holding spears and shields only because it had been forced upon them.

It was just another chapter in the same age-long story of light-hairs suffering and dark-hairs thriving. When she'd been a dark-hair, she hadn't even considered herself

to be 'thriving', or benefiting from the subjugation of others. She'd just...she'd created different problems to fret about. Problems like mud on the hem of her princely coat, or Auri's insubordination. Smaller, less consequential problems than life-long slavery, than reliance upon a master for the most basic of needs, than fear of a scarring punishment if she happened to glance incorrectly at the wrong noble on the wrong day.

"Highness." She pursed her lips. "Do you truly believe what you've written? That Ralli aren't meant to be slaves? That they're...that we're..." She searched for a word to describe the bizarre concept.

"Equal?"

She looked up at him, nodding.

"Why wouldn't I believe that?"

"I don't know," Daila murmured. "Every town, every city, every kingdom is ruled by dark-hairedes..."

"And therefore you think Ralli are meant to be ruled?"

She shrugged. "I suppose."

"Coming from a Ralli, that's rather disheartening," Folston said, which made Daila's heart pang with regret. She didn't like to disappoint Folston, and he wore a tell-tale frown. "Power begets power, wealth begets wealth. We dark-hairs rose to the top, and we made sure that it'd stay that way. It has nothing to do with destiny."

Daila chewed her bottom lip, mulling over the words. Aye. She had been a prince, in a former life, but only because her father had been king. She certainly didn't deserve that crown, or the power that came with it.

"Do you actually believe that you were meant to be a maid? That you shouldn't even attempt to rise any higher?"

She looked up, meeting his eyes, and answered honestly. "I don't know. Maybe. I'm...happier. I have friends." Auri, Mili, Kess, and perhaps even Prince Folston himself. She'd never been so lucky before.

"You're a slave, though," Folston hissed. "And, if I'm not wrong about Marsa, you're a mistreated one."

At the sound of the Madam's name, Daila drew a sharp breath. Thankfully, because she was Folston's personal maid, she no longer had to see the Madam too often. She and Auri had been sharing a room adjacent to the royal quarters, and they fetched their meals directly from the kitchen, without having to deal with the assembly hall. The only time she would likely see the Madam was if Folston reported Daila for punishment, which he would never do. He was too kind to do that. Certainly kinder

than she'd ever been. Even with that degree of separation from the gloved Madam, Daila always felt like Marsa's eyes were on her, making sure that she didn't break from her training.

"That's what I thought," Folston continued. "I've already voiced my concerns about her with my father, but he can be difficult to convince, once he's made up his mind. The stubborn old ox. He thinks that Marsa's a victim, that she's been abused by those Scythari murderers for years. I don't buy it, though. I've seen the way that you maids look at her."

"Aye." Daila shivered involuntarily.

"Maybe you could help me convince him. If he heard your account of how sh-"

"No," Daila snapped, her tone far harsher than she'd intended.

The ice grotto. It flashed before her eyes, just as vivid as it appeared in her dreams. The dark cavern walls, the slow echoing drip of frigid water from the ceiling. Then, the sensation that she was drowning, and that no matter what she tried, no matter how hard she fought, she would inevitably succumb to a frozen, watery grave.

She usually tried not to think about the grotto. But when she did...when she did, it left behind a depressing cloak which pressed down upon her. Pressure. It begged her to surrender, to give up, that the only way she could possibly achieve comfort was through the routine of maidhood. Of folding sheets, scrubbing floors, and removing wine stains from the carpet. The grotto was no longer a mere symbol for punishment or pain, it was something more, something deeper, something that she could not fight.

So she surrendered.

"No," she said, more softly. "I won't do that."

Folston lifted an eyebrow in a doubting 'if you say so' look.

Her hand was shaking. The ice grotto, it was all she could think about. \*Drip\* \*Drip\* \*Drip\*. That sense of breathlessness, the desperate need to draw breath, and the lingering fear that she would never reach the surface.

So, she did what she always did when she needed to clear her mind. She rose to her feet and began pacing across the study, from the nook behind the furthest shelf to the towering oak door, just like old times. She was safe. She was in her study. Nobody was nearby expect for Folston and he would never harm her - he'd already had ample opportunity to do that, but his intentions had proven to be pure.

Speaking of Folston, he took the opportunity to slide gracefully off the table and into her chair...his chair, she supposed. She was Ralli. She couldn't own chairs. Folston eyed her, drumming his fingers on the desk. She tried to ignore the hint of a grin on Folston's lips, and the amused chuckle that threatened to escape from within.

“The words on those pages are more than just words.” Folston said. She wasn’t sure why, but his voice caused her to let out a content sigh and she slowed her pace. “I mean everything that I wrote. It all comes from the heart, and it’s going to turn into reality. By the time I die, this world will be unrecognizable. It’ll be just, everyone will have a say, and there won’t be a single slave. The monsters will be gone.” He paused, and Daila realized that she had paused her pacing as well, stopping in her tracks, her gaze absorbed by...him. “Do you believe in me?”

She wanted to say that she wasn’t sure. That she didn’t know. That a large part of her saw Folston’s work as fairy-tale nonsense.

“Aye,” she said instead. She’d expected her voice to be small and meek, but it was surprisingly firm.

“Then let’s write this next version together. As partners and as equals.”

Daila blinked. “Equals...”

“This is the part where you say ‘Yes’.”

“Yes. Of course.” That reply made Folston grin his infectious grin. Shadows, Daila couldn’t help but smile herself. “Was that all this was? You saw that I knew how to read, so you decided to recruit me as a co-author?”

Folston winked. He looked so regal, sitting on that chair of his, wearing that gold-trimmed Kadian coat.

“Editing all of this...” She laughed, then approached the desk, waving a hand over the stack of papers. There were easily several hundred pages. “It’ll take ages. I don’t know if we can go through this many pages together.”

Pages, pages, pages. So many pages. So much many long, candle-lit nights.

“We won’t make much progress if you spend all day fretting.”

“Oh shush, you.” Daila wrinkled her nose.

Then, she surprised herself.

She sauntered around the table, and ran a hand through Folston’s hair. It was dark as night. And silky. Far softer than she would have imagined. She lowered her hand, tracing across his cheek with her fingernails, grinning as she settled onto Folston’s lap and crossed her legs.

Auri had taught her that move. She’d never imagined that she’d actually use it, though.

She wasn’t sure what drove her to make such a bold gesture. Maybe it was poor judgement, or an out-of-body experience, or perhaps she just wanted to do it. Regardless, it was fun. The look on Folston’s face was priceless, a mix of awe,

adoration, and pleasant surprise that reminded her of a child opening gifts after the Stomping Festival.

He parted his lips, tongue-tied, like he wanted to make an absurd exclamation but couldn't string together the proper words. She felt his chest against her, and noted how fervently his heart was pounding.

“Dai...Daila...this...”

She brought a finger to his lips, shushing him, then she snatched the top piece of paper from her desk. If he could shush her, she could shush him. After all, they were equals.

“Let's start with that monstrosity of a sentence. Shall we?”

# CHAPTER 23

## *Right on Time*

**H**ow can you tolerate this? How could you possibly be okay with constant tardiness? It's unacceptable!"

"Never hurts to be late," Folston countered.

"Doesn't it?"

Without warning, Daila tightened the prince's leather training vest, and took a small amount of joy from his wince. She'd told him that they would be late for his combat training if they kept working on their book for 'a little while longer'. To most human being, 'a little while longer' was a simple handful of seconds or maybe a couple of minutes. But, alas, that definition wouldn't do for Prince Folston of Kadia. To him, 'a little while longer' could mean dozens of minutes or - shadows - even hours.

"Very funny," Folston said with a half-laugh, half-cough. He winked at her through the mirror on the royal armory's stone wall. They weren't alone in the armory. A few other nobles milled about, including Lord Aradon. However, there were no other maids in the armory, as their masters had all been prepared in a timely fashion, and their maids had been sent to the spectators stands. "Why are you so worried about it? It's not as if the Tree stops breathing when I'm late."

"No," she admitted, trying to keep her volume low and her tone measured. She didn't want the other nobles to notice the tone with which she addressed the prince.

"But it is rude."

"It's only a spar with Aradon. He'll understand." He raised his voice so Aradon could hear. The burly lord sat atop a table on the opposite side of the room, chatting with his darkhaired friends. "You can wait, can't you, Donny?"

"Shut the fuck up," Aradon shot back in his booming voice. "My name's not Donny, you inbred dunce."

Daila froze. For a moment, she feared that a brawl would ensue. But then, in the face of all probability, the two men broke out in a fit of laughter.

She pursed her lips, then spoke in a low hiss.

"I don't care who you'll be facing. When you show up half an hour late, it shows people that you don't value their time, that you don't see them as equals. It's not right."

Folston grinned, fixing his cuffs as Daila fastened his leather sheath onto his belt. Almost done, then. All he needed was his sword and his gloves.

"I see someone's been taking *The Proposal* to heart," he said.

Daila blushed.

Shadows, he was right. The book had been Folston's obsession for years, consuming his free time along with his thoughts. These days, Folston was no longer alone in his obsession. When Daila first read Folston's work, she'd been both mildly amused and a bit unsure. Skeptical. After talking through his plans for the world, his vision for a kingdom that wasn't quite a kingdom, where light hair was merely a feature rather than a lifelong sentence, and where laws were used to protect the kingdom's people, even from the wrath of nobles.

"You won't be the only victim of my prose, either," Folston winked. "As soon as you're finished with your editing, I'll make as many copies as I can and spread them to every corner of Old Arbor. *The Proposal, Second Edition*." He swept his arms in a grand gesture, and she had no choice but to giggle.

She wanted to see that world. A world where people believed that they could work together to achieve...something. Anything, really.

But, at the same time, she knew that Folston's vision was only a distant possibility. Folston was a prince, not a king. Though his father was more open-minded than Daila's, King Braum would be resistant to Folston's ideas...and with good reason. Without the support of at least a sizeable chunk of the nobility, Folston's little proposal would likely result in a coup. So, Folston and Daila did what they could. They wrote by candlelight and planned, hoping that someday, some young dark-haired lad or lass would be enchanted by Folston's daring ideas, just like she'd been.

A slight smile graced her lips, and she eyed their reflections through the mirror. Her familiar wavy fire-red locks were styled loosely, framing the delicate edges of her face. She'd grown used to her black maid's dress, as well. She couldn't imagine a world where the garment didn't hug her hips, tightly outlining her decent figure like a finely crafted glove.

The dress was rather flattering on her, in her own estimation. But did Folston like it? She grasped a few strands of her hair and twisted them aimlessly. He stood beside her. He was about a head taller than her, as broad-shouldered as ever, looking rather dashing in his black leathers.

Daila bit her lip. What was going on in his mind? Was he thinking about her? Certainly not. He was likely thinking of something absurdly intelligent, something that surely would soar above her head, and she'd struggle for hours before finally managing to dumb it down to her level.

She sighed. No, he wouldn't be thinking about her. Why would he be?

Sure, she sat on his lap from time to time while they edited pages and he seemed to enjoy that, but...no. As much as Folston claimed that they were equals, she was his property. Nothing more.

"Well?" Folston's smooth voice broke her reverie. "Am I ready to go, Miss Punctuality?"

"Y-yes," she stammered. "Of course, Highness."

She turned to leave, and strode into the hallway with practiced grace. However, she hadn't even made it halfway up the stairs before she noticed that she still held Folston's black leather glove in her hand.

"Shadows," she whispered.

Late and gloveless. No, no, no. She couldn't let him arrive late and gloveless, like some haphazard wreck of a prince.

She rushed back to the armory, and cracked open the door just in time to hear another round of Aradon's laughter.

"So you're giving it to her, then, you scandalous dog?" the lord asked. "You like your women red?"

"No it's not like that," Folston protested. "Daila and I...it's complex. I don't think you'd understand."

Daila froze in her tracks. Oh dear. What had she just gotten herself into? She shouldn't have been listening to this. She should have covered her ears or ran...but she couldn't. They were talking about her. She had to listen.

"But you fancy her?"

"Well, yes. I suppose I fancy her. I wouldn't put it in those particular terms, though..." Folston tried to explain, over a bout of laughter from the other nobles. "She does have a certain allure."

"I knew there was a reason you turned away Lady Netra," hollered one voice. That sounded like Folston's younger brother, Rennon. He wouldn't be dueling, in all



likelihood. He probably wouldn't even be watching the bout, but he was a gossip at heart and liked to chat aimlessly beforehand. "You've already got your fill."

"I am not sleeping with my maid," Folston said, his voice hard as iron. "I wouldn't do that to her."

"Why not?" Aradon asked. There was a hint of seriousness to his tone. "You like the lass, what are you waiting for? It could do you some good, you know? Could make you a bit less of a tight-ass if you have an outlet."

"She's not," Folston sighed. "She's not going to be an 'outlet'. I wouldn't do that to her. And it'd be unfair to her because...even if the stars aligned, it's not as if our relationship could go anywhere."

"I'll have you know that I'm an ordained representation of the Giant," Aradon said, jokingly, causing most of them to burst out in laughter. "Hey now, I can officially marry you to anyone you'd like: a redhead, a turtle, the Great Tree..."

"Shush," said Folston. "No matter what I want, I'll eventually have to marry some daughter of a duke, and I wouldn't want to set Daila up to get hurt. This won't work. She's Ralli..."

"Exactly," Aradon said, lowering his voice to the point that Daila had to strain her ears to hear. "She's Ralli, for the Giant's sake. You're not going to marry her. Why does it matter if you hurt her feelings? She'll probably be over-the-moon that she ever got the chance to fuck a prince. As long as she doesn't get pregnant, who cares?"

Daila eased the door open, just in time to see Folston run a hand through his hair.

"It's not like that," he repeated.

Once the men rose from their chairs, finally ready to begin their dueling, she stepped inside the room.

"Highness," Daila said, doing her best to keep her tone as even as possible. "Your glove."

\* \* \*

"Wild!" squeaked Mili.

"Is that what he said, word for word?" Auri asked, wide-eyed.

The three maids formed a small circle in the stands above the sandy arena. Usually, they sat as a group of four, but Kess had fallen a bit ill in the morning, so she'd been forced to miss the near-daily ritual and poor Lord Aradon had been forced to dress himself.

The duels were well underway, but none of them were too interested in that nonsense. Daila had another reason for ignoring the combat below: she hated seeing Folston get hurt. If she watched, she knew that she'd spend the whole time worrying about him and his utter foolishness. He fought hard and only surrendered his bouts when he was disarmed and pinned.

"Aye. That's what he said. He 'fancies' me."

"And you've got a 'certain allure'," Auri added, giving Daila a pinch on the cheek. "And you're certain that he knows that you like him, as well?"

"I don't..." Daila began to protest, then bit back a smile. She glanced around nervously, despite the fact that the arena's stands were rather empty. With the ongoing war and the upcoming one, there were no tournaments scheduled. Thus, the only spectators were maids and other castlefolk. "Yes, he knows. But, like I said, he doesn't want this to turn into anything."

"Because he doesn't want to hurt you," Auri finished the thought for her. "Isn't he just the sweetest?"

"He is," cooed Mili. "If I were you, I'd go for it."

"Aye," agreed Auri.

Daila rolled her eyes. "Because you're the experts, apparently. Shadows, Auri, I doubt you've ever had a kiss before."

She lifted her chin proudly. "I'll have you know that I kissed Evarr last evening. You know...the cavalry Lieutenant with the King's guard?"

"The tall one?" Mili asked.

Auri's eyes seemed to sparkle. "Aye."

So she wasn't lying. Good for Auri, Daila supposed...but she couldn't let the opportunity slip past.

"Careful, then." Daila failed to conceal her devilish grin. "If you two have children, the monks might think that the Giant's been resurrected."

"Witch," Auri shot back with a shrill giggle. "Suppose it's my own damned fault for rubbing off on you. You actually have a personality now, you're not just a wooden stick. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Shush, you," Daila said.

"Girls," came Madam Marsa's stern voice, from just over Daila's shoulder. Almost instinctively, Daila straightened her posture, crossed her legs as tightly as possible, and clasped her hands in her lap just as she'd been trained.

A quick glance confirmed that Mili and Auri had done the same.

"Hello, Madam," they chorused.

The Madam walked in front of them, carefully studying their uniforms. She looked as regal as ever, with her flowing dress and her long white gloves, though her usual noble bodyguard - Visre, if Daila recalled correctly - wasn't by her side.

After a moment, Marsa nodded her approval and her expression softened.

"Very good. If only I could get the other girls to be so elegant. The lords and ladies know a good maid when they see one, I suppose, always taking my finest pupils."

Daila had to bite back another smile. Her cheeks reddened, undoubtedly visible on her otherwise pale skin. The Madam didn't often hand out compliments, so they were to be cherished, held onto like the rare treasures that they were.

"Thank you, Madam," they chorused.

Marsa leaned in to Auri. "Even you, girl," she added, before raising her voice once more. "If any of you want to discuss anything for any reason, stop by my quarters. Understood?"

Her voice was as sharp and commanding as ever, but her words were so unusual, so strange.

When Marsa strode away, the two of the three maids sat bewildered.

"What in the world," Mili hissed, wideyed.

"I'm speechless," Daila replied, then cursed herself for the inherent contradiction. Gah. Another one of Auri's stupid phrases that had invaded her mind.

"It's a tactic," Auri said with utter conviction. "She's just trying to get dirt on our masters. How else do you think she stays in power?"

Daila lifted an eyebrow. "But she wasn't kind to you when you served Delvaran."

She fixed Daila with a flat stare. "Did anyone actually need dirt on Delvaran? His reputation wasn't exactly sterling."

"Witch," Daila shot back, which drew a curious expression from Mili.

But what if Marsa had changed? What if there could be justice in the Old Arbor castle, without the need for a new Madam? Her heart raced. What if Daila could just steer her in the right direction, without ever having to confront her about the ice grotto?

Auri flourished her wrist. "Whatever. Back to important matters."

"Important matters?" Mili asked.

"Dai's little boyfriend, to be specific" Auri said, wearing her signature smirk. "I was mostly joking about...you know...pursuing Folston. I'd be careful with him. Those lords had a point: it's not too risky for Folston because lords screw their maids all the time, but...if something does happen, it may not be good for you. If he does take a wife, she probably won't want you to stick around as their maid if she knows that he's been..."

Auri took a moment to make a rather unnecessary gesture with her hands. “And I don’t know how the Kadians handle things, but your f-” she caught herself, and glanced toward Mili. “King Icevein didn’t take kindly to half-breeds, or children out of wedlock. They call him Icevein for a reason.”

“Aye,” Daila murmured. She knew. She knew all too well.

She also knew that Auri’s advice was sound. There was no hope for a relationship between her and Folston. If news of a relationship between them became public, Folston’s reputation would suffer among other nobles and they would never support the ideas in the Proposal. People could be willing to accept that Ralli weren’t subhuman, but would they be willing to accept those ideas from the mouth of a man who bedded his Ralli slave? More likely than not, she’d be accused of poisoning his mind, working some Ralli magic to persuade him into writing The Proposal, though that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Even if she revealed her true identity, she was still as light-haired as they came. Hell, if she revealed her true identity, then she’d be an enemy combatant. A war target. Historically, that meant that she was as good as dead, despite how ‘kind’ or ‘just’ the Kadian royals seemed to be. She’d be lucky to survive long enough to explain herself.

A relationship with Folston was a dream, a dangerous dream, one that would only lead to sorrow.

\* \* \*

Ever since that advice from Auri, Daila had been a bit glum. She couldn’t help it. For the first time, she’d come to terms with her own future. She’d been forced to recognize the inevitability of Folston marrying some darkhaired woman. Of him being stuck in a marriage that he’d hate, of her being removed as his personal maid, of being relegated from ‘equal’ back to ‘slave’.

It was enough to make her want to cry. So she did. Sitting on the edge of Folston’s bed, waiting for him to emerge from his post-training shower, she bawled into her hands.

What was she going to be, realistically, ten years down the road? Twenty years? Shadows, would she end up like Marsa? Like Visre, Marsa’s ultimate sycophant?

She wasn’t exactly sure how long she bawled. She only stopped after a warm hand graced her shoulder.

Somehow, Folston had left the shower and snuck onto the bed behind her.

He was still wrapped in his towel, which cloaked everything below his waist. Above the towel, though...Daila gulped. His skin was smooth, aside from ripple of muscles and the small outcropping of dark hair trailing downward below his stomach. Shadows, he was so alluring. It was unfair for him to be so wonderful, especially since he was an insufferable idealist who went out of his way to aggravate her.

He reached out and grasped her hands. His palms were only slightly calloused, and he gently brushed his thumb against fingers, as if he was inspecting the little spiraling circles that made each of her digits unique.

"Am I a coward?" he asked.

"What?"

"Am I?"

Daila furrowed her eyebrows. "Of course not. Wh...why would you even ask that?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Should I care about what the lords and ladies think about me? Their opinions? I know that I shouldn't, but I can't change a kingdom on my own, can I? Sometimes I worry that they'll be difficult. That they won't see things the way I see them..." he trailed off when he met Daila's eyes.

"Is that what you were thinking about in the shower?"

"In a way."

His shoulders were tight and tense. Coiled. She wanted to reach out and relieve him of his stress, of his burdens...but no. She couldn't.

She shook her head, and - desperate to distract herself from those pesky thoughts - remembered the request that she had for Folston.

"Can you speak with Marsa for me?"

"What about?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I thought about what you asked earlier, about going to your father about her...but I don't think that's necessary. I've changed my mind. Or, rather, I think I've realized something about her: she's only harsh on us maids because that's what the Scythari trained her to do. She's as much a victim of the old king as you or me, but she just needs a bit of guidance. Can you speak to Marsa and maybe ask her to be a little less punitive?"

"Of course," he said with an eager nod. "Gladly."

"Excellent," Daila murmured, a wave of relief crashing over her. "And don't tell her that it was my idea, alright? I don't want her to -"

The door burst open, and Folston quickly drew his hand away from hers, reaching for his bedside dagger.

He lowered the dagger when an extremely young maid girl dashed into the room. She was no older than twelve. Her bright blonde hair - brighter even than Kess's - was pulled back and wrapped with a black bow, and her eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Highness!" the girl squeaked. "Highness! Your father, the King, his Majesty. He needs you right quick!"

"Well?" Folston said, a bit dumbfounded. Maids rarely burst into the prince's quarter in such a manner. "What is it? Are you alright?"

The girl just stood like a petrified deer. Oh, by the Giant, Daila knew that look. Daila had worn it herself, when she'd first been inspected by Madam Marsa. The poor thing was intimidated beyond belief. She was a new maid, that much was certain, and she had no clue what she was meant to do. She had even forgotten to curtsy.

"Easy, there," Daila said, as soothingly as she could manage. She rose from the bed and knelt by the girl's side. "Take a few deep breaths. Can you do that for me?"

The girl nodded fervently, then drew in a large breath and exhaled far too loudly.

"Breathe in." Daila said, as she rested a hand on the girl's shoulder. "And out."

After a few repetitions, the young maid seemed to have calmed herself.

"What's your name?" Daila asked softly.

"Opal," the girl whispered.

"That's a very pretty name. After the gemstone?"

Opal nodded.

"What's the matter then, Opal? You can tell us. There's nothing to worry about."

Again, the girl nodded.

"There's...there's..." she stammered. "There's been a theft."

# CHAPTER 24

## *Remnants*

Daila gently coaxed some more answers from Opal, and learned from the girl that whatever had been stolen was dear to the king. Folston had been requested in the throne room for a debrief with his father and his father's advisers.

So, Daila and Folston followed Opal through the castle's hallways and eventually arrived at the throne room's double doors. Folston hadn't been moving too quickly, and he didn't seem particularly concerned about the theft. He seemed more annoyed than anything else. It was a theft, after all, not an emergency. Just run of the mill nonsense that those in charge of a castle were forced to address, the sort of chore that Daila knew all too well from her time as a prince.

Upon reaching the door, Opal gave Daila a nervous farewell wave and scampered away. That poor thing. Hopefully, after Folston talked to the Madam, she'd take his words to heart and wouldn't give girls like Opal too difficult of a time.

Folston and Daila watched the girl leave, then shared a pair of smiles.

"Didn't know you were so good with kids."

Daila snorted. "Good with kids? I'm certainly not."

As a prince, she'd done her best to avoid the little buggers. Opal was different though. Opal was like her when she'd first become a maid: unsure of everything she did, and utterly lost.

"Whatever you say," he replied.

The pair entered the throne room, Daila following at Folston's heels. She went everywhere he went, after all, so she didn't think much of it, until she realized that

there was only one other maid in the room: Auri - no doubt because she served the king directly. Daila gulped. Whatever was happening, it was clearly more important than they'd assumed. The long oak table was filled with a handful of the king's closest advisers, and the king himself sat at the table's helm.

"Is she trustworthy?" King Braum snapped. He was staring at Daila with a level of intensity that left her frozen like a sheep.

"Her?" Folston asked. He placed a hand on Daila's shoulder and squeezed ever-so-gently, just enough to let her know that she was safe. "Of course she is. I trust her more than any of you old leeches."

That earned him a few chuckles.

"Where was she earlier today, during your sparring practice?"

Folston lifted an eyebrow, then shared a glance with Daila.

"What is this, an interrogation? She helped me with my gear, then watched from the stands. She was right next to her friend there," he added, nodding toward Auri.

"Is that so?" the King asked Auri.

"Yes, master," she nodded, then gave Daila one of her infectious smiles.

"Very well. Apologies for the forwardness." The king coughed, then he beckoned Folston to sit. "Dear," he addressed Daila. "Would you and Auri mind refilling our wine? I fear we'll need it tonight."

"Of course, majesty," Daila said. She gave him a crisp, perfect curtsy, then did as he'd asked, skirting around the table with Auri to tend their masters' cups.

"Unfortunately," the king said, mostly to Folston. "We have reason to believe that there is an assassin in this castle."

Daila froze for a split second. No...they couldn't mean her. She'd given up the notion of being an assassin long ago, and she hadn't done anything to raise suspicion. Had she? Oh Shadows. What if they were talking about her?

"Or, at the very least, someone with ill intentions. This afternoon, while I was watching your duels, my chambers were ransacked and a vial of Icevein poison was stolen from an old Scythari vault beneath the floorboards. This happened only days before the poison was to be destroyed."

Daila's eyes went wide. She almost spilled her jug of wine.

Icevein poison. If it entered the bloodstream, it meant a fate worse than death. Daila had seen the poison do its work. Her father had made sure of that. She'd seen victims' veins turn white, their hands tremble, and she could never forget the unimaginable pain in their eyes as they slowly lost every motor function over the course of weeks or months, until their hearts stopped beating.



There was no cure. There was only the inevitable.

“Shadows,” she murmured.

“We don’t know who took the poison, but we do know that it must have been someone who has access to the royal floor: a guard or a maid, or,” he paused, “or even a misguided lord or lady.”

Folston pursed his lips. He wore a serious look, by far the gravest expression she’d ever seen him wear. A mixture of pensiveness and sorrow. It made him look even more handsome, truth be told.

“How do we know that it’s an assassin?” Folston asked.

“We don’t. We have no idea what the thief’s motive could be. They could simply be trying to sell the poison to criminals, which would cause a different sort of danger, but we must assume the worst. We must assume that there is an assassin in this building, no doubt a Scythari sympathizer. Those monsters have been nothing but a thorn in our side, even when they’re leaderless and withering.”

“It could be anyone, really,” Folston countered. “They needn’t love Scythar.”

Daila fought back a faint smile. What would she do without him? He was, of course, correct. Under the definitions in Ostlau’s Principles of Reasoning, the king was making a number of assumptions. She agreed that stealing Icevein poison was likely the work of an assassin, but why did they have to be Scythari? Did the King truly see them as a bigger threat than the Empire?

Also, why couldn’t the thief have other motivations? There were plenty of other types of people who didn’t care for Kadians, or darkhaireds in general. The Lisanai, for instance, or the eastern tribes, or even the islanders. None of those people were friends of Kadia.

The king waved his hand in dismissal.

“I disagree. Nobody loves Icevein poison more than the Scythari bastards. Either way, we’ll be launching a full investigation and we won’t stop until we’ve found the poison. In the meantime, we’ll double guard shifts on the royal floors and encourage people to come forward with any information. Anyone whose whereabouts were unknown during the duels is a suspect.”

Anyone whose whereabouts were unknown during the duels is a suspect.

The words rang in Daila’s ears, and one name twisted around in her mind: Kess.

Her islander friend had plenty of reason to hate darkhaireds. Not only was she Ralli, but she was an islander. She’d probably faced more hatred and cruelty than any other maid because of her heritage, and she had not been at the duels. She’d been sick...but was she truly sick?

Folston, his father, and the rest of the advisers talked about how to approach the investigation, but Daila paid them almost no heed. Kess. She hadn't seemed sick when they'd last spoken, and she had plenty of access...it'd be so easy for her to walk through the halls of the royal floor without raising eyebrows. Kess always seemed so rational and detached, but was that truly her personality, or was she hiding a dark secret?

"Shadows," she murmured, when the meeting finally adjourned.

She could go to Folston with this knowledge, but she had no evidence, just a theory. She'd have to change that. She'd have to launch her own investigation.

\* \* \*

Daila tossed and turned on her bed for hours, but sleep never came. The sun began to peek through her window and she glanced over at Auri. Of course, Auri knew about the Icevein theft, but it didn't seem to be bothering her. Her blonde friend was sleeping like a rock.

Sighing, Daila donned her black dress. She could fasten all of the straps and tassels with her eyes closed by now, and easily sped through the ritual. Then, she put on her shoes and slipped out of the room. She couldn't wait any longer, not when she had questions that needed answering.

She padded across the stone floor, passing other maids' rooms until she reached Kess's door. She laid three gentle knocks on the oak, then stepped back and shuffled her feet.

Gah, was this all a giant mistake? Was she about to make a fool of herself?

She fidgeted with her sleeve. Kess still hadn't answered. Well, if Kess was asleep, then the girl wouldn't mind if Daila snooped around, would she? Maybe she'd find something interesting. What if Kess wasn't in her chambers? What if she was off with the poison, preparing to strike? Daila had to get inside of that room.

Biting her lip, she pulled a marble from her pocket, and held it out in her palm.

"Become," she whispered to the marble, and it shaped itself into the image in her mind: a beetle.

"Unlock door."

Nothing happened.

"Unlock door," Daila growled.

Nothing. Her Totem just pulsed red against her breasts, and she groaned.

"Shadows, Risara," she hissed at her Totem. "Work with me. I'm trying to help."

"Unlock door!"

Still nothing. Daila growled, then tried with all of her might to push her magic against the Totem, but it was as if she was trying to shove herself against a stone wall. Risara wouldn't budge.

"Great. That's just great. Of all the Totems I could choose, I chose you. And this is how you reward me? By being an oppressive, stifling witch?"

Her Totem pulsed green, this time.

"Now you're laughing at me? My old Totem never did this nonsense," she said, recalling her cooperative sun-shaped pendant. Daila tilted her head. "Why is that? Why are you so powerful?"

Kess's door swung open, distracting her from that thought. Daila frantically shoved the beetle into her pocket.

"Daila?" Kess murmured, rubbing her eyes. "What brings you here?"

She wore white pajamas, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and she looked a mess. Her hair stuck out at every angle and her islander skin was far paler and clammy than Daila had seen before. A layer of sweat coated the girl's forehead and she sounded sick, in the way that only sick people could. She was congested, her voice dull and nasally, and her bright eyes had somehow lost their glow.

"It is very early, I believe."

"Sorry," Daila said, wincing. "I just wanted to...to check up on you. I heard you were ill."

"You heard right." Kess coughed into the back of her hand.

Daila laughed nervously, then mentally cursed herself.

"So have you been doing well? What did you do yesterday?"

"What did I do yesterday?" Kess repeated, mulling the words over. "I slept. And I drank water."

Daila nodded, then took a small step forward, trying to get a better look inside of Kess's room. It was a small room, but there was a bed and a nightstand and all sorts of places to hide a vial of poison.

"Are you well?" Kess asked.

"Sorry," Daila replied, blushing. "Yes, I just wanted to make sure that you have everything that you need."

"I do." Kess crossed her arms somewhat defensively. "If you don't mind, I believe that I would like to get more sleep. Aradon wants me to run errands for him tomorrow," she sighed, and let out a disbelieving half-snort. "To prepare his quarters for the arrival of his new sword."

“Of course. Of course, of course. I’m sorry for bothering you. Please let me know if you need anything, Kess. I’ll be right down the hall.”

“Of course,” Kess said, punctuating the statement with a yawn. Was she repeating Daila’s words? Was she mocking Daila?

Daila could only guess, before Kess shut the door in her face.

That left her standing in the hallway, feeling like the world’s biggest fool. Kess was clearly ill. There was no way she’d stolen the poison...unless she’d made herself ill on purpose, or she’d been waiting to become sick before stealing the poison because she wanted an alibi. Shadows. Daila had learned nothing, and she’d managed to make herself look like an awkward idiot in the process.

\* \* \*

That evening, Daila sat frowning in the study, trying to ignore Auri’s chirping laughter.

“You actually thought she was some sort of assassin?! You...you...”

The blonde couldn’t contain herself. She rolled on the carpet, giggling freely.

Daila continued scrawling furiously on her piece of parchment, and only looked up to give Auri a glare.

“You heard the king. Anyone who wasn’t accounted for during the duels is a suspect, and nobody could confirm that Kess was in her room!”

“You’re the shittiest friend,” Auri giggled, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

“I am not.”

“Right. Half the castle wasn’t accounted for during the duels, and you suspected Kess? She wouldn’t hurt a fly. Wait...aren’t you the same Daila who wanted to murder the prince?”

“Shut up.” Daila’s cheeks burned.

That only drew another round of laughter from Auri.

Rolling her eyes, Daila returned to her parchment. For the first time in weeks, she’d been working on something other than Folston’s Proposal, and - as interesting as Folston’s ideas were - the break was much needed. She’d finally finished with the editing process, and Folston had wasted little time, commandeering the royal press to make a few dozen copies of the controversial manuscript’s newest edition. The Proposal was in his hands now, and she wished to reward herself with some personal research.

She bit her lip, and did her best to tune out Auri's chatter. On the mostly-blank piece of parchment, she'd been trying to collect all of her knowledge about Totems. She was hoping to turn them into something comprehensible, perhaps even a book.

Of course, Folston couldn't know about her work with Totems. She didn't want to seem too interested in the topic, lest he grow suspicious. Shapers were rare, after all, and there was a small chance that Folston could piece together what had happened to Prince Delvaran if he learned that she was a Shaper. She couldn't afford that risk.

She bit her lip, drumming her fingers on the desk.

None of her Shaping books had much information on Totems, aside from a vague line or two. Nothing was mentioned about what gave them their power, the details of the tearforging process, the fact that her Totem had a mind of its own, or the potential for some Totems to be stronger than others. Her current Totem was far stronger than her old one had ever been, though she had to beg her current Totem when she wanted to use its power like a child pleading for sweets.

"Why are you like this, Risara?" she murmured to her Totem.

It pulsed, but only barely, giving off a green sort of light. So green pulses were meant to symbolize happiness, affirmation, or something along those lines. Red was for anger and denial. Blue was for...she wasn't quite sure.

"Poor Kess. Kess, Kess, Kess," Auri sighed. "It's a fun name to say, isn't it?"

Daila nodded absently.

Momentarily casting aside her doubts, she jotted down a summary of her findings. She had done a good deal of work on the topic already, trying her best to figure out what made Risara's Totem special. What gave it life. She'd measured its weight, its composition, its shape, and compared all of that to her old Totem. The sun Totem that her mother had given her, so many years ago.

There were still so many unanswered questions.

Why hadn't her mother tried to communicate with her via the Totem, when Risara - a person who Daila had never met - could pulse her feelings to Daila so easily? Why did Risara's Totem have the ability to commandeer Daila's spells and her self-shifting?

"Kess, Kess, Kess. It's like a kiss, isn't it? You can tell a lot about people from their names, I reckon."

Daila sat there, tapping the feather end of her quill against her lips, when a realization dawned upon her.

"Risara!" Daila muttered, her eyes going wide.

The Totem pulsed.

Usually when she said Risara's name, the Totem seemed to react. When she'd first begun the self-shaping process, the first time she'd put this Totem to use, she had spoken Risara's name. Risara had overtaken the shaping, after that, leaving Daila as a ginger. That could not have been a coincidence.

And Risara's tearforging...it was so strong. Was that because the name 'Risara' was etched into the locket? Or, was it something else?

Daila blinked. No, she was thinking about it all wrong. The name 'Risara' was etched into the locket because the man in the locket - the soldier - had loved her. She could feel that love. Daila had never known her mother too well, so her own connection to the sun locket was loose. The soldier who wore this Totem had died with it. He'd died because of Daila's own stupid orders, but he'd died loving Risara.

"Auri," Daila spun. Her hands were shaking, she was so excited. All embarrassment over her suspicion of Kess had evaporated, replaced by the sheer joy of discovery. "You're a genius!"

"That's not news, sweetie."

Daila ignored her sass, gasping. "It's the names! But it's more than just the names. I know it! I know it! I know how to awaken Totems, to make them...to make them more powerful, how to make them special. It's the emotions, Auri! It's the...the things the Totem has experienced. It's...oh, Shadows. If I'm right, then we've made the largest breakthrough in the history of the Three Powers. But it's merely the beginning. With this knowledge, we could...we could make the strongest Totem imaginable!"

Risara pulsed red, and Daila cocked her head.

"Oh. Sorry," she winced. "I won't take any other Totems. You're perfect as you are."

The Totem pulsed green, this time, and Daila had to fight back a grin. She'd made a breakthrough! At the very least, it was a compelling theory. For all of her usual foolishness and faults, she'd done it. They'd done it.

Auri cooed. "You're so cute when you get excited like that, and I do like how you say it's a discovery that 'we' made. I expect to be credited in your book. You know, for all of my wisdom and whatnot."

Giddy, Daila bounced out of her chair and gave Auri a tight hug, startling the tall blonde.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she whispered into Auri's hair.

"Would've been dead ages ago, I reckon."

"Aye," Daila sighed. "I reckon." She shut her eyes. If she could hug Auri forever, she would. Auri had always been the best friend imaginable, and Daila...Daila hadn't always treated others with that same level of care.

Stepping away from the hug, Daila looked down at the Totem swinging from her neck. The last mark that Risara had left upon the world.

“I’m sorry about him. About the man who wore this necklace. It’s my fault.”

The Totem glowed blue, and Daila clasped the locket in her hand, praying to the Giant that blue was the color of forgiveness.

*No, no, no. Not my Yila. Not her, too.”*

*Man, blonde of hair. Case nine hundred and fifty three. Outcome: very strong*



# CHAPTER 25

## *The Heist*

Fog had arrived in force, shrouding the whole city of Trisal in its grey cloak. Liral murmured a quiet prayer of thanks to the Giant and surveyed the Colosseum above her, just across from her dark alleyway. With the heavy fog, the upper reaches of the stone building were completely obscured. Invisible. Still, she could envision her pathway up to those safe reaches, a set of hand-holds and foot-holds that would guide her upward.

She began to creep out of the shadows and head toward the Colosseum when Cross's hand fell on her shoulder.

Boots. Her heart had been beating too loudly, she hadn't even heard the passing column of soldiers.

They marched by, flaunting their fresh grey and red uniforms.

The air smelled of war, recently. She despised the mix of sweat and piss, the repulsive scent of new soldiers, of boys being handed swords and shields. Fools, the whole lot of them, preparing to kill off her countrymen, her family...if she could even claim to be part of a 'family'.

Cross rested a hand on her shoulder once the lads had passed. He nodded up at the Colosseum.

"You know what to do," he whispered. His tone did not sound quite as confident as his words would suggest. There was a lingering uncertainty in his voice. Fear. "You get us in. You know, by doing your jumping-climbing tricks. Find an open window, or a balcony, or a door, or whatever works. Then scout for guards and open the door over

there for me,” he nodded with his head to the small back entrance to the Colosseum. “And I’ll worry about the vault.”

She knew all of this, of course. He was repeating himself again. He was nervous.

Liral nodded, grimacing when one of the soldiers let out a cackling laugh, before turning around the corner. Some lads were rather eager to get themselves killed, it seemed. She had little room to judge, though, given her upcoming fool’s errand of a mission.

Sighing, she returned her gaze to the towering building. Zare lived in the Colosseum. Zare was a...a Redcloak. What if Liral accidentally woke her up, and was forced to fight against Zare? Against one of the few people who had shown her any sort of love?

She closed her eyes, clearing her mind, then gave Cross a much more determined nod.

“So how are you feeling?” Cross continued. “Are you thinking that th-”

She drew her black hood over her head, and ensured that her dark pants were well-secured.

“I’ve got this.”

Before Cross could continue with his typical unnecessary babbling, Liral made her move.

Doing her best to tune out her pulsing heart, she dashed barefoot across the quiet street. Then, she leapt. She sprang upward, higher than any human had a right to spring, and just before she reached the peak of her jump she caught the ledge of a windowsill with her fingertips.

A glance down confirmed what she’d suspected: she’d managed to leap about three stories up. This was good, of course, but not great. After studying the Colosseum each night for weeks, she knew that most of the Colosseum’s lower floors were either windowless or barred. To reach the more accessible entrances, she’d need to venture deep into the fog.

She clenched her jaw and began leaping from hand-hold to hand-hold. She made swift work of it, launching herself from a windowsill to a column, back to another windowsill. And she loved it. The fog, the cool night air, the safety of the night sky. There was nothing better in the world.

After a minute or two of this, she was many stories up - she’d lost track of exactly how many - and she was well into the fog. It spun around her, cloaking the ground and making every distant torch look like an out-of-focus firefly.

Liral was about to launch herself to yet another sill when a noise startled her. It sounded like a human noise, and it’d come from one of the nearby windows. Not the

window from which she dangled, countless feet above the ground, but from one that was two or three jumps over.

“Shadows,” Liral hissed.

A light flickered against the glass, barely visible.

She knew that some of these floors were occupied by the upper nobility. Families like the Petraxes, who had been hand-chosen by the Emperor to have the privilege of living so far above the commoners. Bastards, the whole lot of them...or most of them, at least.

Deep down, Liral knew that she should have just continued her climb. That she should have searched for an open or unlocked window and ignored the noise...but she couldn't. Her curiosity was just too powerful. Shadows, what was wrong with her?

Biting her lip, she took a couple of sideways leaps, and arrived at the curious window.

She peered over the sill.

A small candle illuminated the otherwise dark room. A girl sat beside the candle. No, not just ‘a girl’. A black-haired girl in a white nightgown, legs tucked beneath her on an ornate rug, a small book in her hands.

