

Chapter 6

Aleiri

Brena and Aleiri are standing right outside the wooden gates of Jack's wend. Aleiri turns to Brena who is fiddling with the sword on her hip stashed under her dress.

"Brena, I'm going into town for a second. I need to do something." Aleiri says.

Brena turns to face her, and frowns.

"The army marches at sundown, we both need to go right now." Brena says.

"Go without me, I'll meet up with you at the clearing north of the camp." Aleiri says.

Brena scowls, then turns around and stomps off. Aleiri turns around and walks through the wooden gates. Surrounding Aleiri is one unmistakable stench, the smell of shit and rotting fish. Most would recoil at the scent, but she has not been gone long enough to let herself forget, so while most of the traveling merchants have their faces twisted in disgust, or are covering their noses, Aleiri walks through the streets unobstructed.

She walks through the town paying little attention to any of the squat daub and wattle buildings on her sides. The streets are not stoned simply mud that cakes her boots and the boots of the passersby. One can actually tell by the amount of mud caked on their boots or skirts how long one has been in town. Although due to the cold in the air the mud is not nearly as bad as Aleiri remembered.

Aleiri turns to a nondescript building and takes a deep breath. She fingers the coin pouch full of white coins in her pocket. 'She's just going to smoke it.' Aleiri turns to leave, but then she turns around and walks in. Surrounding her are velvet curtains with women lounging in chairs talking to each other. One woman in the far left is re-sowing her dress. In another corner one is rocking a baby. There is only one man in view, and he is sitting behind a wooden desk at the other end of the room. Aleiri approaches the desk, the closer she gets the more the man frowns.

"She's working today." the man says.

"I don't care." Aleiri says.

The man frowns then sighs.

"Fine." the man says.

Aleiri nods, and the man gets off the desk and escorts Aleiri down a hall. On either side of the hall are wooden doors painted with various erotic scenes on them. On some there are scenes where there are only women, others have scenes with a woman and two men. Others have scenes with just men. Finally behind a door painted with a man and a woman the man opens the door and pushes Aleiri in.

In the center of the room playing herself across the chair is a beautiful woman. She has deep green eyes, and long black hair that flows down and pools on the floor in long strands. She is wearing a sheer silk chemise and a long dress parted in the center revealing her lack of undergarment. She is holding a long pipe emanating a noxious odor that causes Aleiri's eyes to water. She doesn't notice Aleiri and only hears the door shut. She makes no move to meet Aleiri's eyes.

“What an amazing surprise how handsome you are.” The woman says in a deep sultry voice with an exotic twang.

“Kaila it’s me.” Aleiri says.

“Oh shit, sorry.” Kaila curses in a very average if not a little high pitched voice.

She scrambles out of her chair and rushes to embrace Aleiri.

“I missed you little sis. You have been at that damned castle so long I almost forgot your face.” Kaila says.

Aleiri smiles, but her smile slowly fades as she fingers the coin pouch. ‘She is just going to smoke it’. Once they separate Aleiri’s face has set into a deep frown.

“Oh I almost forgot.” Kaila says.

Kaila rushes to a back corner of the room and pulls up a board from the floor. She reaches to her elbow under the floor and retrieves a coin pouch. She runs over to Aleiri and puts it in her hands.

“For you, to buy replacement servant’s clothes or whatever.” Kaila says.

Aleiri opens the small pouch and sees the twenty copper pieces inside. She smiles and pockets the coin pouch.

“Thank you.” Aleiri says.

“You're welcome.” Kaila says as a smile spreads across her face.

Aleiri fingers the coin pouch again then looks at the pipe. ‘She is just going to smoke it.’ Aleiri slips four white coins into her pocket, then pulls out the coin pouch.

“Actually I came to give you something to hold onto.” Aleiri says.

“Oh really.” Kaila says eyes the coin pouch.

“It’s half of what I am owed for the job I’m on.” Aleiri says.

She hands the coin pouch to Kaila.

“Would you hold onto it for? I don’t want to walk around with so much coin on me.” Aleiri says.

Kaila eyes the coin pouch hungrily.

“Of course.” Kaila says.

Aleiri sighs.

“Thank you.” Aleiri says.

“Did you want anything else? Actually today is a slow day. If you wanted to grab a meal we could do that.” Kaila says.

“No, i’m fine, just keep that for me okay.” Aleiri says.

“No problem.” Kaila says.

Kaila rushes to the corner of the room and stuffs the coin pouch under the floor.

“Love, you.” Aleiri says.

