

Introduction to WARBREAKER

Welcome! My name is Brandon Sanderson. Before anything else, I'd like to thank you for your interest in my books. I hope you enjoy *Warbreaker*.

In case you don't know, I'm a professional fantasy novelist. My first book, *Elantris*, was published in some thirteen languages, earned me a Campbell nomination, and got starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and the *Library Journal*. It was also picked by Barnes and Noble editors as the best fantasy or science fiction book of the year.

My second book, *Mistborn*, is out in paperback. *Mistborn 2: The Well of Ascension* was published in August of 2007. Book three is out in October of this year. I also have a kid's book *Alcatraz versus the Evil Librarians* out from Scholastic Press. You can find sample chapters of these books at the end of this file. If you like *Warbreaker*, consider buying those!

As many of you might already know, I was chosen in December of 2007 to complete Robert Jordan's epic masterpiece *The Wheel of Time*. I'm hard at work on the twelfth and final novel in this series, titled *A MEMORY OF LIGHT*. It should be out sometime in the fall of 2009. Coincidentally, that should be the same year *Warbreaker* is released.

How this Book Came About

Warbreaker is something of an experiment for me. For a long time, I've wanted to release an e-book on my website. My first inclination was to grab one of my old, unpublished books and offer it.

And yet, one of my main reasons for releasing said e-book would be for publicity reasons. I wanted something I could give away for free which would show what I'm capable of writing and therefore (hopefully) encourage people to look into my other books. I figure that if people give my books a try, they'll be hooked and read the other ones.

That made me want to offer something new. Something that showed off the very best of my abilities. Why offer an inferior product as your free sample? If it wasn't good enough to get published on its own, then wouldn't that lead people to think of my books as inferior?

That leads us to *Warbreaker*. This is not an old work. In fact, this is my newest work. It has been purchased by Tor (who gave me permission to try this experiment) and will be published in hardcover in 2009, with a paperback release to follow the next year.

I like to have a lot of contact with my fans, and as I contemplated releasing a new book (rather than an old one) on my website, I had a chance to do something rarely seen. I could release drafts of the book *as I wrote them*, allowing my readers to catch a glimpse of the writing process. They could see the evolution of the book, maybe even offer feedback on early drafts, allowing them to have a much closer connection to me as a writer and this book in specific. By doing this, I could make *Warbreaker* a project which would engage my already existing readers as well as people who'd never tried my books before.

I decided to go ahead and give this a try. That was back in June of 2006.

My Worries

Releasing the book this way is a gamble for two reasons.

First off, there's the perennial fear that I think all artists get when they give away their art for free. A part of me worries that by giving this book away, it will end up selling dreadfully when it's actually released. Poor sales like that on one book (even a 10% drop) could set a bad tempo for future books.

I don't think this is likely. I, personally, feel very differently about art and the public than certain record executives appear to feel. I think that people *WILL* pay money for something

they've already read if they liked it enough. They can always get books for free via the library anyway. Besides, I'm not trying to recruit people to buy one book; I'm trying to recruit lifelong fans who will still be reading Brandon Sanderson novels twenty years from now.

On top of all that, I believe that releasing at least one novel for free will bring my work to many readers who wouldn't otherwise be familiar with my work. The potential gains far outweigh the potential losses.

Still, I worry a little bit. But artists tend to do that.

The second fear I have relates not to releasing a work on-line, but releasing an *Unfinished* work on line. Though this is the fourth draft of the book, my novels usually see somewhere near eight drafts before they go to press. This is still a work in progress. What if readers pick this up, read through it, and judge me flawed as a writer because their only experience with me comes from an unpolished work?

This one really bothers my agent. He's got a good point. Still, I think the opportunity that this affords my readers—particularly the aspiring writers among them—was too great to ignore. It is done, and I intend to stick to my original plan. I will post every draft as I complete them, then will eventually post comparisons of the drafts so that readers can follow the changes made to the book.

Know, however, that this is *still a work in progress*. Don't judge me too harshly based on its flaws.

Conclusion

My hope is still to let readers collaborate a little bit on this book. Feel free to visit my forums and email me with your impressions of the novel. Your feelings and questions are important to me and can help this book grow better.

I hope that you enjoy this book. If you do, the best thing you can do to say thanks would be to purchase a copy when it is released! (It's looking like Spring 2009.) You are also welcome to share it with friends (see the rights explanation below.)