It was Zare.

Zare let out another one of those stifled noises. A sob. Tears were running down the poor girl's cheeks, and she reached up a hand to clench the amulet around her neck. She stared into the candle, as if it held the solution to all of her problems, and her whole body rose and fell with each sob.

“Zare,” Liral murmured.

Liral wanted to jump through that window, to wrap her arms around Zare and tell the beautiful girl that everything would be alright. That Liral still loved her. That she wanted to love Zare until their hands grew withered and their hearts faltered. But she couldn't. She was on a mission to save Cross's brother, to rescue him from the mines, and Zare...Zare was a Redcloak. A killer. So, Liral did her best to shove all thoughts of Zare to the back of her mind, to ignore the image of the crying girl that had been burned into her brain.

So, Liral blinked back a tear and returned to her climbing with a new vigor.

She wanted to get as far away from Zare as possible. As far away from the Redcloak as she could.

Catapulting up the roof from hand-hold to hand-hold, it wasn't long before Liral managed to reach an un-windowed balcony. The balcony opened into an ornate bathing room, empty now because of the late hour. Certainly, whoever designed this

open-air space had not expected anyone to make the daunting climb. They hadn't expected someone like Liral.

She scampered through the bathing room, over the painted tiles and past the marble basins, and rushed into the connecting corridor. She moved with a mix of speed and grace, swift but not sprinting. Her feet barely made a sound in the dark, empty halls, and she had to fight back a proud smile. This was what she did. She was in her element. For all of her faults and failures, this was the one task that she'd truly mastered.

So she dashed down the nearest flight of stairs. The back door was near the bottom of the building, and the prize room lay further below. She descended with speed, but also with open ears, and passed more floors than she could count. The occasional window was a gift from the Giant, as she otherwise would have had no clue about her location within the Colosseum, and how much further she had to venture.

By the time she reached the lower levels of the massive structure, she began to hear the occasional thumping of guards' boots. Yes, they would be patrolling here. These floors, after all, were the only way that a normal person would be able to access to building.

Avoiding the guards was child's play for Liral. They were too few and far between, only a few on each floor, and she moved past them like a shadow, careful to avoid their torchlights.

Only a few minutes later, she reached that dark backdoor and eased it open. She'd expected Cross to be waiting outside, but he was lurking in the shadows nearby, and only emerged after an urgent hiss from Liral.

"Sorry," he whispered, "didn't think you'd be so quick."

Liral flashed him a smug grin, beckoning him inside.

"So we'll have to go down about two floors," Cross began. "The prize room is underground, and there are at least a few guards 'round there, so th-"

Liral cut him off, abruptly raising her hand, and Cross stiffened. He likely thought that she was warning him about nearby guards, but she'd heard nothing. She just wanted him to be silent. They'd been over this thousands of times, yet Cross still didn't seem to have faith in her to remember the details...either that, or he was nervously rambling again. Either way, she could do without his talking.

They found the door to the lower stairs and moved downward, into the building's subterranean levels. Candles lit the walls. The lighting was much more abundant in the lower levels than above. Curious. Why would they keep their basement floors lit? It

was a basement, after all, despite its massive size and sprawling corridors. Other than the storage space and the prize room, it didn't have much use.

With Cross in tow, Liral moved slowly, and with much more caution. The oaf had insisted that he needed to wear boots for some nonsensical reason, so his steps sounded like the plod of a horse's hooves. Liral scowled, but she couldn't maintain the sour expression. Her heart was beating too quickly for scowling. The stakes were too high, they'd been planning this heist for too long. What if something went wrong?

Thankfully, everything seemed to be going well when they reached the prize room, in the building's underground level. The room was quite easy to identify. Two torches marked either side of the giant metal vault-like door, illuminating the hallway with enough light to make Liral wince. The door stood taller than Cross and wider than the widest of men, a rounded metal plate in the wall that looked to be absurdly heavy. At its center was a single key-slot. She had been a thief for years, but she'd never seen a door quite like it. Maybe, like Cross had said all those months ago, she just hadn't been eyeing the right targets. She hadn't been thinking big enough.

"Did you remember the key?" Cross asked.

"What?" Liral asked, her eyes going wide. "Cross!" she hissed. "You said that you w-"

He flashed one of his usual charming smiles and let out a nervous chuckle, then opened his hand to reveal the key.

"Shadows take you," she sighed.

Even with so much on the line, Cross tried his best to irk her. And, despite her best efforts to stay angry at him, she couldn't fight back a smile of her own. What would she be without him? Miserable. Lonely. Probably dead, as well.

She rested a hand on his shoulder, and watched as he reached the key toward the vault door.

One twist, one turn, and all of their problems would be solved. They'd have more than enough gold to free Cross's brother and...as much as Liral pretended that she didn't want the gold, she did. She needed it. With her share of the gold, she could live without ever wanting for food, ever again. She could dye her hair for months and live the life that she was meant to live. She could...she could even run away with someone special. Someone like Zare. Not Zare herself, of course. Together, she and this perfect someone could live out the rest of their days on a small country estate, surrounded by love, fields, and butterflies.

Cross turned the key, and the vault door swung open.

"What?" Cross whispered.

He stepped inside the vault, his lips ajar. The vault was about the size of a tiny room, much smaller than the average room at an inn. He turned to glance at Liral, with an expression that seemed to ask 'Are you seeing this, too?'

Liral only nodded numbly.

Aside from a table at the center of the room, a piece of parchment, and a scattering of coins on the floor, the vault was empty.

No chest full of wonders, no baskets of gold, no riches.

"By the Emperor," Cross swore, his voice harsh. Hollow. "By the bloody Emperor."

He stormed across the room and snatched the piece of parchment from the table, squinting to read it in the dim light.

"These funds have been requisitioned for use in the defence of the Lisanai Empire." He let out a bitter laugh. "The Emperor took it." Hand trembling, Cross crushed the note into a small ball and tossed it to the floor.

"He can do that?"

"He's the Emperor. He can do whatever he pleases. And if he's stealing this much from his nobles...he must be serious about winning this damned war." Cross sighed. "All this work, all for nothing. All pointless." He pulled a flask from his coat, taking a hearty swig.

As he did so, Liral scampered around the room, snatching up the gold coins on the floor and pocketing them. There weren't too many coins left behind, maybe a dozen or so, but that was still more money than she'd ever directly owned. Fifteen gold crowns. Each clink in her pocket was another few steps toward a better life, and she wasn't going to pass up that opportunity.

"Nothing's enough for him, is it?" Cross seethed. "Nothing! He...he...he's a monster. This gold was ours. Ours. We earned it."

Liral began to protest that notion, but thought better of it. They had put in a great deal of effort...though they were still thieves.

"Aye." Liral eventually replied. She plucked the last coin from the floor and bit her lip. "So what happens now? Do you think these are enough for your brother?" She slapped her pocket. "I know they said they wanted three hundred crowns, but maybe the-"

Cross barked a laugh, interrupting her.

"Not a chance. We're done, Liral. We're ruined."

Ruined. Her eyes shot to his and she shivered. Ruined. Because she was a Ruiner. The Ruiner. Maybe, without her, Cross would have been able to get the key earlier. Maybe he

would have been able to break into the vault and steal the chest before the war began, before the Emperor stole the riches.

“It’s my fault,” Liral murmured.

“What? Why?”

“It just is. I’m cursed.”

“Liral.” Cross grabbed both of her arms, meeting her eyes. “We’ve been over this. Get that nonsense.” He flicked her in the temple, which made her squeak. “Out of your head. We got unlucky, it happens. We’ll...I don’t know what we’ll do, but we’ll figure this out. I shouldn’t have said that bit. Maybe we aren’t entirely ruined. Maybe we can go to the mines and try to sneak past the Redcloaks...if you’re willing to take that risk with me.”

“I am,” Liral replied, though she wasn’t entirely sure why. She was too invested, she supposed. Cross was her only friend, aside from Zare...but she couldn’t think of Zare without getting teary-eyed, so she blinked those memories away. Cross was all she had, and if they couldn’t get his brother out of those mines, then she was a true Ruiner.

“Good, then we can...” Cross trailed off when Liral grabbed his forearm.

“Boots,” she cursed.

Several pairs of boots, in fact. Guards. They were marching down the corridor, about to round the corner and see the open vault door.

“We have to go,” she hissed.

She dashed out of the vault and Cross followed. Behind them, the guards’ boots pounded louder. They’d been spotted.

“Shadows,” Liral cursed.

If she’d been running alone, she would have easily outpaced the guards. But she couldn’t leave Cross behind. The guards weren’t moving as quickly as a Redcloak Dasher would, but they were still running hard, far harder than Liral had anticipated from the city watch or even from combat-hardened soldiers.

Were they part of some elite unit like the imperial guard?

It seemed outlandish, but who else could these men be?

“Intruders!” yelled one guard. “Alarm! Raise the alarm!”

Hand-in-hand, Liral and Cross zig-zagging through the hallways, and leapt down several flights of stairs. One torch-lit staircase twisted into the next, spiralling downward. She’d known that the lower levels of the Colosseum were extensive - folks always said that they kept the lions and other cage-fighting animals down below - but she hadn’t expected this. She hadn’t expected the vastness, the meandering corridors,

or the seemingly endless stairs...but, with the soldiers on their heels, she was beyond thankful for the maze of floors.

After the patter of soldiers' boots had dwindled into silence, they ran down another flight of stairs before Liral flung them around a final dark corner.

Cross panted for breath. He took a moment to collect himself and fix his fancy dark hair, now laden with sweat. He seemed like he was about to say something when a sharp, muffled noise came from down the hall.

Liral lifted an eyebrow and they shared an uneasy glance. The noise sounded both human and desperate. It wasn't a scream, or at least not a clear scream, but there was something about the sound that made goosebumps pop up along Liral's arms.

Wordlessly, they agreed to investigate the noise.

They moved through three dark hallways, following the occasional noises. The noises grew ever louder as they approached, transforming from muffled echoes into unmistakable whimpers and screams. They passed empty barred cages and unmarked doors, and only paused when they spotted the flicker of torchlight from a double-doored room.

"Cross, I don't know if w-" Liral began, but Cross cut her off with a hard expression.

He looked deadly serious, his eyebrows furrowed. She'd only seem him look like this on one other occasion: that night on the roof, when he'd shared his true motivations for the heist, when he'd told her about his poor brother.

Cross crept forward toward the open doorway, where he froze, his jaw half-open.

Shadows. Did she have to follow him? She knew that nothing good could be beyond these doors, but did she have to?

Liral cursed herself for her cowardice and peeked inside.

The room was horrible beyond belief.

It was undecorated, unless one considered dead bodies to be a form of decorum.

Four fallen forms lay still on the ground. Two men and two women. Their blonde hair mixed with blood on the stone floor, turning a sickening shade of red, almost scarlet but not quite. Long chains were attached at their ankles, fastened to metal rungs on the wall.

Two living people were also chained to the wall on opposite sides of the room, facing one another. A middle-aged blonde woman was chained beside the fallen bodies, on her knees, staring desperately at the man opposite her. She wore a regular brown commoner's dress, the typical attire that Liral would have expected to see worn by one of the Ralli women down by the docks.



“Do something,” the woman whispered to the man, tears in her eyes, her voice hoarse. “Anything.”

The large grizzled man opposite her raged against his restraints, every muscle straining. Two pairs of royal Lisanai guards stood on either side of the man, mirroring the pair beside the woman. Their weapons were drawn, and certainly sharp enough to slice through either of the Ralli folks without incident.

“Let her go!” the burly man roared.

“I think not,” said a dark-haired man. He stood tall and lanky at the center of the room, and wore flowing robes. There was an eerie twist to his voice which made Liral shiver. “You’ll have to beg better than that.”

“Let her go, you bastard! Don’t take her! Don’t do it! I’ll end you!”

Like the woman, the burly man also wore brown Ralli garb. This only made the golden band atop his head stand out even more starkly. It almost looked like an exact replica of the crown that the Emperor had worn to the Colosseum previously.

“Is that a threat?” asked the dark-haired man, as he turned to meet the grizzled man’s glare. “How intimidating.”

Liral stifled a gasp.

“By the Emperor,” Cross murmured.

Liral could only nod.

The Emperor. The sick man in the robes was the Emperor himself, wearing that same smug expression that he’d worn during his tournament speech. She hadn’t recognized him at first because he wore no crown. No, that band atop the shackled blond man’s head was really the Emperor’s crown.

“Finish her.” The Emperor gave the command so casually, at first Liral didn’t realize what he’d just ordered.

One of the guardsmen beside the woman tensed, then nodded. He raised his sword and lashed out at the Ralli woman’s neck with practiced ease, as if he’d been tailor-made for this precise task. When the sword bit into her, Liral let out a high scream which Cross quickly stifled.

The woman collapsed against the wall, just like the other bodies, and the grizzled man howled.

“You bastard!” he screamed. “Why Yila?! You cowards! You...you monsters. No, no, no! Not my Yila! Not her, too.”

His words echoed against the walls, and left a stiff silence in their wake.

“You can do him in, too,” said the Emperor. “I’ll need my crown back.”

“No,” murmured Liral.

She felt empty inside. Like she, too, had died. Her whole body shook, despite the fact that Cross had cradled her in his arms.

Why? What good reason could the Emperor possibly have for doing this? No, he didn't need a reason. He was a monster, the sort of evil that - even as a Ruiner - Liral would never be able to understand.

When a guard drove his sword through the blond man, the Emperor did not even stop the watch. He simply turned to a man in the corner who Liral hadn't even noticed: a small dark-haired man with a pair of spectacles, hunched over a wooden desk with parchment and quill.

"Did you catch his last words?"

"I believe so, Your Most Majestic Excellency," the spectacled man replied.

"What number was this? Nine hundred?"

"Nine hundred and fifty three."

"Far too many," the Emperor sniffed. "This whole affair has grown so...time-consuming. How many more have I scheduled?"

The man adjusted his glasses, inspecting the papers on his table. "Fifteen, Your Most Majestic Excellency."

"Very well," the Emperor sighed, receiving the crown that one of his soldiers had fetched. He placed the crown on his head and nodded in thought. "Put this one down as 'Very Strong'. Apparently he really cared for 'Yila'. Now let's move to the next group. I'd like to finish all of these by tonight. We'll be on the march tomorrow." He turned, shouting toward a small wooden door in the back of the room. "Bring out the next group, and make it hasty."

Before the Emperor could announce any further orders, a staggeringly loud bell chimed from somewhere far above, echoing against the walls.

"What's that?" the Emperor snapped. "What's the purpose of this?"

"Intruder bell, Majesty," said one of the guardsmen.

This made the Emperor groan.

"One hideous waste of time after the next. I'll wager your dullards spotted another owl. Now make yourself useful and search this floor, my snakes will clear the rest."

With that, the Emperor reached into his pockets and pulled out a small handful of string. He whispered something to the strings and they began to wriggle in his hand, twisting like...like snakes.

A Shaper. She'd never seen one before. The Emperor was a true Shaper, horrible snakes and all...and he was a bloody monster.

Those poor people...regular people, like the average Harbor folks that she'd seen every day. Why? Why them?

Liral stood. She was too numb to move. Cross had to drag her away, steering her down the hall, but she hardly noticed. Her mind was too focused on reliving her recent memories, preoccupied with the horror on that poor man's face. What had she just seen? Had it all been real? The man, the woman, the blood, the...the Emperor.

Her mind was a spinning mess. She didn't even remember the precise moment when the low subterranean ceiling gave way to a starry night sky. The moment when Cross saved her life. She only remembered the wet tears on her cheeks, and the bitter cold that seemed to suck away every other emotion like a leech, draining the whole world of its color.

# CHAPTER 26

## *Dawn of Horrors*

Liral sat barefoot on the floor of Cross's flat. She stared at the crack between floorboards with the desperate, forlorn hope that doing so would help her forget the screams. That it would help her erase the image of that man's reddened eyes as he fought against his bonds, and of his quiet sorrow after that monster of an Emperor butchered his last kin.

The man's final shouts played over and over again in Liral's head.

Not my Yila! Not her, too!

She shuddered.

Despite the fur coat that Cross had draped over her shoulders, she felt a deep, hollow cold. Almost as if an icy hand had reached inside of her and casually sliced through the taut strand of life that kept her whole, like cutting a harp's string. It left her with a sinking emptiness. A longing for what was, and for what could have been. A longing for her last shred of innocence, which she hadn't even known she'd possessed before she'd witnessed that grisly scene.

"Soup?" Cross's voice was soft and - though he only stood in the kitchen, a few paces away - he sounded distant. Muffled.

Liral shook her head. "No."

She wasn't sure if she'd truly uttered the word, or if she'd only imagined saying it.

Neither of them had slept after escaping the Colosseum's depths. Cross had sat at his table, smoking a pipe and drinking until the scents of alcohol and burnt herbs permeated his flat. All the while, Liral had just stared at the floorboards, watching as a few rays of morning sun slowly cast their shadows across the room.

“He’s a Shaper, I reckon.”

Of course he was. A Shaper, an immortal. Perhaps he truly was a god. A twisted, evil, heartless god of death. A Ruiner, just like her.

When she didn’t respond, Cross let a long silence pass before speaking again.

“You don’t have to come, but I’m going to break my brother out of that mine. Not right now, but I’m going to do it tomorrow night.” He paused, glancing toward the sunlit window. “Tonight, I mean.”

Liral scowled

“I know. The Redcloaks are probably still guarding it.” Cross shrugged. “But our first plan failed, so this is all we have.”

For the first time in hours, she turned around to face him, then fixed him with a hard stare. His black dye had begun to fade rather quickly. He looked more Ralli than noble, like an older, more tired version of the man who she’d met in that dockside tavern, so many days ago.

She spared a glance down at her own hair. She’d taken a brief bath after their return, and the dye had fled from her hair entirely, leaving it with a familiar wheat-blond color. She was back to being Liral, then. No more Liralyne...though, deep down, part of her still felt like Liralyne. Part of her yearned to wear fancy dresses and dance in ballrooms and...and to fall asleep in Zare’s arms.

Cross had been speaking while she reminisced, but she hardly noticed until he cursed.

“By the bloody Emperor. I know, I know, I know.” Cross said, pulling at his hair with a hand. “It’s foolish and stupid and everything else, but what other choice do I have? If I had a chance to free him, to break him out of there, and I didn’t...I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. I’d prefer death.”

She sighed, then went back to watching the floorboards.

“You saw what he did. You saw how sick the Emperor is. What would you do, if he owned your brother?”

Yila!

She shut her eyes, drawing a sharp breath. That helped little, as the images of Yila’s fallen body replayed behind her eyelids.

Not her, too!

“Well, if you don’t want to go, I won’t force you to. I could use your help, though. You’re the best Dasher I’ve ever known.”

That brought the faint beginnings of a smile to her lips.

“Maybe.”

She'd met his lie with one her own. Cross would try to force her into helping, but she would readily volunteer before he had a chance.

She considered saying more when a curious noise made her ears perk, and she cautiously approached the window.

Boots. Boots on cobblestones. It wasn't one or two pairs of boots, like she would have expected from a few patrolling members of the City Watch. No, this was a slow avalanche of boots. Dozens, hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of distant boots, so numerous that they formed a low rumble. She put her face to the glass, pressing as close as she could, to get a better view down the lengthy street.

"What is it?" Cross asked.

Liral ignored him and continued scanning the horizon.

She did not have to wait too long before the first few lines of soldiers came into view. The column marched in unison, as if each step were the beat of a shared heart. One step, then another, as they made their way down the street.

Cross joined her at the window. Together, they watched the soldiers march. Many of them were young and almost all were Ralli. Blond hair poked out of their rounded helmets, their uniforms all shared a dull shade of maroon, and every soldier in this particular column gripped a pike with the tip pointed skyward. Dark-haired officers were peppered throughout. They wore a more violent shade of red armor and sat high and mighty on their horses, as if they were too good to march alongside their underlings. Bastards. Anger flared in Liral's heart and grew stronger when she pictured Zare atop one of those horses, red cloak and all.

She exhaled a shaky breath, and wiped that image away just as drums thumped in the distance.

War-drums, deep and pulsing, which were soon joined by the blare of horns. There was no mistaking the rising melody and the jarring notes of the Lisanai anthem, the ancient prayer to the Emperor, reserved for only the most special of occasions: jubilees, holidays...and wars.

The columns of soldiers flowed beneath Cross's flat like rolling floodwater. At the end of their street, where it fed into a larger boulevard, more soldiers joined the march. Together, they moved northward through the city, a giant mass of steel, armor, and...and they were all likely heading to the land that she'd once called home.

Liral shivered. She stood, biting her lip. For a long while, she breathed low and shallow, and eyed the men as they marched by.

"Guess this is it, then," she eventually murmured.

The Emperor would butcher his way through Scythar, killing anyone who didn't already fall to the shadow-damned Kadians. She'd once thought that she harbored no more love for Scythar, but...seeing the army that would bring its doom, a knot tightened in her stomach.

"North," Cross said, his voice breaking Liral's concentration. "Why in the Giant's name would they be heading north? Scythar's to the west and they can't hit Kadia through the Red Mountains. Nothing's up north for them but cliffs and cows."

Liral blinked, then tilted her head. The soldiers were indeed heading for the North Gate. Curious.

"Maybe the other gates are too crowded," she suggested.

"No. Too many troops to send in the wrong direction. You know how big Trisal is. It'd take these men hours to skirt around and meet up with anyone who took the West Gate. It doesn't add up."

"I don't th-"

"Let's go."

"What? Go where?"

"Wherever they're going. Something about this seems off," Cross answered, his jaw clenched. He didn't even look down at Liral, he just stared out the window, into the distance. "You're coming with me."

He didn't give Liral much time to protest. Turning on his heel, he strode out of the flat. He even left the door open, as if he just assumed that she would follow him. And...well...she didn't have anything better to do, so she followed.

There wasn't much room on the street for regular folks. To avoid the broad ranks of soldiers, she and Cross had to brush against the wood-walled storefronts as they rushed by. They drew a few curious looks, but were mostly ignored. The soldiers were busy, after all. They had to stay in line if they wanted to avoid punishment from the dark-haired officers, who brandished whips from atop their mounts.

They moved through the city from one street to the next, following the flow of soldiers. When they reached the North Gate, columns from nearby barracks were already marching past the granite arches and through the open doors.

Liral and Cross followed.

Outside the city walls, Trisal continued to sprawl across the hillside, a collection of shacks, smithies, and inns that couldn't fit within the cramped city. The buildings stretched northward from the gates, and so did the line of soldiers. Rather than wrapping around the city, the line of men went on and on, toward.....toward the Northern Mine.

“Cross,” she murmured.

“I know.” His voice was sharp. Focused.

Grabbing her hand, Cross led her away from the soldiers. Thankfully, now that they were outside the city walls, the buildings weren’t quite as tightly spaced, so they didn’t have to push by any soldiers. They could afford to be less conspicuous. “I don’t know what’s going on,” Cross growled. “But I don’t like it.”

She nodded, and the pair made their way to the mine.

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Liral had never seen the Northern Mine up close. To her, it had long been a mark on a map. A dark indent in the earth when she looked down from atop a high-enough roof. She knew it best as the place around which sailors and soldiers would spin their tall tales, of beasts lurking in the depths, and of cursed land. That was all nonsense, of course.

The mine was protected by a natural wall, a high boundary of rock with only one apparent entrance. That entrance, unfortunately, was gated and patrolled by Redcloaks. Twelve of them stood atop the gate, hoods drawn to conceal their faces. Even if the Redcloaks not been there, entering through the gate would have proven difficult. At least a few hundred soldiers stood at attention on either side, having reached their final destination, and she had little doubt that they’d soon be joined by tens of thousands more.

Thus, Liral and Cross had been forced to climb atop the mine’s rock wall to get a look inside.

“Shadows,” she cursed, peering over the ledge.

She hadn’t expected the mine to be so...vast. The mine was a mountain. Or, more accurately, it was the hollowed-out shell of a former mountain, and now resembled a large crater. The wall of rock around the mine cast most of the place in shadow. Even so, Liral could make out most of the fixtures that she’d expect to find in a mine: the excavation pulleys and platforms, and the tiers of wood scaffolding that spiralled ever downward, into the darkness.

The mine did have one glaring absence, however. Where were the miners? The weary faces of slaves? The steady ‘chip chop’ sound of pickaxes hitting rock? She hadn’t been to a mine before, but she’d expected to hear those sounds and see...miners. It was a mine, after all.

A figure below caught Liral’s attention, and her eyes went wide.



“The Emperor,” she hissed to Cross, who lay prone beside her.

He drew a sharp breath and followed her gaze.

The bastard stood at the center of the pit. He wore his crown atop his curly black hair, the same tainted band of metal that he’d forced upon that poor Ralli lad. Liral fought back a wave of nausea.

A pack of Redcloaks stood in a large ring around the Emperor, as if they were awaiting some cultish ritual. The imperial guard was also present, gold-cloaked bastards carrying the Emperor’s standard. Oh how she wished she could kill them all...no. She didn’t wish that. She was no a fighter, she was Liral. Nothing more. Plus, after witnessing that grisly scene beneath the Colosseum, she never wanted to see blood again.

Liral blinked. What were those objects on the ground, partially covered by a massive cloth sheet? Shards of white metal, or perhaps bones, but they were far too large to belong to any animals that Liral knew.

“Warriors of Lisanai,” the Emperor announced in his odd baritone. “Champions. Victors.” Though she was far away, Liral caught sight of a smile on the Emperor’s lips. “For millennia, our western neighbors have squabbled. They’ve fought and they’ve cried and they’ve whined like little piglets. Do we have those sorts of aimless wars in Lisanai?” he asked the assembled soldiers.

“No!” they chorused.

“Do we have strife?”

“No!”

“Do our people thirst for clean water? Do they hunger for food?”

“No!”

Liral raised a skeptical eyebrow at this claim, recalling the countless nights that she’d struggled to sleep with an empty belly. Did he truly believe this nonsense, or was this all for show? No, he had to believe his own words. If not, who was he trying to convince? The soldiers present were already his most loyal supporters, his Redcloak fanatics and his personal guard.

The Emperor paused his speech and gestured toward a dark tunnel nearby. The Redcloak beside the tunnel’s mouth nodded, then grabbed a chain from the ground and tugged. One tug, two tugs, and then...then the first shackled miner stumbled out of the tunnel, and into the Emperor’s iron gaze. More followed, until dozens of miners exited, and swayed before the Emperor. They were surrounded on all sides by the layer of Redcloaks and looked beyond exhausted, barely able to keep their footing.

Cross let out a low growl. Liral flinched. She studied his face and...oh, Shadows. There were so many shades of hurt to behold: sorrow, fear, and a bursting rage that she'd seldom witnessed. It was the same rage as that lad from below the Colosseum, the rage of a man with almost nothing left to lose.

"Your brother?" she asked, unsure if the question would help or hurt the situation.

Cross responded by pointing his index finger. His other four fingers were clenched so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. It took her a moment to follow his gaze, but once she saw the young man down below, she knew immediately it was Cross's brother. It was Tannon.

He had the same strawberry blond hair as Cross, the same prominent nose, and she would have wagered a gold crown that he had the same booming laugh. That laugh seemed like a distant prospect, these days. The poor lad probably hadn't laughed in weeks. Months, maybe. She knew that sorrow, that loneliness. He stood there in line with the others, shackles around his legs and wrists, and there was no fear in his eyes. There was only one emotion, and it was far worse than fear: resignation.

The Emperor smiled, continuing his speech. "They have towns and farms, but no plantations. And what's the result?" He paused for a moment, then answered his own question. "Hunger! Suffering! One might choose to study the western slime, and think that agony is all they know. All. They. Know. And they have not learned. I've received intelligence that some of the Kadian 'nobles' want to grant representation to the Ralli. Imagine a land so desperate. So lawless. A land without traditions, without respect for lineage, for order, for civilization." He opened his hands, his palms up toward the sky. "But I will fix that. I will fix them. I will show them order."

The soldiers cheered, and the Emperor approached the line of miners. He laid his hands on two miners' shoulders. "I will show them true power. We will show them true power. Become!"

As soon as Emperor uttered that final word, the two miners began to change. Their shackles snapped as their arms and legs ballooned in size. They grew larger and larger, until they towered over the Emperor, easily twice the height of a normal man. Their skin lost its color, turning bone-white and their hair disappeared. Their eyes grew large, then glazed over and became milky. Grey. They were the most terrifying creatures that Liral had ever seen. 'Creatures', for they were certainly not men. Not any more. Their teeth glinted, long as sharp, like those of a wild beast, as they opened their mouths and panted.

"Stand at attention," the Emperor ordered.

The two monsters - ghosts, more like, for they looked ghostly white - straightened themselves at his command.

"Excellent. Who's next?" the Emperor asked with a sick, proud smile.

"No," Cross seethed as the Emperor made his way down the line of horrified miners, transforming each of them into one of those...those beasts. He had taken his time on the first couple of monsters, it seemed, and raced to transform the rest. "No!"

Liral grabbed Cross's shoulder, holding him back lest he do something foolish, like drop down the sixty-plus feet and try to rescue Tannon from the crowd of Redcloaks. She couldn't stop him if he chose to do that, of course, but she held him regardless.

When the Emperor approached his brother, Liral had to wrap herself around Cross. She squeezed, as if that would help, and felt his rapid heartbeat.

"Don't look," she whispered. "Please, Cross."

But he looked. He watched as his brother turned into one of those ghostly things.

He screamed, but Liral was quick to put a hand over his mouth, stifling him. Tears ran over her hand.

"Look at me," she hissed, and Cross finally listened. They held each other's gaze, and another tear meandered down his cheek. He was broken. His breathing was ragged. Heavy. His chest rose and fell with each breath, then gradually began to steady, falling into rhythm with Liral's own breaths.

"I know," she said. It was all she could say. "I know, I know, I know."

She clung to him. They did their best to tune out the terrible sounds from below. The screams, the pleas, and the sickening crack of bones rearranging themselves. They ignored it all, until the ground itself began to tremble.

"And now," the Emperor addressed the dozens of ghosts. Kneeling beside the giant cloth sheet, he rested his hand on one of those strange white objects. "My champions, witness the fruit of your labor."

A Redcloak pulled back the cloth, revealing even more white objects beneath. No, not 'objects'. Bones. Fully uncloaked, their nature became clear. Ribs, arms, a skull, and every other bone that one could expect. They were all arranged in the form of a human, but each bone was easily fifty times larger than it should have been.

"Giant bless us," Liral whispered.

Cross gasped beside her as the bones began to rise from the ground. It was as if some mystical force was pulling them up, and weaving them together. It was horrible, so profoundly wrong. The bones rose and rose, until the skull rose past the top of the mine, into the open air. Flesh filled the space between the bones, as if conjured from nothingness, and gave the creature a layer of grey, dead skin.

“Giant,” Liral choked out the word.

And it was. It was a giant, just as large as they looked in the religious paintings, and more horrifying than anything Liral had ever seen. There was an inherent wrongness about the giant, something off, a sense of decay that the Emperor’s Shaping could not undo. It sickened her, and she clung tighter to Cross.

The giant swiveled to the left, to the right, but his head was so far above Liral and Cross that he did not seem to be able to see them.

“Old Arbor will fall!” the Emperor shouted, his voice echoing through the mine. “And when their Tree is ripped from the ground by the hands of their ‘god’, we’ll see how much faith the heretics have left. They will bend the knee, they will see the value of order, of greatness.”

Liral whimpered.

Her old homeland was a distant memory. She hadn’t been there since childhood, yet...she could still envision those poor folks in Old Arbor, slaughtered just like ‘Yila’. And - as fuzzy as her memories were - she could also picture the Great Tree toppling down. The strain of its roots, the gruesome crack of its branches...it was a scene so vivid and so terrible that she had to bite back a scream.

“Onward!” The Emperor called. “To the west! To glory!”

Lifting its heavy leg in a surprisingly swift motion, the giant rose out of the mine pit. The Redcloaks began to stream out of the mine, as well, along with those ghostly beasts that had once been miners...and the ghost that had been Cross’s little brother.

“We have to stop them,” Liral whispered.

Cross stared numbly over the edge of the mine shaft, glaring down at the Emperor. He seemed to be eyeing the floor of the mine, calculating, as if he was weighing the idea of jumping down to his inevitable death or capture. All traces of his usual joviality had fled. He was a husk, a shell, and Liral knew exactly how that felt.

Clenching her jaw, she rose to her feet and offered him a hand.

Someone had to be the strong one. And this time, for the first time in her life, she would take that mantle.

“It’s two week’s march,” Liral said, when Cross didn’t take her hand. “We have time, so we’ll figure something out. We always do.”

He turned to look at her. Dried tear-streaks marked his cheeks, and he furrowed his brow.

“Okay, we don’t always. But we will this time. What do you say? One more try?”

He stared at her for a long while. Then, just when she thought that he might have truly given up, he let out a sigh and accepted her hand.

*“Even men with the best of intentions can be led astray by fear. Rulers, in particular, suffer from an age-old fear that their relinquishment of power will lead to the loss of everything they once held dear, to the loss of all civilization, and to unimaginable tragedy. Thus, they cling to every bit of their power. Rather than improving the world, maintaining that power becomes the primary function of their rulership, and the cycle goes on.”*

*The Proposal. Chapter Eight, Volume One.*

# CHAPTER 27

## *Sacrifice*

Daila hummed to herself in Folston's study. She sat in her old armchair, which now felt massive, and tucked her legs beneath her as she studied the long manuscript. Names upon names. Maids, cooks, stable boys, guards, lords, and ladies. Too many names count. But somewhere in that Giant-scorned list, among the thousand-odd names, was the identity of the Icevein thief.

"Hm," she murmured, tapping the end of her stylus against her bottom lip. She'd done her best to narrow down the list of possible suspects to those with means and motive. While the 'means' qualifier had helped her eliminate a good chunk of names, she'd struggled to find any specific person with a known motive. Shadows, who would want to steal a vial of that terrible poison?

"You're just going to frustrate yourseellllf," Auri cooed from the other side of the oak desk. She was grinning as she moved her finger across a page in her book. It was one of those books about heroism and dragons. It had undoubtedly been written for children, but considering how Daila had only begun teaching Auri how to read a few days prior, Auri's progress was impressive.

Sadly, her newfound pride in reading had left her in an insufferably arrogant mood. Daila sighed.

"You really should go back to writing about your little Totems. You're never going to find out who took the poison," Auri said, then paused, looking up from her book. "That makes it sound like I stole it, doesn't it? Maybe I did."

"I know it wasn't you," Daila groaned. She leaned back in the chair, and stretched her arms. "You were at the bloody practice duels."

“They weren’t that bloody.”

“Auri,” Daila massaged her temples. “I swear to the Giant. I’m trying to take this seriously. It’s poison, Auri. This is not a game.”

Auri only shrugged, and returned to her book. “Nothing to worry about. If I’d stolen that poison, I would’ve just s-”

“Sold it on the black market, I know. I’m not a dog, you don’t have to tell me a dozen times. But even if the thief did sell it, there’d still be a criminal running around Old Arbor with a full vial of Icevein.”

“I suppose. So, do you have any leads yet?”

“You know the answer,” Daila said through clenched teeth.

“Any suspicions then, Miss Investigator?” Auri asked with one of her giddy smiles. She just loved to see Daila get frustrated, didn’t she? She simply couldn’t seem to pass up an opportunity to tease. “You don’t still suspect our poor little Kess-flower, do you?”

Daila’s cheeks burned. “No,” she answered. Her tone was as sharp as steel. She still hated herself for suspecting Kess, and Auri knew that. “There is one development,” she eventually admitted.

“Oh, do tell.”

“Well,” Daila bit her lip. “Early on I’d ruled out Rennon, you know...Folston’s younger brother. I’d seen him in the armory before the duels, so I thought he couldn’t be a suspect...but I don’t believe he actually watched the dueling. He certainly had access to the royal floor, as well.”

“Scandalous,” Auri whispered.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Daila snapped at her. “Though...maybe...who knows.”

“Could’ve been Folston.” Auri’s tone was shrill and airy, as if she was trying to imitate Daila. “He’s only an uneven staircase away from being King.”

“No, you dunce,” Daila groaned. She moved to slap Auri’s forearm, but Auri pulled away with a taunting smile. “Folston was dueling,” Daila continued. “You saw him dueling, for the Giant’s sake. And...shadows, why would you even joke about that? Aren’t you supposed to be the King’s most trusted maid?”

“I just entertain him more than any of you boring lot.” She lowered her voice, batting her lashes. “Not in the same way that you entertain the prince, I reckon.”

“Don’t say things like that!” Daila hissed. Her eyes darted to the door, which thankfully remained shut. “Someone could hear you and get the wrong idea.”

“Or the right idea. Someday, I’ll barge in on you two lovebirds at the exact right time. Mark my words.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Daila had tried to inject some harshness into her voice. Some of that bitter cold that she’d used in her previous life, which had turned maids’ faces white. But, with her cheeks turning scarlet and a grin on her lips, she couldn’t manage to sound fearsome.

“Too late, I already promised it.” Auri smiled, flipping through her book. “I can already imagine your face. Folston, I love you!” she mocked.

Daila only sighed, and returned to her manuscript. To her seemingly endless list of names.

Hiara. A maid who worked in the laundry room. She’d been among the names listed on the castle’s ledger, but Daila had never seen her before. Shadows, she hadn’t ever met the majority of these names. During the theft, Hiara hadn’t been at the dueling arena and had no obvious excuse...but neither did anyone else.

Daila brushed her hair out of her eyes and scanned the list, searching for...she had no clue.

There was Opal’s name, the poor messenger girl with the strikingly blonde hair and a nervous stutter. Daila made a silent prayer that Marsa was treating the girl well. Folston probably still hadn’t talked to the Madam. Knowing him, he’d likely forgotten, or been so preoccupied with everything else that he’d let the task bury itself in the back corner of his mind, like a blasted mole. He was like that, sometimes, and it was beyond infuriating.

Just as she began to re-immense herself in her list, the study door popped open to reveal the frustratingly handsome face that she’d come to know so well. That dark, wavy hair, and those eyes...those bright green eyes. She could have stared into them until the end of time, could have surrendered herself to them, and to the subtle kindness that rested in their depths.

She sighed, tilting her head, and let her stare meander down to his lips.

Folston was not wearing his usual laid-back smile. Instead, his eyebrows were furrowed in concern, which made Daila blink to alertness.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, perhaps too sharply.

“We’ve been summoned to throne room. I think it’s rather important, and it has to do with Lisanai.”

\* \* \*



“Good,” King Braum barked, when the three of them arrived. “Girls, wine,” he ordered. “You,” he pointed to Folston, then jabbed a thumb to the seat beside him on the long oak table. “Sit.”

Daila and Auri knew what that meant, of course, and went about uncorking a pair of red bottles from the nearest rack. Like before, there were nearly a dozen lords in the room - the King’s advisors - , so they’d likely have to uncork more bottles as the meeting progressed. Perhaps four or five, considering that this was an afternoon affair. Royals always drank more in the afternoon. Daila sighed. Wine-bottle strategy, an art that she hadn’t even considered before she’d become a maid. Now she was nearly an expert.

She scanned the lords’ faces. Most of them were on her list of potential thieves, a fact which made her rather uneasy. If any of them got too close to Folston...on second thought, she didn’t want to consider that scenario.

“What’s happened?” Folston asked. Dread seeped into his voice, as he took his seat uneasily.

“As of two days ago,” the King said, rubbing two hands against his beard. “We are now in a two-front war. We just received word from our scouts.”

“Shadows,” Folston cursed. “How large of an army?”

“Our scouts put it at around one hundred and fifty thousand.” the King answered with a gravelly tone. “Our First Army is large enough to defeat them...but that force is still in Kadia. We’re going to leave them there, in case the Lisanai march north. Here in Scythar, we only have thirty thousand in the city.” He gestured to the massive map in front of him, sprawled across the table. “And we have another thirty thousand in the hills. Of course, they’re busy with the Scythari bastards who’ve convinced themselves that their war isn’t lost.”

“We’ve sent out our messengers to bring back your army in the foothills, Majesty,” said one of the lords. Count Something-Another. Undoubtedly one of the names on the list. “They have ample supplies and they should arrive well before the Lisanai army.”

“They’d better,” the King sighed. “Sixty thousand, then, to defend. Behind these walls, they should be able to thin the Lisanai army. Though...though pulling out of the foothills will let the Scythari burn through our border villages, but I suppose everything has a cost.” Folston’s face darkened and he let out a low noise that sounded like a growl, but his father continued. “Either way, that’s not even the worst of it.” The King gulped. “The reports about the Lisanai army are...disturbing.”

“Disturbing?” Folston asked.

The King seemed hesitant to answer, before he eventually said, "They don't mean to take the city. They mean to destroy it. Our spies tell us that they're planning to burn down the Great Tree, and every house in the city." He gulped. "And they're supposedly bringing...monsters with them. A demon giant, so tall that he could step over our walls, and an army of horrors." He lifted a hand to silence Folston, before the bewildered prince had a chance to speak. "I know, it sounds absurd. I wouldn't believe it either, if there hadn't been so many reports from different scouts. The Emperor is a magic-user, they say. A 'Shaper' of unimaginable power."

Daila's eyes widened and she fought to keep a steady hand as she filled one of the advisor's cups. Shadows. There were some rumors that speculated about the Emperor's magical abilities, but...an immortal and a Shaper? A Shaper powerful enough to forge an 'army' and control it over a sustained period of time? He would need to be so absurdly powerful, many times stronger than Daila had ever been. She'd practiced for years and - aside from her self-Shaping - she'd only ever been able to maintain control over a human-sized Shaping for an hour or two at best. To march from Lisanai to Old Arbor while maintaining such a bond...

"Could we retreat?" Folston asked.

"As winter approaches? Through the mountains?" King Braum shook his head. "How will we feed our troops? We'll have to start pillaging like the damned Scythari. We will fight here, and the odds will not be favorable. We will make them pay to take this city, and the men who fight here will cripple their army so badly that it will not march on Kadia...but we will not win. And that, my son," the King continued. "Is why you must leave the city."

"Leave?!" Folston sputtered. "Absolutely not. No. Not in a thousand years. I will not."

"You will. I've already arranged for a swift escort back to Kadia. You'll be safe, and you can bring whoever you choose."

Folston lifted his chin, glaring down at his father. "We are Kadian," he hissed. "We do not run like the Scythari prince, and leave our city to its fate."

The King paused for a long while, meeting Folston's glare. "Lords," he said to his advisors. "Please leave us for a moment."

The lords filed out. Daila wasn't sure if she was meant to leave as well, but she stood meekly by Auri's side and the King didn't seem to pay them any mind.