“Love you too.” Kaila says.

Aleiri walks out of the room with her head hung low. ‘She is just going to smoke it.’ Once outside the establishment she walks back to the outer gate. She passes a shop

with a picture of a shirt painted on a wooden sign dangling above the door. She looks inside and sees a beautiful velvet green dress. She sighs wistfully, then moves on.

On the way out of the town there is a small market stall with boots of every size available. She walks to the stand. Behind the stall there is a middle aged man with a long brown beard and thinning brown hair.

“Oh, little miss, needing a replacement pair.” The man asks.

“Yes, can you take a pair and make measurements?” Aleiri asks.

“Of course, I have a chair set out there if you need to sit down.” The man says.

Aleiri nods and sits in the chair. She pulls off her ruddy boots and hands them to the man. He goes back inside the stall. For a moment she stays seated staring at the people walking from place to place. He returns with a well made pair of shiny black leather boots.

“I have the perfect match, that will be twenty two coppers.” The man says.

Aleiri pulls the coin pouch from her side.

“Will you take twenty? That's all I have.” Aleiri says.

The man thinks only for a second.

“Fine, take the boots and be off with you.” The man says.

Aleiri smiles, then puts on the boots. She stands up and starts walking out of town. A stranger in a long black cloak bumps her to the side, causing her to fall on her back side. She turns to face the stranger, but he has already moved on. She frowns as she looks at his expensive black leather boots. She makes to follow him, but at the sight of a

small silver pendant on the ground she gives up the chase and instead pockets the pendant. She gives one last glance to the man as he passes into the crowds of townspeople and she walks out of town.

On her way to the clearing, Aleiri takes a closer look at the silver pendant. It is made in the likeness of a rose with rubies inlaid for the petals. Dazzled by the ornate craftsmanship she stumbles on a root. She turns around and curses at the root for her stubbed toe, then when turning back around spots the clearing she and Brena agreed to meet the night before. On the far edge of the clearing, Brena is gazing at the camp biting at her nails.

She smirks then crouches down and starts slinking towards Brena. She makes little noise and Brena keeps her focus solely on the camp. Once only a finger's length away Aleiri grabs Brena's shoulders. Brena shoots up grabbing at the sword under her dress, and Aleiri doubles over laughing.

"That's not funny!" Brena yells.

"Of course it is." Aleiri struggles out between ribs of laughter.

Brena sits at Aleiri's side as she recovers from her laughing fit and pinches her hard on the cheek. Aleiri pushes Brena's hand away, then she sits up. Brena sits back where she was sitting and continues looking at the camp.

"What are you looking for?" Aleiri asks.

"Nothing." Brena says.

"Ah of course." Aleiri asks.

Brena scowls.

“Can you at least tell me his name?” Aleiri asks.

“No.” Brena says.

“Hmm, I’ll figure it out eventually. I’ll just measure the size of the puddle that forms beneath you when we eventually stumble across him.” Aleiri says.

Brena blushes then pushes Aleiri to one side, this starts the laughter all over. When the laughter settles Brena gives up the search. Brena turns to face Aleiri.

“How do we get in?” Brena asks.

“I’ll figure it out, just follow my lead..” Aleiri says

Brena nods.

“You ready?” Aleiri asks.

Brena nods, and they both walk out of the clearing. They make haste to the camp, some soldiers notice them, but then they see their clothes, and they continue with their tasks. They make it to a large tent right outside the middle of camp.

“Wait here.” Aleiri says.

Inside the tent is lavishly decorated with golden chalices on the deep brown oak wood table, and three ornately carved chairs besides a plump feather bed. On the other side of the tent two women are rolling up a black and red carpet from the floor and tying a band around it. Aleiri walks to the women.

“Genna.” Aleiri greets.

The two women look up from the dirt floor of the tent. The one on the right is Genna, she has a stocky figure with short bright red hair, and pale white skin, making her look like a fat candle with a tiny flame, this image is not helped with her cream colored servants uniform that has been washed so many times it's starting to become see through. 'Genna spends all her money on her sister, she'll be an easy mark. Feydra is something else, might need to add more incentive.'

"Hello, Aleiri, you got enlisted for the expedition?" Genna asks.

"No, and I want to fix that." Aleiri says.

"What madness has come upon you now Aleiri?" Genna asks.

"I'll pay you a white coin, and I will take your place." Aleiri says.

Genna sighs then stands up off her knees.

"I know you ain't got that kind of money, so i'm gonna give you a chance to leave, before I tell the captain you sneaked in." Genna says.