Remember my published novels as well. They are far more polished, and if you want to make certain that I write more fantasy novels in the future, the best thing to do is indicate your will to Tor by purchasing my novels. You can find sample chapters of each of my published works at the end of this document. If you're reading in Microsoft Word, you can use the Document Map to jump to them. (Or to jump between chapters of WARBREAKER.) Using this, you can also find a list of revisions (spoiler warning!) that were made in this draft.

Most of all, I want to thank you for reading. I think the primary motivation of all artists is the desire to express themselves. My books are not complete until you read them and add your imagination to the events they contain. For me, sales are secondary to that.

Enjoy.

Brandon Sanderson, January 2008

My website: <http://www.brandonsanderson.com>
(This includes my blog.)

WARBREAKER Portal: <http://www.brandonsanderson.com/portal/Warbreaker>
(This includes links to older versions of the book.)

My forums: <http://www.timewastersguide.com/forum/index.php?board=14.0>
(This includes a thread dedicated to WARBREAKER reactions and feedback.)

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- 6) The above also holds for any feedback or suggestions you give me regarding this work on my forums. By offering feedback, you waive all rights to those suggestions and waive all rights to compensation for your help. I love to get feedback, and it's one of the reasons why I decided to post these chapters on-line as I wrote them. However, don't sue me if I actually decide to take some of your suggestions!

Acknowledgements

I haven't yet compiled a list of all the people who have given feedback on this project. It's going to be a large task to do so! I plan to do it next revision, though.

Many thanks to the following people who have commented on the book so far, or who have given me proofreading help! Special thanks in this department go to Emily Sanderson, Jovans3, and Dreamking47 for their extensive suggestions.

Also, many thanks to Jeff Creer, Megan Kauffman, thelsdj, Peter Ahlstrom, Miriel, Greyhound, Texxas, Demented Yam, D. Demille, Loryn, Kuntry Bumpken, BarbaraJ, Shir Hasirim, Digitalbias, Spink Longfellow, amyface, Richard Gordon, Swiggly, Dawncawley, Derio, amyface, and David B for their suggestions and encouragement.

Prologue

Why, Vasher thought, do so many things begin with me getting thrown into prison?

The guardsmen laughed to one another outside, slamming the cell door shut with a clang. Vasher stood and dusted himself off, rolling his shoulder and wincing. He glanced about. While the bottom half of his cell door was made of solid wood, the top half was barred, and he could see the three guards open his duffle and rifle through his possessions.

One of them noticed him. The guard was an oversized beast of a man with a shaved head and a dirtied uniform that just barely showed the bright yellow and blue colorings of the T'Telir city guard.

Bright colors, Vasher thought. *I'll have to get used to those again.* In any other nation, the vibrant blues and yellows would have been ridiculous on soldiers. This, however, was Hallandren: land of Returned Gods, Lifeless servants, BioChromatic research, and—of course—color.

The large guard sauntered toward the cell, leaving his friends to amuse themselves with Vasher's duffle. "They say you're pretty tough," the man said, sizing up Vasher.

Vasher did not respond.

"The bartender says you beat down some twenty men in the brawl." The guard rubbed his chin. "You don't look that tough to me. Either way, you should have known better than to strike a priest. The others, they'll spend a night locked up. You, though... you'll hang. Colorless fool."

Vasher turned away. His cell was functional, if unoriginal. A thin slit in the top let in light, the stone walls dripped with water and lichen, and a pile of dirty straw decomposed in the corner.

"You ignoring me?" the guard asked, stepping closer to the bars. The colors of his uniform brightened, as if he'd stepped into a stronger light. The change was slight. Vasher didn't have much Breath remaining. The guard didn't notice the change in color—just like he hadn't noticed back in the bar, when he and his buddies had picked Vasher up off the floor and thrown him in their cart. He'd soon wish that he'd been more observant.

"Here, now," said one of the men looking through Vasher's duffle. "What's *this*?" Vasher had always found it odd that the men who patrolled dungeons tended to be as bad, or worse, than the men they guarded. Perhaps that was intentional. Society didn't seem to care if such men were outside the cells or in them, so long as they were kept away from more honest men.

Assuming that such a thing existed.

A guard pulled a long object—wrapped in white linen—free from Vasher's bag. The man frowned as he unwrapped the linen, revealing a long, thin-bladed sword in a silver sheath. The hilt was pure black.

The guard whistled quietly. "Who do you suppose he stole *this* from?"