"Don't be foolish, son. I've already sent Rennon away this morning, and you're far too valuable. Folston, you know that the chances of victory in this battle will be slim. If we both fall, who will lead the Kingdom? Your little brother? I think not."

Folston grimaced. "Is it foolish to think that our kingdom is worth fighting for? That the men in our army are worth dying for? That their lives shouldn't be sacrificed so easily? You talked a great deal back at that feast, about how our Ralli soldiers were people, too. Was that all it was? Just talk? Just blubbering, meaningless words? Just calculated wordsmithing to win over your most idealistic young lords?"

"I meant what I said," the King replied coldly.

"Did you? Then aren't I worth the same as my men? Isn't my life just as 'valuable' as any Ralli? Shouldn't I die by their sides?"

"You are a prince. A fool of one, but a prince. I don't throw lives away, but soldiers are soldiers. They're meant to fight, to protect against the evils of the world."

"And what am I meant to do?" Folston shot back. "To run? To let them die? Am I not supposed to protect against evils?" Anger flared in his eyes, and he rose from his chair. "I will fight on the front lines, father, and I will not let this city burn."

"No," the King said slowly. Icily. "Do not forget who rules Kadia." He rose his chin, pride glinting in his eyes. "Or who conquered Scythar. It was not you, boy. You will do as you're told."

"I will not," came Folston's measured reply.

The King slammed his fist on the table and Daila flinched. Auri grasped her hand, though, and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"All of these years, my lords warn me about this. About you. They tell me I've raised an idealistic fool, but I've always defended you. I've told them 'No, not my son. Not my son, he's got a soft heart, yes, but he knows what it means to rule. He knows that without strong leadership and wise decisions, only chaos reigns.'"

Folston scoffed, his glare deepening. "This castle is filled with slaves. Over half of the Ralli in Scythar are slaves, and a good portion of Kadian Ralli are slaves, too. Slaves, father. Not even the Lisanai are cruel enough to hold so many people in captivity. Is that what it means to 'rule'?"

"We've been over this. Freeing the slaves would destroy our whole economy. And what happens when our kingdom turns destitute? Another civil war, another famine, another dark age."

"Strong leadership," Folston sneered. "So much for that."

"Enough," the King said, dropping his voice to a frightening whisper. "Enough. What is wrong with you, boy? Have I raised a fool? You wish to talk about freeing slaves, while we have an army on our doorstep? And you wish to remain here when that demon's army arrives? When mythical beasts begin stomping through our defences?"

Folston tilted his head, as if he'd just made a discovery.

"You don't plan to stay and fight, do you?" the prince asked.

The King was silent for a moment, and Folston laughed dryly.

"You plan to leave at the eve of battle."

"Only after the battle preparations are finished. Only after I've done all I can."

"All you can. Right. Do your lords know that?"

A vein popped to the surface of King Braum's forehead, and his face reddened.

"They've made their own travel arrangements," he answered in a controlled, clipped tone.

"Coward," Folston scoffed. "You're all cowards." He stormed toward the door. Daila cast an unsure glance at Auri, then followed at the prince's heels. He stopped, looking back over his shoulder to give the King one last frosty glare. "I will stay. I will fight. I will remind the world that Kadia does not abandon its people."

# CHAPTER 28

## *Beneath the Leaves*

**N**ews traveled quickly in Old Arbor. Only one day after that brutal council meeting, where Folston and his father seemed ready to throw punches, everyone in the city knew that the war had begun. The city's people understood that a second Battle of Old Arbor was more than just possible, and now rested on the cusp of inevitability.

Daila sighed. She rested her hand on her cheek as she stared out of her window, eyeing the city below. So many people were in the streets, rushing this way and that, and a seemingly endless line of wagons rolled out of the gates. Understandably, everyone wanted to leave the city. Mothers and fathers hauled their belongings onto horses, mules, and carriages, and tugged their children in tow. Dark and light haired people alike, rich and poor, all struggling toward a common goal: to join the caravan and get as far away as they could.

Those poor people. For many of them, this would be the second time that they fled their homes in a matter of months.

It was a similar scene to when the Kadians first attacked Old Arbor...though there was one major difference. This time, the civilians were not on their own. They weren't abandoned and told to fend for themselves. Under Folston and his father's direction, the Kadian Army had gone out of their way to organize evacuation efforts. They'd planned the caravan and its route, and were directing the operation with the utmost discipline. Down in the streets, they were helping the city's people load their belongings and providing them with some food for the journey north, to safer towns.

She gulped, and fought down the guilt that stirred within her. Useless. She'd been a useless ruler, who'd only made life worse for her people. During that time, she'd worried more about proving herself to her father, and about reading scientific or mythical theories. She'd spent long days brooding like a petulant child while the people of her city suffered.

"Are you excited?" Auri asked from her bed, which made Daila blink. Engrossed in memory and regret, she'd forgotten that Auri was even in the room.

"Excited?"

"To get out of the castle," she laughed. "You wouldn't shut up about it this morning. Don't tell me you've already forgotten."

Right. Folston wanted to take a more active role in the battle preparations. He'd arranged to go out to one of the neighborhoods in central Old Arbor this evening, near the Great Tree, to help with a vague 'water issue'. For whatever reason, he'd also insisted that Daila had to tag along.

"Of course I'm excited," Daila said, her lips betraying a smile.

"I was speaking with the King, you know. Told him that if we survive this nonsense, he'd have to let us leave the castle whenever we please. No more cooping us up like hens."

"You said that to the King?" Daila snorted. "Shadows, girl. How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know..." Daila licked her lips, searching for words. "How are you so bold? Do you never stop and think, 'Wow, saying this could get me beaten', or 'What would he think of me?', or any of that?"

"Oh, honey, that's the beauty of it. My first week on this job, the King scolded me once or twice. But after a while, once people start to expect boldness from me, when they realize that there's no way I'm ever changing, they stop trying. That's the trick, Dai. 'Course, you should know that, if you'd been paying attention back when I was your maid." Her tone faltered for a moment, a rarity that made Daila shiver.

Auri didn't finish that thought. She didn't have to. How many times had Daila ordered Auri to be punished for insubordination? How many times had she tried to 'discipline' Auri, because of pressure from Daila's father?

Her father's voice played back in her ears, soft yet wicked: "Light hairs are like dogs. If they don't fetch, you make them fetch."

No. That monster was not Daila's father. He was just a King. An old, wicked, dead King.

"You should try it, sometime," Auri chirped. She twirled her hair, seemingly oblivious to Daila's shaking hands. To her trembling lower lip. "I know that you fret over everything you say and do, and you drive yourself half-mad. Just loosen up for once. Do something daring. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

"The worst thing?" Daila sputtered. "If I was running around the castle, acting like you, demanding privileges from nobles? From the King? I'd be...I'd be breaking every rule! What if Madam Marsa found out? I'd be publicly humiliated and the King would scold me, and Marsa would send me to the grotto, and I'd have latrine duty, and I wouldn't be able to see Folston, and I'd...I'd..."

"Don't think too hard on it. That's your problem, you know? You think too much, you never do anything. Nothing interesting, at least."

Daila tilted her head and cast Auri an annoyed glare.

"Don't hate me for being right, princess."

"Queen, technically," Daila muttered.

"I'll stick with 'princess', thank you very much. You're too fussy to be a queen."

"You witch! If I'm 'fussy', what does that make you?"

"Charming." She batted her lashes. "Beautiful, intelligent, perfect..."

Auri would have undoubtedly continued, if not for two patient knocks on their door.

For the first time since Daila had known him, and perhaps the first time in his entire life, Prince Folston was on time.

His arrival was so unexpected that Daila nearly tripped over herself, as she struggled into her boots and hopped to answer the door.

"Folston!" she chirped in greeting.

He lifted an eyebrow. Shadows, he was looking dapper. He wore sword on his hip and a fur-lined coat, as black as night, which curled around his neck and almost blended into his dark hair. His shirt was beneath. It was lighter in color, and seemed to hug his chest outlining some of his mass, of those honed muscles that she knew so well. Oh, how she wished she could rest her head against him and doze into a long, cozy sleep.

"Daila," he greeted her.

"You two are on a first-name basis, now?" Auri asked from her bed.

Daila's cheeks burned, but she cast down her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Highness," she managed.

"No worries," he said, in that genuine tone of his. "Are you...are you well? You look flushed." Auri let out a snort, but Folston didn't seem to notice. "If you aren't well, you needn't come along."

"I'm...fine," Daila stammered. She turned around and gave Auri a glare. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

Daila had journeyed through the city on many occasions back when she'd been a prince, yet she'd never received the same warm reception as Folston.

On every street, some light-haired townspeople would recognize the prince. Most of them would nod and wave, and others would even strike up conversation. A small part of her was bitter about it. Folston was Kadian, for the Giant's sake, the age-old enemy of Scythar...though, it seemed like the Ralli in Old Arbor had never harbored too much Scythari pride. She couldn't blame them. Would she care if a kingdom crumbled, when that kingdom had only caused her pain? Shadows, how could anyone hate Kadia after they'd met Prince Folston?

The prince didn't take a carriage through the city, or even a horse, and they had no royal escort. If King Braum knew of their lack of security, he would have likely been furious...even with their recent quarrel. Folston didn't seem the least bit bothered, though. He marched through Old Arbor without a care in the world, shaking hands and handing out small parcels of bread that he'd stuffed into his coat pockets.

Daila had aired her own concern about the lack of bodyguards - especially given the recent icevein theft - but Folston had refused to listen. Bringing guards would only alienate the common people, he'd said. She would have bickered, but he seemed especially passionate about the matter.

Their travel was agonizingly slow, thanks to the frequent stops. Even so, Folston continued to chat. He talked about the wars, dueling, and even the weather. But, more often than not, Folston listened. He listened to men and women griping about the fact that they had to leave the city for the second time in a year, bemoaning the fate of the city and their families.

"They're both still up there in the foothills, I reckon," an older blonde woman was saying. She was part of a small crowd that had come to surround Folston, on one of the busier streets. Her posture was slightly hunched, and deep sorrow lingered in her eyes. Claspng her hands, she eyed Folston as if he was a living vessel of the Giant himself. Reverent. "It's those commanders. The lieutenants and captains and whatnot. Those black-haired bastards..." She paused. "Not that there's anything wrong with black hair, Highness, but these Shadows-damned bastards. They won't let up. Their war is over, but they won't stop. My two boys, they're alive and I know it, but those bastards won't let them come home. Do something, Highness, I'm begging you. I'm begging."



Folston gulped, but his eyes glinted with something fiery: a mix of anger and conviction.

"I can't promise you that they'll be saved," he said, with the sort of calm strength that made Daila's heart race. "But I can promise that if they do escape from their army, they will be welcomed back here with open arms. And that those commanders will be met with justice."

Promises. Folston made many of those to the city's inhabitants. Promises to lend a mule to an elderly couple, so they could pack their belongings. Promises to increase the number of soldiers in the neighborhood, to dissuade looters. Promises to look into the case of a missing chicken. Those promises would have been idle, fleeting things, if not for the fact that after speaking with each peasant, Folston jotted down a series of notes in his journal.

"Sir, err...Highness," greeted one stout man, whose low rumble of a voice carried beneath the others. He was a smith, if his hammer and apron were to be believed. "The name's Blint. Are the rumors true? Did you write the book?"

Folston cocked his head. When Blint pulled a black-covered copy of *The Proposal* from his pocket, the prince's eyes widened with realization.

"Because if you did, you've changed everything. Icevein took me sister from me, but I thought it was pointless to fight back. Even if I killed his fat arse, there'd just be another prick to take the crown and do whatever he damned well pleases...but not with this." He shook the book, waving it in front of Folston. "Don't forget what you wrote in here, lad. Don't forget it."

The prince, looking rather numb, gave Blint the slightest hint of a nod. That was enough to make the smith beam with joy, before the large man sank back into the crowd like a raindrop into a pond.

"Highness!" interrupted another townswoman, in a rather urgent tone. Another blonde, younger, perhaps only a few years older than Daila. She bounced on the soles of her feet from deeper within the crowd, yet her voice was so loud and shrill that the distance made little difference. "We saw one of them Lisanai last night, we did. A Lisanai spy. She had a hood and a tattoo on the forearm and everything! You know the one, with the circles and all. Disappeared right into the air, she did. She was there, she was there, she was there, then she was gone. Seen it myself, my own two eyes."

"Nonsense, girl!" barked a man from near her. "I've told you before, I'll tell you again. I served for eight years in the highlands and if that wasn't a highlander town marking on that girl's wrist, I'll eat a shoe. Hells, I'll eat my own damned shoe!"

"Shut it, Connel!" the blonde screeched. "I know a Lisanai when I see one!"

“What color was her coat, then? Sure as Shadows wasn’t red, was it?”

From there, the conversation descended into a slew of insults, bickering, and a few hopeful voices trying to speak to Folston above the roar.

Daila had to grasp Folston’s hand and hold on tight as they broke through the circle of onlookers and continued their journey.

After another hour of tugging Folston along and cutting his conversations short with timely shoulder-taps, the pair finally reached their destination: a small neighborhood beneath the Great Tree known as the ‘Blessed Village’.

The streets of the Blessed Village were difficult to navigate. They twisted their way around the tree’s massive roots, meandering this way and that, as if they were desperate to avoid touching any part of the sacred tree. Moss covered many of the roots, giving them a lovely green coat that sparkled with dew. Daila had seldom ventured to this part of the city...it had a bad reputation, given the fact that this neighborhood was almost entirely Ralli. Despite the tree’s beauty, few nobles wanted to live in the shadow of the tree all year round.

Daila drew her furs closer and suppressed a chill shudder. Shadows, the Blessed Village felt a whole season colder than the rest of the city.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Folston asked. He was eyeing the tree as they walked down a particularly windy street, seemingly oblivious to the goosebumps on her arms.

“Aye,” she murmured.

Beautiful was the correct word. The Great Tree. Its smooth trunk was as thick as the castle, and it towered so high above the city that clouds could often be seen drifting through its canopy like wispy lovers on a stroll. The leaves were things of beauty, as well. Massive feathers that sometimes fluttered down to the ground, to be reverently gathered by the Ralli and hung over the doorways of their houses.

“It’s a shame,” Folston continued, lowering his gaze to the street. “To be next to something so beautiful, only to live in squalor.”

She inclined her head. “Aye, Highness.” Her voice was a mere squeak.

Despite their leafed decorations, the houses in the Blessed Village were far from beautiful. Rundown buildings lined the muddy street. They were composed of hastily nailed wood, and the thatched roofs looked as if they’d topple to the ground at the mere mention of a storm. Even compared with the other Ralli neighborhoods they’d passed, the Blessed Village was particularly glum.

Even so, the townspeople went about their work. The communal market bustled, and a blacksmith hammered on his worn anvil. His steady rhythm was matched by a handful of musicians who plucked guitars and played flutes in front of a nearby inn.

All of the Ralli here were clad in heavy furs, but many wore determined smiles on their faces, and nodded to Folston as he passed.

“Do they know you?” Daila asked, puzzled. “How does everyone in the whole blasted city know you?”

“I helped them clean up after we took the city. Remember? Also, I might have...snuck out a time or two.”

“You what?!” she hissed, trying to keep her voice down as they passed a group of Ralli women carrying fruit baskets. “Without telling me? And you visited places like this?!”

“Whoops?” He grinned.

“And when were you planning on telling me?”

“I just told you,” he shrugged. “You didn’t seem to take it very well.”

“Unbelievable,” Daila snarled. She let out a low, wordless growl, but stayed close to the prince’s side.

“Any matter, that’s not important. What’s important is our reason for coming, since we are...here.”

He came to a stop outside of a seemingly unimportant building, the size of a small prison cell. It was only notable because of its composition: stone, rather than wood. Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked the door and ushered her inside.

“What is this?” she muttered, hesitating as she stepped into the torchlit room.

The room was empty, aside from a flight of stairs that spiraled downward, similar to the stairway that led to the ice grotto. The door clicked shut behind her.

Daila’s breath caught.

“Folston, what’s going on? Why are we here?” she said, her voice betraying a trace of nervousness. “What is a ‘water issue’ anyway?”

“It’s less of an issue and more of a potential threat,” he said, nodding to himself. Gah, she loved when he did that. It made him look so...thoughtful. With that simple gesture, that mere movement of his head, her fear began to ebb. “The people here aren’t going to be evacuating the city. They don’t care about battles or wars, they’ve lived here for nearly as long as the tree, and they’re going to stay here.”

Daila gulped. She hadn’t even considered the possibility that a good chunk of the city’s populace wouldn’t want to evacuate, even when given the choice.

“If they stay here, they’re going to need clean water. And, knowing the Lisanai Empire,” Folston’s voice hardened. “We’ll have to seal off the aquifers.”

She pursed her lips, then her eyes went wide.

“You think they mean to poison the wells?”

"If this becomes a siege?" he nodded gravely. "I don't just think they will. I know they will. That's what the Emperor did to his own subjects when they rebelled a few decades ago."

"Shadows," she cursed.

"Shadows," he agreed.

That had never even occurred to her. She'd certainly never guarded her own people against that possibility before the Kadian attack.

"How does one seal off an aquifer?" she asked, then scolded herself for sounding like a clueless Ralli girl. Though...well..that wasn't far from the truth.

"That's the easy part." He extended a hand, which Daila did not hesitate to accept, and they made their way down the stairs.

As usual, Folston was right.

Sealing off the aquifer was a simple matter. They only had to open a few more doors and pull a lever on the wall, which set a gear in motion. This lowered a gate between the river water, which ran aground outside of the city walls, and the reservoir that the people in the Blessed Village and surrounding Ralli neighborhoods would drink.

Only a little while later, they were back on the street.

"So what now?" Daila asked. "How many more aquifers do we need to protect?"

"None. I've already had the others taken care of."

"None?" she blinked, disbelieving. Folston liked to joke, though he didn't look like he was kidding. There had to be more reasons for coming half-way across the city. "But..."

"I know that the castle has been rather tense, lately." Folston shuffled his feet awkwardly. "So I left some extra time, before we have to head back. Time for a picnic, I suppose."

"A picnic, Highness?" Her lips parted, but she couldn't find any more words.

"Do you have picnics here? With food and drink and t-"

"Yes," she cut him off. "I know what a picnic is, I'm just...surprised."

Happily surprised, she should have added. Her stomach had been grumbling for a while. She wasn't accustomed to walking through an entire city, after all.

"Brilliant. I was thinking we could share our meal on the lower branches," he nodded to the Great Tree. "Have you ever climbed it before?"

"Of course not." She wrinkled her nose.

Although the tree was holy, there were no restrictions against climbing it. Still, she was about to speak about how climbing the tree was a Ralli tradition, how a noble would never be caught dead in the branches of the Great Tree. Thankfully, she caught herself.

“Not yet, anyway.”

Folston gave her that charming grin of his and extended a hand.

“Me neither, but it does look inviting, doesn’t it?”

A grin crept onto her lips as she eyed the tree above.

“Aye,” she whispered. “Aye, it does.”

\* \* \*

The climb was a troublesome ordeal.

Her dress kept getting snagged on tiny knobs and branches, and one of her boots almost fell off. However, with Folston’s patient help, she managed to reach a cozy ledge in the tree, perhaps five or six stories off the ground.

She let out a long sigh, and sank to her knees.

“This spot will do, won’t it?” she half-asked, half-pleaded.

“Aye,” Folston answered.

Her eyes went wide as the word registered in her mind, and he gave her a devilish wink. Scandalous, Auri would have said, had she witnessed the Prince of Kadia using such a word.

He unfurled a small blanket on the ledge. It was small, perhaps a touch too small for two people, but he sat regardless and beckoned for her to join him.

She obeyed, of course, and curled her legs beneath her. Their arms were touching, which couldn’t be helped, and the sensation of her skin against the small hairs on his arm was enough to make her heart race.

“Bread?” he asked, pulling a loaf from his bulky coat.

She snorted. “Bread?! What else do you have in there? A second Great Tree?”

He smiled, and pulled out a wine-flask.

“You thought of everything, didn’t you?”

“Always,” he winked, then took a long sip from the flask.

Daila carefully chewed her bread, and followed the prince’s gaze. He was staring out at the city, at the thousands of little torches and fireplaces that dotted the houses, shops, and taverns. Night wouldn’t arrive for some time, but the areas around the Great Tree always kept their torches lit.

“Do you love this city?” Folston eventually asked.

She hesitated for a moment, taken aback by the question.

“Maybe,” she murmured.

The castle loomed in the background, a dark stone structure that was both beautiful and...and terrible. All of the best moments of her life had happened within those walls, as had the worst. The good moments outshined the bad, however. She recalled all the times that she'd laughed alongside Auri, even when they'd been scrubbing toilets. And the moment when Folston saved her, how he stood up for her when no one else could.

"I didn't used to," she clarified. "But I do now. I love it."

He nodded to himself.

"My father thinks that he loves Kadia and Scythar, both."

"Does he?"

Folston shrugged. "I don't know." He paused, as if considering how much he could tell her. "He's said that he wants to pay the Kingdom-owned slaves, like I do."

"Really?"

He snorted, then sent her a snarky smile. "He says that, yes. But the time is never right, apparently. He claims he can't afford to stop making more weapons. He can't stop buying more steel from the islanders, more wood from the tribes. It's nonsense, of course. He doesn't intend to change a thing. I still love him, but...Shadows, between him and this 'Emperor', sometimes I wonder if there will ever be a just kingdom."

Daila gulped.

"There will be," she assured him, speaking with far more confidence than she truly possessed. "When you're King, there will be."

"It's hard. I haven't worked on the Proposal in weeks. It was almost done, too. I just can't force myself to write it, not now. Not with the war and all of these 'sacrifices'." He nodded at the city around them. "It's too much."

"You'll fix it," she whispered. "You'll find a way."

He looked down at her and gave a slight nod.

She searched his eyes. She wasn't quite sure what she intended to find. There was pain lingered in those green irises. Pain and, though she may be imagining it, a flicker of hope.

Silence passed between them, the only sound coming from the gentle rustling of leaves and the echo of the blacksmith's hammer. She took the wine-flasked from his and downed a few gulps of her own.

"You know," she began. "Call me a fool, but I'm beginning to think that you didn't need to come to the Blessed Village at all."

"You just realized that?"

Her cheeks burned, and she cast her eyes down at the embroidered blanket. “No,” she admitted. “I don’t blame you, though. Reckon we’re all looking for an excuse to leave the castle.”

“No, I was looking for an excuse to leave the castle with you.”

She drew a sharp breath. Her heartbeat seemed to triple, and she knew with certainty that her cheeks were burning a furious shade of red.

“Truth be told,” Folston said. His voice was strained, as if he was physically forcing the words to come forth. “I wanted to bring you here because I know that I’m staying for the battle...and, if we lose, I’ll have regrets.”

“Regrets,” she repeated softly, because it was all she could do. All she could say. Her throat was tight, her breathing rapid, and Folston could undoubtedly feel her arm tremble against his. Their eyes met, again. He was so close. So, so, so close.

If Auri was here, she’d tell Daila to be bold. To do something daring. Well...Daila wouldn’t ever be as daring as Auri, but - by the Giant - she could take risks, too.

Ever so slowly, Daila leaned into Folston. She took a trembling hand, and placed it on top of his.

“And...ah...” Folston forced a cough. His hand was shaking, too. “Oh, Shadows. I suppose I could do with one fewer regret.”

With that, Folston shut his eyes, and lowered his lips to hers.

It was a kiss, yet it was far more than a kiss. It was graceful, like a slow dance. Folston was so gentle, caressing her lower back as he drew her close. He cradled her in his arms and, sitting on that treeledge, she’d never felt so safe in her entire life. She was warm despite the cold. She was strong despite walking across the city and struggling up a tree. And, more than anything, she was alive.

Her stomach fluttered as she ran a hand through his hair, delighting in his soft curls. She’d wanted this moment more than anything in her life. She’d been waiting for it, dreaming of it, and praying to the Giant that it would come.

His tongue danced with hers. He was tender and careful, as if he knew how many months she’d longed for this. As if he’d longed for it, too. His lips were softer than she’d imagined. Against hers, they felt like flawless puzzle pieces, as if the Tree had decided that they were destined to be together, destined to hold one another, destined to love.

During the kiss, Folston lowered himself to the blanket and laid on his back. Daila settled onto his chest, and traced each of his muscles with the tips of her fingers. Perfect. He was perfect.

Their lips parted and they drew a much-needed breath. Rather than pull away, however, she leaned into him. She brushed her lips against his ear, and whispered two words that rang with truth:

“I’m yours.”



*“The Emperor is a symptom, not the disease. Though little is written about his rise to power, it is theorized that he was one of many princes vying for the throne. He won by being more ruthless than his competitors, through deception and bloodied hands. So, by filtering its royals through a sieve, the Lisanai system ensured that its ruler would not be the most fit to rule, or the most just, but rather the cruelest, the most likely to see enemies in every shadow.”*

*The Proposal. Chapter Eight, Volume One.*

# CHAPTER 29

## *Reconnaissance*

Liral could barely remember the last time she'd seen so many trees. It had been years. In Trisal, she went entire weeks without seeing a single tree, and the ones she did see were planted for decoration in the fancy districts. The land around Trisal didn't have many trees, either. It was just farmland with a healthy spattering of fairly big towns.

Out here, though, about halfway to the Scythari border, the crops and pastures had given way to a forest. The pine trees were beautiful, soaring up on either side of the wide imperial road. Oh, how Liral wished that she could use her gift and leap onto one of those distant treetops, without any prying eyes. The forest would look enchanting from up above, no doubt.

"Pretty," Cross grunted, following her gaze.

He marched beside her on the road, just two small dots in an army of thousands. The group was large and the marching column was so long that folks in the back often didn't arrive at camp each night until well after the sun had set.

"Aye, there's something peaceful about it," Liral offered.

Cross replied with a pained smile. In his mind, he probably thought that the expression was reassuring, but it only made her heart sink. Though he was her only friend, he was too good for her. Usually, he was too kind, too charming, and too caring for a Ruiner. She couldn't help but feel like it was her fault that he'd been so down and defeated recently. She certainly hadn't helped him deal with his sorrow, despite her efforts.

"Ruiner."

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

Liral pursed her lips and stole a glance at Cross.

He was dressed as a mercenary, clad in a full coat of mail. He didn’t have a breastplate, but there were a few other mercenaries about who were similarly underdressed, so he didn’t stand out too much. The sword and the armor had been expensive. At the shop, they were three times the price that they should have been, thanks to the war, and Liral had been forced to spend most of the scattered coins that she had gathered from the prize room floor.

Meanwhile, Liral wore a simple grey dress. She was meant to be his little sister again, but they were no longer Liralyne and Crossander Ashden, just Liral and Cross. The chances that anyone would make the connection were slim, unless they happened to run into a noble who she’d met at the Golden Wing, like Torra or Sionel or...or Zare. But, in an army so large, a run-in like that seemed unlikely.

The blond mercenary and his even blonder sister. An entirely unremarkable pair. That was their ticket into the military camp, and it had been working so far. The Emperor had hired a staggering number of mercenary companies to grow his force to its absurd size. What was one more man with no insignia and a sword?

Liral played with her dress’ side-stitching. It was made in the Lisanai Ralli fashion, a tight-fitting garment that rose to encapsulate her neck in a warm layer of fabric. It had been one of Kellory’s plainest garments, a uniform shade of grey without a frill in sight, unlike the dresses that Kellory made for the nobility. She’d gifted to Liral just before they left the city, and there’d been tears in the poor woman’s eyes.

Kellory had lost her son, Tannon. Liral had stood by awkwardly when Kellory and Cross embraced, and she’d tried not to feel like an outsider. She’d never even met Tannon before...though, she’d still felt a pang of loss when her eyes had met Kellory’s. She may not know Tannon, but she had made a vow. A vow to Cross, and a vow to Kellory that she’d do everything she could to get Tannon back.

They reached camp just as the sun neared the horizon.

The army was miles from the nearest town, so this particular camp was assembled at the center of a large meadow. Thousands of tents were already assembled in neat rows, and men were erecting a perimeter of wooden stakes to guard against ambush in the night. It was a Lisanai military tradition, Cross had explained. Every night while they were on the march, the army would set up a fortification that resembled a small city. There were always marketplaces, gear shops, and numerous bonfires. The risen Giant was even in attendance, standing like a statue on the edge of the camp.

Liral shuddered, and looked away.

The only thing that the temporary forts seemed to lack was alcohol. The Emperor was strict, and anyone caught in camp with booze was punished severely. In their days of marching, Liral had already witnessed eight hangings.

Trying to wipe away those memories, Liral helped Cross set up their brown tent amid the sea of others. The tent was undoubtedly heavy, and Cross had been lugging it in his bulky pack since Trisal, but he never complained.

Liral began to duck into the tent, when she paused. Cross was staring over the camp, toward one of those hulking grey Ghost creatures. Four of them, in fact, the Emperor's personal escort. The Emperor wasn't visible, of course. He was inside of the palanquin that the monsters carried on their shoulders. They were marching him across the camp, toward the largest tent in the camp: the Emperor's fancy home.

A dark expression settled on Cross's face. On him, it looked wrong. Unnatural. However, Liral tugged on his shoulder, his frown disappeared and he gave her another one of those pained smiles.

They ducked into their tent and faced each other. The tent walls were thick, granting it warmth and - more importantly - privacy.

Ever since she met Cross, he'd been the positive one. He'd been the one driving her forward, challenging her, forcing her to become more confident. Over the past few days, though, Cross had been downtrodden. She'd been forced to help him cope, to help him stay focused on the task ahead. So far, she'd failed miserably.

There were likely some perfect words that Liral could say, which would encourage Cross and help him ease his pain. Liral didn't know those words. She'd never been good at dealing with other people, and she admittedly had little experience...but she was trying.

"Good?" Liral asked, because it was the only word that popped into her mind. Idiot. Ruiner.

"Good," Cross said.

It was a lie. She knew it was a lie, and he was well aware. In a strange, difficult to explain way, that comforted her. They understood one another. She'd never understood anyone else quite like that, not even her mother. Especially not her mother.

She searched her mind for anything positive to say and came up empty.

"What's on your mind?" she eventually asked.

"Our plan."

"Worried?"

He shrugged. "I thought the Colosseum job would be the dumbest thing I'd ever done. Stealing the Emperor's crown, though...you know neither of us are going to make it out of here alive. I wish there was another way."

That was their plan. The crown had power, because there was no other reason for the Emperor to do...what he did with it. It had to be important. Plus, if the crown worked with the Emperor's power like her own moon amulet affected hers, then the Emperor's power would fail if he lost it. So they'd steal the crown, get it away from the Emperor, and there was a chance that it would release Tannon. Risky, yes, but Liral didn't have too much to live for. She had no true family, and almost nobody would mourn the death of a roof girl.

"I'll be fine." She summoned as much confidence as she could, straightening her back like Kellory had taught her. "Today's just a scouting mission. We've scouted before."

"I'm not worried about today," he grumbled. "I'm worried about the day when you try to steal the bloody crown."

"I'll be fine," she repeated.

He met her eyes, and gulped. His hands were shaking. "I don't want you to die because of me. You're like...a daughter to me."

"You aren't that much older," she snapped, but her heart rose a bit. Even when he was tragically sad, he still managed to lift her spirits. "And I'll be fine." She wouldn't be fine. She would die, but she would die for Cross, and for his brother. It would still be a better fate than withering away on a rooftop. This way, she had a chance at changing the world before she passed on, an opportunity to become more than a Ruiner. She spoke slowly, with confidence that surprised even herself. "We're going to take him down."

\* \* \*

The scouting mission began smoothly.

Liral and Cross made their way through the camp. They blended in quite well. Some soldiers had brought their wives along with them, so Liral's presence wasn't too unusual, and Cross embraced the role of an angry mercenary with ease. That anger, of course, was not feigned.

The sun had set, but torchlight illuminated much of the camp, causing the Emperor's gaudy tent to cast long shadows over the other tents. The tent's primary entrance was guarded by one of those elite guard forces, like the one that they'd

spotted below the Colosseum, but regular soldiers manned the post at the rear of the tent. A large group of soldiers, all clad in Lisanai burgundy, all wearing swords on their hips.

The pair was leaning against a nearby tent post, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible while they studied the tent's defences.

"Can you do your little distraction thing, while I climb?" she asked, nodding up at the top of the tent, where a small flap was visible. It was the perfect spy-hole. Cross still looked rather dejected, so Liral threw in some extra encouragement. "Unless you think it's too many for you to handle..."

She hadn't challenged him like this before, but...perhaps it would help him break out of his mopey rut.

He leveled her with a flat stare. "I can handle them."

"Are you sure?"

Cross smiled grimly. "Better too many than too few. If it was just two guards, they'd be on their toes. Sixteen? That's enough lads to cause some trouble."

She lifted an eyebrow, and failed to contain a smile of her own. Finally, she'd done something right. She wanted to spin and dance when Cross composed himself and righted his posture, then marched toward the group of soldiers.

"Which one of you pricks want to be laid on your ass?" Cross snarled, brandishing his fists.

Liral's eyes went wide. This was an even better response than she'd hoped. This was the real Cross, not the beaten-down version of the man.

"Ten silvers says none of you lot can beat me in a fair fight."

The guards shared amused looks. Many of them were rather brawny, with the sort of bulging forearms that reminded her of the anchormen by the docks. Some were tall, some were short, and most were more sturdily built than Cross. He wasn't a weak-looking or particularly lanky man, but a few of the men absolutely dwarfed him.

"You hear that, Norin?" a raspy-voiced guard asked, nudging his towering friend. "This fella wants to make a donation."

"Ten silvers," Norin repeated slowly. He was the largest of the soldiers, and looked as if one of his not-too-distant ancestors was part bear. He cracked his knuckles. "I could use ten silvers."

Shadows, that man easily quadrupled Liral's meager weight.

It wasn't long before the men formed a circle around him, and Norin stepped into the ring to face Cross.

Norin's confident smile was broken after the first punch. It was a quick, powerful strike from Cross, as if he'd thrown years of pain into that punch. It landed in the middle of of Norin's stomach. The large man staggered back. He drew a few heavy breaths and blinked, while his friends looked on in dismay, gradually coming to the conclusion that defeating Cross wouldn't be as simple as it seemed.

Liral didn't watch the remaining punches, or the grappling, and she tried to tune out Cross's guttural snarls as he unleashed himself upon his hulking opponent. She didn't even turn when Norin hit the ground with a thud and all of the soldiers.

Instead, Liral planned her move.

The lower half of the tent was illuminated by torches, but the higher reaches were clear. If she wanted to scale the tent without detection, she'd have to leap high and fast, and she'd have to hold on tight.

The tent's roof was steep, far too steep for a normal person to scale, and there were no clear hand-holds. There was nothing that she could grasp, to keep herself from sliding down the side after her leap. She bit her lip. There was only one way she could get to that flap undetected. It wouldn't be easy, though...and she'd have to wash her feet afterward.

Silently, she slipped out of her pesky boots.

After Norin's defeat, Cross had attracted a moderately sized crowd. This combat display was the most interesting activity in this part of camp, it seemed.

Liral pursed her lips, waiting for her moment. The soldiers were distracted, yes, but they were still fairly close to the tent. Liral met Cross's gaze from a distance, and he seemed to understand her hesitancy.

"You lot are too noisy, though," Cross said, a moment after announcing that he would face multiple opponents simultaneously. "We'd best take our circle over there, so we don't wake the Emperor."

That seemed to do the trick. Gradually, the men abandoned their post and walked a good fifty paces away from the tent. Excellent. Liral drew a deep breath and wasted no more time.

In one fluid movement, she leapt halfway up the tent, landing just beyond the illuminated area. She began to slide down almost immediately, but she clung to the fabric with all of her strength, and held her position. She could do this. If she wasn't good at this, then she was good at nothing. If she couldn't climb to that distant tent flap, she'd be utterly useless. She knew how to trust her balance. She knew how to pinch the fabric just enough to form a hand-hold, and how to use her bare feet to do the same.

The dress was annoying and cumbersome, but it was tolerable. Silently, she praised the Lisanai's Ralli dress fashions. Tight on the top, loose of the bottom. It gave her legs plenty of room to maneuver. If she'd been wearing a Scythari noblewoman's dress, which hugged the legs like a coffin, this adventure would have been an utter failure.

She moved carefully, one step after the other, and listened to the cheers below. She needed those cheers. If the cheering stopped, that something had happened to Cross, and...she didn't want to consider that possibility.

It didn't take long before she reached the small flap at the tent's top. Carefully, she peered inside.

There he was. The Emperor. He was sitting casually at his desk, sipping a glass of wine. His face was impassive, lit up by candlelight, and didn't betray a hint of remorse or guilt or...or anything. It was enough to make her grind her teeth.

"Lord Emperor, this is not a matter to take lightly." A squirly man on the far side of the room asked. Liral hadn't seen him at first, as he was sitting humbly at a much smaller desk. It was the same man from before, the man who had been taking notes beneath the Colosseum while the Emperor had been...

Yila, Yila, Yila!

She gulped.

"We've summoned an unrivaled force, but such a force requires nourishment," the man continued, his voice betraying a hint of fear. "Wars are won and lost by measure of the stomach. Even if we take the city swiftly, we will not have enough food to continue into Kadia."

"Food," the Emperor snarled mid-sip, cocking an eyebrow. "Are there not hundreds of thousands of undesirables, loyal to some Giant, living behind the walls of Old Arbor, taking food like parasites while producing almost none?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. They will need to be fed, as well, and we may have to dip into our own supplies to accommodate their..." the man trailed off, the puzzle pieces clicking in his mind. "Do you mean to...to slay them, sire?"

"Slay them? That, my good man, is not how you deal with a parasite."

"My lord?"

The Emperor smiled.

"To defeat a parasite, one must pluck it from its host." He tapped two fingers on his desk. Hard. It made Liral tremble. "Why kill them when the problem can take care of itself? We will take the city, we will bar the gates, and they'll wither away. We need the food, after all. Wars are 'won and lost by measure of the stomach.'"

Liral fought back the sudden urge to vomit.



How could this happen? Of all the people in the whole Lisanai Empire, there had to be a better ruler than this man, this immortal, this 'god' according to many. He was no god. A demon, maybe, but no god. A god wouldn't do this, and a god wouldn't create those...things.

Eight of those Ghost creatures guarded the inside the Emperor's tent, four on either side of the tent. They just stood there, staring blankly at one another. Unthinking, unfeeling. They'd been human, these terrifying creatures, just poor lads who'd been forced to excavate giant bones all day. They didn't deserve this fate. Nobody did.

The rest of the Emperor's tent was rather bare. Just a massive bed and a few Redcloaks standing by the entrance. She could have dropped in and stolen the Emperor's crown, right then and there, if it hadn't been sitting atop the Emperor's head.

She narrowed her eyes.

No, the crown wasn't just sitting atop his head. It was secured to his head. Bolts marked the sides of the band, which had previously been nothing more than smooth metal. Bolts that drove through the crown and - though she could barely tell, in the dim light - looked like they were pressing against his skin.

Did the bolts...did they break his skin? Had he really drilled into his own skull, just for that bloody crown? She couldn't tell, but she wouldn't be surprised. Either way, that crown was not budging, not when it was so snug on his head. There would be no crown theft. She could have pulled on it with all of her might, but she was just a Dasher, not an Ironskin like Cross.

Ruiner. If those guards hadn't spotted her breaking into the prize room all those days ago, would the Emperor have gone through so many precautions to secure his crown from thieves?

Ruiner, Ruiner, Ruiner.

She could have been a savior, if she hadn't been so clumsy. So stupid. Such a miserable failure. She had a chance at doing something useful for once in her life, but no. Of course not. She just had to go and sabotage herself. There was no stealing that crown, not when it was so secure, not when it was guarded by Redcloaks and those other creatures.

You did it again, Ruiner. You thought you finally had a friend, but you couldn't even help him save his brother.

Feeling like an emptied waterskin, Liral slid down the Emperor's tent and disappeared into the maze of tents.

There was no chance. No hope. There never had been.

# CHAPTER 30

## *The Madam*

**M**arsa Kesherin strode down the castle hallway, and ran her gloved fingers over the letter in her dress pocket. She just wanted to ensure that the letter was still there, and that it was more than a figment of her imagination, more than wishful thinking.

She hated this place. She always had, ever since she'd first been stationed here. Blonde and ginger imbeciles. She was surrounded by blonde and ginger imbeciles, girls who failed to grasp the simple concept of privilege. It was a privilege for them to be here, housed under this castle roof, yet these entitled brats broke every simple rule unless they were severely punished.

With the new Kadian rulers and their weak-willed restrictions on punishments, keeping order of the maid brats had become much more difficult.

"Madam," a blonde maid greeted her with a rushed curtsy, before skittering past.

On any other day, Marsa would have had the girl flogged for such an inadequate curtsy. Today was different, however.

Again, Marsa checked on the letter. It was still there.

"Madam Marsa," a red-haired girl said, before giving her a more precise curtsy.

"Daila, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ma'am." The girl lowered her eyes and clasped her hands together.

"And what are you up to?"

"Checking on the laundry, Madam. My...my master has sparring tomorrow, you see, and he spilled wine on it, so I had to clean it...not that..." She shuffled her feet, and avoided Marsa's gaze. "Not that it's his fault for spilling the wine, Madam. I wouldn't

ever suggest that about Master, but I...what I...what I mean is that I need to make sure that his training outfit is dry, Madam.”

“Of course, dear,” Marsa said. She gave the girl a reassuring pat. “You run along, now. Wouldn’t want to keep the prince waiting, would we?”

“No, Madam.”

Marsa nodded her approval. This girl was one of the good ones. Not at first, when she’d made the mistake of befriending that insolent, arrogant blonde brat, but Marsa had brought them both into line. A few dips in the ice water had a way of reminding girls that their presence here was not to be taken for granted.

Bringing a hand to the girl’s chin, Marsa angled the girl’s face to the left, then to the right. Yes, it was no surprise that Prince Folston chose this girl. She was pretty enough to be pleasant on the eyes, but not enough to be an irresistible temptation, and that hair of hers could not have possibly been more red. She was a submissive one, no doubt, and better trained than the castle’s hunting dogs.

Marsa let the girl pass by, then sighed. Again, she patted her pocket.

Poor Daila. It would be a shame to waste such talent, but it couldn’t be helped. For that girl, at least, Marsa would make sure that her suffering was brief.