Aleiri reaches into her pocket and flashes a white coin. Genna's eyes go wide, then she walks over and plucks the coin out of her hand.

"Don't need to ask me twice, but I'll give you one piece of advice. If you're doing what I think you're doing then it's a fool's errand." Genna says.

"And, what is that?" Aleiri asks.

"You're trying to find a man, just like that fool girl over there." Genna says.

Aleiri turns to face Feydra. She is a waifish thing, her clothes hang off her like a scarecrow, her face pale and sallow, and her blond hair is oily and matted, but hiding

under the sickly complexion is something very beautiful. Aleiri pictures her with clearer skin and full hair. 'It's almost painful to watch a face like that go to waste. Although that look in her eyes is off putting. No amount of good food or makeup is gonna fix that.'

"I believe we haven't met." Aleiri says.

"I'm Feydra." Feydra murmurs.

"Aleiri, and what do I have to do to convince you to let my friend take your place?" Aleiri says.

"I don't want to leave." Feydra murmurs.

Aleiri steps closer and Feydra flinches imperceptibly. 'Something's wrong here'.

"Why not?" Aleiri asks quietly.

"Nothing, I just want to find a man like Genna said." Feydra says.

"Okay, I won't pry, but how about this. I can give you a white coin just to say that I was always here." Aleiri says.

"You don't have to pay me." Feydra says.

'Something is seriously wrong.'

"Okay, my friend is going to come in, she can help you clean up while I rustle up another spot." Aleiri says.

Aleiri leaves the tent.

"Go in, stay with that girl, her name is Feydra." Aleiri says.

Brena nods, then starts to walk in. Aleiri stops her and grabs her shoulder.

“Be careful around her, something’s wrong, tell me if you notice anything off about her behavior.” Aleiri says.

“Okay I will.” Brena says.

Aleiri walks off deeper into camp. As she walks she can't seem to get the image of that girl out of her mind. She finds another woman by the name of Kaniope, and pays her to leave. As she's walking back a grim thought comes to mind. ‘I’ve seen this before. Back when I lived with Kaila in the pleasure house she worked at before this one. There was a room reserved for special clients. I never went in there because of the cries that came out of that room. Once I saw a woman leave and she had the same look. Oh Broun what have I got us into.’ Aleiri walks back into the tent. Brena and Feydra have completely packed up the tent with all the furniture outside ready for pick up. Brena and Feydra are talking. Aleiri grabs Brena, and leads her out of the tent. She continues leading her until they arrive at a place devoid of activity.

“First thing, I am now Kaniope, and you are Genna.” Aleiri says.

“Okay.” Brena says.

“Next thing, we are never to talk to that girl, or ever enter her sphere. You got that.” Aleiri says.

Brena frowns.

“She seems nice, we were talking about the right way to tie a bow knot and she actually showed me how to do it right.” Brena says.

“Never talk to her again, promise me.” Aleiri says.

“I don’t understand.” Brena says.

Aleiri sighs.

“I have seen that look before. Something is happening to her that I don’t want to get mixed up in.” Aleiri says.

Brena furrows her brow, then her eyes go wide.

“We should tell someone.” Brena says.

“No, we shouldn’t, first they won’t believe us, second we will implicate ourselves and we will be dealt with.” Aleiri says.

“You can’t just tell me this and expect me to just watch it happen.” Brenna says.

“I didn’t want to tell you, but you don’t get it. If we announce that we know we could be found out or even killed. I don’t think you understand the gravity of this.” Aleiri says.

“It’s not right.” Brena says.

“Of course it's not right. What do you think? I'm some sort of monster. There is nothing we can do except protect ourselves. You have to promise me you won’t go near that woman or say anything.” Aleiri says.

Brena frowns, Aleiri grips onto her shoulders tightly.

“Promise me.” Aleiri says.

“I promise.” Brena says.

Aleiri sags in relief.

“Okay, well we need to find a place to work where we won’t seem suspicious, and you can find your knight in shining armor.” Aleiri says.

Brena nods, the sour look on her face set like stone. Aleiri sighs and leads Brenna deeper into the camp. ‘What can I do? If I tell anyone they will target me, and I will be killed. If I spread the rumor that woman could be hurt or killed. There is nothing to do.’ She turns back to face Brena who is now starting to tear up. ‘If only I could be your prince.’ Aleiri and Brena continue into the camp. On the other side of the camp a man in a dark cape walks into Feydra’s tent. The night does not pass quickly for Feydra, but it does for the man.