The lead guard eyed Vasher, likely wondering if Vasher were some kind of nobleman. Though Hallandren had no aristocracy, many neighboring kingdoms had their lords and ladies. Yet, what lord would wear a drab brown cloak, ripped in several places? What lord would sport bruises from a bar fight, a half-grown beard, and boots worn from years of walking? The guard turned away, apparently convinced that Vasher was no lord.

He was right. And he was wrong.

“Let me see that,” the lead guard said, taking the sword. He grunted, obviously surprised by its weight. He turned it about, noting the clasp that tied sheath to hilt, keeping the blade from being drawn. He undid the clasp.

The colors in the room deepened slightly. They didn’t grow brighter—not like the guard’s vest had when he approached Vasher. Instead, they grew *stronger*. Darker. Reds became maroon. Yellows hardened to gold. Blues approached navy.

“Be careful, friend,” Vasher said softly, “that sword can be dangerous.”

The guard looked up. All was still. Then, the guard snorted and walked away from Vasher’s cell, still carrying the sword. The other two followed, bearing Vasher’s duffle, entering the guard room at the end of the hallway.

The door thumped shut. Vasher immediately knelt beside the patch of straw, selecting a handful of sturdy lengths. He pulled threads from his cloak—it was beginning to get frayed at the bottom—and tied the straw into the shape of a small person, perhaps three inches high. He plucked a hair from one of his eyebrows, set it against the straw figure’s head, then reached into his boot and pulled out a brilliant red scarf.

Then, Vasher Breathed.

It flowed out of him, puffing into the air, translucent yet radiant, like the color of oil on water in the sun. Vasher felt it leave: BioChromatic Breath, scholars called it. Most people just called it Breath. Each person had one. Or, at least, that was how it usually went. One person, one Breath.

Vasher had around fifty Breaths, just enough to reach the First Heightening. Having so few made him feel poor, though many would consider fifty Breaths to be a great treasure. Unfortunately, even Awakening a small figure made from organic material—using a piece of his own body as a focus—drained away some half of his Breaths.

The little straw figure jerked, sucking in the Breath. In Vasher’s hand, half of the brilliant red scarf faded to grey. Vasher leaned down—imagining what he wanted the figure to do—and completed the final step of the process as he gave the Command.

“Fetch keys,” he said.

The straw figure stood and raised its single eyebrow toward Vasher.

Vasher pointed toward the guard room. From it, he heard sudden shouts of surprise.

Not much time, he thought.

The straw person ran along the floor, then jumped up, vaulting between the bars. Vasher pulled off his cloak, then set it on the floor. It was the perfect shape of a person—marked with rips that matched the scars on Vasher’s body, its hood cut with holes to match Vasher’s eyes. The closer an object was to human shape and form, the fewer Breaths it took to Awaken.

Vasher leaned down, trying not to think of the days when he’d had enough Breaths to Awaken without regard for shape or focus. That had been a different time. He pulled a tuft of hair from his head, then sprinkled it across the hood of the cloak.

Once again, he Breathed.

It took the rest of his Breath. With it gone—the cloak trembling, the scarf losing the rest of its color—Vasher felt... dimmer. Losing one’s Breath was not fatal. Indeed, the extra Breaths Vasher held had once belonged to other people. Vasher didn’t know who they were; he hadn’t gathered these Breaths himself. They had been given to him. But, of course, that was the way it was always supposed to work. One could not take Breath by force.

Being void of Breath *did* change him. Colors didn’t seem as bright. He couldn’t *feel* the bustling people moving about in the city above, a connection he often took for granted. It was the

awareness all men had for others—that thing which whispered a warning, in the drowsiness of sleep, when someone entered the room. In Vasher, that sense had been magnified fifty times.

And now it was gone. Sucked into the cloak and the straw person, giving them power.

The cloak jerked. Vasher leaned down. “Protect me,” he Commanded, and the cloak grew still. He stood, throwing it on.

The straw figure returned to his window. It carried a large ring of keys. The figure’s straw feet were stained red. The crimson blood seemed so dull to Vasher.

He took the keys. “Thank you,” he said. He always thanked them. He didn’t know why, particularly considering what he did next. “Your Breath to mine,” he commanded, touching the straw person’s chest. The straw person immediately fell backward off the door—life draining from it—and Vasher got his Breath back. The familiar sense of awareness returned, the knowledge of connectedness, of *fitting*. He could only take the Breath back because he’d Awakened this creature himself—indeed, Awakenings of this sort were rarely permanent. He used his Breath like a reservoir, doling it out, then recovering it.