She headed down a staircase, and paused at a window overlooking the city. A sense of disgust grew in the back of her throat. Aside from the castle, this city was an utter pig pen. Half of the streets weren’t paved, and much of the city was a slum, infested by light-haired rats. It was always cold, too. She’d heard stories about the foul weather in Scythar, in this more elevated kingdom, but nothing had truly prepared her for reality. For over half of the year, the city was covered in a layer of frost. The bitter cold was inescapable. It seemed to permeate through every wall, and made life utterly miserable.

Brushing a lock of brown hair behind her ear, Marsa sighed. Oh, how different her life would be, if she weren’t cursed with brown hair. If her hair had been black like her father’s, she never would have received this awful assignment. Her master would have chosen someone else, another brown-haired girl with weak powers. Maybe that other person would have even enjoyed this nightmarish castle. Curse her father for choosing to sleep with a Ralli whore.

She would give anything to return to the Empire. She breathed deep through her nose, and tried to imagine that she was smelling the flowers of her childhood. The budding yellow flowers of southwestern Lisanai, sprawling across vast fields that seemed to go on forever, as far as the eye could see.

She hadn't been home in two decades. Two whole decades. How old was her father? Was he still alive? If he was not, then the farm would have passed onto her little sister Amelle. By the Emperor, that girl had been as small as a field mouse when Marsa had first bid her farewell and left for the academy.

Marsa frowned.

That would all change, of course. After the deed was finally done, she would be free of this prison. She would never have to listen to the maid-girls' idle babbling, or deal with their insolence ever again. No, she would return home to the quiet farm-life, to the calming streams, the near-constant sun, and the gentle breeze.

She blinked. Had she truly been dozing off for so long? Just staring out the window like a cow-eyed idiot? Like one of her maid-girls? Marsa shook her head, and continued down the flight of stairs. Dawdle any longer and she would be wasting precious time.

Her heartbeat quickened to match her step. She had to hold herself back from rushing down the stairs like a child. It had been years since she'd last been so excited. Then again, it had been years since she'd last received such an explicit order.

She came to a stop outside of Visre's door and knocked twice.

Visre, as always, was quick to answer.

"Commander," Visre greeted her.

"Visre."

Marsa eyed the brute of a woman and frowned.

Like Marsa, Visre long gloves. Hers were grey, not white like Marsa's own, and they were already splotched with some food. Disgusting. Three years as a maid, three years as Marsa's right-hand, and Visre still possessed no sense of hygiene. Was she truly the best option for her superiors to send?

"Follow," Marsa ordered. "This is important."

Visre closed the door behind her with all of the grace of an enraged bear. Marsa flinched at the noise, and bristled as she led the girl down a side-corridor. No elegance, no subtlety. Disgusting. For the last three years, she couldn't even trust Visre to clean people's rooms. The girl was too strong for her own good, and had a frustrating lack of control over her power. So, Marsa had confined the girl to a bedroom, taking her out only when her strength was required. Mostly, she was only needed for administering punishments to the maid staff.

But today was different. Today was special. Today was beautiful.

"What's this about?" Visre asked. "Has something gone wrong?"

"Wrong? I wouldn't say that, child. I wouldn't say that at all."

"So you won't tell me?"

Marsa shut her eyes for a moment, gritting her teeth.

“Would I have told you to follow me, if I wasn’t going to tell you? Did that ever pass through your thick skull? Shadows, you’re beyond daft, and about as patient as a dog at mealtime.”

As soon as the string of words left Marsa’s mouth, she scolded herself for using the Western curse. She had spent far too long in this place.

“Sorry,” Visre mumbled.

Marsa muttered to herself, ignoring the girl. She’d been in such a good mood, before she’d been forced to deal with this one.

They meandered through the castle’s lower levels, down to the ice grotto. There was a small wooden door behind the ice grotto, in the back of the cave. It was beyond view of any prying eyes, concealed by stalagmites and jagged rock. The shade of the wood so closely resembled that of the wall, the door was nearly undetectable for anyone who did not already know of its location.

Marsa twisted her master key in the lock, and opened the door.

The small room was just as she’d left it. A table marked the room’s center, and the walls were adorned with dozens of weapons. Swords, knives, daggers, and bows. There were even disguises, two suits of Scythari guard armor - which was useless, these days - Kadian military suits, lady’s dresses, and an assortment of bright red cloaks. Beside those were an assortment of jars. Some contained liquid of various color, while others held mushrooms and flower pedals.

A smirk worked its way onto her face.

Oh yes. For the first time in far too long, Marsa would have the opportunity to use her tools.

“We’ve received orders,” Marsa said, producing her letter and handing it to Visre.

*Brownbird,*

*Your time has come.*

*Strike now.*

*Start with the prince, then king.*

*Bring me the I.V.*

*I wish to study it.*

There was no name from the sender, of course. The letter was legitimate, however. ‘Brownbird’ was her coded name, dating back to her academy days. She detested it. She

had learned, though, that there were some people in the world with whom one could not argue. Just one person, to be precise.

The large blonde woman read the letter, then scanned it again. Her eyes widened.

“About time, no?”

Visre stared for a while, then a gradual smile worked its way across her lips. “About time.”

Marsa mirrored Visre’s grin.

Carefully, she removed her white gloves and placed them on the table. Her skin beneath was pale. Oh, the woes of having to wear gloves for twenty-odd years. Her hands looked almost withered, unlike those of the bright young woman who first graduated the academy and thought that she was going to live a life of thrills and praise.

She paused for a moment when she eyed the small tattoo on the underside of her forearm. Three circles, all locked together, representing a unified continent. A completed Empire. Yes, she had sacrificed her youth for the Redcloak order. She had served as their spy for what felt like an eternity, probably because her powers weren’t strong enough to earn her a place as an imperial guard. Curse her and her weakness...though, in the end, it would all be worthwhile. They would shout praises to her in the streets of Trisal, and erect statues in her honor.

She would finally be a hero.

# CHAPTER 31

## *Butter Knife*

**A**ye, I know they're skilled," Daila sighed, resting a hand on her cheek as she watched the arena below. "I just don't see why they have to hit so hard. It's meant to be a practice, for the Giant's sake. At this rate, someone'll get hurt."

"By 'someone' you mean your precious Folston?"

That remark earned Auri a hot glare.

"It's not a joke. They're using real swords. Whose idea was that, anyway? To use real swords in practice? It's idiocy."

"They're duller than butter knives, Dai," Auri giggled. "Don't be such a worrier."

Daila was about to snap back, but she knew better than to argue with Auri. Doing so would only encourage Auri's teasing...and Auri always won their arguments. "Butter knives can still cut people," she eventually mumbled, sending Auri another glare.

The glare only lasted for a moment, however, before the metallic clang of two swords made her yelp in surprise.

Folston and his father circled each other like wolves. They'd been going at it for well over an hour. Though they were still locked in a stalemate, there'd been no shortage of angry battle cries and spirited swings between the pair. She'd never seen Folston fight with so much anger before. He and his father hadn't spoken much since the argument, despite the fact that the king was scheduled to leave in a matter of days, and they clearly still had some unsettled differences to work through.

If only they'd be more open with one another.

They held their broadswords at the ready, poised to strike. The prince and the king. Usually the prince dueled with Lord Aradon, that handsome oaf, but Aradon hadn't left his quarters all day. Kess was also notably absent. Scadellous, as Auri would say. Aradon was planning to stay and defend the city with Folston, and - like Folston - he seemed to accept that his time in this world was limited and precious.

Daila gulped. No, no, no. She couldn't let her mind wander there again. She had to think of something else, anything else. Ah, outfits.

The prince and king both looked so regal, even in their training leathers. So handsome. They complimented Folston so well, outlining his muscles. She bit her lip...which may have been a mistake, because Auri began to snicker.

"I did tell you that you'd be happier if you let him stick you. Didn't I tell her that, Mili?"

"Aye, reckon she's well stuck now."

The pair of demons shared a giggle, and Daila crossed her arms with a deep scowl.

"Stick me? If that means what I think it means...nobody has ever stuck me."

"Right," Auri said, utterly unconvinced.

"I'm serious! We just kissed, that's all!"

"Mhmm," Mili smirked.

"I hate both of you so much."

"Aww don't say that," Auri cooed. "I was just teasing...but I am serious about walking in on you two fooling around. I work in the next room, it's bound to happen eventually. One of these days, you'll be so enthralled with your lover that you'll forget to close the door. I can't wait to see how red your cheeks will be. I'll act all indignant about it, too. 'The prince and a maid girl! Oh, shadows! Oh, the horror! I'll need a lot of coin to forget about this.'"

"If you try that, I'll kill you."

"I'm sure you will, sweetheart. I was joking, by the way...mostly."

"You're the worst." Shadows, sometimes Daila almost wished that Auri would be leaving with the king, though she'd opted to stay in Old Arbor.

Daila sighed, before another clang returned her gaze to the two duelists.

There was something enchanting about them. It was the way that they moved. The grace, the expertise. From his father, Folston had learned how to fight and how to rule, though they disagreed on many of the details of the latter.

What had Daila learned from her father? Nothing useful. But...no. That dead king was not her father.

"You're dead. You're gone," Daila whispered to herself. "You only exist in my head."



The amulet on her chest pulsed red, and Daila rushed to cup it in her palms. She glanced around and, by the grace of the Giant, nobody had seen. They were all too busy watching the spirited royal duel below. She exhaled a long-held breath.

"I wasn't talking about you, Risara" she hissed to her locket. "That was about my father." Risara didn't pulse, and Daila groaned. "I'm serious! I need to stop thinking about that horrid man."

Nothing. Great, now she'd gone and got the amulet in a bad mood.

"Risara," she protested.

"Did you say something?" Mili asked, blinking up at Daila in half-confusion, half-amusement.

"What? Me? I...what? No."

Mili tilted her head with a confused smile, but looked back toward the action below.

The amulet pulsed green.

"Very funny. I can't believe I have to deal with you and Auri. Just one of you nuisances is more than enough."

Daila would have said more, but an excited gasp from Auri drew her attention.

Folston had fallen to the sands. He laid there motionless, and his sword dangled limply in his fingers. Daila bolted upright, her heart racing. Had he been struck down by his father's sword? Gah, she'd told him that the swords were too sharp to be used for training. Or had he been poisoned? Oh Shadows, what if it was Icevein? That was impossible, of course. Icevein took a while to set in, and had clear symptoms. Even so, an awful feeling brewed in her stomach.

Just as Folston's father made his triumphant approach, Folston flipped up onto his feet and released a powerful swing. The king deflected the blow at the last moment, but stumbled back.

"Curse you, Folston," Daila hissed. Why did he have to do that to her? Men. Feigning defenselessness to win their silly practice duels.

She returned to her seat and felt like the world's biggest fool as Folston maintained his pressure, slicing to the left, then maintaining his momentum with a jabbing strike. It struck home and the king stumbled back. He landed on his rear, blowing up a small cloud of dust, and Folston was quick to kick the sword away from his father's grasp.

Slowly, King Braum raised a hand to signal his yielding.

When Braum rose to his feet, a wide smile creased his lips. He extended his arms toward his son, wide and open...and Folston hugged him. It was a fond embrace, the kind that fathers were supposed to share with their sons.

"What?" She blinked, suddenly unsure if her vision was reliable. "Shadows."

Together, the royals headed back into the armory. Now they were on good terms with one another? Just like that?

She exchanged glances with Mili and Auri, who both shrugged.

Utterly perplexing. Thankfully, it was a bathing day, so she would have plenty of time to interrogate Folston about his father.

\* \* \*

After shepherding Folston back to his room, Daila had shut and locked the door behind her, then she'd exhaled a long sigh. Inside Folston's quarters, she had always felt profoundly secure. That sense of security became interwoven with excitement after Folston had agreed that this would be a bathing day.

Daila loved the bathing chamber. She loved when the warmth from the hot water filled the air. It made the room humid, but not intolerably so, and caused little mystical droplets of condensation to form on the stone walls. She loved the smell, too. The lavender scent from the bathwater that soothed her frantic thoughts and set her at ease. Shadows, she wished that Folston would bath more often, not just after his most spirited combat practices.

The bath was an ornate stone hole, large enough for six or so people, and was built into the ground in a side-room of Folston's chambers. Steam wisped up from the water, so beautiful and fleeting. It was the opposite of the ice grotto. A lazy smile drifted onto Daila's lips. She sat on the edge of the bath, her feet submerged. She was naked except for a simple white shift, which was composed of such thin fabric that it was practically transparent. She'd never worn this one before, but...Shadows, why not wear it? They'd be under siege in a week's time.

"So," Daila murmured. She ran her soapy hands through Folston's hair. In the past couple of baths, she'd used the bathing cloth to clean him...but it now seemed unnecessary, so she'd left it on the floor beside her. It felt much better to use her hands, to feel him. To touch those gorgeous black curls. If she could just massage his head for the rest of her life, she'd die happy. "Do you think part of you is glad that your father is leaving?"

He turned around and gave her a bemused look.

"I suppose I'm glad. He'll be safer. Still, I think he's wrong about the battle."

"What do you mean?" She brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes.

"Well, he thinks we're going to lose. We aren't going to lose."

Daila paused for a moment, and bit her lip. "You've heard the reports, though..."

“We have plenty of catapults and launchers, and they’re all in place.”

“Catapults? They have a demon giant, and beasts, and twice as many men.”

The second Kadian army had arrived from the foothills, but their forces were still outnumbered, and - to make matters worse - now the Scythari army was re-taking the foothills. Her army...but she couldn’t bear to think about that. Was there some way she could stop them? Run away from Old Arbor and convince her army to come defend the city? It was foolishness, of course. How could she possibly convince generals and lieutenants that she was their ruler? She was just a redheaded girl - a redheaded slave of Kadia - and even if she showed them her blood, they would probably just think it was a trick.

“Everything dies, even ‘demon giants’.” Folston winked. “They won’t take this city because I won’t let them take it.”

She was silent for a long while, and extended a hand to brush his cheek, leaving a line of soap in its wake.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“So you’re having second thoughts about letting me stay?”

“Letting you stay?” That brought a slight grin to her lips. “As if it’s my choice. As if I’m responsible for your own recklessness. Don’t put that on my shoulders, you prick.”

She gave him a playful slap on the cheek.

He responded in the most juvenile, and frustrating way possible. Grabbing her wrist, he gave her one small tug. That was all it took. Just one tug, and she went tumbling over the edge and into the bath.

She hit with a splash. For a moment, she flailed around like a startled kitten, until two strong arms wrapped around her. Folston’s arms. He drew her close, and she settled onto his lap.

“Prick,” she hissed, though she allowed her lips to twitch upward.

“I didn’t think it possible, but you’re even prettier when you’re angry.”

“Shut up. You’ve gone and gotten my hair all wet, and my dress!” She motioned down at her gown, which was still half-submerged. Now wet, the white fabric clung tightly to her skin. Every inch of her skin was visible beneath the gown, from her slight curves to her breasts, and all illusions of modesty had fled. “Do you know how long this will take to dry?”

“I quite like your new look.” He shrugged. “And if your wet dress is bothering you, you needn’t wear it...”

She wanted to maintain her anger, but she couldn’t manage it. Instead she blushed. Tenderly, she rested a hand on his chest and traced his muscles, his smooth skin, and

she stared deep into his eyes. Folston, meanwhile, brought a careful hand to her cheek, and ran his thumb along her bottom lip. Goosebumps popped up along her arms. They were good goosebumps. The kind that only came when she was feeling safe and...excited.

Their lips met. While their first kiss had been explosive, the end product of months of repressed longing, this kiss was tender. Sweet. Deep. They took their time, moving slowly, as Folston carefully massaged his tongue against hers. It lasted for a beautiful eternity, and all concerns about battle, death, and intrigue began to dissolve in Daila's mind. They didn't matter. Not as much as this.

Folston lowered his mouth to her neck and she drew a sharp breath when he trailed his lips down her body, laying gentle kisses along the way. He stopped only when he reached her breasts, and his hands took over from there. He explored her body, feeling every inch of her skin, claiming her. It was as if he was discovering a new book and decoding its pages, but she was the book and the pages were more than willing. She yearned for this. He lifted her arms and slid off her wet gown, tossing it gingerly beside her discarded hand towel.

She was entirely nude, aside from the amulet that hung just above her breasts. Just pale skin and subtle curves, with a peppering of freckles. Aside from Auri, nobody else had seen her naked before. Even so, she felt no shame, only certainty that this was profoundly right.

"I don't know what the future holds," he rasped. "But I want you, Daila. Tonight, I want you."

"I want you, too," she whispered back far too quickly, licking her lips.

That drew a grin from Folston. He toyed with her left breast, and she let out an embarrassingly high gasp. Apparently, she wasn't a particularly difficult code to crack. His hands worked their Fourth Magic while she trailed a hand down his body. Lower, lower, and lower still. By the time the tips of her fingers brushed against his hardness, she was already shuddering with exhilaration.

"Folston," she whispered in his ear, though it was more of a prayer than a name. "Folston!"

She took his member in her grasp, gently and anxiously guiding him toward her. Shadows, it was so close. She wanted this. She wanted this more than anything she had ever wanted.

"Take me."

And he did.

What followed was the most confusing, most mind-blowing, and the most amazing set of feelings that she had ever experienced. She laughed, she screamed, and she cried. They were happy tears, she thought, though she couldn't be entirely sure. The emotions swirling in her mind were so complex, so layered, but - on the whole - they were positive.

And the sensations...nobody had warned her about those. Even long after Folston was done, she couldn't stop the tremors. They sat together in the bath, her nestled in his lap, as the lower half of her body shook intermittently for at least a quarter of an hour. Though the shakes were a touch debilitating, they weren't violent or terrifying, they were wonderful. She'd never imagined that anything in the world could feel so good.

But that was not the best part of the ordeal. The best part was being able to curl up in Folston's lap. It was cuddling into him and placing gentle kisses on his neck, as he wrapped her tight and whispered sweet nothings into her ear. That level of serenity, of inner peace, had always eluded her.

Folston. She was his maid, and his...whatever this was. Her whole life revolved around him. And she accepted that fact. He was the center of her universe. This man, this Kadian prince who she'd once been tempted to assassinate. She had been a fool. An ignorant, misled fool.

"I used to hate you, you know?" she eventually whispered. "I can't even imagine it now, but..." she trailed off.

"Hate me? Why?" He placed a hand on her chin and tipped her head up, so their eyes met. She shuddered again.

"I was jealous, I suppose."

"Jealous about...?"

She gulped, searching for words. Truth be told, she didn't know the right answer. Was there a 'right' answer?

"Was it about your hair? Because if it is, I can assure you that opinions about hair color are going to change. Mark my words. Ten years from now, you won't even be able to recognize this world because ther-"

"Your father loves you," Daila interrupted. "You two don't always get along, sure. But even when you don't agree, you still respect each other. He still cares about you and...and treats you like his son, like his...his child. Mine never did. I lived my whole life trying to be good enough for him, but I never was." A tear streaked down her cheek. Or was it water from the bath? She couldn't be sure. A chill breeze passed over her, in the otherwise humid room. Her arms trembled. It was the chill of realization, of

truths that she hadn't fully admitted before, not even to herself. "I've always hated you."

He pulled her closer on his lap, until she felt his warm breath against her cheek, and the chill began to fade. What had that been? Surely she hadn't imagined it all.

Daila furrowed her eyebrows. Deep within her, a primal sense stirred. It was not the same primal sense that Folston had awoken earlier. No, this was different. This was the uneasy feeling that something was not quite right.

She stiffened. Her eyes drifted past Folston's shoulder, toward the door...the half-opened door.

"What's wrong?" Folston whispered to her. "Did I do something wrong?"

Silently, she shook her head.

"Something's here."

Folston looked incredulous, but still turned to follow her gaze.

The door to the bath couldn't be open. It was impossible. She'd certainly closed the door to the bathing room, and she had locked the front entrance to Folston's chambers when they'd first arrived. To enter his chambers, someone would need the key, and nobody would dare to enter the prince's quarters without announcing themselves. Plus, it wasn't as if every lad and lass in the castle owned a key to the royal suites.

A gloved hand appeared on the edge of the door, and pushed it open.

"What have we here?" asked Madam Marsa, cocking her head. She strode into the room. Like usual, she wore her flowing black dress, and a sad smile graced her lips. "I was wrong about you, girl. I thought you were brighter than the other foolish swine, but it seems you're just another light-haired whore."

Visre entered beside the Madam. Her face was neutral, an intense mask. Shadows. Nothing ever good happened when that woman was around.

"M-Madam," Daila stammered, cheeks flushing. She brought her trembling hands to cover her breasts, and slid out of Folston's lap. Shadows, she hated disappointing the Madam. She feared the Madam's ire almost as much as she'd once feared her own father's wrath. "It's not what it seems," she managed in a weak voice.

"And a liar, too. Well, that should make all of this much easier."

"Why are you here?" Folston snarled. "You'd better have a good reason, or I'll have you in chains."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Marsa's grin turned into a smirk. She reached within her dress and withdrew a knife. It was not a kitchen knife, meant for chopping onions or beets. No, this knife was built for one purpose. It was made to kill. The handle was ornate, carved with concentric circles, and the knife's edge was thin and deadly, sharp

enough to glide through flesh. "Your father should have heeded you when you went to him like a spineless pup and begged for me to be removed."

Folston's eyes widened and he raised a hand. "Marsa," he said, clearly struggling to maintain composure. "If that's what this is about, you needn't worry. I pose no threat to you."

"You're right, you don't."

Marsa approached the bath slowly, clearly relishing each step. Her knife was extended, and her grip as certain. Experienced.

Folston growled. He rose from the bath like a living manifestation of the Giant himself. Water dripped down his skin, pooling at his feet, as he glared defiantly at Marsa. Daila stumbled up after him, still trembling. Shadows, was Folston's truly going to fight her? He was absolutely naked and he'd left his sword in the other room. Shadow of the Giant's foot, this was bad. She scanned the room, desperate to find anything she could use as a conventional weapon. Aside from a meager torchlight, there was nothing.

"Madam," Daila squeaked. "Why...why..."

Those were the only words she could muster, before the Madam's smirk fled, replaced by sheer intensity.

"Why didn't I do this earlier?" she asked. "Because orders are orders, and I'm the most patient of women. If it was up to me, I'd have killed all of the blasphemers long ago." She paused, and her eyes glinted with thrill. She raised the knife, as if she was about to strike. "But the Emperor gets what the Emperor wants."

Just as Marsa tensed, a high voice drifted through Folston's chambers. Marsa hesitated.

"Hello? Little Miss Daila, did you forget to close your door? Were you too busy doing you-know-what with you-know-who?"

Auri. Daila would have recognized that voice anywhere, that drifting tone that seemed to be almost incapable of conveying dismay.

"Where's my favorite gingerbean?" Auri sang from the foyer. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Marsa paused, and exchanged an irate glance with her henchwoman.

"Deal with that one, Visre. Make it painful, Emperor knows that cursed child deserves a slow death." Marsa turned back to Daila and Folston, and her lips twitched upward. "I'll take care of the whore and the idiot personally."

# CHAPTER 32

## *Into the Depths*

**M**arsa attacked. She lunged at Folston, knife outstretched, with speed that was nothing short of terrifying. Her knife caught only air, as Folston hopped aside at the last possible moment. He had trained his whole life for this, for combat, but...Shadows, he needed his sword. Marsa circled him, like a wolf surveying her prey. Folston stood in a low stance and prowled away from the bath, his bare feet leaving wet marks on the stone floor.

“Dasher,” Folston growled.

Yes, that was it. Marsa was a Dasher, and...and what had she said about the ‘Emperor’? She was a Lisanai, a shadows-damned Lisanai. How had Daila not seen it earlier? How had she been so blind?

Marsa lashed out again, lower. This time, her blade found flesh, leaving a neat cut down Folston’s thigh. He hissed in pain. Thankfully, the cut did not look particularly deep or long, but that was merely the first strike. More would come, and Marsa clearly knew what she was doing with a knife.

“Shadows,” Daila murmured.

This was a losing battle. Folston was in trouble and Auri...oh, Auri. How was she faring in the other room? Not well, most likely. Unlike Folston, Auri wasn’t trained in combat. If Visre had half the skill of Madam Marsa, Auri would be finished.

Daila bit her lip.

She wasn’t much of a fighter, herself. She couldn’t brawl or stab or slash, but she did have one talent. Daila’s eyes fell upon the bathing cloth, her white shift beside it. She’d



never shaped these exact materials before, but the beginnings of a bold idea took root in her mind. She knew what she had to do.

“Help me with this, Risara,” Daila murmured, as she stole a glance at Folston. At the man she loved. “Please.”

Just as Marsa launched another assault, Daila whispered into the bathing cloth.

The cloth maintained its white color, but it began to shift. Its fibrous texture became thinner, nearly thinner than a sheet of paper, and small veins materialized on its surface. Wings. Large wings. The rest of the cloth bundled together until it formed the body of the creature. The body of the bat. It was the first time that Daila had ever attempted a bat, and her work had been inefficient at best.

She’d made the bat too large, larger than an eagle, which caused the Shaping to take more power than she’d expected. She was left woozy and unsteady by the expenditure, but her efforts were worthwhile.

The bat flapped its wings and screeched as it plummeted toward Marsa. The Madam had to alter her swing at the last moment to fend off the bat. Stumbling backward, she snarled curses as she grappled with the bat. Marsa kicked herself free from the bat, but all the while her knife was still trained on Folston’s chest. She realized the bat for what it was: a diversion. Daila hadn’t even been able to give the poor thing any teeth since she apparently hadn’t studied her Chiroptera closely enough.

No, it wasn’t a perfect solution or an ideal use of Power, but the Shaping had bought Folston some much-needed time. He backed further away from Marsa and grabbed a metal candle-holder from the floor. Good. At least that would give him a better chance.

With more urgency, Daila whispered a few words into her shift and tossed it into the bath. Shadows, she just hoped that her old memories from Ostlau’s Guide to Aphotic Creatures were trustworthy. If not, they were in serious trouble.

She tried to get Folston’s attention and share her plans. She wished she could just tell him what to do, but then Marsa would hear and...well...this was not the sort of plan that worked when all parties were aware of its existence.

She likely would have thought up some brilliant way to share her ideas with Folston, if not for the bone-chilling scream that came from the prince’s bedroom.

“Auri.”

Daila did not think, did not plan, did not tarry any longer. She bolted past Marsa and slammed open the bedroom doors.

“Get away from me, you tit!” Auri piped.

She crouched atop a high bookcase, one of several in Folston’s quarters, and hurled books down at Visre. How had she even climbed up there? Had she always been a good

climber, or had she scampered up that bookshelf out of pure desperation? Shadows, Daila could live around that girl for a thousand years and still never fully understand her.

Visre stood below the bookcase and shook it violently, like a rowdy child trying to knock an apple loose from its tree.

“Daila!” Auri called, as she threw another book onto Visre’s head. The large woman shook her head slowly, dazed, but continued to shake the bookcase. “Tell this big oaf to stop it. I don’t know what she’s playing at, but she’s got a knife, and she made me spill my glass of wine. Look what she did to my dress, for the Giant’s sake! And I just washed it!”

Auri was correct. A puddle of wine marked the center of the room, along with a discarded goblet. The goblet was ornate, golden, and almost certainly belonging to Folston, not Auri. Daila would know, as she’d cleaned that damned goblet every day for months. Had Auri truly attempted to steal the prince’s wine, after she purposefully barging in on herself and Folston? Shadows, that girl was up to no good.

That girl was also in a great deal of danger and didn’t seem to realize it.

“Hang in there, Auri,” Daila squeaked.

She glanced around the room for an object she could Shape, but her well of Power was already taxed thanks to her two on-going Shaping links, so she had to choose wisely. There was a desk, which was useless. She couldn’t Shape a desk into anything useful. Another option was the various discarded books which lay scattered on the floor. For those, no uses came to mind. She turned around in a circle, her eyes scanning. The wine goblet? No. Folston’s black sword by the bed? A swordfish, perhaps? No, that wouldn’t be useful on land, and swords were nothing like swordfish, regardless of what Ostlau had decided. What else could she use? One of those distasteful Kadian decorations?

Lost in contemplation, Daila didn’t notice that the bookcase no longer rattled from Visre’s shaking. She didn’t stop to consider the fact that the assassin may have given up her pursuit of Auri, in favor of easier prey.

Daila’s amulet glowed red, and she froze.

A warning call from Auri made Daila snap her eyes away from the sword, just in time to meet Visre’s eyes, as the woman charged at her like an angered bear.

A more agile person may have been able to dodge Visre, but Daila had never been particularly athletic. Instead, she only let out a shrill cry and braced herself for impact.

At full speed, Visre hit hard. It felt as if Daila had just run herself into a tree. She flopped to the ground like a ragdoll, with Visre’s bulk piled on top of her. If she had

landed on stone, her head may have split open. Thankfully, a distasteful Kadian decoration saved her life: a white fur rug on the floor. Even so, the impact was hard, and her temples throbbed with pain. That pain was made direr by the fact that Visre had her pinned to the ground, pressing upon her with easily thrice her own weight.

She struggled for breath as Visre pinned one of her arms to her side. She needed more air, but her lungs were under too much pressure. Her mind went into panic mode, and a passage from Principles of Human Anatomy played over and over again. "All aerobic creatures need oxygen for cellular respiration. All aerobic creatures need oxygen for cellular respiration. All aerobic creatures need oxygen for cellular respiration. She needed air. She needed to breathe...and she needed to breathe soon. Oh Shadows, why did she have to be such a scatterbrain? Why couldn't she have just paid bloody attention to a gigantic thug charging at her?

Visre's fist collided with the side of Daila's stomach, and she let out a soundless gasp. Visre was not just a large woman. That punch had more power than anything Daila had ever felt before. Inhuman strength. Shadows, she was in the grip of an Ironskin. Another punch rained down, then another. From the sheer pain in her side, Daila was almost certain that she'd broken a rib. Daila dug her fingers into the white fur rug, almost instinctively, as if she was clinging to hope, to life.

The edges of Daila's vision began to fade. She was about to accept her fate, accept her death when a thought occurred to her.

Risara, she thought to her Totem, though she had no reason to believe that Risara could hear her thoughts. I'll need all of your help with this one.

Visre again slammed her fist into Daila's side and she edged closer to unconsciousness, just as tendrils of power crept out of her fingers. She couldn't see their work, but she could feel them and control their movements as they Shaped the fur rug. She knew this creature, though she did not know it well. She understood the bones that she would need to construct, the ligaments, the muscles, and even the teeth. Still, a fur rug was a long way from a real animal. Shaping this creature when she was already maintaining two others would stretch her abilities to their limits.

But she had no time to spare, no time to worry about her leaking well of power.

Daila gasped from another brutal punch, just as the wolf rolled out from beneath her. It rose over Visre like a shadow. She'd crafted the animal to be larger than any real wolf, which required even more of her dwindling power, but that was a necessary evil. Fighting an Ironskin was no small task. The wolf needed to be strong and vicious, and it had to last long enough to make an impact. All of those requirements had drained Daila's powers even further. Suffocating as she was, she also hadn't been able to give

the wolf any verbal instructions. Instead, she had relied upon the strength of her own power to issue a simple, one-word command: attack.

The wolf leaped at Visre. It struck hard and the woman stumbled back, cursing. Finally, Daila could breathe. She gasped for breath and rolled onto her hands and knees as the wolf and the Ironskin grappled behind her. They both snarled like beasts, rolling across the stones in a battle of sheer desperation. Droplets of blood sprouted from Visre's arm as the wolf's teeth dug in, and she swung brutal punches into the wolf's side with her free hand.

"Shaper!" Visre squawked. "How?" She spoke further, but her words were little more than sharp grunts.

This display of combat was unlike the polished battles in the dueling arena. It was more akin to the battle on the wall when the Kadians seized the city. There was no technique or calculated movement in the grappling match between Visre and the wolf, just panic and wild flailing.

Daila struggled to her feet and touched a hand to her side. She winced. Had her ribs truly broken? Perhaps. She was no doctor. At the very least, though, she sensed that Visre's strikes would leave her with a harsh bruise. No, she didn't have time to worry about that. Blinking, she glanced around for something else to shape. Her well of power was close to running dry, but she had to save Auri. She had to save Folston.

Her eyes fell upon the black sword, resting beside Folston's bed. She couldn't shape it, but maybe she could use it. Wield it. She was no swordswoman, of course, and the sword seemed gigantic, but she staggered toward it anyway and gripped the hilt with a clammy hand.

When she turned back to the brawl, the wolf let out a cry. Visre had rolled on top of it and pressed down with her full weight.

"Shadows."

No, the wolf would not be victorious. Daila had to take matters into her own hands. Slowly, she let her wolf go. The bond had been a taxing one to maintain. As soon as she let go of it, a bit of relief washed over her, as if she'd just released a long-held breath. Beneath Visre, the animal twisted and turned, then spread out and lost its sharper features as little wisps of power unraveled into the air around it. Like fabric being unwoven, the wolf collapsed beneath Visre...then the wolf was gone, and only a rug remained.

Gritting her teeth, Daila raised the sword. It was heavy. Beyond heavy, but anger fueled her, strengthened her, and she raised the greatsword with two hands and leveled it at Visre.

Visre was clearly astonished from the fact that her adversary had turned into a rug. She knelt on the piece of Kadian decor and blinked for a few moments before raising her gaze. She studied her arm, still bloody from where the wolf had struck, leaving a trail of red on the white rug. When her eyes settled on Daila, she let out a wordless snarl.

Daila held out the sword in trembling arms. Although the kneeling woman was a good ten paces from her, Daila was utterly terrified. She was a Shaper, not a warrior, and Visre was an Ironskin assassin.

“You,” Visre sneered. There was blood in her mouth, filling the grooves between her teeth. “Your turn, lass.”

With an unsteady hand, Visre lifted herself to her feet. She towered above Daila, blocking out the rest of the room. Daila held out the sword, directing its point at Visre’s chest. Wait...where was Auri? Daila glanced around the room. Her friend was nowhere in sight. Hopefully, that meant she’d been able to escape. Good. At least one person would make it out of this room alive.

Daila re-gripped the sword. Shadows, her whole body was shaking. Between that and the weight of the sword, how would she ever be able to land a strike? This was a bad idea. A bad, bad, bad idea.

Visre began to march toward her, before pausing. She cocked her head.

“What’re you waiting for?” Daila whispered. She’d intended for the words to come out as a brave taunt, but she couldn’t manage that. A whisper would have to do. “Fight me!”

“Did you...” Visre glare turned to a look of half-amusement. “Did you pee yourself?”

Paling, Daila looked down. Shadows, had she truly...yes. She had.

“Shut up. Stop smiling. It’s a perfectly natural response to fear. Have you never read *On Human Emotions and the Body* by Kostow?”

Visre only let out a low chuckle. Then, she spoke at her usual sluggish pace. “You’re funny. I did not wish to kill you. It’s a shame.”

The large woman took another step forward, just as a loud metal clang echoed through the chamber.

Visre stood and stared for a moment, then her eyelids fluttered shut. She collapsed to the floor with a loud thud.

Auri stood behind the fallen woman, a metal wine pitcher in hand.

Daila gaped. She glanced from Auri to the unconscious assassin, then back to Auri, who had crouched beside Visre, and gave the woman’s cheek a gentle pat.

“Did you see that? Got her right over the back of the head. Got her good, I reckon. What comes around goes around, bitch.”

“But she’s an Ironskin,” Daila whispered.

“Aye. Ironskin, not Ironhead.” A wide grin split Auri’s lips. “Thanks for peeing yourself, by the way. That was the best distraction I’ve ever seen, I reckon, and all this time I thought that the whole ‘Shaping’ thing was your true gift.”

“Shut up. Tie her up and take off all of her jewelry. Throw it away.”

Daila shook her head slowly, finally absorbing what had just happened. She was alive...and she was miraculously unbloodied, only sporting a few nasty bruises and marks.

“Away?”

“Away. I don’t care where. Just don’t let her get near her jewelry, or she’ll heal up fast and give us trouble. Do that, then get the guards.” Daila eyed the door to the bathing chamber, and her heartbeat tripled. Folston. He was still in danger. “And whatever you do, don’t follow me.”

Daila marched through the bathing chamber doorway naked, sweating, and bruised. Her power expenditure had left her light-headed, but she still gripped her sword as tightly as she could.

She let out a small sigh of relief. Folston was alive. He wasn’t in great shape, however. Naked and without his sword, he stood at the center of the room. He was clearly struggling to deal with Marsa’s speed and her knife. He had managed to wield one of the room’s torches and was using it to deflect her blows and buy as much time as possible. Even so, his skin was marked by at least four separate gashes, which dripped blood onto the stone floor and sent tiny streams down into the bathwater.

Marsa paced around him, searching for an opening in his defenses. She bled from her nose and had a few cuts and bruises from where Folston had managed to strike. Regardless of her powers, Folston was the better-trained fighter, and that alone had probably saved his life.

Daila’s bat had long since returned to being cloth, and her white shift...well...she could sense that its shaping had held, but its lifespan was limited. Maintaining hastily constructed bonds was no easy feat.

“Folston!” Her voice came out as a squeak.

He looked away from Marsa for a split second to give Daila a reassuring nod. Marsa saw that as an opportunity to strike. She lunged forward and her knife grazed Folston’s forearm. She would have cut deeper, had Folston not moved to seize Marsa’s arm. She narrowly avoided his grasp and dodged backward. This was their game, it seemed.

Marsa would chip away at him with one small cut after another and hope that Folston could not grab her. She was a Dasher, after all, and couldn't compete with his strength, so one grapple could mean the end for her.

Still, Marsa was winning this battle. Slowly and surely, she would bleed Folston dry.

Daila growled and eyed the black sword in her hands. It was useless in her hands. She glanced between the sword and the bath, and an idea took root.

"Catch!" she called. With all of her strength, she threw the sword toward Folston. It didn't reach him, of course, but hit the floor near Marsa and slid to Folston's side. The prince dropped his torch. He lifted his sword from the ground and gripped it with two hands as if he was embracing an old friend.

Marsa backed away from him, re-assessing the situation. The Madam was cornered between Folston and Daila and, though Daila no longer had any weaponry, she did have a strategy...and she couldn't let Folston die to this witch.

Folston swiped with his sword and Marsa dodged backward. He followed up with another swing, which Marsa ducked beneath. This was it. With Marsa distracted and Folston on the offensive, this would be Daila's opening.

Shaking, trembling, and trying to ignore all of the worries swirling in her mind, Daila charged. Yes, she was uncoordinated and inexperienced in actual combat. Yes, she was not sure if this would work. And yes, she had peed herself out of fear only minutes before, but she could not stand by and watch as Folston crumbled.

She ran at Marsa, reaching for the woman's neck. For that pendant nestled beneath the Madam's dress. Her plan was foolish and idiotic and everything else, but it had to be done. It was necessary. She was willing to die for him. She had made that decision long ago.

Daila fumbled with the necklace, trying to undo its latch when Marsa spun around.

The Madam's knife flashed out.

"Daila, no!" Folston cried, but his warning came too late.

Dull pain lanced through Daila's side, but she ignored it as she snatched away the Madam's necklace. If only her fingers had been quicker or her hands more dexterous, she would have been able to take the necklace and retreat unharmed. No such luck. Daila clutched the necklace in her hand. No, she clutched the Totem, for it had to be Marsa's Totem...or all of this would be for naught.

"Fool," Marsa smirked. The knife withdrew, and Daila let out a startled gasp. "This isn't your fight, Shaper whore. What are you, his bodyguard? Sent from Kadia to care for this heretic child? You deceived me. And you know what happens to maids who deceive me." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "They pay."

“Madam Marsa.” Daila’s voice was little more than a rasp. “I think you’ve forgotten something.” Carefully, she unfolded her hand to reveal Marsa’s necklace.

Marsa’s eyes widened, just as Daila tossed the necklace over her shoulder and into the bathing pool. It wasn’t far away, only ten or fifteen paces, but - according to Valthus’ Observations on Sympathetic Magic Systems - that was beyond the range of diminishing effects. At such a distance, Marsa would begin to feel sluggish. She would lose her edge.

Ignoring Daila entirely, Marsa withdrew the knife and sprinted after the necklace. She let out a wild curse in the Emperor’s name. It was her Totem, then. Daila had been right about something, for the first time in what felt like a millennium.

Daila turned to watch the spectacle, as Marsa dove into head-first into the pool. A weary smile graced Daila’s lips. The Madam was visible beneath the clear blue water, her black dress flowing behind her as she desperately clawed for her Totem.

Behind Daila, the Kadian prince took a few brisk paces toward the pool, as if he intended to follow Marsa and continue the battle underwater.

“Wait, I wouldn’t do that. Not yet.”

Folston paused but continued to study the water with an expression that betrayed only sheer intensity.

“Just wait.”

After only a few more moments of sifting through the pool’s depths, Marsa began to shake violently. She flailed as if desperate to reach the surface.

“It’s not a good way to go,” Daila murmured.

Folston peered closer to the water, a mix of confusion and horror on his face. “What’s happening?”

“Loss of muscle control, spasms. The early stages of cardiovascular collapse.”

“What? How?”

“A Heriotza Jellyfish, of course. A mere touch is fatal. Ostlau captured one for research years ago and wrote a quite fascinating chapter on the matter. I didn’t like to think of my shift as a jellyfish, but...desperate times called for desperate measures.”

The Madam stopped her flailing and lay still. She was face-down in the water as she floated to the surface.

“Loss of all bodily functions. Full cardiac arrest.”

Her chest convulsed once, twice, and then...nothing. No more breaths, no more heartbeats. Madam Marsa was dead.

Folston shuddered. He squinted into the water, looking rather queasy. “I don’t see anything.”



“Neither did she. They’re rather small.”

Shutting her eyes, Daila released the Shaping bond with her jellyfish, which promptly returned to being a sunken shift. She’d have to throw that one out, sadly. She couldn’t stomach the idea of wearing a jellyfish.

Folston came up beside her with a towel and gently laid it over her shoulders. Unfortunately, he had donned one as well. She leaned into him. He was so loving, so caring, so perfect.

“Daila!” Folston gasped, stepping back from her. “She stabbed you! You’re...you’re...why is your...? No...”

Daila’s eyes drifted down to her side, just below her ribs. The knife had left a wound there. The wound was shallow but wide, an ugly gash of exposed skin.

Blue blood ran down her torso.

She shook her head, dazed. How had she forgotten that she’d been stabbed? Adrenaline, perhaps. Now that the excitement of battle was fading, or maybe because she was now thinking about her wound, her side began to throb with pain. Even so, the wound would not be deadly. Her blood, on the other hand, could be.

“Shadows,” she muttered.

She wrapped her towel tightly around herself, tying it above her breasts as if that would erase Folston’s discovery. Even that was futile. Blue blood seeped through the towel and left an obvious mark on the outside. The blood had also begun to trail down her leg, forming a small blue pool on the floor beside her.