Compared to what he had once held, twenty-five Breaths was a laughably small number. However, compared to nothing, it seemed infinite. He shivered in satisfaction.

The yells from the guard room died out. The dungeon fell still. He had to keep moving.

Vasher reached through the bars, using the keys to unlock his cell. He pushed the thick door open, rushing out into the hallway, leaving the straw figure discarded on the ground. He didn’t escape the dungeons, but instead turned south, penetrating deeper into their depths.

This was the most uncertain part of his plan. Finding a tavern that was frequented by priests of the Iridescent Tones had been easy enough. Getting into a bar fight—then striking one of those same priests—had been equally simple. Hallandrens took their religious figures very seriously, and Vasher had earned himself not the usual imprisonment in a local jail, but a trip to the God King’s dungeons.

Knowing what kind of men tended to guard such dungeons, he’d had a pretty good idea that they would try to draw Nightblood. That had given him the distraction he’d needed to get the keys.

But now came the uncertain part.

Vasher stopped, Awakened cloak rustling. It easy to spot the cell he wanted, for around it a large patch of stone had been drained of color, leaving both walls and doors a dull grey. It was a place to imprison an Awakener. No color meant no Awakening. Vasher stepped up to the door, looking through the bars. A man hung by his arms from the ceiling, naked and chained. His color was vibrant to Vasher’s eyes, his skin pure, his bruises brilliant.

The man was gagged. Another precaution. In order to Awaken, the man would need three things: Breath, color, and a command. The Harmonics and the Hues, some called it. The Iridescent tones. The relationship between color and sound. A Command had to be spoken clearly and firmly in the Awakener’s native language—any stuttering, any mispronunciation, would invalidate the Awakening. The Breath would be drawn out, but the object would be unable to act.

Vasher used the prison keys to unlock the cell door, then stepped inside. The aura of color this man gave off was a manifestation of the many Breaths he held. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. Anyone would be able to notice an aura that strong, though it was much easier for someone who had reached the First Heightening.

It wasn’t the strongest BioChromatic aura Vasher had ever seen—those belonged to the Returned, known as gods here in Hallandren. Still, the prisoner’s BioChroma was very impressive and much, much stronger than Vasher’s own.

The man swung in his bonds, studying Vasher, gagged lips bleeding from lack of water. Vasher hesitated only briefly, then reached up and pulled the gag free.

“You,” the prisoner whispered, coughing slightly and licking his lips. “Are you here to free me?”

“No, Vahr,” Vasher said quietly. “I’m here to kill you.”

Vahr snorted. Captivity hadn’t been easy on him. When Vasher had last seen Vahr, he’d been plump—but now, judging by the emaciated body, he’d been without food for some time. The cuts, burn marks, and bruises on his flesh were fresh.

Both the torture and the haunted look in Vahr’s bag-rimmed eyes bespoke a solemn truth. Breath could only be transferred by willful, intentional Command. That Command could, however, be encouraged.

“So,” Vahr croaked, “you judge me, just like everyone else.”

“Your crimes are not my concern. I just want your Breath.”

“You and the entire Hallandren court.”

“Yes. But you’re not going to give it to one of the Returned. You’re going to give it to me. In exchange for killing you.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of a trade.” There was a hardness—a void of emotion—in Vahr that Vasher had not seen the last time they had parted, years before.

Odd, Vasher thought, that I should finally, after all of this time, find something in the man that I can identify with.

Vasher kept a wary distance from Vahr. Now that the man’s voice was free, he could Command. However, the only thing he was touching was the chains. It would take more Breath than even Vahr possessed to Awaken metal. It had never been alive, and it was far from the form of a man. Even during the height of his power, Vasher himself had only managed to Awaken metal on a few, select occasions.

Vasher walked around the chained man, finding it very difficult to offer any sympathy. Vahr had earned his fate. Yet, the priests would not let him die while he held so much Breath; if he died, it would be wasted. Gone. Irretrievable. The hundreds of people Vahr had coerced into giving him their Breath would continue to live as Drabs—or Faded Ones, they were sometimes called—but their Breath itself would be lost.

Wasted power. Not even the government of Hallandren—who had such strict laws about the buying and passing of Breath—could let such a wealth slip away. They wanted it badly enough to forestall the execution of even a high-profile criminal like Vahr. In retrospect, they would curse themselves for not leaving him better guarded.