“Daila?” There was confusion in his voice. Fear, too. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“It’s...it’s a long story, but I can explain.” The words came out higher than she’d anticipated, and far more rushed.

“Who are you? What are you? You’re a Shaper, you’re...” His eyes widened as it dawned on him. Sharp emotions lingered in those green eyes: surprise and betrayal. “You’re the prince.”

Ever so slowly, Folston took up his sword again and leveled it at her.

Daila gulped. Her head was still dizzy, still spinning from the conflict with Marsa. This was not how she envisioned she would have this conversation with Folston. Shadows. Shadows, Shadows, Shadows.

“I...I’m the queen, technically. I think. Please put down the sword, Folston. I love you...I always will.”

“You lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie. You just never asked me...and I just saved your life.”

Folston only growled wordlessly.

"I'm not evil. I'm not evil, I promise. I know I did some terrible things when I was a prince, but I've changed. You have to believe me! Everything we had together was genuine. It was real, Folston. Everything I told you about my life was the truth."

"So your mother was a Ralli woman who taught you how to read? You didn't have instructors?"

"Okay, that was a lie," Daila whispered, pulling the towel more tightly around her. "But she was killed by the King, and I did love her, and I do hate my father for it. I hate him...I can't tell you how much I hate him. I can't put it into words. And he destroyed me, Folston. He tried to make me like him...and you fixed me. You'll always be my hero. You can hate me, you can loathe me, you can curse the ground that I walk on, but I will always love you. No matter what. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Ever so slowly, Folston lowered his sword.

"So you aren't here as part of some plot?"

"I tried to Shape myself and escape the castle, to escape justice because I was a coward. It went wrong and I became...Daila. I stayed here in the castle because Auri was the only person I trusted. She was my only friend, and I wanted to stay by her, and I had no idea how to get along as a Ralli girl. I needed her." Daila drew a deep breath. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about harming you and your family, at first. Then I actually met you and...and I'd never do that to you."

"Right," Folston said, not sounding entirely convinced.

"I would give up my crown for you. I would give up my life for you. I would give everything."

He leveled her with a hard gaze as if he was trying to determine how much of that statement was true. It was all true. She knew that, and hopefully he realized just as much.

"Why didn't you just tell me?" he grumbled.

"Because!" She pointed at his massive sword, still aimed in her general direction. "Have you ever not told someone something, because you knew it would hurt them? Because you knew they would hate you for it, even though it's the truth?"

For a long while, he just stared at her. Into her. Shadows, he really did have a fourth power. She wished that all of this could be forgotten and that she could simply collapse into his arms. She was beyond tired, too tired to deal with any of this.

"I'm not Delvaran anymore. I'm Daila, and I lov-"

Before she could finish, the door to the bathing rooms burst open to reveal a squad of six guards. They were geared for battle. Their swords and shields were at the ready, but they paused when they saw the scene before them.

"His Highness is safe!" called one of the guards. "Another body in here."

"Let me through, let me through!" came the King's voice. "Let me see my son." The guards parted around him, and King Braum marched inside the bathing chamber. "Did you drown her?" Braum asked, tilting his head curiously at Marsa's body.

Folston didn't answer.

This was bad. Beyond bad.

The King prodded Marsa with his foot.

"Guess you were right about this one," the King muttered. He turned and his eyes inevitably fell on Daila. On her towel, and the blue stain.

"Girl," the King said, testily. "Let me see that wound."

Daila gulped and exchanged a glance with Folston. He nodded.

Hands trembling, she pulled back the towel to reveal the long blue gash.

"Scythari!" the King barked.

What seemed like only a heartbeat later, two guards seized her. They gripped her tightly on either arm, which stretched the wound in her side and brought tears to her eyes.

"Wait," she pleaded. "Folston..."

"She had nothing to do with this attack," Folston said. "The assassins were Lisanai, from the Redcloak order, I think." There was a surprising harshness in his voice, and he was careful to avoid her gaze. "She's responsible for saving my life, but I do believe that she is the Scythari prince."

Her heart sank. She'd been betrayed. He would never love her. How could he? She had lied to him about her past, her identity, and even her own name. No, she hadn't been betrayed. This was justice.

"The prince, you say? The Shaper? Confiscate everything she owns and take her to the dungeons. Prepare the execution block for tomorrow morning. I want her head to roll before I ride north. That ought to show the loyalist army that their cause is over, and we won't have to deal with those rats anymore."

"Father! That's extreme, is it not? She hasn't harmed anyone!"

"Show me a Scythari royal who's never harmed anyone, and I'll show you a second Great Tree."

"But father..."

"Stop thinking with your cock. She's the enemy, and she'll pay for what her army's done."

Daila wanted to be surprised or indignant, but she was too empty for that. Too drained. She hardly even listened to Folston's other pleas. Instead, she went limp and

resigned herself to her fate as the guards dragged her out of the room, down a flight of stairs, and into the darkness.

# CHAPTER 33

## *Cloak and Dagger*

When Liral and Cross entered the Cloak and Dagger Tavern, they studied the patrons for a few moments before exchanging a subtle nod. Finally, they'd found a tavern that wasn't overrun by soldiers. With the Emperor's 'no alcohol in the tents' rule, soldiers stopped at every possible tavern along their route through eastern Scythar. Soldiers occupied a few of the long wooden tables, to be sure, but most of the folks were locals or mercenaries.

The pair settled on the far corner of a long bench, finding a spot that was far away from prying ears. They placed their order with a young serving girl. One beer and two meals. The girl had a lofty Scythari accent, so slow and careful that it could put people to sleep. Liral had missed that accent. She missed how each word in each sentence seemed marginally higher in pitch than the last. Shadows, Scythari accents had been so rare at the Trisal docks, she hadn't even realized how much she'd missed them.

The serving girl nodded smartly and scampered back toward the kitchen. The girl was blonde of course, and looked terrified. All of the folks in these towns were scared for their lives. If they insulted the wrong soldier or officer, they were as good as dead. Even if they did nothing wrong, the Emperor had given his army license to loot and pillage as they wished. Thus, the local folks' survival hinged on sheer luck.

The tavern's owner, a blonde man with a thick mustache, tapped his fingers impatiently against the bar. He waved to every patron who entered or exited, and barked laughs with over-the-top joviality. One wrong move, and his life's work would be forfeit.

Liral gulped.

A surprising amount of the Scythari Ralli had opted to stay in their villages, despite the army's locust-like advance. She understood why those folks stayed. Those villages, farms, and taverns were all they knew, just like her roofs were all she had known. They couldn't imagine any other existence. Sometimes, it was easy to retreat into a turtle shell and hope to find comfort. She empathized with that, even though she had little in common with the scared roof-dweller who picked pockets to survive.

The serving girl returned with Cross's drink only moments later.

"Bless the Emperor," Cross sighed, before taking a long sip. "Can't remember the last time I had a drink, thanks to that..." He glanced around to see if anyone was listening in. "...that prick."

"Aye."

Liral felt empty. She'd felt that way, ever since she realized the futility of her plan. She couldn't steal the bloody crown if it was nailed to the Emperor's head, could she? Ruiner.

"Aye," Cross echoed, and silence passed between them.

What more could she say? Cross had lost everything thanks to the Emperor, and Liral hadn't even been able to help him.

Her eyes drifted to the far side of their bench. Another mercenary - or, at least, he had the look of a mercenary - settled down there and placed his order with the waitress. He wore light mail armor in typical Scythari style, and he sported an unkempt beard. He had a pained expression and a deep weariness in his eyes. Shadows, he looked even more morose than Cross. Thankfully, the man was just outside of earshot.

"We could always handle our..." Cross paused, casting a wary eye toward the mercenary. old-fashioned way. He lowered his voice. "Our 'issue' the old-fashioned way."

Liral looked up at Cross sharply.

"You mean..."

"You westerners say he's not a god. If you're right, he'll bleed like you or I."

"I doubt that," she said weakly. "But...aye."

"I know it's a lot to ask. I know it's a deathwish, but you can get close to him. I know you can. I'll run distraction again, and we'll finally see if the stories are true. Plus, I don't know how Shaping works, but killing the bastard could bring Tannon back." His voice trembled. "We have to butcher that prick, Liral."

"Aye."

Butcher. She'd...she'd butcher him. She imagined the Emperor lying on the ground of his tent, bloodied and dying...but that vision mixed with a memory. The Emperor's body transformed into...into Yila, into that Ralli woman with a sword through her stomach. The memory was poignant. She could smell that coppery-metallic scent of bloodshed, and goosebumps raced up her arms. The screams, the blood, it was all too much for Liral to bear. She'd always hated blood. She couldn't even imagine herself killing someone with her own hands, even if it was that evil Emperor.

Liral drew a few hurried breaths, willing the goosebumps to disappear. What was wrong with her? Even Cross, despite the fact that he'd lost everything, was more courageous than her. After he'd taken out his anger on those soldiers in the punching matches, he'd regained some of his swagger. Some of that swagger remained, even after Liral updated him on the crown situation. Shadows, he needed her to be stronger.

"I'll try." She drummed her fingers on the table. "But I'm no good with knives or swords or any of that."

"We'll do it when he's sleeping, then. You can use my knife."

"But...how?"

Cross lifted an eyebrow, and made a small jabbing motion with his hand. "Stab him. Aim for the heart or the throat. We're getting close to Old Arbor, so if we want to off him and avoid a bloodbath, we'd better do it soon. And Emperor-knows what all of this'll do to Tannon...we can't let him be part of the siege." He clenched his fist, and his knuckles turned white. "We can't let him get ordered around like some murderous bull. We need to make our move. Tonight, maybe."

"Tonight?" Liral blinked. She slowly shook her head. "But Cross..."

"Tomorrow, then."

Liral was going to argue when she noticed that they were being watched. The man at the end of the table - the grizzled mercenary - studied them closely. How long had he been staring? Had he heard their conversation?

Cross noticed the man too, just as goosebumps returned to Liral's arms. The man wore a rather large sword on his hip. What if he was a mercenary in disguise? What if he was a Redcloak?

To her surprise, though, the man let out an amused snort.

"Lots of whispering for a tavern," the man rasped. He spoke with a snail-like Scythari accent which Liral recognized immediately as a rural variety. Pausing, he took a sip of whatever dark liquor he was drinking. Shadows, it was strong. She could smell the alcohol from halfway across the table. "Don't stop on my account, I won't judge

you folks for being discrete. That said, I'm more than a little curious 'bout what you're up to."

Liral worriedly glanced up at Cross, who was busy studying the man's tattered armor.

"And what if I told you that we're not up to anything, that we're simply enjoying some food and drink."

"Then I'd call you a liar," the mercenary said, before taking another sip of that foul liquid. "You sit in the back corner, you whisper, and your wife has restless hands. A thief's hands, I reckon."

"A thief's hands?!" Liral crossed her arms. "That's absurd. And I'm not his wife."

The man just waved a hand dismissively. "As long as you're robbing dark-hairedes, I've no issue with you."

"Is that so?" Cross asked. "What'd they do? Besides being pricks, of course."

"More than you could know. I'd give anything - anything - to see some justice. I worked for them. I worked my whole life for those spineless, soulless, Shadows-damned idiots. They gave me one promotion after another. Corporal of the city guard, Sergeant of Scythar! It's all meaningless. Just words. They paid us next to nothing and, come war, that idiot of a prince threw boys into the fire while he ran off to the hills."

"You fought against the Kadians, then?"

The man's face darkened. He downed his mug of beer in a single gulp and wiped his mouth across his sleeve.

"Fought? That was no fight. It was a culling. Our boys didn't stand a chance. That's what being a dark-hair is all about: piling up our bodies 'til they make a nice staircase for themselves, then walking on up. Fuck Prince Delvaran, and fuck Scythar, too. And fuck the Empire, while we're at it. They're all the same. All fucking power-hungry murderers." He let out a long sigh. "You're all marching west, aren't you?"

Liral nodded.

"Great. As if that city needed another bloody battle."

"Aye," Liral whispered, and a silence fell over the table.

"So you're not with the army, then?" Cross asked. "You're just passing through?"

"Don't know where I'm going, to be honest. I'm just...going. Was thinking of taking a ship from Trisal, sailing to one of them other continents."

"They say there's some lands out there where everyone's got black hair. Crazy, no?"

"Can't imagine that," the man smirked. "But I reckon I'll steer well clear."

Cross let out a hearty laugh. It was music to Liral's ears. The laugh was so powerful that all sound in the tavern seemed to



“No doubt you will. The name’s Cross, by the way, and she’s Liral.”

“Hein.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Hein.”

Hein snorted. “Has anyone ever told you that you talk funny, even for an easterner? What are you, a couple of half-nobles?”

Liral gulped.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind Liral, startling her. “These seats wouldn’t happen to be taken, would they?”

She turned and stifled a gasp. Liral would have recognized the blonde woman anywhere. Pretty with eyebrows that arched high, the woman clutched a flagon of mead in her hand and smiled goofily. Liral knew that smirk. She also knew the deep red cloak that the woman wore, and the white scarf wrapped around her neck.

It was her, the Redcloak from that dark night in the fancy district. The same Redcloak who had chased them through alley after alley with murder in her eyes. The same Redcloak who Cross had punched in the face.

Liral’s blood ran cold.

Only then did she realize that the tavern’s silence hadn’t been imaginary. The townsfolk and mercenaries talked in low whispers. Many of their eyes were fixed on the scarfed Redcloak and her three companions. Some, like Hein, had chosen to stare down at their mugs of ale and appear as inconspicuous as possible.

Liral should have done the same, but she couldn’t stop herself from studying the group.

Of the three other Redcloaks, two were light-haired men, likely the same two folks who’d chased them down the alley with scarf-girl. They had been strong and not particularly swift. At least three Ironskins, then.

The last was a dark-haired man. He had square shoulders and an even squarer jaw, and his hazel eyes seemed glow with knowledge, as if he knew something that nobody else did. He was the only dark-hair in the whole tavern, and he carried themselves as if he understood that. He stood proud, with the same arrogant posture that Liral had been forced to practice for hours on end under Kellory’s careful watch. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he was superior, that he could end anyone’s life with no recourse. Though scarf-girl had been the first to speak, everyone knew who was actually in charge.

Liral and Cross shared a worried glance. They hadn’t been wearing disguises during their first encounter, but it had been dark. Had they been recognized? Was this the end?

“No,” Cross said. His voice rang with false confidence, and he kept his gaze trained on Liral while he spoke. No matter what happened, they were in this together. “Please, have a seat.”

The scarfed woman needed no further invitation. She settled onto the bench beside Cross and her glazed eyes studied Liral for a brief moment before flicking away. Her companions found seats around Cross and Liral. Shadows, shadows, shadows. Redcloaks surrounded them on all sides. The dark-haired man had decided to sit to Liral’s left, close enough that she felt the fabric of his red cloak. There was no running away from this.

“By the Emperor, you wouldn’t believe how crowded all these taverns are,” the scarfed girl sighed. “But it’s like I always say: you can ban drinks in the camps, but people’ll find a way. You know?”

She took a few long sips of mead then slouched forward on the table and rested a hand on her cheek. She giggled, as if something funny had just popped into her mind, then shook her head and hummed a quiet tune. She was drunk, Liral realized. A small glimmer of hope began to sprout in Liral’s chest.

Beside Liral, the black-haired man summoned the barmaid by snapping his fingers. The poor girl came scampering with the utmost speed.

“Another round of mead,” the man said, flashing a smile. “That’s what you westerners drink, no?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I’m no lord,” he winked, then paused to study her. He eyed her like a piece of meat, as if he was trying to pry her clothes off with her mind. “Call me Pevrin. And that mead will be on the house, of course.”

The girl swallowed. “Of course,” she said, before darting back to the bar.

Liral released a tense breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, and met Cross’s eyes.

“So,” Pevrin sneered, leaning toward Liral as he spoke. “Are you what passes for a mercenary these days?” Shadows, he was so close that she felt his breath on her neck. He smelled like alcohol, though he didn’t seem to be quite as drunk as the scarfed girl. As he moved, a bit of string protruded from his cloak’s right-hand pocket. It was likely the tie on a coin purse. How many golden crowns was Pevrin carrying? In another life, in another time, Liral would have been tempted to find out. But not today.

“I am,” Cross said.

“The small one, too?”

“Not her. She’s my sister and she’s just traveling with me.”

“Not your wife? How lovely.”

That earned Pevrin a few forced laughs from the blond Redcloaks.

“Lovely indeed,” Cross said, rising from the bench. “And we should both be on our way. We’re early risers, and I wouldn’t want to impose upon y-”

“No, don’t leave me,” the scarfed girl slurred. She held Cross’s sleeve and tugged him back down to his seat. “We’ve barely gotten to know you. It’d be a shame if you left us so soon.”

“Ashelya’s right, you’ve only had...what? One drink?” Pevrin said, spreading his hands, a grin on his lips. He used the motion to slyly drape his arm over Liral’s shoulder. Ice flowed in her veins and her eyes went wide.

Across the table, Ashelya met Liral’s eyes. Her smile fled, replaced by...was it sympathy?

“Why don’t you stay.” Pevrin growled. “What are your names?”

A bead of sweat trickled down Cross’s brow when he again introduced himself and Liral.

“Oh, I know! We can all play a game,” said the scarfed girl - Ashelya - in her lofty voice. “Have either of you ever played the Assassin Game?”

“Can’t say I have,” murmured Cross.

Liral just shook her head, too petrified to speak. She eyed every possible exit, but only found two. The front door, where they entered, and a small back door. It was a good twenty paces away. If she wasn’t restrained, she’d be able to cover that distance in a blink, but Cross...no, Cross wouldn’t be able to escape a group of Redcloaks. Especially when they didn’t even know Pevrin’s power. Could he also be a Dasher?

“No matter, no matter, it’s no matter. The rules are dead simple, but these two idiots,” she motioned toward the two blond Redcloaks. They had moved further down the table and were playing some two-player dice game that Liral couldn’t quite understand. “They never want to play with me because they’re no fun.”

Pevrin sighed, but nodded. “I’ll play, If it’ll keep you from bitching and moaning,” he smirked.

He pulled his arm off of Liral, thank the Giant, and leaned back on the bench.

Ashelya shot him a dirty look.

“Very well.” Ashelya pulled out a massive deck of cards and placed them at the center of the table. She clumsily shuffled the cards, before selecting a few off the top of the deck and adding a separate card from her pocket. “So here’s how it works. It’s dead simple, by the way. All you have to do is draw a card from the pile. It’ll be a profession card, like a tailor or a soldier, or something like that, right?” Her face seemed to glow as

she explained the game, and her slurred voice quickened. "And one person'll always get the 'Assassin' card, and we'll all have to question each other about what cards we got, and our job is to figure out who the assassin is. You aren't allowed to show anyone else your card, and all of the cards have loads of details on them. Don't worry, I don't know all of the stuff on the cards, there's way too many of them. You'll have to trust me on that one. So, after some talking and whatnot, we all vote on who we think the assassin is. If we're right, the townsfolk win. If we're wrong, then the assassin wins. Does that all make sense?"

After everyone had drawn their cards, the serving girl arrived with a meal for Cross, chicken legs on a metal plate, along with more mead for Pevrin. The black-haired man took a few long sips.

"Emperor knows I'll need some more of this, if this game lasts as long as it usually does."

"It's not thaaat bad," Ashelya shot back. "Now what are all of your jobs? I'm a baker. I make bread for a living, and the card says I enjoy wearing my baker hat, I'm quite good with rye bread, and I've got a Kadian accent." She coughed, then did her best impression of a clipped Kadian accent, which was far from convincing. "And ooh it says my hair is brown!"

Liral glanced down at her own card.

Knight, it read, just below a portrait of an armored man. Interests: Warfare and Battle. Expertise: Poleaxes. Traits: Tall, Strong, Black hair, Cannot ride horses.

No riding horses? That seemed oddly specific.

"What's your card?" Ashelya asked Cross, poking at his shoulder.

"I'm a cobbler, I suppose."

"Oooh, I love cobblers. What sort of shoes do you make?"

"I make boots, and I'm a frequent sneezer."

She blinked. "So are you going to sneeze, then?"

"That's just what the card says. I'm not going to sneeze."

Ashelya frowned.

"And I'm a bloody light haired," Pevrin groaned. "A light haired farmgirl, apparently. Brilliant. And I'm only good for herding sheep. Safe to say, I won't be playing this game again."

Both Liral and Ashelya shared a devious grin, which Ashelya buried in her scarf.

"And what're you, quiet one?" Ashelya asked her. "You're almost too quiet, in fact... you know what else is quiet? An assassin."

"I'm a knight," Liral answered truthfully. "I can't ride horses, though."

“What weapon do you use?”

“A poleaxe.”

Ashelya narrowed her eyes, but her lips betrayed another childish grin. “A poleaxe? Can you even lift a poleaxe? You’re so tiny, I could just lift you up like a sheep and kiss you.”

Liral’s cheeks flushed. Shadows, Ashelya seemed so much more approachable than she’d been in Trisal. She was pleasant, even. Was that due to her intoxication, or had they just never truly spoken to her before everything descended into violence. What had they said to her on that dark night? Liral couldn’t remember. She felt like centuries had passed since then.

“You regularly kiss sheep?” Cross lifted an eyebrow. “I thought he was supposed to be the farmgirl.”

“Watch your tongue,” Pevrin snapped. “Or I’ll have you butchered like the Ralli swine you are.”

“I meant no offense!”

Ashelya was already bursting with drunken laughter.

“Bold words from a farmgirl!” She giggled high and shrill. Then, to Liral’s surprise, the Redcloak leaned against Cross, resting her head on his shoulder. He blinked in surprise.

“I could gut you too, girl.”

“No. The Emperor would be all sorts of angry if you did that.”

“He wouldn’t be angry.” Spittle left Pevrin’s lips as he spoke. “He’d be annoyed. There’s a difference, you stupid wench.”

Cross and Liral exchanged a knowing, hopeful glance. If there was such discord within the Redcloaks, this could be their opportunity. How hard would it be to persuade someone like Ashelya to turn a blind eye as they attacked the Emperor?

“I’m the stupid one?” Ashelya gasped. “Am I...am I the one who decided that we shouldn’t patrol the Colosseum when there were intruders and whatnot?”

“I won’t hear another fucking word from you. We were on the eve of war and...no. I don’t need to explain myself to a drunk Ralli witch. How dare you question me? When we get back to camp, you’ll be due for ten lashings.”

“Ten lashings?” she whispered. “I was only joking, I was...I didn’t...”

“I don’t give a shit.”

Ashelya lifted her head from Cross’s shoulder and gave Pevrin a hard glare.

“Enough,” Pevrin snapped, glancing around as if he’d just noticed that their conversation had not been private. He forced an awkward cough. “Back to your little

game. We'll have to vote soon, won't we? Well, which one of you blond rats is lying? You," he leaned uncomfortably close to Liral. "What're you supposed to be, again?"

"Knight," she whispered.

"A knight? Right...smallest knight I've ever seen. And you?" He asked Cross. "You said you were a cobbler? Are you certain you didn't make that up?"

"I'm certain," Cross winked. "And if I did invent a role for myself, why would I choose to be a cobbler? Seems rather bland, doesn't it?"

"Too bland. You're lying."

"As bland as a 'farmgirl'?"

Pevrin ground his teeth. "You don't want to make an enemy of me, boy."

Cross raised his hands in surrender. "I meant no offense. I'm merely a simple cobbler."

"I'm sure you a--"

"Merely a simple cobbler?" Ashelya interrupted, looking up at Cross with a curious expression. "Not merely a simple merchant?"

Cross lifted an eyebrow, then his eyes went wide.

"I knew I remembered you from somewhere," she slurred. "You looked really...what's the word...familiar."

"You're mistaken," Cross whispered.

"No, no, no. You're the one who punched me. Why did you punch me? You know, I wasn't prepared to be hit by another Ironskin. It was very...rude."

"Ironskin?" Pevrin's hand drifted toward his pocket, where the bit of string hung out. "Ashelya, is he truly an Ironskin? By the Emperor, girl, sober up."

The other two blond Redcloaks were also now paying rapt attention to the conversation.

"It wasn't very nice," she continued. "I was just trying to keep the streets clean and you were running around with those...those vials and whatnot, but I knew! I knew you weren't a merchant. You're too handsome to be a merchant, I reckon. Then you punched me so I had to chase you, because there were only two things you could be: a rogue or some kind of spy. Either way, I had to bring you in. Her, too. She's a Dasher, isn't she? She's wicked fast."

Liral shrunk away. Her heart thudded against her chest, and she eyed every possible exit. Shadows, why couldn't that drunken fool keep that realization to herself?

"You're mistaken," Cross said, though he sounded more rattled than convincing.

"She's a drunken wench, but she doesn't sound mistaken,' Pevrin sneered. His voice was so near and so cold that Liral had to suppress a shudder. "So tell me: what brings a secret Dasher and a secret Ironskin to an army camp?"

"I don't know what you're on about."

"You're not a convincing liar. I think they may have given me the wrong card."

Pevrin flipped his playing card right-side up, revealing an image of a cloaked figure bearing a dagger. Assassin the card read. He tossed it across the table toward Cross.

"This belongs to you. Who are you working for? Kadia? Scythar? Some foreign king?"

"No one," Cross whispered, spreading his hands. "No one at all. Please, Pevrin, we j--"

"Pass me your sword," Pevrin said in a distinctly black-haired tone. A tone that demanded obedience. He gripped Liral's arm, and she cursed herself for not darting away when she'd had the chance. Was he an Ironskin? If so, she was doomed. Ruiner. Pevrin dug his fingers into Liral's arm. "Pass me your sword," he slowly repeated.

The two blond Redcloaks rose from the table and drew their swords, sharp blades glinting in the hearthlight. The tavern fell silent. Slowly but surely, the locals and mercenaries began to make their way toward the exits. Even the tavern's keeper backed away, half-crouching behind the bar. Liral couldn't blame them. When Redcloaks wished to spill blood, only a fool would dare to stand in their way.

"Is this truly the way you wish to die? In a tavern in the middle of nowhere?"

"If the cause is just," Cross replied, his voice shaking. "Then the cause is just. Is yours?"

Pevrin sneered. "Very well. You give me no other choice. Boys, if either one of these Ralli swine leave this tavern alive, heads will roll."

"Wait," Ashelya mumbled. "I didn't...I didn't mean for...oh dear."

Letting out an angry growl, Cross kicked back the bench and rose to his feet. Ashelya toppled to the ground. She whimpered for a moment, confused and dazed, before slumping into her cloak as her eyes fluttered shut.

Ashelya was lucky, in a way. Part of Liral would always envy the girl. Lost in her cloud of dreams and drunken slumber, Ashelya didn't have to witness the fear, the chaos, or the bloodshed that followed.

# CHAPTER 34

## *The Liar*

**T**he blond Redcloaks struck first. They charged at Cross. Robes billowing behind them, they readied their swords with murder in their eyes. The pair let out vicious howls as they swung. Their large blades whistled toward Cross with enough force to cleave through muscle and bone.

Cross lifted his own sword. Steel met steel in a jarring clang. Shadows, somehow Cross had managed to deflect both blows with a single swing. He recovered and lashed out, slicing into one of the attackers' arms. The man howled, but showed no signs of retreat. Instead, the two men took a moment to regroup before rushing forward once again.

Again, Cross fended them off, but he paid a price. Before they retreated, one of the Redcloaks struck at his unprotected leg and drew blood. Cross let out a deep bellow.

She had to help him. She had to do something, but Pevrin still gripped her arm. No, that was an excuse. A poor excuse. She could have helped, but all her limbs had decided to stop obeying her. It was as if her muscles agreed to lock together and resist her every movement. She knew this feeling well. This was one of her two instincts. When terrified, she either ran away or she froze like a Shadows-damned fool. Like a Ruiner.

Shutting her eyes, she recalled the first time she'd ever frozen like this. She envisioned that night on the rooftop, that night when her mother walked into the ocean. Liral trembled.

Ruiner.



She didn't even raise a hand to stop Pevrin when he reached into his pouch and pulled out a line of rope. The rope was small, no longer than half the length of his forearm, and tan in color. He murmured into it with a sneering grin. His words were too soft for Liral to decipher, but that smile chilled her to her bones.

The rope began to wiggle in his hand, moving on its own accord. The collection of strings began to harden and change, until they turned shiny and...scaly. Shadows. The rope had become a snake.

Liral cursed her luck, as Pevrin tightened his grip on her arm. He was a Shaper. Memories of the Emperor's Shaping rushed past her eyes. Shadows, she wished she had never left her rooftop.

Abruptly, the snake-rope leapt from Pevrin's arms.

It writhed through the air and flailed onto Cross's shoulder.

"Cross!" Liral managed to squeak, but it was far too late.

The snake opened its mouth, revealing a set of sharp fangs, and bit into Cross's arm. He roared in pain. Still, he continued to battle against the other Ironskins, but he seemed weaker. More sluggish. He stumbled against their barrage of attacks, struggling to repel their blows. Again, one of the Redcloaks got past his guard and stabbed through Cross's mail chest. The sword emerged red with blood.

This was Liral's doing. She'd sat there like an idiot and watched. She had doomed her only friend. Ruiner.

No. She had to snap out of it. She couldn't let this happen. She couldn't be a victim or a coward. Cross had saved her, cared for her, and broadened her world. He was her friend and, if she was truly his friend, she would return the favor. She would set things right.

Liral clenched her fists and screamed. She pulled violently against Pevrin's grasp, but he only let out a deep chuckle, taking joy in her plight. So, she grabbed a fork from the table with lightning speed. He stopped laughing when she slammed it into his thigh as hard as she could.

Being a rusty old fork with no dull prongs, she doubted that it had struck deep. Still, she'd expected Pevrin to howl in pain, or let go of her arm, or...do something. Instead, he gritted his teeth and drew a knife from his belt. Of course. He was a Redcloak. A trained assassin with probably years of training. Why would he care about a fork?

"You'll regret doing that, little bird," Pevrin snarled, shoving her back against her chair.

He brought the knife to her neck.

Shadows, why had she sat so close to him? Why did she do everything incorrectly? Why her?

Cross turned to watch from across the table, and their eyes met. One of the Ironskin Redcloaks still circled him, like a gull eyeing a stranded crab. At some point in the fighting, Cross had incapacitated the second Redcloak. The man lay gasping on the ground beside the unconscious Ashelya. The snake on Cross's shoulder was gone, too, but the damage had been done. Cross stood unsteadily, and his armor was stained with his own blood. He didn't have much time left.

The knife's cool metal dug into her skin.

"Cross," she whispered, her lips trembling.

His face fell. "Wait! Pevrin, wait! I surrender!"

Pevrin cocked an eyebrow, as if considering the offer. Then he laughed. He actually laughed.

"That's no longer an option."

Then, just as Pevrin began to cut into her neck, just as she felt blood pool around his knife, something slammed into the darkhaired man. Someone, rather.

Bellowing a wordless battle cry, Hein tackled the Shaper. Hein. Shadows, the mercenary barely knew her...but he saved her. Hein rammed his sword into Pevrin's chest, embedding it to the hilt, then he knelt atop Pevrin and rained punches down upon the Shaper's face.

Pevrin's bloodied knife tumbled to the ground, and Liral scrambled to recover it. She was free.

"Black...haired..." shouted Hein, as his fist cracked against Pevrin's jaw. "Giant-damned...coward!"

Pevrin muttered something unintelligible and a large rat darted out of his pocket. The rat latched itself onto Hein's leg and dug in its teeth. Hein cried out in pain, but he didn't stop punching. He was focused, and more furious than anyone Liral had ever seen.

Liral blinked in surprise, but she couldn't afford to tarry. Across the table, Cross's strength was ebbing. He was fading. The Redcloak had scored yet another blow. Worse yet, the snake had almost certainly been venomous. With every exchange of blows, Cross became more sluggish and bloodied.

Cross crumpled to the ground. The blond Redcloak raised his sword overhead, a victorious grin upon his lips. Before he could bring his sword down, Liral struck. She leapt across the table with more speed than she'd ever used before, and thrust her knife forward. She aimed squarely for the Ironskin's back. When the knife met some

resistance - skin, tissue, and muscle, no doubt - Liral shut her eyes and prayed to the Giant. She hated blood. She always had, ever since her mother had first warned her about its dangers.

A wave of queasiness passed over her, but she fought it back and pressed the knife deeper. Deeper, and deeper. She twisted the handle over and over again, as if she was digging a hole. She had to do this. For Cross, for Kellory, for a chance at righting a wrong. She only stopped when she heard a sickening gurgle, then the loud clatter of the man's sword hitting the stone floor.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that her blow had struck true. Truer than she had expected, truth be told. The Redcloak toppled forward like a lifeless sack of potatoes, with the knife planted firmly in his heart. Her hands were covered in blood. Her chest was covered in blood. Shadows, her own blood was still trickling down her neck.

Heart racing, she snatched the white scarf from around Ashelya's neck and wrapped it around her own. It was the second scarf they'd stolen from the girl, but hopefully she would understand.

Only after that did Liral kneel by Cross's side.

He was wheezing on the ground. He propped himself up on one knee, but that seemed to take considerable effort. When he smiled up at Liral, there was blood between his teeth. His chainmail was in ruins, with several large holes between the links, and every piece of his armor was tinted red.

"You're hurt," Liral squeaked. She cursed herself as soon as the words had left her mouth. 'Hurt' was an understatement. Cross had long a staggering amount of blood, and he had more stab wounds in him than she could count.

"You think?" Cross said with a coughing laugh. "By the Emperor, those assholes were tough."

Slowly, with Liral's help, Cross got to his feet.

"Careful," Liral whispered. "Hold my hand."

"Whatever you say, sis."

Liral wanted to smile at that, but she only managed a grimace.

She had to hold on tightly to his elbow as Cross swayed back and forth. Maybe with his Ironskin abilities, he'd be able to heal...maybe. If his healing abilities were anything like hers, though, then they wouldn't be enough.

"Fucking pricks," Hein growled from across the table.

His voice echoed through the now-deserted tavern. The place had become eerie without the slamming of ale mugs and the dull hum of banter. Not even the owner or

the trained Lisanai soldiers had stayed for the fight - they wanted nothing to do with Redcloaks.

Like Cross, Hein was slow to his feet. His hands were coated in blood and he winced down at his leg. "Ankle's busted. It's done. He used a rat! A damned rat! How fucking fitting."

Hein propped himself against the wood and breathed through his teeth.

"It's...it's okay," Liral said, though she knew that she sounded utterly unconvincing. "We've got to get out of here, then we'll be fine. There are woods nearby, and we aren't too far from Old Arbor, and...and..."

The tavern's front door swung open, and a squad of three Redcloaks entered.

"I don't think so, kid," Hein sighed.

"Shadows," she cursed.

Cross, who was somewhat limp against her, lifted his head and noted the Redcloaks with a vague grunt.

"Go," Hein said to her, nodding toward the back door. "Leave him and go. It's your only chance to get out of here alive."

"No," she whispered. But maybe Hein was right. From their angle, around the corner of the bar, the Redcloaks were only barely visible. What if they hadn't spotted her?

"He's not going to make it, kid." He glanced down at his leg again. "Neither am I. Get away while you can."

"Liral," Cross murmured.

With that simple word, that desperate word, something ignited within her. She set her jaw and spoke with sheer conviction. "No."

The Redcloaks stalked forward. Their boots thudded against the floorboards, a sound that chilled Liral's blood. None of them seemed to move like a blur and there were no flying snakes...three Ironskins, then. She thanked the Giant. They did have a chance to escape. She tugged Cross toward the back door with all of her strength. He was still upright, but he had an arm draped over her shoulder. Shadows, he was heavy. She felt as if she was carrying him across the tavern like a young girl hauling a sack of corn.

"Come on, come on, come on," she hissed.

When they reached the back door, Liral paused and stole a glance back at Hein.

He held his bloodied sword, retrieved from Pevrin's body, and held it in a defensive posture. He knew how to wield that sword, there was no doubt about that. Against three Redcloaks, though? He was doomed...and he seemed to understand that.

The Redcloaks circled him like a pack of wolves, surrounding the injured man.

Hein met Liral's eyes and gave her a single nod. A final salute. Then he let out a high, throaty battle cry: "For Datch!"

Liral could watch no more.

She shut the door behind them and hauled Cross onward. The back of the tavern exited to a field of barley, with a forest in the near distance. It was five hundred paces, maybe more. Liral could have cleared that distance in mere moment, but not with Cross. He staggered forward, one step after the next.

From the tavern, the sound of steel clanging against steel made her shiver.

"Come on!"

They made it to the barley field, which covered Cross up to his waist. They were still exposed. Cross still left a trail of blood behind them, but she couldn't think about that. She had to save him. She rushed him forward, closer and closer to the forest's edge. She dared a few glances behind them. No pursuers yet. Had the Redcloaks not seem them slip out? That seemed unlikely, but possible.

They were about halfway to the woods when Liral heard the first scream. Hein's, no doubt. She shut her eyes and tried to tune it out, dragging Cross further into the field. One step, then another. She had to get him to safety. If she didn't...what good was she?

She stopped glancing behind her and pushed onward. She used every ounce of her strength and, by the generous miracles of the Giant, she reached the shadows of the woods.

Once they were deep in the forest, they sunk to the ground beside an old oak. Liral struggled for breath.

"Cross," she gasped, propping him against the tree. "Cross, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

His eyes blinked open and he let out a rough-sounding cough.

"I don't think so," he said. His voice was weak and he lifted up a bloodied hand.

Unsure what to do, she grasped his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"Stay with me, Cross," she murmured. "We're going to stay here until you're all healed up, then we're going to go to Old Arbor and they'll be able to help us."

"I don't think so," he repeated.

"No. You can't die because of me. You can't die because I did nothing. That's not...no. Cross. Don't. Please, don't. Cross..."

She trailed off when Cross began to smile. He smiled. Somehow, with his body poked full of holes and wounds, with blood gushing from him, Cross smiled like an idiot.

"You," Cross whispered, still wearing that small grin. "You lied."

Liral blinked. She tilted her head in confusion. But when Cross lifted his hand and brushed the edge of her stolen scarf, she understood.

"I didn't lie," she whispered back. Her voice cracked. "I just withheld things."

Carefully, she undid her scarf. Once white, the scarf was now stained on both sides with her blood. With her vibrant blue blood.

"Scythari blue. Never thought I'd see it with...with my own damned eyes. It's beautiful, the stories are real." Cross coughed, then winced from the pain. "But who are you? You're...you're a bastard? Is Liral even your name?"

"Mostly."

Cross shuddered, but she couldn't tell if that was a reaction to her or to his wounds. Shadows, he was growing pale.

"I'm not a bastard. My name..." she drew a deep breath. "I never thought I'd ever have to tell anyone this. I never thought I'd want to tell anyone this. But my name...my name is Princess Liralyne of Scythar. I'm the rightful princess of Scythar, second heiress to the throne, daughter of the Tree, defender of the valleys...I forget the rest of my titles. It's been a long time."

"How?" he rasped.

"Well," she shrugged, though her hands were shaking. "When I was an infant, my father wanted me dead because of my hair. You know, two dark haired's aren't supposed to have daughters like me, but I guess the royal line wasn't as pure as people thought...and I happened. The Ruiner. I ruined everything. Sometimes I think my father was right for what he did. He had to kill me, or else he'd lose everything: his throne, his kingdom, his legitimacy. I ruined everything for him. For years, my mother hid me as a servant's daughter. When my father realized, Mom had to get us out of Scythar. She wanted to bring my brother Delvaran, but she couldn't, so she had to settle for me. We lived in a little flat in Trisal for a while, surviving on the money she'd stolen from the King...until..." Liral gulped. "Until she couldn't take it anymore."

"Princess," was all Cross said. He didn't argue or express disbelief or question her. He smiled, brought her hand to his lips, and laid a gentle kiss on the backside of her palm. His lips were ice cold. "Promise me, Princess," he rasped.

"Anything."

"Promise me...that...you'll stop the Emperor."

She hesitated for a moment, before bowing her head. "I'll try."

"No. Promise. If you don't...nothing matters. So many will die."

"I do. I promise."

Cross smiled again, though his eyes had lost some of their sparkle. "Remember that night in Trisal? When you..." he coughed. "When you...tried to rob me?"

"Course."

"You've changed...I'm...I'm proud of you."

She knelt in front of him and ran a hand through his hair, which dripped with blood and sweat.

"Liral," he managed. "You're my best friend. Thank you."

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Well you're my only friend."

She stared into his face for a long while, holding his hand as tightly as she dared. He looked so peaceful, so calm.

Eventually, she laid a hand on his chest, expecting to feel it rise and fall. He was an Ironskin, after all. He was unstoppable. He was Cross.

Nothing happened. He was gone.

Another round of tears welled in her eyes and she struggled to her feet.

"I'll be back," she whispered to Cross, studying the forest around them and dedicating it to memory. "I'll be back for you."

And she would, but only after she visited a place that she hadn't been in quite some time. A place with an army, a massive tree, and thick walls. A place that, for much of her life, she thought she would never see again: Home.

*Justice is a concept as old as time. Good kings are said to be just kings, the greatest of the virtues. However, we often forget the difference between justice and vengeance, for justice takes many forms, but vengeance has only one: bloodshed.*

*The Proposal. Forward, Volume Three.*



# CHAPTER 35

## *Justice*

Daila sat in the back corner of her tiny cell. She'd been sitting there on the cold stones, legs tucked beneath her, since before the sun had set. She hadn't slept a blink. Morning light leaked through the hand-sized window on the wall, illuminating a few of her prison bars. Her neck felt bare without the weight of her amulet. Knowing that she was a Shaper, they'd been sure to confiscate it, leaving her with only a white prisoner's dress. Daila hadn't been prepared for how powerless she would feel without Risara's presence...powerless and lonely.

Shadows, they'd better not destroy Risara.

Daila looked up toward the small window. This was to be her last sunrise and she couldn't even see it properly. She let out a long sigh.

"You should have told him," she muttered to herself, for what felt like the thousandth time. "You should have told him."

If she'd told Folston earlier, if she'd had enough courage to trust him, she might not be sitting in the cell. Knowing Folston, he would have hatched some brilliant plan and they could have reached some sort of agreement with the King. But no. Daila was too daft to make the right decision. Too daft and too cowardly. She dwelled on those last words that King Braum had said, his claim that the remaining Scythari army would lay down their arms upon her death. Was it true? She couldn't be sure. She hadn't even talked to those lords who were still supposedly fighting for her. She hadn't attempted to communicate with them in any way. She hadn't tried to stop their warring in the foothills, their burning of villages.

She buried her face in her hands.