But, then, Vasher had been waiting two years for an opportunity like this one.

“Well?” Vahr asked.

“Give me the Breath, Vahr,” Vasher said, stepping forward.

Vahr snorted. “I doubt you have the skill of the God King’s torturers, Vasher—and I’ve withstood them for two weeks now.”

“You’d be surprised. But that doesn’t matter. You *are* going to give me your Breath, Vahr. You know you have only two choices. Give it to me, or give it to them.”

Vahr hung by his wrists, rotating slowly. Silent.

“You don’t have much time to consider,” Vasher said. “Any moment now, someone is going to discover the dead guards outside. The alarm will be raised. I’ll leave you, you *will* be tortured

again, and you *will* eventually break. Then all the power you've gathered will go to the very people you vowed to destroy."

Vahr stared at the floor. Then, he looked up at Vasher. "That... thing you bear. It's here, in the city?"

Vasher nodded.

"The screams I heard earlier? It caused them?"

Vasher nodded again.

"How long will you be in T'Telir?"

"For a time. A year, perhaps."

Vahr grew quiet. "It's yours," he finally whispered.

Vasher reached over, resting his hand on Vahr's forehead—careful not to let any part of his clothing touch the man's skin, lest Vahr draw forth color for Awakening.

Vahr didn't move. He looked numb. Then, just as Vasher began to worry that the prisoner had changed his mind, Vahr Breathed. The color drained from him. The beautiful Iridescence, the aura that had made him look majestic despite his wounds and chains. It flowed from his mouth, hanging in the air, shimmering like mist. Vasher drew it in, closing his eyes.

"My life to yours," Vahr Commanded, a hint of despair in his voice. "My Breath become yours."

The Breath flooded into Vasher, and everything became vibrant. His brown cloak now seemed deep and rich in color. The blood on the floor was so pure and red, as if aflame. Even Vahr's skin seemed a masterpiece of color, the surface marked by deep black hairs, blue bruises, and sharp red cuts. It had been years since Vasher had felt such... *life*.

He gasped, falling to his knees as it overwhelmed him, and he had to drop a hand to the stone floor to keep himself from toppling over. *How did I live without this?*

He knew that his senses hadn't actually improved, yet he felt so much more alert. More aware of the beauty of sensation. When he touched the stone floor, he marveled at its roughness. And the sound of wind passing through the thin dungeon window up above. Had it always been that melodic? How could he not have noticed?

"Keep your part of the bargain," Vahr said, and Vasher noted the tones in his voice, the beauty of each one, how close they were to harmonics. Vasher had gained perfect pitch. A gift for anyone who reached the Second Heightening. It would be good to have that again.

Vasher stood, then pulled out the colorless scarf he had used earlier. He tossed it over Vahr's shoulder, then Breathed.

He didn't bother making the scarf have human shape, didn't need to use a bit of his hair or skin for a focus—though he did have to draw the color from his shirt.

Vasher met Vahr's resigned eyes.

"Strangle things," Vasher Commanded, fingers touching the quivering scarf.

It twisted immediately, pulling away a large—yet now inconsequential—amount of Breath. The scarf quickly wrapped around Vahr's neck, tightening, choking him. Vahr didn't struggle or gasp, he simply watched Vasher with hatred until his eyes bulged and he died.

Hatred. Vasher had known enough of that in his time. He quietly reached up and recovered his Breath from the scarf, then left Vahr dangling in his cell. Vasher passed quietly though the prison, marveling at the color of the woods and the stones. After a few moments of walking, he noticed a new color in the hallway. Red.

He stepped around the pool of blood—which was seeping down the inclined dungeon floor—and moved into the guard room. The three guards lay dead. One of them sat in a chair. Nightblood, still mostly sheathed, had been rammed through the man's chest. About an inch of a dark black blade was visible beneath the silver sheath.

Vasher carefully slid the weapon fully back into its sheath. He did up the clasp.

I did very well today, a voice said in his mind.

Vasher didn't respond to the sword.

I killed them all, Nightblood continued. Aren't you proud of me?

Vasher picked up the weapon, accustomed to its unusual weight, and carried it in one hand. He recovered his duffle and slung it over his shoulder.

I knew you'd be impressed, Nightblood said, sounding satisfied.

Chapter One

There were great advantages to being unimportant.