“Hypocrite. You stupid, stupid hypocrite.”

She didn't deserve Folston. For months she had been following him around, writing down his noble ideas about justice and goodness. All the while, great injustices had been carried out in her own name, a war had been waged for her. If the King was right, she could have stopped that war at any time, simply by turning herself in, by telling the truth. But she hadn't. She'd been too busy cleaning floors and...No, that wasn't the true reason why she'd chosen inaction. That was only an excuse.

In truth, she hadn't wanted to destroy that spark between her and Folston. She didn't want to see his enchanting green eyes flicker with disdain, or hear his soothing voice turn angry and heated. She didn't want to lose him. So much for that.

Daila grimaced, resting a hand on her cheek. Perhaps they would have gone leniently on her if she'd surrendered herself. They could have worked out a deal, some sort of arrangement to end the war peacefully. But no. Now she had to face the consequences. Now she had to face death. The word of the King was binding, after all. Not even Folston could change that.

Water dripped from somewhere nearby in the empty dungeon. Visre's cell, most likely. The drips didn't keep the lanky assassin from her snoozing, however. Ever since Auri had hit her over the head with that wine pitcher, Visre had been fast asleep. That woman ought to count herself lucky. Drip, drip, drip. The drips echoed every few seconds almost torturously, as if the water was mocking her and counting down her last living hours. Beyond that and the distant shuffle of guards' boots, the dungeon was painfully silent.

It was a great relief, then, when the large oak door at the end of the distant hallway began to creak open.

Daila sat upright.

She expected the King to walk through, the executioner by his side, but she couldn't have been more wrong.

Two guards entered with bright torches, escorting Daila's dearest friend.

“Auri!” she chirped. “You came!”

She bounced to her feet and rushed to the edge of her cell to grip the metal bars.

Auri carried a platter of food. Chicken and eggs, by the look of it. The guards stood back. They let her approach the cell and slip the food underneath, though they did watch the exchange carefully.

“You've got five minutes, that's it. King's orders,” one of them snapped.

“Whatever,” Auri said, sticking out her tongue at the man. She turned to Daila and a devious half-grin split her lips. “Of course I came,” Auri said with a half-grin. “Reckon

you came too, all locked up in here with nothing but ten fingers and a mind full of dirty thoughts about a certain prince.”

Daila’s cheeks reddened. “Shut it, you. Now’s not the time.”

Despite the rebuke, Auri broke out in a fit of giggles. Daila tried to fight back a laugh of her own, but failed.

“Giant curse you, Auri.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “That wasn’t even funny.”

“Funny enough for you.”

“I suppose.”

Daila wiped off the last of her tears and sighed. Shadows, how could she laugh at a time like this? She was about to die. With that thought, repressive sadness passed through her, sniffing out her joy like a candle doused in water.

“What’s it like out there?”

“It’s been better,” Auri shrugged. “All the girls think it’s pretty wild that you managed to Shape yourself...and Mili says sorry for calling you a spineless twat. You aren’t a spineless twat, and she wants you to know that. She also said that you’re a wonderful person and a good friend. She almost hopes that you don’t die, but she also doesn’t want to set herself up to be disappointed.”

“What?!”

“I’m just the messenger, sweetie.”

“Still didn’t need to hear that part,” Daila grumbled.

Auri shrugged again, but sympathy flashed across her eyes. “Sorry. I thought it was funny. I tried to find Kess to see if she had anything to say to you, but I couldn’t find her. She and Lord Aradon have been off doing Giant-knows-what. I couldn’t find your boyfriend either. Maybe he’s trying to change the King’s mind?”

“Maybe,” Daila allowed. “He didn’t seem too malleable yesterday.”

“People can change. Look at you!”

Daila snorted. “I took longer than a few hours, and I’m a bad example. I’m still a selfish prick.”

“That doesn’t sound like something a selfish prick would say,” Auri said in an especially sing-song tone.

“Maybe not.”

Auri reached through the bars and took her hands. Daila braced herself for another Auri joke or a teasing barb, but froze when tears began to well in her friend’s eyes.

“I’m going to miss you,” Auri whispered. “I’ve known you my whole life and...and I haven’t always liked you or gotten along with you, but you’re all I have. You’re my family. I will never abandon you. Never. Got it?”

Daila nodded, because she knew she wouldn't be able to speak without tearing up.

"Time's up," one of the guards barked.

"Not yet," Auri snarled, then she lowered her voice to a hushed whisper. "I left you a gift. It's under the plate. I don't know how any of this magic stuff works, but I just...I just hope it'll help you stay around."

Before Daila could ask for more details, the guards tugged Auri away, back toward the oak door. Daila gripped the bars of her cell.

"I love you," she managed to say, just as the door thudded shut.

As soon as the guards were gone, Daila fell to her hands and knees. She checked the underside of the plate and felt something small and metallic tied to the bottom. Her eyes went wide. Could it be her Totem? Could it be Risara? Daila would have bet the two kingdoms that King Braum had locked her Totem away in the royal vault. Shadows, had Auri truly managed to break in?

Daila got her answer as soon as she ripped the object free and held it up to the light. She cursed. No, Auri hadn't rescued the Totem. The object was only a simple bracelet...but perhaps she could still use it to escape. Maybe it contained Totemic properties, and Daila could harness its power! It was silver, far more expensive than anything Auri could own...had she stolen it? Daila snorted. She smiled and shook her head, but her grin faded when she spotted the words etched into the bottom of the bracelet in Auri's careful scrawl: Daila. I'll never forget you.

Auri hadn't brought her this gift to facilitate a grand, dramatic escape. She'd brought it because she knew. She knew Daila was as good as dead, and she wanted a small part of Daila to remain, to be immortalized like Risara. To be preserved. To become a Totem for someone else.

Daila cried.

She didn't cry nobly, like a prim and composed lady. Instead, she bawled. She curled up on the floor, clutched the bracelet in her hand until her nails dug into her palm, and let her tears and snot run free.

Daila couldn't quite say how long she lay there. Despite her hunger, she didn't even touch her food. In her mind, she replayed the happiest moments of her life. They were all recent memories and they were all so fleeting...yet so calming. Memories of Auri and her cleaning and laughing together, of Mili and Kess teasing her as they watched the lords duel, of Folston sitting by her side in the branches of the Tree, and of that indescribable kiss.

By the time the dungeon's oak door creaked open again, Daila's tears had long since dried.

She wasn't sure what she felt, when the half-dozen Kadian royal guards took her from her cell, and led her out of the dungeon. Serenity? Tranquility? Or was it just emptiness? She had no clue. She simply put one shackled foot in front of the next, and marched through the doors.

\* \* \*

The guards took her directly to a low balcony, hanging over the castle's courtyard. She'd visited the balcony more times than she could count, both as a prince and as a maid, though never before as a prisoner with metal bonds around her ankles.

King Braum stood at the balcony's center, only a few paces from the execution block. He looked stoic. Determined. His lips were drawn into a thin line and his green eyes had an intense gleam. He wore his traveling clothes, a patterned jacket and riding breeches, and carried an axe. Shadows, was he going to execute her himself?

Daila hesitated for a moment, gripping Auri's gift in her palm, but a guard pushed her onward into the daylight.

She tried to spot Folston on the balcony, but he was nowhere to be seen. Typical. He never could show up on time, could he? Daila tried to muster a smile, but failed.

The only faces that she recognized were Auri's and Mili's, who both stood on the far side of the ledge, their backs to a glass window. Auri offered her a small, reassuring smile, which Daila couldn't reciprocate.

Aside from her pair of friends, only a handful of Kadian lords, a few maids, and about a dozen guards stood atop the marble-tiled platform. She couldn't remember the lords' names, but their faces all held varying range of satisfaction, from grim acceptance to utter glee at having finally caught their last Scythari foe.

Perhaps a thousand onlookers crowded the courtyard below. Shadows, she hadn't known that this would be such a public affair. When Daila stepped into view, a rush of whispers passed through the crowd, and they all stared at her. Countless eyes, all on her. She had to look down to avoid a rush of shame. These were her people, but how many of their lives had she sacrificed to preserve Scythari rule when the Kadians offered a much better alternative? How many of their sons had her father carelessly murdered?

"Not my father," she mumbled, which drew a curious eyebrow from the guard beside her. No, Icevein wasn't her father anymore...but that didn't matter. Not when she was about to have her head lopped off.

An execution. There hadn't been one of those since her father's reign. Back then, they were common. A Ralli girl could get her head cut off for giving Icevein a dirty look...and now Daila was that Ralli girl, though she was guilty of far worse than bad manners.

The guards steered her to the center of the balcony. They handled her more gently than she'd expected, and brought her to a stop just in front of the wooden executioner's block. She straightened her dress and knelt down. She'd seen enough executions to learn the proper steps.

Kneeling there, gazing out at the crowd, she felt...strangely numb. Distant, almost.

"Delvaran, King of Scythar," Braum said in his booming voice. His tone was so neutral that his voice seemed almost inhuman. "Is that your true name, girl?"

"It is," she muttered.

"Louder, for everyone to hear."

"It is," she repeated more firmly.

Braum grunted.

"And you, with your magic, have transformed yourself into this shape out of cowardice? To escape justice?"

"No," she gulped. "It...ah...it was a mistake."

Braum lifted an eyebrow, clearly not believing a word she said.

"A mistake. King Delvaran, you are guilty of desertion, for fleeing your consequences and surrendering your honor. You have been found guilty of high treason against the people of Kadia, and the people of Scythar. You are an enemy combatant, whose army to this day continues to raid, pillage, and plunder. And as our laws state, in their wisdom as old as time itself, I have no choice but to pass down the judgement of death."

Another lively murmur swept through the crowd. Surely, they knew this would be the punishment, but the words themselves made the whole affair so much more real.

The King's axe scraped against the marble as he lifted it from the floor.

"As King, justice is mine to hold, and mine to deliver." He drew a deep breath. "If you have any final words or prayers, speak them now."

Daila licked her lips, and stared out across the throngs of onlookers. Shadows, that numbness and emptiness had begun to fade. Her heartbeat quickened. Sweat dampened her palms. Had she only just begun to fully understand her situation? This was it, the end of her life. What would come next? Emptiness? Darkness?

"I failed you," she said, piping out the words as loudly as she could. "Scythar is my home. Our home. I love the Tree, the city, the people...all of you. And I failed you. I was

a weak prince, a selfish prince, and a cruel prince. I made you suffer, I sacrificed your lives, and I...I never stood up to my father. I failed you and I'm sorry. I know that the Empire is coming. I know that these are trying times. If there's anything I can do to help, I will. I'm sorry for what I did, and I beg you, Braum." She looked up at the King with pleading eyes. Her lips trembled and she lowered her voice. "I can still be of use to you. I can...I don't know...now that people know I'm alive, I can send to a letter to my army. I can...I can..."

"And they'll respect a letter that they know was sealed under duress? A letter that you wrote as a prisoner?" Braum shook his head.

"Then release me. Please. They won't surrender on account of my death. They aren't loyal to me, they're loyal to the idea of an independent Scythar. It's about pride, not about me. Please..."

"Maybe they won't surrender, maybe they will. Either way, if what you say is true, then your letter would be of little use."

Daila tried to cycle through her mind for a counter-argument, but came up empty.

"You aren't going to convince me, girl. You have my gratitude for aiding my fool of a son. If you hadn't done that, I wouldn't have given you the last to speak, but I made this decision a long time ago."

With that, King Braum gripped his axe.

"Wait!" a voice called from the balcony entrance. Folston's voice. As soon as she heard it, Daila's heart soared. She was going to die, yes, but at least he hadn't forgotten about her. He cared. He truly, truly cared. "Wait, father. I have to speak with her. I have to. If you truly care about honor at all, then you'll s-"

"Fine," Braum grumbled, furrowing his brow. "But make it quick."

Folston rushed to her side. He hadn't arrived alone. Kess had come too, along with her master, Lord Aradon. Kess wore a curious expression, as if she knew something that Daila did not, and it left Daila feeling rather puzzled. Puzzled and hopeful.

Taking her hands, Folston lifted her up from the execution block. The mere sight of him was like a breath of fresh air hours of being cooped up in a dungeon. His hair was disheveled, fresh stubble marked his chin, and the whites of his eyes were a bit red from lack of sleep. Even so, he was the most beautiful person she had ever seen. He fixed one of her stray red locks and with that gesture alone, she knew that he'd forgiven her. Another wave of murmurs passed through the crowd. These murmurs were curious and excited, as if the crowd was watching a play.

"Thought you might be late," she whispered.

"Never, I'll never be late for you."

She had to bite back a smile, though a tear stung her eye.

“Daila,” Folston said, massaging her palms. On his lips, her name sounded like a blessing. “I need to ask you something foolish. No, not foolish...bone-headed. Bone-headed and fantastic.”

“What?” she murmured, because it was the only word that she knew at that moment.

“Daila, will you marry me?” He opened his palm to reveal a ring. It was a Kadian royal ring, black as night with white trim around the edges.

“Marry...you?”

“Right here, right now. Will you marry me?”

She gaped.

“What is this nonsense?” Folston’s father barked. “Marry her? Are you insane? She’s the enemy, and she’s about to be put to death with good cause! I know you wish to defy me at every turn, boy, but thi-”

“Yes!” Daila managed to squeak. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Then I declare as witness,” Lord Aradon said from behind them, his voice booming almost as loudly as the King’s. “That Folston of Kadia and Daila of Scythar are wed, under the boughs of the tree and the hand of the Giant, to rule these lands together. May they bring prosperity and peace for decades to come, and lead us all closer to the Giant.”

Daila slipped the ring onto her finger then bit her lip, gazing up into Folston’s eyes. Her heart soared. This had to be some sort of dream. It was too perfect, too good. When Folston lifted her chin with a finger, she shut her eyes and grinned as their lips met. Oh how she loved kissing him, even with his annoying stubble. The way he held her as they kissed, the way his tongue caressed hers as he pressed a hand against her lower back, drawing her close. It was so indescribably perfect.

Below, the crowd roared, a sound that conveyed more astonishment than anything else.

“What?! King Braum bellowed. “This is absurd! And who are you to marry them? This is no true marriage!”

“I’ll have you know,” Aradon said, sounding rather offended. “I’m an ordained representative of the Giant, under Kadian law. I have every right to marry them, and they seem to want to be wed...and, if my memory serves me, members of the royal family cannot be killed without unanimous agreement from the rest of the family. Anything short of that would be condemned by the Giant.”



Folston drew her into a tight hug, and Daila nestled her head beneath his chin. This was bliss. This was perfection. She could stay like this forever.

King Braum leveled Aradon with a fiery glare, but the Lord only smirked in reply.

"Shadows, son," he said, turning that glare onto Folston. "I thought you had a head on your shoulders."

"I do. That's why I'm certain that I made the right choice."

"I can't accept this marriage," Braum said. "I won't, I ca-"

"You must, father. If you truly want to make the world a better place, why not start here? If you want peace, this is the only way. She's a Shaper, father. Do you know what that means? In battle, she's worth a thousand soldiers."

That was far from true. She wasn't quite that strong, not nearly as strong as the Emperor was said to be. She was worth maybe twenty or thirty soldiers on a good day, if she was extremely efficient with her power reserves...but she knew better than to contradict Folston at such a time. To contradict her husband. That thought made her stomach leap.

"If she's the difference between this city being sacked and thousands being slaughtered, won't that make it all worthwhile? Have you forgotten about the reports? About the towns that the Empire has already looted?"

"Of course not," Braum growled, looking warily at the cheering crowd below. Yes, they had begun to cheer. Daila could hardly believe it either. These men and women who had attended the ceremony expected to see her head get separated from her shoulders were cheering her fresh marriage. They came for a spectacle, she supposed, and they got one. "But that still doesn't change the fact that there's a Scythari army running around, committing the same crimes in Kadian land without any resistance, because we sent our army here to defend those idiots' families."

"Give them independence. Let Daila and I rule them, while you rule Kadia. You were planning to abandon these lands to the Empire, anyway. You wouldn't be wearing your traveling breeches otherwise, would you? You wanted to use these walls to cut down the Empire's numbers, but you never planned to hold these lands. Don't pretend like you did. So give them independence. Give us independence and we'll send them a letter. We'll tell them why they ought to put down their arms."

"So youthful, yet so short-sighted. What will happen when I die, Folston? You'll inherit Kadia and Scythar. There won't be an independent Scythar."

"They may prefer that to a forceful takeover," Folston argued. "It's worth the chance, at least...and it'll give them an excuse to come back here and defend. Like you said,

some of their families are here. They have every reason to help us and if this turns into a long siege, they'd arrive in time."

Braum muttered something to himself, below the rumble of the crowd.

"I'll do it," Daila whispered. "I'll do anything."

The King glanced between his son and Daila, then let out a tired sigh. From that sigh alone, she knew that they had won.

"Fine. But we'll have to discuss the details of this arrangement in private. Without all this...fanfare," he scowled.

"You arranged for the crowd, father," Folston winked. "Don't forget that."

"I don't think I ever will. My own blasted son. Marrying a Scythari prince for all to see."

"Queen," Folston corrected. "And she's a remarkable woman, father. Maybe someday you'll come to realize that."

Daila shook her head, but said nothing. She was not remarkable, but if Folston wanted to believe that she was...well...Folston was usually correct, so perhaps she was remarkable. That thought warmed her deep inside.

Shutting her eyes, Daila planted another light kiss on Folston's lips.

"I love you, Folston," she whispered.

"I love you, too, Firefly."

# CHAPTER 36

## *All Hail the Queen*

**A**s King Braum waved his farewells and loaded his axe into a saddlebag, Daila finally came to terms with her new reality. She was the queen. She wasn't the 'rightful' queen or a princess in hiding, but the true, recognized Queen of Scythar. The Empire's army drew near, but she would defend her people because she was the better option, the better ruler. She would be caring and just, and deserving of her people's loyalty. Yes, she would rule them the right way...and she would not have to rule alone.

Beside her, Folston, King of Scythar, squeezed her hand. She blushed. Shadows, his mere closeness was enough to send a flurry of excitement through her. He cared about her. He knew her like nobody else did, except perhaps Auri, and he had changed her. No, perhaps that wasn't true. He hadn't changed her, he'd simply helped to open her eyes and see the obvious: that she could be so, so, so much better. With him by her side, she would die happy - whether that death came in the following week or in a century's time.

Folston led her down the castle's front steps and came to a stop before his father. The King of Kadia was busy barking orders at Auri and a few other maids as they finished preparing his carriage and horses.

Daila had learned that man's voice rather well over the past few hours. Holed up in the throne room, they had negotiated and planned for what felt like millennia. Her finger still stung. King Braum wouldn't accept the marriage until Daila physically wrote and sealed the letter to her remaining army, instructing them to stop their raiding and head back home. She'd done so without any qualms, of course, and Braum

had worn a smug grin all the while, as if he'd won in some way. He still thought she was a monster. He still thought she didn't care about the suffering of others...but he couldn't be more wrong.

"Son," Braum grunted, wrapping Folston in a bear-like embrace. "You'd better be right about her."

"I am."

"I doubt that, but I suppose only time will tell."

Braum took a step back. From over his shoulder, Auri turned and made a silly face, forcing Daila to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from giggling.

"And you'd better be right about this, too." The King gestured to the distant city walls. Torches lit the stone wall like candles and hundreds of armored silhouettes were visible against the afternoon sky. "History is filled with men getting themselves killed on account of some girl. If you're defending this place to make her happy, then I d-"

"No," Folston interjected. His voice was firm and unwavering, and brought a warm smile to Daila's lips. "These walls will hold. We will defeat them...we'll find a way. As far as Daila goes," he glanced back toward her. "I'm not doing this for her. I'm doing this because it's right, because if I don't, every man, woman, and child in this kingdom will suffer...and how long will it be, father? If Old Arbor falls, how long will you have before the Empire marches on Kadia?"

"Not long," Braum grunted. He gave the castle's defences one last scan, before his eyes fell on Daila. He walked toward her uneasily, and stopped a good distance away. "I suppose you're my daughter now."

"Yes, I suppose so," Daila replied, trying to ignore the bitterness in Braum's tone. It was of a different variety: a hopeful smile, bordering on pleading.

"Be good to him. If you...if you do anything to him..."

"I won't. I love him."

Conflict brewed in King Braum's eyes. He leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"If he tries anything idiotic...more idiotic than usual...if he attempts some sort of 'Last Stand', you'll need to stop him. You'll have to get him to safety. Can I trust you to do that?"

Daila bit her lip, then nodded.

"I can't lose him."

"I know," she whispered.

He stared into her eyes for a long while before giving her a curt nod. He didn't give her a hug, not exactly, though he clapped her gently on the shoulder and offered her the beginning of a forced smile.

"Good."

With that, he bade farewell to the handful of young lords and ladies. They were mostly Folston's friends, who had opted to stay and defend Scythar. Like Daila, they'd fallen under his spell. It was a startlingly easy thing to do.

Folston wrapped an arm around her waist, and a smile blossomed on her lips. He pulled her close as the King, his counselors, and their guards all mounted horses and embarked on their long journey north.

\* \* \*

Daila and Folston stayed longer than most of the other spectators, watching until the King's carriage disappeared around a distant corner.

When the newlyweds returned to the castle and made their way toward the counsel chambers, she was fully prepared to dive into deliberations about battle strategies. She expected all of the remaining lords to be assembled there with grave expressions. After all, they were pitted against a Shaper with the power to create undead beasts, if those reports were true.

She was surprised, then, to be greeted by the squeals of her friends as soon as she entered.

"Daila!" Auri raced toward her, wrapping her in a suffocating hug. To make matters worse, Mili and Kess joined in. "I thought I'd lost you," she whispered in Daila's hair. She proceeded to repeat that phrase at least another dozen times. "Don't scare me like that, you prick."

"I won't."

Elsewhere in the chamber, Folston's friends greeted him in a more tame fashion. They embraced and shared a few mugs of ale. Unlike Daila's friends, his didn't even attempt to starve him of oxygen with absurdly tight hugs.

"Stop it," Daila wheezed.

"I truly was sorry about what I said earlier," Mili giggled. "Mostly sorry. I still think I was right about you being an ass when you were a prince."

"No reason to apologize. She was most definitely an 'ass'," Kess chimed in.

"Shut up," Daila managed to gasp. "I know I wasn't great. Now can you all please...Stop...stop, you're hurting me."

Her friends relented, and Daila thoroughly straightened her fresh maid's dress. There were no royal dresses tailored to fit her and...truth be told, she'd come to enjoy her maid's dresses. There was an elegance in their simplicity, and they lent her comfort. Perhaps she'd keep wearing them, despite her new status.

Watching her fuss over her garb, Folston let out a snort. That earned him a glare from Daila, which gradually morphed into an embarrassed grin.

"We'll have to give you a proper wedding, though, Dai," Auri said. Her eyes sparkled with the faint beginnings of tears, but she blinked them away. "Because that was a hasty excuse of a wedding."

"I know. Do you want to be in charge of the planning?"

"Thought you'd never ask," Auri winked.

Daila held Auri's hands for a moment.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Daila whispered. She unclasped the bracelet from her wrist and fastened it around Auri's. "This belongs to you. I think...I think, when I'm gone...if this battle doesn't end well, it'll stick around. I left a piece of myself in there, I think."

Auri sighed. "So dramatic."

That earned the tall blonde girl a scowl.

Daila was about to hit back with a - hopefully - clever retort. She paused when she realized that the entire chamber was staring at them, lords, ladies, and maids included. Blushing, she rushed to take a seat with Folston near the head of the long oak table.

"Welcome all," Folston said, in a booming voice that reminded her of King Braum's. "I know that you have much to say and much to ask. Before we get started, however, I would like to enact our first decision as monarchs of this realm. My wife and I have already agreed on this decision, and I hope that you see the merits in it as well: as of this day, all persons employed in Scythar will be paid a fair wage. This includes the soldiers, guards, and maids in this very castle. We looked at the budget, and we can absolutely afford it. That being said, the days of the royals hoarding Scythar's wealth are over."

Daila tensed, preparing herself for angry mutterings, but the lords and ladies slapped the table appreciatively. She caught Auri's eye, and the two of them shared surprised grins. Shadows, she knew that these nobles had read Folston's book, but...could a book - could an idea - truly be that powerful? She shook her head in wonder.

“Our belief is that the Ralli of Scythar will fight with more spirit, knowing that they fight for their own best interests, and for the future of the families. We also believe that this is a just decision, and that it will please the Giant.”

Another round of table-smacks. It was an odd Kadian custom, but she already found herself enjoying those thumping affirmations.

“Excellent. Now I’ll let your new Queen introduce herself, before we discuss the issues at hand.”

Folston turned toward her, as did everyone else. They all seemed to be waiting for her to speak. Shadows.

“Hello, council,” she said. She tried to sound far more confident than she was, but failed miserably. “Welcome to uh...to the Kingdom of Scythar...though, I suppose you’ve already been here for some time...I can’t thank you enough for your support in these difficult times, with the invasion and the monsters, and all. You...” she trailed off. This was how she’d introduce herself to her new nobility? To her advisors? Her supporters?

Daila bit her lip. Her hands began to tremble. No, she hadn’t considered how to stop the monsters. She’d been more worried about staying alive, above all else. But she couldn’t say that...if she did, would she lose the support of her lords and ladies before she even began her rule?

She was hopelessly lost in her own thoughts when Risara pulsed against her neck. Bright blue light flowed from her locket. Confidence. Stoicism. Daila drew a deep breath, and grabbed Folston’s hand beneath the table. She was not alone in this.

She lifted her chin. “I am your queen, and I intend to represent the interests of all of our countrymen, and make this kingdom peaceful, strong, and kindhearted. We have an opportunity here, an opportunity that few ever get: we have a blank slate, a chance to craft an entire kingdom to our liking. A chance to forge a better kingdom...and I intend to forge it with you. If you have any questions, please do ask.”

“Do you actually bleed blue?” asked a young man. She recognized him as one of Aradon’s training partners.

She nodded, forcing a smile. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Amazing,” he muttered. “What was it like to be hiding in plain sight?”

“I don’t know. I reckon I forgot that I was hiding, after a while. I just became...a maid.”

Auri gave her a thumbs-up from across the chamber, which made her bite back a smile. An idea popped into Daila’s mind. A foolish idea...but a daring idea, a tempting idea.

“Speaking of maids and the Ralli, my husband and I decided that we want our council to be more representative of those over whom we rule.” She shot Folston an innocent smile. No, they hadn’t discussed this at all, but that wouldn’t stop her from doing what was right. “Therefore, I’m proud to announce an addition to the advisory council: Lady Auri. She’s as trustworthy as friends come, and smarter than she has any right to be. In the future, we’ll be adding three more advisors from the Ralli community.”

Daila expected looks of revulsion or disgust, but the council members seemed more excited than anything else. They whispered among themselves as the maids piped their congratulations to Auri. All the while, Auri fixed her with a perplexed expression that seemed to scream: ‘How could you do this to me?’

Daila simply giggled, and answered the next few questions, which became increasingly more serious.

“And what exactly is our plan to stop these monsters that you mentioned?” asked one of the more skeptical nobles, a dark-haired woman named Jatyra. She wore a dress made of velvet, which looked uncomfortably tight. “You’re a Shaper, aren’t you? I trust you have some idea on how to defeat them. Could you summon your own beasts?”

“No, I cannot summon monsters of my own. I’m not as strong as the Emperor, it would seem. But I do know how to stop him.”

Everyone in the room tensed, their attention hanging on her next words. She licked her lips.

“I know that Folston has already set up ballistae on the walls to attack the monsters, but I don’t believe that will work...at least, it’s not a sure fix, depending on how ‘monstrous’ these creatures are. The only way to stop a Shaper for certain is to distract them, kill them, or disrupt their Totem. We don’t have any plans to achieve that yet, but I have a few ideas.”

The nobles began to whisper among themselves.

“And we have time,” Folston cut in, silencing the room. “We have several days to plan, and I urge you not to forget the power of a well-constructed plan. Dozens of mighty empires have toppled thanks to clever plans. Mark my words: the Lisanai will be among them. We will win this battle.”

Jatyra parted her lips, as if she was about to continue her line of questioning, when two urgent knocks sounded on the chamber doors.

They swung open to reveal Opal. The small girl looked nervous, and didn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. She settled on clasping them together. Shadows, that girl was too innocent for her own good.



“Majesties.” She curtsied low, then glanced around the room uneasily. “Hello, Daila. Queen Daila, I mean...Majesty.”

“Opal!” Daila beamed. “You’re just the beautiful person I wanted to see. How would you like to be our new chief messenger? You’ll be in charge of all of our royal messages, and you’ll be paid handsomely.”

Opal bit her lip. “Really?”

“Aye,” Daila winked.

Opal’s eyes lit up. She straightened herself, lifting her chin high. “Chief Messenger,” she murmured to herself.

“Chief Messenger,” Daila repeated. “So, what message did you have for us?”

Opal blinked. Her lips parted for a moment, as if her mind was racing faster than her tongue could match.

“Umm...” She glanced from Daila to the lords and ladies around them.

“It’s okay, sweetie. Everyone in here is trustworthy.”

Opal bit her lip.

“There’s a...a woman at the gates. She says that she’s a princess of Scythar. I wouldn’t have believed her, Majesty, but she’s bleeding a whole lot and...and it’s blue.”

\* \* \*

Opal hadn’t lied.

Daila knew that the girl hadn’t been lying, but she still hadn’t been able to shake that hint of lingering doubt in the back of her mind. This couldn’t be real. It couldn’t be true. She had no sister, Icevein had only one heir and it was Daila. Had this supposed princess truly bled blue? Could she be...could she be a distant cousin? She couldn’t be her sister, could she?

But, as she stormed into the castle’s foyer and found herself staring down at a short girl with blue blood dribbling down her neck, Daila could not deny her own eyes.

The girl was small. She was as thin as a branch and profoundly dirty. Her straw-blond hair was matted with sweat, and many locks were colored by someone else’s blood, which had dried to a rusty color. More than anything, her hair resembled one of the hawk’s nests on the ledges of the castle’s towers, with wild strands jutting out in every direction. Her clothing was blood soaked, too. A purplish mixture of red and blue darkened her torn dress.

Her eyes were her most striking feature. They were large and blue. Strikingly blue, like the water of the clearest lake imaginable. The whites of her eyes, however, were a

network of fiery red veins, as if she had gone days without sleep. The edges of her eyes were equally concerning. They were reddened and puffy, the eyes of a person who had shed more than their fair share of tears. The girl's face was coated with mud. The dirtiness obscured some of her features, but not enough to hide the fact that she was quite cute, and that she resembled an image from some of Daila's most distant memories. Daila gulped. This was her sister. She was certain, because the girl was a spitting image of their mother.

Several guards stood around the girl. They were visibly tense, given that their newly crowned queen was standing so close to this unknown girl.

"May I?" Daila reached out a hand and brushed her fingers against the cut on Liralyne's neck. Liralyne tensed, but didn't pull away. The cut was shallow and not particularly dangerous, but it would leave a faint scar. Daila caught a drop of the girl's blood on her finger and inspected it. It was royal blue, as clear as day.

A rogue tear streaked down Daila's cheek.

"King Braum," the girl whispered, speaking in a rolling Lisanai accent that Daila had to concentrate hard to understand. From a Lisanai tongue, each word seemed to brush against the next, like friends at a crowded tavern. "My name is Princess Liralyne of Scythar. I want to help. Please take me to King Braum." The girl's eyes darted around skittishly, as if she expected to be ambushed at any moment.

"King Braum's gone."

A grimace flashed across the scrawny girl's face.

"I'm in charge now, little sister."

Liralyne seemed confused. She cocked her head.

Daila surrendered another tear as she undid the buttons of her dress and exposed the cut along her own ribs. The guards all looked away. Her cut no longer bled, but had closed into a line was that startlingly blue.

"I'm Daila. Queen Daila of Scythar. I was your brother...it's a long story. I had no idea that you existed, but...welcome home. You have no idea how glad I am to meet you."

"What?" Liralyne said. Her lips parted, as if more questions lingered on her tongue, but she said nothing.

"I was Delvaran. We're sisters. I'm your older sister." She blinked back more tears and managed a smile. "I've missed you for so long, and I've never even realized that you existed. Shadows, how is your hair so blonde?"

Liralyne licked her lips and shrugged. Under her breath, she murmured a low and nearly inaudible word. "Ruiner."

Daila didn't understand why, but that single word made her stomach sink. What had the world done to this girl?

Bracing herself, Daila stepped forward and embraced her dirty, bloody sister in a tight hug. Her dress would be ruined, but Shadows she didn't care. Liralyne squirmed for a moment or two, but seemed to warm up to the hug after that. She even wrapped her arms around Daila, but did so with caution. Had her poor sister never shared a hug before?

That only made Daila tighten the hug. She pulled Liralyne close, and gently rested her chin on top of her little sister's head. Liralyne didn't make a sound, though Daila felt the girl's tears soak into her dress.

"You're safe now," she murmured into Liralyne's ear as she stroked the girl's dirty hair. "But you're going to have to tell me everything. And I mean everything."

# CHAPTER 37

## *Sisterhood*

Liral didn't trust her older sister. She was too kind, too accepting, and far too proper. Nestled in the warm comfort of Daila's bedroom, Liral had spent a great deal of time studying her sister as they shared stories about...well...of everything. About their whole lives. All the while, Daila sat in the most proper, lady-like manner. Was Daila truly the same person as Delvaran? Liral found that hard to believe. Daila had a sort of graceful femininity that no man could possess. She crossed her legs tightly and her posture was always perfect. Too perfect. Even her hand gestures were elegant and stately, giving Liral the impression that her sister had been raised to lead, that she deserved her royalty in a way that Liral never would.

Daila used fancy words, too, and she talked a lot. She talked more than any person Liral had met. Ever. Her sentences were like rivers, winding around and flowing with a weird sort of determination, as if her mind was constantly racing, and those thoughts were being converted into words at an unbelievable speed. Liral couldn't talk like that. She also couldn't fight the feeling that her sister was much smarter than her, and that Daila might even be toying with her in some way. Like a child playing with a bug.

No, she couldn't fully trust her sister. Even so, Daila kept encouraging Liral to say more, to speak more, to tell her story, and she did. Slowly, in short bursts of words, Liral told her life story and left out as little as possible. She had to tell someone. If she didn't she'd burst from the pain of holding it all in. When she reached Cross's death, Liral had to clench down hard on her teeth to keep from openly bawling. Daila, of course, being too perfect for her own good, had pulled Liral into another hug and soothed her until the tears stopped flowing.

"Wow," Daila sighed, crossing her legs as she sat beside Liral on her fancy bed. She was probably relieved that Liral had finally found the words to finish her story. "It's incredible, isn't it?"

Liral shrugged. She hugged her knees to her chest and instinctively tugged at the edge of her Kadian noble dress. Her sister had been eager to get Liral cleaned up and 'presentable' as quickly as possible. The lords and ladies wanted her to present at their council meeting. Apparently, this meant she needed a warm bubble bath with two helpful maids at her beck-and-call, along with a freshly pressed dress. It had all been a surreal experience.

"For starters, I never thought the Emperor could be so heartless. To kill innocents, just to build more Power for his Totem..."

"Aye," Liral murmured. She shut her eyes, trying to fight off the memories of those poor Ralli folks in the depths beneath the Colosseum. Of the late blonde woman named Yila, her unfortunate husband, and the countless others who'd been butchered out of mere convenience.

"What a monster. And I have a thought or two about how he's ruled for so long, yet remains so young. I reckon I may have been thinking about Shaping all wrong. People like me, with simple Totems, may only be able to Shape ourselves once, but it's possible that he's so powerful because of...you know...the murders, that he's Shaped himself over and over again to stay young. It's just a theory, but..."

Her older sister trailed off upon seeing Liral's downcast eyes. Her trembling lips. Liral would have preferred to talk about anything else. Anything.

"Beyond that, I never thought I'd have a sister who talks like she's Lisanai."

Daila smiled, but Liral only offered a nod and let silence settle between them. Her sister was trying to loosen her up, and doing a poor job of it. She had no Lisanai pride. She never would. If she could, she would have scrubbed those vowels and consonants from her tongue.

"We've both dealt with our share of Redcloaks too, huh? Between Marsa and...what was her name again? Your friend?"

Liral's cheeks burnt red. "Zare," she murmured. She'd been foolish enough to share her feelings with her sister...she'd just blurted it out for no particular reason. It was as if deep down, she knew that she had to tell someone about Zare.

Again, Daila seemed to realize that she'd made Liral uncomfortable, and quickly changed the subject.

“So. Do you remember when you mentioned that the Giant was dug up from the ground? You said that there were other bones scattered around. Were they as large as the Giant bones?”

“Abouts.”

Daila let out a small, disbelieving chuckle. “Shadows, the heretics may be right, then. Maybe there never was a Giant. A Rodmahein. The non-believers say that there once were thousands of Giants roaming around. That once upon a time, the fields from the South Sea to the Kadian Mountains were filled with thousands of Great Trees, and Giants would pick them of their fruits with glee. Then, when there was only one Tree left, and only legends about the Giants of old, mankind built a religion out of those anomalies. I always thought that heretic line of thought was so speculative, so pernicious...yet, I suppose they now have considerable evidence. It’s remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” Liral nodded.

Daila fixed her with a long stare, then waved her hand dismissively.

“Any matter, let’s talk less about that, and more about us.” Her lips twitched. “All those years, I wondered what had happened to our mother. I thought for sure that father had murdered her, but...wow.”

“She died anyway,” Liral murmured.

“Not before she saved you! Our mother is a hero, sis. She defied King Icevein. King Icevein! Can imagine being in her situation and being so brave?”

Again, Liral shrugged. “She shouldn’t have.”

“What do you mean? What other choice did she have?”

“I wasn’t worth it.”

Daila bit her lip. “It doesn’t add up, you know? Think about it. Why would she go through all of that trouble to rescue you, just to leave you on your own? I don’t think she ever intended to abandon you. She wouldn’t just walk into the ocean. She wouldn’t do that. I don’t remember much about our mother, but that’s not the sort of -”

“I know what I saw,” Liral snapped.

She immediately regretted her tone. A look of hurt flashed across her sister’s face. It was gradually replaced by one of those sympathetic smiles that Liral had seen from her sister countless times over the past few hours.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I didn’t mean to doubt you.”

Liral wrinkled her nose, and shrugged again.

“You said she gave you that necklace, right?” Daila motioned toward Liral’s moon-shaped Totem. “Can I see it?” Liral pulled the necklace out from beneath her dress.

After hesitating for a moment, she pressed it into her older sister's palm. "She gave me a similar necklace which was sun-shaped," Daila hummed. "That was my old Totem."

"The one that broke in battle?"

"So you were listening," Daila said with a quiet laugh. She rubbed the locket with her thumb, and held it up between them. "Has she ever spoken to you?"

Liral cocked her head.

"Through the Totem, has she ever...I don't know...flashed colors at you?"

"Sometimes. I think when I'm in danger, it flashes."

"Red?"

Liral nodded. "Red."

"What if I told you that she could hear us, as long as she's activated. Remember what I told you about Risara? How I accidentally woke her up?"

Liral fought the urge to pull away, to snatch back her Totem and run. What if this was some sort of trap?

"Do you want to speak to our mother?"

Liral met Daila's eyes and held them for a long while. Shadows, her sister seemed so genuine. Fighting back her suspicions, Liral nodded.

"Okay. I've only just discovered this, so don't go spouting on about it until I've written my book." She cast Liral a side-glance. "Though I reckon you don't spout much, do you?"

Liral didn't answer.

Daila, looking regal and rather pleased with herself, brought the Totem to her lips.

"Mother," she whispered. Nothing happened. "Adelaine," she tried. "Adelaine, Adelaine, Adelaine. Adelaine, Adelaine, Adelaine." Nothing. Daila closed her eyes, as if she was focusing with all of her might. "Adelaine. It's your daughter. Your eldest. Can you hear me?"

Again, nothing. Daila flashed Liral a weak smile.

"This was more of a test, to be honest. I haven't tried to activate anyone else's Totem before, only my own. Maybe you should try i-"

Before she could finish, the pendant let out a small wisp of soft pink light. It was a color that Liral had never seen from the Totem before, and there was something indescribably warm about the light. Something loving. The wisp faded into the air after a few moments, and Liral yearned for its return. Was that really her mother? Some small part of her?

"There we go," Daila sighed. "Hello mother. I miss you...and I think Liralyne has a few questions for you."

Gently, Daila pressed the Totem back into Liral's palm.

Liral's lips parted. She searched for words, but none came.

"Mum?" She eventually whispered. "It's me. Liral. Liralyne."

The Totem let out a small wisp of pink light, and goosebumps crawled up Liral's arm. Shadows, it was her. It was really her. She gulped, which was a struggle thanks to the lump forming in her throat.

"I miss you. I'm...I'm sorry."

Again, a faint pink light. A loving light. That small lingering thought in the back of Liral's mind, the fear that Daila was wrong and this Totem was nothing more than magic and metal, began to ebb. This was her mother.

"Mum..." She didn't want to ask, but she had to. It was the only question that mattered in her life, a question that she thought she would never have the chance to ask. A question that Liral had already answered long ago...but she needed verification. She needed to know that she was a Ruiner. "Why did you do it?" she choked out the question. Tears streamed down her cheek, and she made no effort to stop them. "Why did you drown yourself? It was because of me, wasn't it? It's my fault."

Bright red lit up the room. The light, pulsing out of the Totem, out of the last memory of her mother, made Liral blink in disbelief. The red light was dozens of times more powerful than any light that the Totem had ever emitted before. Like the previous light, this one carried powerful emotions with it, emotions that almost seemed to seep into Liral: anger and deep frustration.

Gradually, both the light and the feelings faded.

"Are you lying?"

A softer, more gentle red pulse.

Liral gulped.

"Then...then why? Why would you leave me? If it's not my fault..."

No pulse came, though Daila let out a small gasp. A yelp, almost.

"Giant's boot," her older sister muttered. "Mother, were you poisoned?"

A small blue light came forth. It was fleeting, and sad, the light equivalent of a sigh.

"Does that mean yes?" Liral asked, her eyes darting between Daila and the Totem.

Daila gave a pensive nod.

"Was it Icevein?" Daila asked their Mum.

Again, that faint blue light.

Liral fought back another wave of tears. She'd been wrong. All her life, she'd been wrong. The news hit her like a punch to the stomach. She blinked, which caused another few tears to tumble from her lashes.



“What?” she murmured.

“Our father’s poison of choice. Nowhere was safe from him, it seems, not even Trisal. They say it’s the most painful of poisons. A slow, tedious death. You wither until you fade away. I suppose...I suppose she didn’t want you to see her like that.”

More tears stung Liral’s eyes.

“You didn’t tell me, Mum,” Liral whispered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

No pulse came.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Liral repeated, this time with much more force.

Daila furrowed her eyebrows, deep in thought. “Because she didn’t want you to blame yourself for getting her poisoned.”

Faint blue light crept out of the necklace. It was a ‘yes’, but a hesitant ‘yes’. A guilty ‘yes’.

So much for that. Letting out an angry growl, Liral allowed her thoughts to return to her familiar pit of self-loathing. The pit was so welcoming, so easy to slip into, almost comfortingly so. It was the same pit that she’d been living in for years, until she met Cross...who she’d also gotten killed. Her thoughts spiralled downward. She was a mistake. Her mother should have left her to die. Cross should have left her to starve on a rooftop or be taken by the Redcloaks. Zare...Zare was lucky that Liral had left before destroying yet another person’s life.

“Mother,” her older sister began, interrupting Liral’s descent. “How much do you love Liralyne?”

The room flooded with pink light. It was a surging pink light, stronger than even the fiery red had been, and brighter than a thousand torches. The light filled Liral’s heart. Her lips parted and she fumbled for words, but none came. Her hands trembled. This had to be some sort of dream, it couldn’t be real...but all of her dreams were filled with sadness, doubt, and regret. This love had to be real.

Daila wrapped an arm around Liral, pulling her into another hug. Her sister seemed to be fond of hugs. Given the circumstances, Liral couldn’t fault her. Liral needed a hug. She’d been wrong. Her whole life, she’d been wrong. Everything she thought she knew about herself was based upon a lie. A series of lies, really, but they all came back to one initial lie, one falsehood, one mistaken fact.

She wasn’t a Ruiner. She wasn’t a Ruiner. She wasn’t a Ruiner.

Her mother loved her. She always had and, based on the strength of that light, she always would.

Daila caressed her, and gently stroked her hair.

"She loves you," Daila repeated over and over again. "We both love you. And now that Mum is awake, she'll never leave you. Ever."

Liral surrendered to the hug. She nestled herself into Daila's shoulder, drying her tears on her sister's dress. This 'love' was strange and foreign to Liral, and it delighted her. It swept away her worries, her fears, and every hint of doubt that lingered within her. Her sister's embrace helped her ignore the dark corners of her mind and the horrible things she'd endured, the terrible sights she'd seen. She needed this love.

They held each other for a long while, until a demanding knock sounded against the door.

It swung open before her sister could answer, revealing Auri. Liral hadn't talked much to Auri, though Daila seemed to trust the tall woman. Auri had an aura of mischief about her, though, and Liral certainly wouldn't be confiding in her.

"Ooo!" Auri cooed as she sprang into the room. She covered the distance to the bed in only a few bounding steps, and giggled a shrill laugh. "How cute! The queen and her little kitten!"

She hopped on the bed beside Liral and fixed a lock of her hair. Liral had to fight the urge to shy away from her touch.

"I'm not a kitten," Liral mumbled, wrinkling her nose.

"Why not?" Auri sighed. "You're so tiny...maybe a rabbit would be a better comparison."

"Auri," Daila fixed her with a stern frown. "Let her be."

"Oh shush." Auri lowered her lips to Liral's ear. "Your sister is so up-tight, she'd be making diamonds if only she'd think to stick some coal up her b-"

"Auri!" Daila snapped. Liral, though, was already hiding a giggle behind her hand. "You shush. Why'd you even come here? Just to mock us?"

"Oh, right." Again, mischief flashed in her eyes. "I almost forgot. The council is ready to see her. I was meant to send in a girl to fetch you, but I figured you'd both rather see my own beautiful face."

"Unlikely," Daila sighed, though Auri wasn't entirely wrong. She was beautiful. Intimidatingly beautiful, like a mermaid from lore. A very, very tall mermaid. "Are you ready, Liralyne?" Daila asked. "Remember: you don't have to do this. We can delay until after...after the battle, if all goes well."

Was she ready? Daila had assured her that they wouldn't ask her any challenging questions, or interrogate her too much about her time living on roofs...but Shadows, they were going to judge her. They were going to hate her. Shutting her eyes, she gripped her necklace, and felt her mother's love flow through her.

Liral opened her eyes and spoke with pure determination: "I'm ready."

\* \* \*

Daila spoke the truth. After Liral told her story to the council, no members interrogated her about the more sensitive details. She was absolutely convinced that Daila had talked to the councilmembers before her presentation, warning them about what they could and couldn't ask. More than anything, the councilfolk seemed most interested in the composition of the Lisanai army, how many monsters the Emperor had created, and how powerful she estimated the Giant-sized monster to be. When she answered these questions, their faces paled.

She stood up there for a few agonizing minutes, fidgeting in her dress and praying that she didn't have to speak any more. Fighting past her nervousness, she got through her tale and left out only a few parts, like Cross's death...and Zare.

After it was all over and she was allowed to take a seat, she was a fully recognized Princess of Scythar. They gave her a little silver crown and everything. It was all a formality, as she was a princess by birth, but the councilfolk thought it was a necessary ceremony.

Liral played with her necklace as the council discussed how to prepare for the upcoming battle. It was a grave discussion, but she felt strangely at peace. She was home. She was surrounded by people who loved her: Daila and her mother. You could be surrounded by two people, couldn't you? Either way, there were people here who cared about her. Shadows, one of the maids even had the foresight to leave a cushion at the base of her chair, so her feet wouldn't dangle in the air as she sat. That brought a grin to her lips.

She was sitting there, tossing a remnant of her mother from one hand to the other, completely ignoring the on-going battle preparations, when an idea hit her. It was a stupid idea. A daring idea.

The idea 'hit' her because she certainly hadn't been seeking it out. She hadn't been meditating on the topic or sitting in a cave like a philosopher-hermit, dedicating her heart and soul to solving their dilemma. Nevertheless, the idea took root in her mind.

"All I'm saying," a lady by the name of Netra droned on. "Is that our goal should be to delay them as long as possible, until our forces arrive from the North. Of course we'll use our walls, ballista, and every Powered available...but if we have to destroy parts of the city to achieve that, that's a sacrifice we have to be willing to make, if we want to save lives."

“You have a point,” Folston nodded sagely. “And you’ve identified a real problem, but I think there may be an easier solution. What if we erect barricades at various points in the city, as fallback locations should the wall fall? That way, we ca-”

“I have a plan!” In Liral’s mind, those words came out in a strong, confident tone. In reality, they were screechy and frantic. Regardless, the interjection drew everyone’s attention, including the King’s. All of the councilfolk were surprised by her outburst, though Daila seemed most shocked. “I have a plan,” she repeated.

“A plan,” Folston repeated, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s dangerous.”

“Reasonably dangerous?”

Liral bit her lip. “I think it might be the only way we can stop them, but I need to know something first: how many people in Old Arbor have Powers?”

*“The best war is a war never fought. The next best is a war fought to save lives.”*

*The Proposal. Chapter Six, Volume Three.*

# CHAPTER 38

## *A Final Kiss*

**T**he war came to Old Arbor on a cold, foggy morning. Queen Daila of Scythar raced up the castle stairs, brushing past nervous guards and frantic maids as the horns of warning echoed through the halls. The Lisanai had been spotted from the walls. Shadows, they were coming and she would curse herself until the end of time if she didn't bid Princess Liralyne farewell before the girl risked her own life.

Auri's voice sounded above the dreary horns. As planned, she had taken on the role of organizer and was ensuring that all of the castle's staff reached the safety of the ice grotto. Once the source of Daila's nightmares, that place was now to be a safe haven for her people. Shadows, how times did change.

"Faster!" Auri piped. "I've seen fresh shit move through the sewer faster than you lot! And what are you up to? Are you doing your best impression of a tortoise?"

Daila hastened her pace and reached the royal floor, where she found Liralyne in her new chambers. Her little sister was struggling to pull on her red cloak when Daila burst through the door, and she let out the most startled of squeaks.

"Thank the Giant! I thought I'd missed you..." Daila furrowed her eyebrows. Her sister had put her head through one of the cloak's arm-holes. "Oh look at you, you poor thing," Daila murmured. As gently as she could, she fixed Liralyne's cloak, then stared deep into her sister's eyes. "Liralyne, are you certain that you want to do this? You know you don't have to, you ca-"

"I do."

Daila frowned.

Again, the horns rang out their sound of warning. They were pitched low and dark, almost ominously so, and Liralyne visibly shuddered. Was this truly the girl who they were sending into the heart of evil? Into the greatest danger they'd ever known?

Cursing, Daila wrapped her sister in a tight hug. Like usual, Liralyne hesitantly allowed the hug, nestling her head against Daila's neck.

"You'd better not get hurt," Daila murmured. "I swear on Rodmahein himself. I'll shatter if you get hurt. I mean that."

"I won't."

"Promise me, then. If you're in danger, you'll run away. You'll keep yourself safe."

Liral pulled away from her and offered only a shrug.

"Promise me," Daila repeated more forcefully. "Giant's sake, Liralyne. I only just found you. You're my family and I only just found you. Don't let them take you away from me, not yet." She pinched the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes. "Why am I even letting you do this?"

"Because," Liralyne drew a deep breath. "You trust me?"

"Maybe too much." Tears welled in Daila's eyes, but she fought them back. This was not the time for tears. "Take this." With shaking fingers, Daila slipped off the bracelet that Auri had given her, and handed it to the tiny girl.

"I have to go now." Liralyne bit her lip. "We haven't much time."

Her poor sister was trembling, but she still made for the door.

"I love you." Daila blurted. "I always will."

Liralyne flashed a tiny smile.

"I love you, too."

Then, her sister dashed into the hallway. Her cloak, an exact copy of the infamous Redcloak uniform - courtesy of Marsa's stash - billowed freely behind her.

\* \* \*

When Daila reached her place beside Folston along the wall, their troops were already assembled. She'd come as quickly as she could, but only after donning her newly tailored battle dress. It was Auri's idea, and admittedly gave her a queenly look: a padded garment of Kadian black, with a white stitching of the Great Tree upon the center.

She glanced around, eyeing their defenses, and her lips twitched with a satisfied grin.

Lines upon lines of soldiers stood at attention atop the snaking wall, staring into the fog. Many of the troops were in Kadian black. Even so, a good number of Scythari men had taken up arms to defend their home, and their proud Tree banners mingled with the Kadian crests. The soldiers all formed a perfect row, leaving no gaps along the wall. The front line sported large shields, while the second and third lines gripped long spears. A ways behind them were the archers, each carrying several quivers. They all looked fierce and organized. How had Folston done it?

She looked up at Folston's passive face, and awe swept through her, following by warmth and love. He looked so kingly in his dark armor and that black sword by his side. That same sword that she'd briefly considered using to assassinate him. A grin flashed across her lips. What a mistake that would have been. She could rule for a thousand years and still not be half the ruler that he was. In only a few weeks, her husband had somehow managed to combine their forces into a terrifyingly disciplined army. What would she do without him?

She'd be dead. She would be dead without him, and poor Liralyne would have arrived only to find Daila's fresh corpse. Worse yet, if the King had remained in Old Arbor and Folston wasn't there to mediate, Liralyne might have met the same fate after revealing her blood.

Her lips trembled, and she wrapped an arm around one of Folston's. He looked down at her with those beautiful eyes of his. Alert fires marked each of the wall's towers, and their light danced across his emerald irises. He didn't speak, though Daila detected a question in his furrowed eyebrows: What's wrong?

"Liralyne. I'm worried about her."

Another round of deep horns echoed through the city. The Lisanai were growing nearer. They still weren't visible, but they were out there.

"Don't be. There's nothing more we can do for her, she made her decision."

"It sounded like a risky plan back in the throne room. Now, though, it's insane. It's utterly insane."

"Risk and reward. If there's one thing I've learned about battle, it's that being risk-averse seldom benefits the weaker party. Come tomorrow, if this city is still standing, it'll be because we took a risk."

"And Liralyne has to be that risk?"

"As do we, my Queen." Folston leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek, before whispering: "You didn't think we were up here for the view, did you?"

"No," she replied, unsure if she wanted to blush or cry. "I suppose not."



Daila and Folston were here to delay the Lisanai as long as possible. That was the only way Liralyne's plan would work. They had opted to defend a critical stretch of wall themselves, a fifty-foot section above the city's eastern gate. If they were to fail, the Lisanai could raise the gate and rush into the city. Daila wouldn't allow that to happen. Surrounded by royal guardsmen, one of whom was a Dasher, she was confident in their position. Folston had even arranged for a statue to be transported for Daila to control, and three baskets full of marbles sat against the nearby wall. The gate would not fall without a fight.

It was mid-morning, just as the fog was beginning its eastward retreat when the Lisanai first appeared. A set of evenly spaced columns emerged, spanning in either direction as far as the eye could see. More of them emerged from the fog with every passing moment, until thousands upon thousands of burgundy-clad soldiers descended upon the walls. Her foes all marched to the beat of distant drums. Wheeled siege towers cast long shadows over many of the attackers. They held their large tower shields high, shrouding their faces, and each column flew the same banner: a golden circle upon a glowing red background.

"It's a shame," Folston muttered. "They shouldn't have to die for this."

Daila nodded, her whole body feeling numb.

It was an army the likes of which this land had never seen: over one hundred and fifty thousand strong. Shadows, how did one even equip so many soldiers?

Then, she spotted the monsters. Hulking beasts, easily thrice the size of a man, ambled in between the columns. They were whitish-grey in color. She couldn't make out too many discernible features initially, but as the creatures grew nearer, she was able to study their red eyes, their long, bulky limbs, and the fangs that came to a fine point below their chins.

"Folston," she hissed.

"I know."

Shadows. Liralyne hadn't lied. There was only one way that a Shaper could be strong enough to create such a monstrosity. The Emperor had harvested Power at scale...by harvesting people.

She fought the urge to tremble, but failed miserably. Folston took note. He gave her a tranquil rub on the shoulder and set his jaw in determination. Around her, nervous mumbles rose from the troops, though a new tune from the Kadian horns hushed their uneasiness. The horns no longer played a song of warning, but one of battle: blaring, resilient, and defiant.

"Archers, ready!" Folston roared.

The command was swiftly echoed across the stretches of wall, and thousands of archers prepared their bows.

“Fire!”

Black arrows whistled through the air. They formed a broad veil over the sky before falling upon the Lisanai troops like harsh rain. A scattering of Lisanai soldiers toppled to the ground. Their countrymen, however, did not pause their advance. They marched forward, hauling banners and ladders, pushing their siege towers closer to the walls.

More volleys of arrows fell upon the attackers, and more Lisanai fell, but they did not slow. Catapults hurled boulders and fiery wreckage from the ramparts, and more holes formed in the Lisanai ranks. The nearest siege tower took a direct hit from a rock and careened sideways, crushing one of the grey monsters beneath it. A roar of triumph rose from the nearby Kadian troops, but Daila maintained her uneasy silence. That was merely one destroyed tower out of several, one crushed monster among dozens, and perhaps several hundred fallen soldiers in a sea of foes.

When the Lisanai mounted ladders onto the walls and began their assault, Daila was stunned by the discipline of the defenders. Part of her still expected their troops to break formation and fight chaotically, just like they had during her first poorly orchestrated defense against Folston. That did not happen. Instead, both Scythari and Kadians held their lines on the walls, even as burgundy-clad enemies streamed over their ladders. The second line of soldiers thrust their spears, striking foes before their boots could find the stone, holding their line with mesmerizing discipline.

More and more Lisanai fell. Their progress was delayed further when the defenders unveiled one of Folston's better tactics: tossing buckets of boiling oil over the siege ladders. The rungs became slippery and blisteringly hot, sending even more Lisanai tumbling down to the ground. Daila followed up on these efforts, tapping into her Power reserve to send vicious beetles on attack runs, targeting Lisanai officers and Redcloaks when she could. The Redcloaks were the only concerning elements of the Lisanai army, so far. A few of the Lisanai Dashers had sprinted directly up the face of a nearby wall, and Folston had been forced to send his own few Powered warriors to battle them. That was a poor trade, considering that the Empire had easily thrice their number of Powered fighters, if not more...but it was a necessary move.

Daila gulped as she surveyed the carnage. Most of the Lisanai losses were regular lads, not Redcloak elites. She pitied them, the ones who didn't volunteer for this fate. Yet, their Emperor would slaughter countless innocents if he took the city...she had to do fight back. And she did.

All seemed to be going rather well when a nearby soldier let out a frantic cry.

“Monster! Monster on the wall!”

Daila looked around, confused. How could one of those beasts reach the wall without the siege towers in place? The ladders were thick, but not thick enough to hold one of those behemoths.

Her mind was still running through the possibilities when a massive grey-skinned hand reached over the edge of the wall and snatched the shouting man. The poor lad went soaring through the air and landed down below with a sickening crunch. A second large hand appeared at the wall’s lip, and the grey monstrosity slowly climbed onto the rampart.

Up close, the creature was even more terrifying. It was a ‘ghost’, as Liralyne called them. Between the ghost’s giant yellow eyes, the teeth, and the claws, this was a monster built for one task: war.

The royal guard showed no fear. They lunged forward with their spears, stabbing into the monster’s flesh. Their attacks drew black blood, though the creature seemed more angered than injured. It let out a high screech. The sound seemed more like a shout of anger rather than pain.

Just as the soldiers braced themselves, preparing for the ghost’s charge, another grey monster hoisted itself onto the ledge.

“Oh dear,” Daila murmured.

The ghosts barreled forward, plowing through the shield barrier.

The Kadian Dasher leaped atop one of the ghosts with terrific speed, stabbing the creature in the eye faster than Daila could blink. It stumbled backward, toppling from the wall with the Dasher atop it. Shadows, she prayed the man was unhurt. If he wasn’t, then she prayed that he would be their only Dasher to fall on this Shadows-damned day.

A catapult stone hummed through the air above Daila, narrowly missing her statue. It would have landed amid the sea of Lisanai soldiers below, had it not cracked against the face of the second ghost. The beast careened backward, sustaining even more spear pokes from the royal guard as it retreated.

The third ghost, however, was unfazed by the demise of its comrades. It took dozens of stab wounds, but pressed onward, stomping with single-minded determination toward...her.

Her mind raced. What could she possibly do? How could she stop this ghost? Her statue. She had to get to her statue, and quickly. She'd decided not to maintain an

active link to her statue, so as to avoid draining herself of Power. Shadows, what a mistake.

She scrambled backward, toward the statue. Her heart thudded in her ears. Time seemed to run in slow-motion as the first ghost raised its claws and let out a high, bone-chilling shriek.

She placed a hand on the towering stone statue. He was a grave-faced warrior, with a fearsome beard and a trident held firmly in his hands. Some ancestor of old? No doubt, Folston would know who this was built to honor...but she had no time to ponder such trivialities. She shut her eyes. She ignored the clash of battle around her, the strange rising cries of panic from the defending troops, and the looming ghost. None of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was this statue. She imagined that his limbs were not filled with stone, but rather tendons, ligaments, and bones. Magic wove through the statue like tendrils of light, gradually changing its essence.

Risara worked alongside her, hastening the transformation...but Shaping a statue took time. Too much time. As the statue underwent its last few changes, she hissed a single urgent command over and over again: "Defend us!"

Shadows, why couldn't this blasted statue Shape faster?

The ghost was close. Too close. It was surrounded by her guards and they continued to jab it with spears, but that seemed to be rather ineffective. Had the Emperor given it special orders to kill her? Shadows, she was finished. She'd surely die, and Folston would follow. The ghost readied itself for an attack.

It lunged forward, and she screamed. Her cry of terror morphed into one of anguish when Folston leaped in front of her. He thrust his blade at the beast's arm, just as it swiped at him with both sets of claws. The hilt drove deep into the monster's left forearm, spraying black blood, but that only seemed to enrage the monster. With no blade, Folston could only brace himself for its attacks.

"No!" was all she managed to screech. The ghost's left set of claws raked across Folston's side. He let out a pained gasp and fell to his knees. She clutched him from behind, praying for the Giant's mercy. The right claws followed, swinging directly toward Folston's skull.

This was it, then. The end. Her stomach sunk.

Then, finally, the Giant heard her prayers. Her statue sprung into action.

He took two bounding steps, and stood over Daila and Folston, casting the royals in shadow. The blow that would have crushed Folston's skull instead cracked against the statue's leg, causing a few pieces of stone to crumble down beside her.

More spears hit the ghost from behind, and it let out another high shriek, perhaps a mix of anger and fear.

The statue's head was roughly even in height with the greyish monster. The massive figures stared at each other for the shortest of moments before the statue gripped its trident with both arms and thrust forward. Black blood sprayed down on the Royals. The trident had landed home, directly at the center of the monster's chest. Still, the ghost flailed its arms at the statue, causing more chunks of stone to rain down on them. The statue didn't seem to mind. He marched forward, his trident still impaling the ghost. One step, then another, then another, until he'd walked the creature to the wall's edge.

In a calm, graceful motion, the statue kicked the ghost free of his trident. The monster stumbled backward, oozing blood as it did, and toppled over the battlement. Its bulk slammed into a ladder on the way down, and it hit the ground with a crunch...though, by that point, Daila was barely paying attention to the Titans' duel.

"You're hurt," she said, her voice a mere whimper. "Oh, Shadows. Oh fucking Shadows, you're hurt."

Blood ran down Folston's armor, a trail of slick red that began at the side of his chest, where his armor sported three deep claw-marks. She cradled him in her arms, kneeling on the stones.

She applied pressure to the wound. It was all she could do. She'd read it in a medical book, though she no longer remembered the page or chapter. None of that mattered anymore. Only Folston mattered.

"Just a scratch," he said. His wince said otherwise. "I'm serious, dear. I'm fine, I just need," he shut his eyes, "to rest."

"No. You. Don't," she snarled. "Stay with me, damn it!"

She pressed harder against his wound until her hands were coated with blood. Shadows, this was bad. It was so bad, in fact, that her whole world felt as if it was shaking. Her body trembled and the ground seemed to rumble beneath her.

"I've had worse," the King said, a weary smile on his lips. He tried to rise to his feet, but Daila shoved him back down. She foraged through her pockets until she found a handkerchief, and pressed it to his side. "You worry too much."

"I what? You're wounded! A monster wounded you...and it's my own stupid fault!"

"Calm down, sweetheart."

"Don't tell me to calm down."

“Majesty,” a nearby royal guard said. He sounded frantic and grabbed her shoulder with a firm hand, a gesture that would have gotten him dungeon time under Icevein’s reign. “We have to get down from the wall. Now!”

She prepared a retort. It died on the tip of her tongue when she noticed that the guard’s eyes were no longer upon her. No, he gazed past her, over her shoulder. Toward the undead Giant that emerged from the fog, and marched upon the wall with frightening speed.

The beast was larger than any creature she had ever seen. Thrice the size of the wall, easily. It made those ‘ghosts’ look like mere children. Its flesh was dead, sickly, and strangely uniform as if a painter with a deep appreciation for the color grey had taken a brush to its whole body. Its face had vaguely man-like characteristics, but it was far from human and its eyes...its eyes were wide and black, with no visible iris. Or, perhaps the whole eye was an iris...as if that mattered.

Around them, their troops wavered. The battle cries and taunts died into silence, interrupted only by the intermittent thumps of the giant’s footsteps. Fearful murmurs of ‘Giant’ coursed through the men.

“Retreat? I will do no such thing,” Folston hissed. “Not when I’m most needed.” Speechless, Daila couldn’t object as Folston let out a low curse and rose to his feet. Daila had to hold his arm to steady him, but he still eyed the approaching giant with sheer defiance. “Soldiers!” his voice boomed. It carried farther than Daila had expected, causing troops to turn their heads from distant walls and towers. He’d inherited something from his father, after all, Daila thought with a grim smile.

“When you pray to the Giant, what do you pray for? For happiness? For love? For freedom? For your family? The Giant does not answer your prayers with words. The Giant does not hand you what you desire or thrust gifts upon you. But the Giant does give you a choice. Opportunity. That is the Giant’s only gift. He grants you trying times when you can change the world with a simple choice when you can reach for your wishes and leap into the unknown.”

The undead behemoth grew nearer, headed almost directly on a bee-line toward them.

“So what will it be?” Folston cried out, visibly gritting his teeth through the pain. “What will you do with his gift? Will you squander it, or will you fight? Because when I look up there, do you know what I see?” He pointed the bloodied tip of his sword up at the giant, who now loomed almost directly overhead. “I see one massive fucking opportunity. Who among us wants to be a demon-slayer!?”

Many soldiers cheered. Most beat their weapons against their shields, creating a high drum above the dull thump of the behemoth's feet. Salvos of arrows flew through the air. Many struck home on the colossal target, though the 'Giant' paid little heed. Ballistae bolts smacked into him, too, with six bolts embedding themselves into his chest, but the 'Giant' only let out an angry roar. The sound was deep, deeper than any sound Daila had ever heard before, and loud enough to shake the wall's foundation.

Then the 'Giant' struck.

Clumsily, he swung his balled fist across the wall, only a dozen paces from Daila. The strike, though inaccurate, was devastating. Dozens of soldiers toppled from the wall. Those who had been hit directly by the monstrosity went soaring into the air, landing mangled and broken. Large chunks of the wall broken off, tumbling down upon the Lisanai soldiers below, though the 'Giant' seemed not to care. Shadows, how could one person hold so much power? And how could a Shaper control something like this? The Emperor must have been charging his Power for years. Decades, even.

Again, the 'Giant' bellowed in anger. He lifted his foot. Shadows, it was massive. Then, gradually, he centered his foot over their stretch of wall. The foot was indescribably huge - even proportionally speaking. It was almost greater in width than length, and easily covered the entirety of the wall. Around them, everything fell into shadow. Darkness.

"Run!" cried out the nearby guards. "Majesties, run!"

But it was too late.

"Shadows."

Tears wet Daila's eyes and she clung to her husband, caressing him from behind as they both stared upward, toward the behemoth's waiting foot. It stayed there for a moment, an ominous weight above their heads, waiting to deliver its inevitable doom.

Folston turned, no longer choosing to stare at death. Instead, he fixed her with a look of longing, desire, and - above all - regret. "Daila," he whispered. His voice was hoarse and his eyes...his lovely green eyes glistened with tears. She'd never seen those eyes again. "You're the love of my life."

She'd caused this. If only she'd listened to that guard and convinced Folston not to make that stupid, idealistic speech. She fought back her own tears and lifted her chin. No. She wouldn't die crying and feeling sorry for herself. Fighting back her fears, her worries, and her sorrow, she pressed her lips to Folston's for one last kiss as the hulking foot came down.

*"What makes a god? Is it power? What type of power, then? The ability to create or to destroy? Does a god turn cities to ash and grind cultures to dust? I think not. A god who commits such acts is more of a debtor than a deity, for - in time's cruel meandering - one's wrongs seldom go unpunished."*

*The Proposal. Post-Script One, Volume Three.*



# CHAPTER 39

## *Faith*

**T**he battle had not yet begun when Liral met her two escorts at the postern gate. They were Ironskins, Sir Evarr and Blint, and they'd been hand-selected to accompany her on her mission. Both men wore the same outfits as her: red cloaks, black gloves, and boots.

After greeting her with a pair of bows, they stood awkwardly, as if waiting for her to speak.

"All...all ready?" she managed to ask.

"Of course, Highness," nodded Sir Evarr.

Shadows, she was nervous, but she couldn't let it show. Not when she needed these men to sacrifice so much for her. She had to be resolute and commanding, like her sister.

Liral lifted her chin.

"Good. Remember: not a word from the two of you, once we get inside the Lisanai camp. You've both got the West on your tongues. Once we leave these walls, you're Redcloaks and you're silent." She spoke with clarity and purpose that would have impressed Cross. The mere thought of her fallen best friend stung, but she persevered. "And when we get to the target, you're to distract - that's all. Don't put yourself in unnecessary danger. If you need to run, run. Understood?"

"Yes, Highness," said Evarr.

Blint echoed, "Aye, Highness."

The warning horns droned another somber note. The battle would start soon, then.

“And I trust you’ve both taken care of all of your...affairs? In case anything happens?”

The men nodded.

“Good. Evarr, you ought to lead the way, given...” She gestured toward her own bright blonde locks.

“If you say so, Highness.”

She would have preferred to take the lead, but Evarr’s chestnut hair placed him about a dozen rungs above her in the Empire’s hierarchy, and the last thing they needed was unwanted attention. Evarr was apparently one of Folston’s friends, a tall fellow with a unique laugh that sounded more like a snort.

Evarr was not an ideal escort for this mission, but Folston had identified him as the most trustworthy Ironskin he knew. Rather uncoordinated, she’d seen the man trip at least twice in the few days since he’d volunteered...and his red cloak barely fit. They’d been forced to use spare cloth from her own cloak to give him enough length to cover his deer-like legs.

Queen Daila had insisted that she help with the sewing.

“Say,” Evarr continued. “Did you happen to see Lady Auri on your way out of the castle? Is she safe?”

“What?” she blinked. “Auri?” That cruel, teasing woman who Daila seemed to favor? She didn’t say that bit, of course, but couldn’t hide her surprise at the question. “She’s...I don’t know, I think she’s safe in the grotto.”

That seemed to please the knight.

“When I first told her I was going on this mission, she said I was an idiot.”

“Sounds about right,” Liral murmured.

“Any questions? Requests before we go?” she asked Blint, her second Ironskin.

The man only shrugged, then nodded his head at Sir Evarr. “If we make it out alive, I’d like to be knighted like that bloke.”

“Done,” she said, mustering a weak smile.

At first, Liral had wanted to take only one escort. That would make things simpler, safer. The larger the party, after all, the more difficult it was to pass unnoticed. Daila wasn’t so convinced. The Queen had insisted that Liral be escorted by at least one more lad with Powers, and threatened to shackle Liral to a council room chair if she refused. Her older sister truly was the most forceful and fretful person she’d ever met...but that fretfulness brought a warmth to Liral’s heart. Liral couldn’t explain its presence, not in words, but it was there.

Due to her sister's insistence, Liral had to pick a second Ironskin to accompany her. The escort had to be an Ironskin, rather than a Dasher or Shaper, because only an Ironskin could survive long enough to be a true distraction. She'd been given the option to choose any Ironskin in the Kadian elite forces, but she'd declined.

Instead, to her sister's shock, she'd settled on Blint.

Blint had little combat experience. But what he lacked in that department, he made up for in heart and grit.

He was a middle-aged blacksmith, a widely built man with thick biceps that threatened to stretch his cloak. His hair was straw-colored. It was almost the same shade as Liral's own. According to him, Blint had been homeless on the streets of Old Arbor as a child, until he was taken in as a blacksmith's apprentice. Ever since, he had been living a dreary, lonely life, like so many others. For decades, he expressed no allegiance to any crown or kingdom, and he largely minded his own business. That all changed when a boastful dark-haired lord by the name of Aradon stopped by his smithy to have a new blade crafted. The lord, perhaps by mistake, perhaps on purpose, left a book on his stool as he departed. A book titled *The Proposal*.

Blint became engrossed in the book, sharing it with everyone he could, discussing it with anyone who would listen. Under Icevein, speaking of such things meant sure death. Even under King Braum, the book held dangerous ideas. That did little to dissuade Blint, by his own recollection. He even went out of his way to meet Folston, the book's rumored author, during the now-King's visit to the Tree.

When Queen Daila, her hair as red as fire, rose to power, Blint knew it as a sign that *The Proposal's* prophecy would come to fruition. He knew that it signified a new world, a better world, a world where hair color was just hair color - nothing more. Though Blint was no fighter, he volunteered his services when the Empire's army approached. After he shared his story, Liral didn't hesitate to select him. More than prowess or stealth, she needed people who she could depend upon...and she trusted him more than most of the other folks in the realm.

"Alright, then," Liral released a nervous breath. "Thank you. Thank you for doing this."

"Anything for you, Highness," Blint said. He thudded his fist against his chest and gave her a grim, toothy smile. "If you're not a sign of hope from the Giant himself, I don't know what is."

"I'm far from that."

Her Totem, her mother took that opportunity to omit a comforting blue pulse.

"Yours does that too?" Evarr asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Only when she wants to tell me something. I can show you how to make yours do it...but now’s not the time.” She lowered her voice. “Sorry, mum. I know I’m not a Ruiner.”

Her mother lent her a happy flash of green, and her heart swelled with confidence and love and...Shadows, she needed that little push.

She set her jaw and took the first few steps through the postern gate.

“Let’s get going, then.”

\* \* \*

The red cloaked trio hastily covered the open distance between the city and the Lisanai camp. A heavy layer of fog still hung in the air, for which Liral silently thanked the Giant. Less visibility meant a lower chance of recognition, and recognition was one of their greatest threats.

She followed Evarr’s lead as they arrived at the outskirts of the military camp.

Wooden poles formed the camp’s wall, the same defensive arrangement that the Empire had erected on every night of their voyage from the East. The camp’s sheer vastness still astounded her. So many soldiers...so many enemies. She had to clench her fists to keep from shaking, as lines of Lisanai soldiers poured out of the camp, all descending upon Old Arbor. The thud of catapult-stones in the distance confirmed that the battle had already begun. How long would it take the Empire to break through the city wall? Hours? Minutes?

Liral grimaced.

Brushing past soldier after soldier, they neared the largest camp entrance, where she figured that the watchman-to-soldier ratio would be lowest. Silently, she prayed that none of the camp watchmen were excellent at their jobs, else blood would have to be spilled, and their lives would likely be squandered.

She pulled her Redcloak hood further down to better conceal her face. Shadows, this would either be the best idea in the world, or the worst.

They neared the camp’s entrance, where four burgundy-armored watchmen stood at attention, atop wooden parapets on either side of the open gate. The men studied all of the departing forces with keen interest. As long as their eyes didn’t fall upon her, all would be well. Unfortunately, her trio was fighting against the tide. Among the sea of departing troops, they stood out like dark-hairs in a harbor pub.

As Liral and her escorts passed beneath the gate, one of the watchmen caught her eye. Immediately, she knew that this lad would be a problem. He took his job too

seriously. His uniform was in perfect order, and...Shadows, he even tucked his pant-legs into his boots.

“Halt!” the guard ordered. “You three, halt.”

They came to an uneasy stop. Evarr was visibly uncomfortable. The knight glanced back at Liral, a hint of desperation in his expression.

The watchman descended from his parapet, confronting the three of them. He was taller than Liral, but both Evarr and Blint dwarfed him. He barely seemed to notice. Instead, the blond man gave her a hard, discerning look, as if he could see straight through her Redcloak disguise. Did he know? Of course he knew. She was too small to be a Redcloak, too weak, too useless. She wanted to shrink away. She wanted to disappear into the river of soldiers, like she’d done so many times during her days as a thief, she wanted to escape, to...no.

She had to be strong. For her Daila, for her mother...and for Cross.

“You’re with the Raven squadron, no? Why aren’t you heading to the front?” He glanced down at a sheet of paper in his hand. “You’re to lead the assault, aren’t you?”

Liral stared up at the watchman. She set aside her fear, steadied her trembling hands, and gave him the fiercest, most disgusted look she could muster. She attempted to channel the same disdain that the scarfed Redcloak Ashelya had used in that alleyway, and wore the same sneer as the late Pevrin.

“You’re mistaken, boy. We are not with your ‘Raven squadron’, we’re on special orders from the Emperor.”

The watchman hesitated for a moment, as if he’d just begun to realize the weight of his mistake. In the Lisanai army, organization and orderliness were important, but the world revolved around the Emperor. If a well-meaning soldier accidentally inconvenienced his ruler, the man’s head would roll.

“My deepest apologies. I meant no offense, but it’s imperative that everyone follows orders, and your gloves are black which means you’re su-”

“I. Don’t. Care. My gloves could be bright fucking pink, and it wouldn’t matter because when the Emperor tells me that I need to return to camp, I return to camp. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t butcher you right here on the spot for intervening in the Emperor’s affairs?”

The watchman paled.

“Now get out of our way.”

He opened his mouth, as if he wanted to have the last word, then changed his mind and hastily retreated to his wooden perch. Problem solved.

A thin smile worked its way onto Liral’s lips.

“Well done,” Blint muttered.

She turned around to give him a sharp, silencing look, before following Evarr further into the camp.

No other guards were foolish enough to question a trio of Redcloaks.

Liral was surprised by the sheer emptiness of the camp. When she'd been traveling with Cross, the daily camp was always crowded enough to make Trisal seem like a rural escape. Now, the small avenues between tents held only a few stragglers and the occasional guard patrol.

As they moved from empty tent to empty tent, dull thuds periodically shook the mud beneath them.

When there were no guards nearby, Blint whispered, “What in the hells is that?”

“Giant, I reckon.” Liral grimaced, staring out into the fog, in the direction of the footsteps. She couldn't see the beast, of course, but it was clearly on the move. “Hurry. We don't have much time.”

If the Giant got to the wall...well...that wasn't the sort of fight that a wall would win.

They quickened their pace. They moved as quickly as they could without raising any eyebrows, which was still a frustratingly slow pace. Her sister was on that wall, fighting for her life, buying precious seconds for Liral...if Daila died, it'd be Liral's own damned fault, just like everything else.

Her pendant pulsed a soothing shade of blue, and Liral battled back those dark thoughts.

When they caught sight of the Emperor's gaudy tent at the camp's center, Liral was dismayed to find that there were still about a dozen guards outside. Only two of those guards were Redcloaks, but still...it was a bad sign. Their whole plan revolved upon the idea that the Emperor would leave his tent less heavily defended if he believed that he needed to commit more troops to the battle.

“Shit,” she sighed, ducking behind the nearest tent.

“Two Redcloaks,” Evarr said, adding a curse. “They'll know we're fakes. Looks like it'll have to be the hard way, then.”

Liral frowned. “How long do you think you guys can hold your own against those folks?”

“We can handle them.” There was only the slightest hint of doubt in Evarr's voice.

“Aye, Majesty,” Blint agreed. He patted the warhammer hidden beneath his cloak. “They won't know what hit them.”

Liral bit her lip, then nodded.

“Okay, then.”

"I see those guards as a good sign, truth be told," Evar shrugged. "They wouldn't be here if the Emperor wasn't here."

"Spineless twat, that one is," added Blint. "Sending his lads and monsters off while he dawdles."

"Aye." Liral drew a deep breath and patted her dagger sheath, just to make sure that her weapon was there. She didn't intend to use it on a person. She prayed that she didn't have to. But if she had to, she would.

Another Giant step shook the ground beneath her.

"It's time."

With that, Blint and Evarr approached the collection of imperial guardsmen and the Redcloaks in front of the tent. Liral snuck around the side. Thankfully, no guardsmen patrolled on the back side of the tent, and morning fog still draped the camp. Her heartbeat raced. This might actually work...just maybe. Since her last infiltration, she'd had a good deal of time to strategize her new approach. The plan wasn't perfect by any means, but it was better than anything that she'd thought up with Cross.

She slowly climbed to the top of the tent, then paused at its peak and listened.

As she did, her thoughts drifted back to her old friend. Cross...he would have been so proud if he'd seen how she'd terrified that watchman. She had to do this for him, and for his lost brother. According to Daila, Shaped objects regained their original forms after being used by Shapers. Why wouldn't Shaped people work the same way?

The metallic clang of steel against steel interrupted her thoughts.

She heard shouts from inside the tent. This would be her best opportunity.

Liral peered down, through the hole atop the tent...and froze.

"Oh, by the Giant's foot," she cursed.

The Emperor wasn't alone. Since her last visit, he had increased his security dramatically.

A dozen ghosts lined the walls of the tent. They all stared forward with vacant expressions, ready to obey any command that their master ordered. On top of that, the Emperor's throne was flanked by three Redcloaks, who stood at attention. Great. Just great. In all likelihood, they were all Ironskins - most Powereds were - which meant that she'd have to avoid them at all costs. If they even got a single hand on her, she'd be as good as dead.

As Liral surveyed her options, half of the ghosts began to lurch forward to the tent's entrance. Two of the Redcloaks left, as well. The Emperor had learned about Blint and Evarr's attack, then, and wanted to squash them.

Liral bit her lip. Even with the departures, jumping down into the tent meant near-certain death...but failing to do so would doom the two men who'd volunteered to help her. More than that, it would doom Daila and Tannon, and her whole damned kingdom. She couldn't let that happen. She was Liralyne of Scythar, and she was willing to die for this.

Clenching her teeth, Liral leaped into the tent.

When her boots thudded against the wooden floor at the center of the tent, the Emperor let out a deep gasp. He flailed in his gold-leafed throne, and almost toppled from it. His drink - a chalice of red wine - did fall to the ground, and hit with a loud clunk. In his lap, a cobra let out a low hiss, baring its teeth at Liral. A cobra? Shadows, how many 'Shapings' - as Daila called them - was the Emperor controlling simultaneously? Daila had said that she could only manage a few large creations at any given time, but the Emperor had an entire army of Shapings.

"Identify yourself!" he thundered, staring down his nose at her. "Identify, yourself, Redcloak!"

Beside the Emperor, his Redcloak guard drew a sword. Their face shrouded by the shadows of a hood, and the Redcloak gripped the hilt of the long metal blade with white-knuckled hands. Liral's eyes drifted from the Redcloak to the Emperor, whose lips had returned to their usual sneering posture. He still wore that crown. That bloody, bloody crown.

Liral snarled.

She launched herself at him. She covered half of the distance between them in a single jump, but hesitated when the cobra launched itself toward her. Was it venomous? Shadows, she hoped not. After hearing Daila's horrific story about the death of Marsa, Liral didn't want to find out.

She rolled to the side. The move allowed her to dodge the cobra, who hit the far wall of the tent with a thunk, but it also sent her into an off-target slide. She ended up on her back, about a dozen paces from the Emperor, with an angry Redcloak storming toward her, sword at the ready. The Redcloak was probably an Ironskin, given her rapid but not Dasher-like speed, and was closing fast.

The Redcloak swept their sword in a wide arc, aiming for Liral's chest. She dodged backward to avoid the swing, and the blade struck only the edge of her cloak.

Shadows, the Emperor was already shouting for help, and the ghosts all around him had been roused from their slumber. She had to act fast.

Before the Redcloak could swing again, Liral punched the bastard in the gut and rushed past them. She had a single focus: the Emperor. She had to get to the Emperor.



The ghosts reached out toward her with their meaty claws, and she dodged with all of her skill. She dodged one, and another, and another. Then, when she was only a few paces from the Emperor, something powerful tugged on her robe, stifling her momentum.

“Shadows,” she cursed.

One of the ghosts had managed to snag her robe with its lengthy claws. Gah, why did the Emperor have to give his beasts such long claws?

She whimpered as the ghost’s other clawed hand wrapped around her neck.

She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe! Desperately, she fumbled through her robes, searching for her knife.

The ghost lifted her until her feet dangled in the air.

“It was a noble attempt,” snorted the Emperor. He rose from his throne, sneering like usual, and clicked his tongue at her. “You had me worried there for a moment, believe it or not. I’m always concerned about Dashers. Your kind are so fast...but perhaps not quite fast enough.” He barked a laugh at his joke.

She needed air.

“You, Redcloak,” the Emperor called. “Disarm this one and show me its face. I want to see it squirm.”

Her fingers searched and searched and, finally, they wrapped around the hilt of her knife. Before she could lash out, however, a strong hand gripped her elbow. It was the Redcloak from before. Liral let out a quiet curse, as the prick stole her knife, then brandished it for the Emperor to see before tossing it aside.

Liral kicked her legs, squirming, screeching, doing everything she could to get free. She’d be unconscious in seconds. The corners of her vision were already fading.

“Excellent. I’m thinking we could carve this one up and feed it to the ghosts at the victory dinner. They always do prefer Powered flesh.”

The Shadows-damned Redcloak then came around to face her, and lifted Liral’s hood.

The Redcloak froze.

“Oh, a little Ralli girl,” the Emperor continued. “How nice. Once she suffocates, can you cut off her head? I think I’ll put it on a pike. It’ll make a nice piece of decoration at the new castle, and it’ll show those gremlins not to provoke me.”

She didn’t know what else she could do. She writhed and kicked the ghost in the stomach, but the creature barely seemed to mind. It just held her there, gripping her throat with unreal strength.

Liral was about to give up, to ball her fists and shed tears, when the Redcloak lowered her hood.

“Zare?!” Liral tried to say, though it came out as a choked gasp.

Zarellia Petrax stood opposite Liral. She’d been the Redcloak, the Ironskin with whom Liral had fought. Liral’s heartbeat thudded in her ears.

“Help me,” she mouthed. “Help. Me.”

“You know what, this is taking too long,” the Emperor sighed, as he began to pace the room. “Suffocation always sounds better in theory, but it can be rather boring. Just stab her and be done with it.”

Liral shut her eyes. No. She refused to believe that her best friend would do that. When she opened her eyes, she found that a tear had begun to meander down Zare’s cheek.

Zare looked torn. Conflicted. Her sword trembled in her hands.

“Help. Me.”

“Looks like our friend is already having fun,” the Emperor snorted, as he began to pace the room. “Soon enough, they’ll b-”

Before he could finish, Zare thrust her blade toward Liral.

Liral anticipated the sensations to come: pain, the slick rush of blue blood, and betrayal’s deep sting. However, none of that came.

Zare drove the sword past Liral’s head, and struck home through the eye of the ghost.

The grip on Liral’s neck loosened. She would have toppled to the floor, had Zare not caught her in a firm embrace, and helped her find her footing. Her heart raced and she wanted that embrace to last forever...but now was not the time.

“I’ll take them,” Zare nodded toward the remaining ghosts. “Or I’ll try. I love you.”

“I love you,” Liral managed to choke, before turning her attention to the Emperor.

The Emperor sputtered as he backed away from Zare. He was already crouched behind one of his ghosts, trying to use the bulky monster as a shield.

“What is this? Betrayal? Your whole family will pay for that, whore. Rest assured.”

Liral was no longer interested in what the Emperor had to say. Snarling, she kicked off her boots. She’d never liked boots, and she needed to be as light and as swift as possible.

Though her throat burned with every breath and her eyes stung with tears, Liral rushed straight toward the worst monster she’d ever known. The ghost in front of him prepared to take a swing at her, but she changed her trajectory at the last moment. She hadn’t tried this move in ages. The last time she had, she’d landed on her butt.

Clenching her teeth, Liral ran up the side of the tent.

Her Totem glowed blue. It lent her agility as her bare feet struggled for traction against the tent's fabric. All the while, her momentum fought against gravity. The ghost's clumsy, terrifying claws swept just below her, and she turned her sprint into a backflip. She landed beside the Emperor in a crouch, feeling more like a cat than a human, and she eyed him with a grim smile.

The crown sat atop his head. It was so near, just as tantalizing as that golden coin that Cross had brandished in his pouch in that dingy harbor tavern on the night they'd first met. The analogy fell apart in her mind when she eyed the steel bolts along the sides of the crown, securing it to the Shaper's head. Shadows, that man was insane...or maybe not. Maybe he was more paranoid than insane, and that paranoia had served its purpose. Even if Rodmahein had gifted Liral with a full hour to steal that bolted crown, she wouldn't have been able to do it. It was fortunate, then, that theft had never been part of Liral's plan.

The Emperor braced himself, expecting her to strike him with some sort of blow, or stab him.

She didn't. She wasn't a fighter. Instead, Liral placed a hand on either side of the Emperor's crown, and prayed that Daila's theories were correct.

"Yila, Yila, Yila!" she cried out. The words were rough and grating from her sore throat, but they were still intelligible. They were still clear. "Yila! Yila! Yila!"

"Get off me, whore!" The Emperor flailed his arms at her, and caught her on the cheek with an awkward yet stinging punch.

She ignored the pain, and grappled with the Emperor, wrapping her leg around his to ensure he couldn't escape. On the far side of the room, she caught a glimpse of Zare's sword whistling into a ghost. Her friend was surrounded by the beasts, and she appeared to be favoring her left leg.

Work, damn you, Liral thought. She thought back to how Daila had invoked her own Totem, how Daila had awoken their mother from her long slumber. Daila had been loving at the time. Emotional.

The ghost, confused by her wall-jump, was slow to turn around. When it finally did, it fixed its vacant eyes on her and lifted one of its meaty arms, preparing to strike. Shadows, those claws would hurt.

Steel clanged near the tent's entrance. Blint and Evarr ducked beneath the tent flaps, and two ghosts sliced through it only moments later. Her friends were retreating desperately toward her, trying their best to deflect brutal swipes from two ghosts.

Blint's shirt was bloodied and Evarr's sword had been shattered into a jagged shard that measured about half of its previous length.

"Yila, Yila, Yila!"

Liral recalled the dungeon where she'd first heard that name. She recalled the man who spoke that name, the Ralli lad who'd done nothing wrong, aside from being born with the wrong colored hair in the wrong Empire.

A distant stomping noise caused the whole tent to shake. No, it wasn't a stomp. It was a bellow. A deep, angry roar that could have only come from the Emperor's Giant-monstrosity. It made the tent's Lisanai banners ripple and even caused a few torches to go out. The Giant had made it to the city walls.

"Yila, Yila, Yila!" she chanted, even more urgently.

She didn't know the names of the countless others who had given their lives, just so the Emperor could increase the strength of his Totem, of his crown. Just so he could Shape an army of monstrosities. She called to those people anyway.

"I remember you!" she rasped. "Yila, Yila, Yila."

The Emperor's crown glowed. The light was faint at first, a muted pinkish tone that grew more angry with every passing second, until it became a deep, disturbing red. A shade of red that almost seemed to speak. As its light flooded through the tent, filling every nook, it said: No. This is wrong. This has always been wrong, and now it's time to pay.

Liral stepped back from the Emperor, and admired the light.

"What in the world? What did you do, you witch?" He looked up at his ghost, a scowl on his lips.

The scowl turned to confusion as he glanced around the room. His ghosts had stopped fighting against Zare. They did not stand at perfect attention, like they had before the Emperor activated them. Instead, the ghosts looked around at each other, then down at their own bodies. They seemed...odd. Like they'd just woken up for the first time in ages.

Liral's heart swelled. Had it worked? Had it truly worked?

"What are you doing? Why aren't you listening to my commands?" He fixed his glare on the ghost who stood before him. It still had its arm coiled, ready to slash Liral in half. "Kill her! Why are you staring at me like a fucking dunce? Strike her down! She touched me! This mousy whore touched me! Kill her!"

"Don't call her that, you twat," Zare called. Her friend watched the ghosts uneasily, as if she wasn't sure if this was some ruse. "Liral, what did you do?"

Liral wasn't quite sure how to answer that. If she told Zare that she'd tried to awaken the murdered Ralli whose spirit gave the Emperor's Totem its strength, and have those spirits seize control of the Emperor's active Shapings...she figured that Zare would have more than a few questions.

The ghost eyed the Emperor, then its head swiveled to Liral. For a brief moment, she considered running. Maybe it hadn't worked. No...the ghost's eyes were different. They weren't quite as empty as before, not quite as dead. Ever so slowly, the beast turned its gaze back onto the Emperor.

"What did you do to my creations, witch? What does 'Yila' mean? What foul language is that?"

"You don't remember?" Liral murmured, backing further away. "Suppose you wouldn't."

Why would he remember one of his victim's death cries? Why would he recall the name of just one dead Ralli, when he bore the blood of so many on his hands? No, he wouldn't remember them. But Liral would.

"Kill her! Now!"

The crown's red glow intensified, and the ghost let out a high, tormented shriek.

Then the ghost struck.

Its claws struck down hard on the Emperor, slicing through the man's head from his shoulders. Blood sprayed out. It splattered across Liral's face and blended with her red cloak as she stood in stunned disbelief. She knew that the Ralli folks would want their revenge, but...Shadows, that was unsettling. The Emperor's head rolled across the carpet, leaving a trail in its wake. Liral watched it roll. In death, the Emperor did not wear a hateful expression, just one of shock, as if he never imagined that he could possibly be outmaneuvered by a 'mousy' Ralli girl.

The head came to a stop at Zare's foot.

Zare stared into the Emperor's cold, dead gaze, and released a shaky breath.

"Liral," Zare whispered. In that single word, there was pain and worry and...love. "Are you hurt? Is there..."

She trailed off.

Around them, the ghosts were undergoing a transformation. The creatures' musculature was warping and reforming. They were shrinking. Wisps of power swirled around them, and their gruesome claws began to dwindle, smaller and smaller until only fingernails remained. Their grey skin peeled back to reveal...humans. Young men, all of them, completely naked with the wiry muscles of slave laborers.

“By the Giant himself,” Blint cried out, eyeing the small handful of Ralli laborers around him at the mouth of the tent.

“You can say that again,” Evarr muttered.

Blint brandished his hammer at the lads. “You’d best not rise again, beasts.”

“Don’t hurt them!” Liral ordered. “They were just controlled, I think. We don’t mean to harm you, I promise.”

Blint hesitantly lowered his weapon.

The men were slow to get to their feet, but did so. They seemed dazed, as if they had just woken up after a night of too much drink.

“Where am I?” whispered the nearest lad.

“You’re...you’re in danger. We’re in the middle of an Imperial camp, they want to kill all of us, and we’re getting you out of here,” Liral said. Her breath caught when a familiar hand wrapped protectively around her arm, just above the elbow.

It was Zare.

Liral knew that there was no time for sentimentality or lust, and that she should have been planning an escape...but it was Zare. Zare had come for her, had saved her. The same girl who she had missed so much that her heart ached with every breath. Zare, who she felt feelings for, feelings that she’d never felt toward anyone else in her entire life.

She pressed her lips to Zare’s in a hasty, desperate kiss. They didn’t have time for this, she knew that, but...she’d missed that feeling. She never wanted to go so long without it again.

They broke off their embrace far too hastily, but they couldn’t dawdle. Lives were on the line.

“Get these men on their feet,” she ordered Blint and Evarr.

“I’ll get them cloaks,” Zare said. Her cheeks were a wonderful shade of pink when she rushed toward the nearest wardrobe, her leg betraying only a slight limp, and began hauling out cloaks for the men to wear. “They won’t fit well, but it’s better than having to stare at your cocks all day long.”

“Sorry,” mumbled the nearest lad.

A smile crept onto Liral’s lips. She’d missed Zare more than she’d realized...but she couldn’t dwell on that.

“Blint, Evarr, where are those Redcloaks who were following you?”

Blint thrust out his chin proudly as he tossed a sword to one of the men. They seemed to be slowly regaining their awareness, coming to terms with the fact that all of this was real.

“One got injured because he stood too close to these beasts. His friends dragged him off, but I reckon that was less about helping him and more about getting away from these big grey bastards. They’re wild as a newborn deer, flailing around and all. Tough bastards, though.”

“Tough bastards,” Liral echoed softly. She would have said more, but paused when she caught sight of a familiar face. “Tannon!”

She bolted past other former ghosts, most of whom now wore red cloaks, and looked up toward the gangly adolescent. She’d never seen him so close, only from a distance...but she recognized him immediately. He looked so much like Cross.

A tear ran down her cheek, and she wrapped him in a brief hug.

“Do I know you?” He scratched his head.

“Not yet,” she gulped. “But...Cross sent me. Know that...that he loves you very much.”

“Hey, you,” Zare snapped. “Hands off, she’s mine.”

That made Liral snort a laugh, and she wiped the tears - turned pink from the Emperor’s blood - from her cheek.

“Let’s go. Those Redcloaks were my squad, I know them. They’ll be back with more soon. If any of you idiots want to get out of here alive, follow me.”

# CHAPTER 40

## *Rise and Fall*

**D**aila held the kiss, pressing her lips to Folston's, and waited for the end to come. The 'Giant's foot, lingering high above, would come down and then...then she would be no more. She ran her hands through Folston's hair, and prayed that their deaths would be swift. Painless. Or as painless as it could be, given that blood already trailed down her husband's side. She loved him too much to see him suffer in her dying moments. So she massaged her tongue against his and waited...and waited.

Nothing happened.

She only broke off their kiss when a royal guardsman laid a nervous hand on her shoulder.

"Majesty, look," the man said.

It was all he had to say.

The man pointed up at the underside of the 'Giant's foot, where that layer of oddly uniform sickly skin had begun to peel back and reveal grey tissue. The tissue was breaking down as well, revealing the massive white bones beneath.

Folston pulled her close, as if his first instinct was to shield her from the deteriorating behemoth. "What's happening?" he asked.

For a few moments, she only gaped up at the 'Giant' like an imbecile.

"It worked. The Emperor's Shaping link was disconnected."

"So he's dead?"

"I don't know. There are many ways for a link to break down, but probably. I hope so."



She glanced around the battlefield. Atop the walls and below, the relatively smaller Shaped creatures - the 'ghosts' - had already lost all of their skin and were reverting back into men. Cheers rose from the Scythari and Kadian troops, and the Lisanai seemed to hesitate. Though some Lisanai were still fighting for purchase atop the wall, their reinforcements began heading back down their ladders.

When she looked back up at the 'Giant', whose flesh was now almost entirely absent, a realization struck her. Liral had witnessed the creation of the 'Giant'. According to her, the Emperor had animated it from a collection of massive bones. If there was one fact that Daila knew about Shaping, it was that - with the exception of self-Shaping - Shaped objects always returned to their original form after their link had been severed. The 'Giant's foot was holding its position thanks to the few remaining tendons and ligaments, which were sure to erode soon. Once that happened, the bones would come tumbling down.

"Clear the wall!" she piped, as loudly as her lungs would allow. "Clear the wall beneath that beast! Move! Move!"

She grabbed Folston and bolted along the rampart, toward a nearby tower. Around her, some of the troops seemed more confused about the ordeal than anything. Thankfully, many of them had already begun retreating from the area when the Giant had first drawn near. Most of the others seemed to realize what was happening and moved for cover in a surprisingly orderly fashion. The troops further down on the wall even adjusted to make room for the retreat.

"Everyone move! Move now! Else you're going to be crushed!"

That was enough to spur the remaining men into action.

By the time the first few bones cracked against the stone, shattering Daila's beautiful statue and denting the wall's neatly placed stones, none of her soldiers were in danger. Daila had shoved Folston to the top of the tower, and set him on the ground beside a burning brazier. She politely asked three guards to stand over them, shields raised against the falling debris, despite the fact that they were a safe distance away.

"And you," she commanded a royal guard. "Please fetch a doctor with a needle and stitches, and a few bandages, if you would be so kind." As someone who had been ordered around for months, she knew how pleasant it felt to be ordered with respect. She would always issue her commands in that manner, for as long as she lived.

The man nodded and went to leave.

"And liquor, please!" The liquor would serve two purposes: for drinking and for cleaning the needle. She remembered that bit from her medical book.

"You know, that doctor could be better use serving someone who's actually dying," Folston stated flatly, as more bones cracked into the vacant wall.

"Don't you dare guilt me about this."

She tried to frown at him, but that broke down as soon as a smile split Folston's lips. Shadows, she could watch his smile until the end of time.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, where he laid a gentle kiss.

"If you're allowed to fret like a mother goose, I can guilt you from time to time."

"Maybe...but damn it, Folston. Don't ever get yourself hurt for me again. I love you too much for that, you big, stupid, stupid man."

She couldn't hold back her grin, so she stopped trying to suppress it and sighed, running a finger along his jawline.

The echo of screams made her smile falter. Daila rose from Folston's side to peer over the parapet. She wished that she hadn't. The Lisanai troops, being a larger, more confined, and less trained force, weren't able to retreat from the falling bones as quickly as the defenders. While the creature's foot and leg had hung over the wall, the rest of its body had still been positioned above the Lisanai army. Its bones rained down upon terrified men below. Some were crushed. Most escaped unharmed, though they did not escape the sense of doom. With every new bone that tumbled from the monster's deteriorating structure, the army descended further into terror. The scene was chaotic. Horses ran wild through the broken ranks, and the army turned into a desperate swarm, like a disturbed ant colony, with throngs of men sprinting away from the city while orders went completely ignored.

More cheers sounded from the defenders. The Lisanai troops atop the wall, realizing that they were being abandoned by their own army, were laying down their arms. Even a few of the Redcloaks threw up their hands in surrender.

"I think we might have...won?"

Sure enough, the horns of victory began to blare from the top of the castle. Their notes were clear and triumphant, a far cry from the somber warning horns that had sounded only hours prior.

"We did it," Folston grinned.

"Liralyne did it, you mean."

"That too."

Folston started to rise to his feet beside her to watch the spectacle, but she stopped him. Joining him on the ground, she tucked her legs beneath her and wrapped her arms around him, nestling her head into his shoulder.

They sat there for a short while, until a doctor arrived and began to care for Folston's wounds. The wounds weren't serious, thank the Giant...or, rather, thank Folston's thick armor. By the time the doctor finished his stitching, the Lisanai were already in full retreat. Some of their swarm had returned to the camp, while others seemed to be heading straight east, back toward their homes.

"Reckon someone's had an eventful day. Isn't that right, Dai?"

Her ears perked up at the sound of Auri's voice. Her friend stood before her with a wicked grin.

"Auri!" she hissed. "You're meant to be back at the castle!"

"Shush, Queenlet. Isn't the battle over?"

"Yes, but still...and don't call me 'Queenlet'."

"It's better than 'Fire Queen' or 'The Phoenix'. Did you know that's what the other girls are calling you? I wish I could have a nice nickname like that. Reckon 'Lady Auri' isn't too bad, though."

"Not bad at all," Folston agreed. He choked a choked laugh, then winced and pressed his hand to his side.

"Careful, darling," Daila whispered to him, before planting a brief kiss on his cheek. "You know, Auri, if you gave people more flattering nicknames, you'd probably receive one yourself."

Auri tilted her head, as if considering the notion, then shrugged and settled onto the ground beside the royal couple.

"That's no fun."

"Not everything has to be fun."

"Majesties," interrupted a messenger boy. He looked to be in his late teens, and seemed rather nervous.

"Yes? What is it?" Daila asked, summoning all of the kindness she could manage.

"The princess's party has returned, and they have it on good authority that the Emperor is dead."

"Thank the Tree. Please send for them."

"So cordial," Auri murmured.

"Shut it."

"They're already on their way," the boy continued. "And...ah...do you wish to press the attack?"

Daila shared a look with Folston.

"No," she answered for both of them. "Let them go."

Liral couldn't believe that she had succeeded. For once in her life, she'd done something right. She wasn't a ruiner. Even when she crested that final step of the tower, and saw the King, Lady Auri, and her sister sitting side-by-side, sharing a bottle of liquor, she still found it difficult to believe that the day's events weren't part of some dream.

Holding hands with Zare, Liral was the first to approach her sister. The rest of the group hung back. Their party had grown close to two dozen in all, with the former ghosts that they picked up along the way.

Zare curtsied before the Queen, and Liral hastily replicated the gesture.

"Not necessary," Daila laughed. "Liralyne, you need never bow to me. You're my sister, for the Giant's sake. And you saved us. You saved us all! I ought to build one of those statues for you. You're the most courageous person I know, Liralyne, and I mean that."

Liral had to fight back a wave of tears. "Sorry for bowing," she murmured. "This is Zare. She's my..." She looked up at Zare, and all of the words for her carefully constructed introduction disintegrated. What was Zare to her? Zare was...well... "She's special. I love her."

Zare glanced between Liral and Daila, looking awfully confused. "Wait...you're sisters? And you're a queen? I thought Liral was just a spy, that's why she pretended to be dark-haired, and...by the Emp-" Zare shook her head, and fixed Liral with an iron gaze. "Why didn't you tell me you're a princess? A light-haired princess? How is that even possible? You have a lot of explaining to do."

Liral bit her lip and whispered, "I know."

She rose to her tiptoes to give Zare a peck on the lips.

"I'll tell you everything soon."

Then Liral knelt beside her sister and the pair shared a long, teary hug. Daila took only a brief respite from the hug to wipe the blood Liral's cheeks with a handkerchief.

"There," her older sister cooed. "Now I can see your beautiful face."

"Stop that," Liral blushed, which made Daila giggle.

"Welcome home, Zare," Daila said, as she pulled Liral close once again, and stroked Liral's hair.

"Home?"

"It's home if you want it to be home. If you want to be part of a new world, a better world. As long as you're good to Liralyne, you're welcome here."

Zare hesitated for only a moment, before answering. "I will be."

"Good...and who are your other friends, Liralyne?"

"Just good folks," she murmured. "Just a bunch of good folks. Tannon," she beckoned the lad forward. "This is Tannon. He's Cross's brother."

"Tannon," Daila repeated. "Welcome to my court. From what Liralyne tells me, your brother was a brave and noble man. Not noble in terms of hair color, mind you, but noble here," she pressed a hand over Liral's heart. "Where it counts. If you're anything like he was, we'd love to have you among our court."

"Was, Majesty?" Tannon asked, blinking. "He...was?"

"Ah. You didn't tell him. You truly have to work on your communication skills, Liralyne."

"I..." Liral whispered, before sighing and shaking her head. "Sorry."

"Tannon, I'm sorry for your loss. Your brother died a hero, saving Liralyne here. I know it is little consolation, but do know that we will always remember him, and we will honor his name. He did a great kindness for our people, and he always held you dearly in his heart."

"A-and my mother?" Tannon stammered. The rims of his eyes glistened.

"She lives in Trisal, yes? I have no reason to believe that she's been harmed. I can send for her, if you wish."

Tannon pursed his lips and nodded, visibly struggling to hold back tears. Daila seemed to pick up on that and left Liral's side to embrace the man in a tight hug. She rubbed his back, and whispered inaudibly soft yet soothing words into his ear. Daila just knew all of the best possible words to use, all the time. Shadows...why couldn't Liral be more like that?

"Idiot," she muttered under her breath. "You're a daft idiot, Liral."

Liral's Totem pulsed a brief, friendly wave of light, as if telling her not to be so hard on herself. It worked, and she let her bitterness slip away.

"Thanks, Mum."

Blint was next. Folston recognized him immediately from his trip thorough Old Arbor, and two shared a fervent discussion about the inner workings of The Proposal, most of which was far too technical for Liral's understanding.

While they were chattering, Sir Evarr stepped forward with a bundle in his arms.

"Is that a gift for me?" asked Lady Auri, arching one of her oddly flexible eyebrows.

Evarr hesitated, and he shied away from Auri's gaze. "No, my Lady."

"What is it?" Daila asked.

Carefully, Evarr unwrapped the bundle, revealing the Emperor's severed head. His eyes were still open, his mouth still ajar, and the crown was still bolted to his skull.

Daila let out a gasp, and Folston winced.

"I'm a Lady now, you know," Auri said with a tiny sniff. "You'll have to do better than one head if you want to impress me. I was thinking four heads, maybe five."

That drew a chuckle from Evarr. Shadows, he did fancy that crazed woman. Giant help him.

"Auri, that's not just any head," Daila snapped. "It's the Emperor's."

"Obviously. I was joking, Queenlet. No need to get snooty with me." She studied the Emperor's dull face and tilted her head thoughtfully. "Say...can I have his crown if nobody else wants it?"

"That's actually a good point," Daila muttered.

"Of course it is."

"Someone's going to want it, as soon as they realize what it's capable of."

Liral nodded. She could practically feel the power seeping from the crown, fueled by the thousands of lives it had consumed.

"It's cursed," Zare chipped in, a tremble in her voice. "If you knew half of what he did with that crown..."

"We know," said Liral. "And we should destroy it."

"Are you so sure? The crown is Tearforged, from what I understand." Folston countered. "It carries the spirits of the dead. If we destroy their memory, are we not doing them a disservice? And now that it's activated, nobody should be able to use it without the will of the Totem. We could use it for good. Daila, you could use it to Shape creatures that could move mountains and build great monuments...that could redirect rivers and clear land for our people to farm upon. The potential for good is so boundless."

"You...you don't understand." Liral had to fight to keep the bitterness from her voice. Folston hadn't seen the suffering that had forged that Totem. He hadn't heard the screams, or seen the blood. Deep down, she sensed that the souls trapped inside that crowded Totem were still feeling that terror, that pain. They always would, as that was the only emotion that they shared as a group. It was overpowering. Her brother-in-law simply didn't understand.

"Perhaps not." Folston turned to Daila, and everyone else followed his gaze. "What do you think, love?"

Daila paused, biting her lip.

She rose and took the head from Sir Evarr, grabbing the Emperor by his hair.

“Liralyne is right. It’s too much power for one to wield, even if it’ll probably be used for good. We can’t know what it’ll be used for, over the course of time. When we’re long dead and some ambitious Shaper comes along and takes this crown, nothing could stop them from committing atrocities.”

“But the Totem has been activated. Doesn’t that mean it could stop any misuse?”

Silence fell across the group. Was that how it worked? Certainly, when she’d first activated the Totem, the Emperor seemed to have lost all control of his Shapings.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Daila said, choosing her words carefully. “In the future, someone could devise a way to deactivate a Totem. The risk is too great...and these poor souls have been through enough pain. It’s time to let them rest.” She rested her fingertips on the metal band and lowered her voice. “What do you think, Yila?”

A faint blue wisp of green light came from the Totem. The light was akin to a sigh. Its mood was somber but not negative, almost as if it’d come to a state of acceptance.

“As you wish.”

Everyone watched as Daila brought the Emperor’s head to the burning brazier, and tossed it into the flames. She hastily washed her hands in a nearby basin, then watched the spectacle. Folston came to her sister’s side. He wrapped an arm around her, holding her close.

Liral looked on silently from a distance, feeling...surprisingly empty as the Emperor burned. She’d thought that her heart would swell when she achieved vengeance for Cross’s death...but that wasn’t to be. He was dead, thank the Giant, and his dark mark upon the world was being erased, but...she looked up at Tannon. No, perhaps not all of that prick’s marks could be erased.

She gave Tannon a reassuring smile, and squeezed his hand.

He only grimaced.

“I don’t know what comes next for those souls,” Daila stated, as the gold band began to melt into thick liquid. “But they’re free now.” She beckoned to Liral, and gave her the warmest of smiles. Liral hesitated to leave Tannon, but did so. “As are we, Liralyne. We’re free to live, to love, and to change the world. Will you join me in court? Will you help me rule? Help me make put a slice of goodness into this world?”

Daila offered a hand to her. “Are we going to do this together?”

Liral gazed up into her older sister’s eyes, and looked back at Zare before giving a hesitant nod. She took Daila’s hand.

“Together.”

# CHAPTER 41

## *Epilogue*

**D**aila breathed in the fresh woodsy air as her horse cantered along the eastward road. She would miss the serenity of the forest upon her inevitable return to Old Arbor.

Two months had passed since the ‘Battle of the Giant’, as people were calling it. The war began and ended on that field outside of Old Arbor. The Emperor had been the unifying strain, tying together the rival Lisanai factions with the bonds of fear. When the Emperor fell, his empire was all but doomed to crumble.

Its collapse was swift, far swifter than Daila could have imagined. The Empire had been built over the course of thousands of years. It had endured through the centuries. Prior to the Emperor, the Lisanai had been ruled by a long, steady dynasty, worshipping a pantheon of the sea. Block by block, the beautiful city of Trisal had been constructed by Ralli slaves, and the Empire had exploited its way to riches...only to fall thanks to one man’s ambitions and paranoia.

He created a religion. When that religion fell, when his lies of immortality were shattered, local lords were quick to seize any shard of power they could grasp. So, the Empire dissolved into a set of fragmented lordships, more tiny kingdoms than Daila could name. There was the High Coast, a rural fishing kingdom that ran along the former Empire’s northernmost tip, the Blue Valley through Lisanai’s center, the Kingdom of Trisal, which was controlled by Zarellia’s father, and so on.

Daila had been sure to extend the hand of diplomacy to each of the fragmented kingdoms. Some responded with open hostility, though most were willing to negotiate



trade routes and passage. The border kingdoms were all reasonable, which was fortunate given the fact that Daila's party was now rather close to the eastern border.

She shifted on her horse and gave Folston a warm smile.

They were toward the end of their goodwill tour through the Kingdom. It had been Daila's idea, and Folston hadn't raised a single objection. For the last two weeks, they had been traveling through the far stretches of the Scythari kingdom, listening to the plight of their people. The last two wars hadn't been kind to the townsfolk, but she and Folston were quick to assure people that they would do whatever they could to maintain peace.

The main reason for the travel, however, was to show Daila and Liralyne to the kingdom. To show people that a light-haired girl could rise in their new kingdom. That was only part of the equation, however. In many of the towns they visited, the Ralli were still borderline servants, despite their new wages. That was a long-term problem, of course, and one that they would have to work to solve. They had some ideas on how to rectify the situation, from increasing the amount of available apprenticeships to providing homes for lost Ralli children like Liralyne, a collection of small steps that had the potential to make the kingdom a better place for its people.

While the royals traveled, Sir Evarr and Auri were charged with managing affairs in Old Arbor. Giant help them. Daila would be lucky if they didn't strangle each other by the time she arrived home...or spend all day kissing. It'd either be one or the other. Kess had just been elected as the Head Maid, based upon a vote taken by the maid staff, and there were rumors about her relationship with Lord Aradon becoming more serious, despite her hair color. Oh, how the times had changed. Mili served as Kess's right hand, and the pair were almost destined to be less efficient than Madam Marsa, but that was more than acceptable. When it came to the quality of people's leadership, 'efficiency' was not the best measurement.

Daila rounded a corner and slowed her horse to a trot. A small town emerged through the trees ahead, with the road splitting its center. The town was nestled into the forest, bordered on one side by trees and on the other by a stretch of farmland. Shops and tavern lined the road, while houses backed up to the woods. A sizeable group of townspeople, perhaps four hundred or so, stood lining the road ahead, waving Scythari flags and singing tunes about wars long past. Like most of the other towns, they'd heard about the royals' coming visit.

"Is this the town?" she asked Liralyne, who rode beside her. Shadows, her little sister looked comically small in the saddle. Maybe the girl should have shared a horse with

her girlfriend Zare. She wanted to grin, but the look on Liralyne's face evaporated all traces of Daila's mirth.

"Aye. Looks the same as it did back then."

"It wasn't that long ago, sweetheart. You say that like it's been centuries."

Liralyne sighed, and cast down her eyes. "I know. I suppose I just...I wish it'd been longer ago. I don't know."

That just about broke Daila's heart. She wanted to reach over and hug her sister, but that was ill-advised considering the fact that they were mounted.

"It'll get better. Always does."

Liralyne only nodded.

They waved to the townsfolk as they passed. Daila paused every once and a while to accept flowers from the onlookers, and share in pleasant conversation. They would have more opportunities to meet the locals during their shared dinner that night. She was mid-way through a chat when she saw that Liralyne had stopped her horse before a tavern which bore the name The Cloak and Dagger in sharp letters above its double-doors.

"That's where it happened?"

Liralyne didn't turn around.

"Aye."

"Do you want to go in? Have a look around?"

Her little sister shook her head.

"Maybe later."

"That's fine, sweetheart. No worries."

"I want to go to the woods."

"The woods where...are you sure? You want to do that now?"

"Yes," Liralyne said, looking up at her with urgent eyes.

"Very well. If that's what you want."

After explaining the matter to their loved ones, Daila and Liralyne traveled through the barley fields behind the tavern. Folston had insisted that they took guards, but those lads stayed a good distance behind them. They dismounted upon entering the woods beyond the field, and Liral led the way through the trees, toward a small clearing. Light poured through a hole in the forest's canopy, illuminating three marble stones that sat at the clearing's center.

The woods were silent, apart from the pleasant chirping of songbirds.

"I figured none of them would want fanfare and whatnot," Liral said, as if forcing herself to speak. She'd gotten better about speaking more, especially when Zare was

around. "Just a pretty little spot. Somewhere quiet. Kellory and Tannon visited it about a month back. They were on their way up to Old Arbor, they should be there by now. Nice and safe. If you ever need a royal dressmaker, she'd be a good choice. Anyway, when they came through, I think the lads had only set up Cross's stone at that point, not the others."

Cross. A True Brother, Son, and Hero. You Won't Be Forgotten, read the center stone. Beside that sat a stone dedicated to a man who Daila had only heard mentioned in Liralyne's stories. Hein. A Warrior for Scythar, and for Justice.

Daila nodded numbly. When she spotted the right-most stone, she fell to her knees.

Queen Adelaine of Scythar. Fierce, Brave, and True. Beloved Queen to her Kingdom. Beloved Mother to Two Daughters. Here She Rests.

Neither Cross's nor Hein's tombstone had moved Daila to tears quite like her mother's did.

"You didn't tell me," Daila choked out the words past a lump in her throat.

Liralyne sat beside her, and rubbed her soothingly on the back.

"They never found her body, but...I thought you'd want a place where we could remember her. Somewhere quiet and secret, and among heroes because she's a hero. All three of these folks saved me."

The Totem on Liralyne's neck released a small, happy wisp.

"I...I love you," was all Daila managed to say, before succumbing to more tears. "I love you both."

"After Mum passed, I went years before I met someone who was good to me...then Cross came along, and they took him away...but you saved me too, Daila."

"I did?" Daila sniffed back more tears. "I did."

"When I came to Old Arbor, I thought I'd have to beg for you lot not to kill me, but you hugged me. You hugged me, and I didn't even know how to be hugged."

That made Daila release a half-laugh, half-sob. She threw her arms around her little sister, and held her close.

"Liralyne," Daila murmured, before trailing off.

"Just Liral. I was too nervous to correct you, because I thought you'd think I wasn't... princess-like."

"Liral," Daila repeated. She wiped away her tears and giggled. "Liral, you're a princess. Anything you do is 'princess-like'. But thank you for telling me. I'm proud of you for telling me. You shouldn't ever have to be afraid of anyone judging you, myself included. Understand?"

Liral's cheeks flushed. She nodded once, and rested her chin on Daila's shoulder. They sat there for a long while, holding each other and saying nothing, until the sun began to retreat through the trees, and the forest floor became chilly beneath them.

"Thank you for taking me here. You created something beautiful, something that Mum would be proud of." Daila rose to her feet and helped Liral up. "Mum would have wanted you to be happy. She would've wanted you to drive forward, into this new world, and leave your mark. To bring joy where her husband left pain. She wants you to be happy. Are you ready to do that for her?"

Daila offered a hand.

Liral hesitated for only a moment before wrapping her fingers around Daila's. "Aye. I'm ready."

Together, the sisters headed back through the woods and the barley field.

Royal guards stood outside the Cloak and Dagger, suggesting that Folston, Zare, and the rest of their entourage were inside. They must have been making friends with the locals. Folston was quite good at that, especially when it came to the Ralli. He had the world's easiest laugh and - when he became enamored with a topic - nothing in the world shone as bright as his eyes. Moreover, black-hairs, for all of their evils, still held a mystique among the Ralli. Small towns like this one wouldn't see more than a couple black-hairs all year. Thus, having a black-haired King who was willing to lend them an ear and mediate their issues was the stuff of fantasy. Unbelievable. For the rest of their lives, they'd be telling tales and singing about how King Folston complimented their threadwork, and they'd hang 'King-Approved' signs over their shops and beer-barrels.

Daila bit her lip as she neared the tavern's door. She'd been away from Folston for...what...less than an hour? Yet she already missed him.

Music drifted through the open windows. It was an upbeat tune carried by the thrum of a lute, the pluck of a harp, and a woman's soaring, almost dream-like voice. Even with that beautiful music coming from inside, Liral still hesitated at the door.

"Go on," nodded Daila. She took a delicate tone, as if she was nudging a freshly hatched bird to flap its wings. "There are only friends here, and I'll be right behind you."

Liral bit her lip.

"Reckon there's a certain black-haired girl in there," Daila cooed. "A girl who would love to see you, and wants to know that you're okay."

Liral drew a sharp breath, as if memories of her lover were pouring back into her, and Daila knew that she'd succeeded. With that, she placed her hand on the small of her little sister's back and ushered her inside.

The tavern was just as lively as the music would suggest. It carried the scents of chicken, ale, and sweat. Everyone in the town seemed to have packed themselves into the wide room. The townspeople danced arm-in-arm, stopping only to take gulps of ale. Their laughs melded with the music, creating a beautiful sound that almost brought tears to Daila's eyes. Did they typically rejoice like this, or was it only because the royals were visited? Deep down, she hoped that it became a regular occasion, and that these people laughed and danced until the pain of their grief faded.

Daila ushered her sister deeper into the tavern. She steered Liral past joyous townspeople who grew even giddier when they recognized their queen and princess. Could she have even imagined a world where the Ralli were overjoyed to see their rulers? Delvaran seemed like a person who she'd barely ever known, but these poor townspeople probably would have bowed to him out of fear, not admiration...and they would have been right to do so. Delvaran hadn't deserved their admiration. A smile flashed across her lips, and she bowed her head to the townspeople in mutual respect.

Despite the festive mood, dark splotches still marked the wooden floor where blood had been shed. A memorial plaque hung just above the bar, dedicating the tavern to the "good folk who're gone forever thanks to the Empire pricks". This town, and many others, had endured much suffering...as had her own sister.

Beside her, Liral trembled. Daila ran a hand through her little sister's hair. Her touch was gentle and easy. She dug deep in her memory, and tried to replicate the way that her own mother had comforted her, all those years ago. Her efforts were moderately successful, and Liral seemed to relax a bit.

Liral's trembling fully ceased when she caught sight of Zarellia Petrax. The black-haired beauty looked tired from riding, but still wore a weary smile when she caught sight of Liral. Beside her, Folston didn't notice Daila's arrival. He was deep in conversation with a mustached man who wore barman's apron. As usual, he'd engrossed himself in a topic and it had become his sole focus.

Her little sister darted forward like a blur, and Daila had to rush after her to catch up, careful not to stumble on her dress.

By the time Daila reached the bench, Liral had already wrapped her arms around Zare. They exchanged a few whispered words before their lips met. Daila failed to hold back a grin. Liral's relationship with Zare was atypical, but not unheard of. She would be the first princess to wed a woman, when that time came...but, then again, Folston had been the first king to wed a light-haired woman. Times were changing, and the Giant never restricted anyone's love. In the different versions of their faith, whether

Kadian or Scythari, the Giant never told people what they couldn't do, he only empowered people to stomp out their own darkness and overcome their fears.

Seeing Liral happy, seeing her conquer her doubt, was more fulfilling than anything in the world. Liral had been through too much hardship. She'd suffered more than any one person deserved. If Daila had any say in the matter, she would make sure that Liral never suffered again.

Liral and Zare finally broke off their kiss. Without warning, Zare lifted Liral from the ground, which made her little sister squeak. She twirled Liral around a couple of times, and hauled her onto the dance floor, where the pair fell into a lively jig.

Daila settled onto the bench beside Folston. He was still talking with the barkeep and two other men, undoubtedly explaining a new governing mechanism that he'd devised and sought to test. When Daila placed a gentle hand on his elbow, his diatribe came to an abrupt halt.

"Daila," he whispered, before he even turned. When his eyes met hers, he was grinning from ear to ear. Shadows, his genuine smile was still enough to make her cheeks flush. "Just the woman I wanted to see."

"I'd hope so." She gave a polite nod to the men with whom Folston had been chatting. They fell into low bows. "No need for that, lads. We're all friends here."

"Is that all I am to you?" Folston joked.

Turning, she sighed and rested a hand on her king's cheek. Thanks to their frequent travel, he'd grown a bit of stubble. She let her thumb trail over it, and brush against his lip.

"No," she laughed. "I could tell you how much you mean to me, but I don't think you'd ever believe me."

"Is that so?"

"Aye."

He nodded, as if pondering her words, then offered his hand.

"A dance, my Queen?"

She glanced around and realized that at least a dozen people were watching them with interest. Her cheeks heated. In the blink of an eye, she felt like she was the timid redheaded maid again, and was lucky enough to be chosen by the greatest man she'd ever known. Did she deserve a man like Folston? He was the kind of man who people wrote about in history books. A man who people would tell stories about when they were gathered around the fireplace, dozens of centuries down the road.

But...no. She wasn't that girl. Nor was she the spineless prince. She was Queen Daila of Scythar, and she was Folston's match. He made her stronger, and she completed him, like two pieces to a puzzle.

Licking her lips, she took his hand.

They danced until sweat caked Daila's hair, and soaked through Folston's shirt. The townspeople were overjoyed to be sharing the dancefloor with the royal couple, and everything became a blur of joy and laughter.

As the midnight bells sounded through the town's barren street, the music changed to a slower, more intimate variety.

Daila wrapped her hands around Folston's neck as he held her, and she rested her head against his chest. They swayed back and forth together, and collected their breath. It was a needed respite after hours of fervent dance.

"So," Folston breathed down her neck.

"So?"

"You smell much better than when we first met."

Daila snorted. "You don't fancy latrines?"

"Can't say I do."

"That makes two of us."

Folston's breathing was so steady against her cheek, so hypnotic that she wanted to rest there until the end of time.

"When you went off with Liralyne, did you find what you were looking for?"

She tilted her head, and shot a glance back toward Liral. Zare was tickling her little sister, and Liral was laughing so hard that she barely managed to stay on her feet. It was the happiest she'd ever seen her sister.

Daila returned her gaze to Folston, whose eyes almost seemed to deepen with concern. She laid a delicate kiss on his lips, then nestled into his chest and let out a long, content sigh.

"I think I did."

The End.