True, by many people's standards, Siri wasn't 'unimportant.' She was, after all, the daughter of a king. Fortunately, her father had four living children, and Siri—at seventeen years of age—was the youngest. Fafen, the daughter just older than Siri, had done the family duty and become a monk. Above Fafen was Ridger, the eldest son. He would inherit the throne.

And then there was Vivenna. Siri sighed as she walked down the path back to the city. Vivenna, the firstborn, was... well... Vivenna. Beautiful, poised, perfect in most every way. It was a good thing, too, considering the fact that she was engaged to marry a god.

Either way, Siri—as fourth child—was redundant. Vivenna and Ridger had to focus on their studies; Fafen had to do her work in the pastures and homes. Siri, however, could get away with being unimportant. That meant she could disappear into the wilderness for hours at a time.

People would notice, of course—and she *would* get into trouble. Yet, even her father would have to admit that her disappearance hadn't caused much of an inconvenience. The city got along just fine without Siri—in fact, it tended to do a little better when she wasn't around.

Unimportance. To another, it might have been offensive. To Siri, however, it was a blessing.

She smiled, walking into the city proper. She drew the inevitable stares. While Bevalis was technically the capitol of Idris, it wasn't that big, and everyone knew her by name. Judging by the stories Siri had heard from passing ramblemen, her home city was hardly even a village when compared to the massive metropolises in other nations.

She liked it the way it was, even with the muddy streets, the thatched cottages, and the boring—yet sturdy—stone walls. Women chasing runaway geese, men pulling donkeys laden with spring seed, and children leading sheep the village on their way to pasture. A grand city in Xaka, Hudres, or even terrible Hallandren might have exotic sights, but it would be busy with faceless shouting, jostling crowds, and haughty noblemen. Not Siri's preference; she generally found even Bevalis to be a bit crowded for her.

Still, she thought, looking down at her utilitarian grey dress, I'll bet those cities have more colors. That's something I might like to see.

Her hair wouldn't stand out so much there. As usual, the long locks had gone blonde with joy while she'd been out in the fields. She concentrated, trying to rein them in, but she was only able to bring the color to a dull brown. As soon as she stopped focusing, her hair just went back to the way it had been. She'd never been very good at controlling it. Not like Vivenna.

As she continued through the town, some small figures began trailing her. She smiled, pretending to ignore the children until one of them was brave enough to run forward and tug on her dress. Then she turned, smiling. They regarded her with solemn faces. Idris children were trained even at this age to avoid shameful outbursts of emotion. Austrin teachings said there was nothing wrong with feelings, but drawing attention to yourself with them was wrong.

Siri had never been very devout. It wasn't her fault, she reasoned, if Austre had made her with a rather distinct inability to obey. The children waited patiently until Siri reached into her apron and pulled out a couple of brightly colored flowers. The children's eyes opened wide, gazing at the vibrant colors. Three of the flowers were blue, one yellow.

The flowers were stark against the town's determined drabness. Other than what one could find on the skin and eyes of the people here wasn't a drop of color in sight. Stones had been whitewashed, clothing bleached grey or tan. All to keep the color away.

For without color, there could be no Awakening.

The girl who had tugged Siri's skirt finally took the flowers in one hand and dashed away with them, the other children following behind. Siri caught a look of disapproval in the eyes of several passing villagers. None of them confronted her, though. Being a princess—even an unimportant one—did have its perks.

She continued on toward the palace. It was a flat, single-story building with a large courtyard. Siri avoided the crowds at the front, rounding to the back and going in the kitchen entrance. Mab, the kitchen mistress, stopped singing as the door opened, then eyed Siri.

"Your father's been looking for you, child," Mab said, turning away and humming as she attacked a pile of onions.

"I suspect that he has." Siri walked over and sniffed at a pot, which bore the calm scent of boiling potatoes.

"Went to the hills again, didn't you?"

Siri smiled, then pulled out another of the bright yellow flowers, spinning it between two fingers.

Mab rolled her eyes. "And, been corrupting the city youth again, I suspect. Your father will have words with you about that."

"I like words," Siri said. "And I always learn a few new ones when father gets angry. I shouldn't neglect my education, now should I?"

Mab snorted, dicing some pickled tomatoes into the onions.

"Honestly, Mab," Siri said, twirling the flower, feeling her hair shade a little bit red. "I don't see what the problem is. Austre made the flowers, right? He put the colors on them, so they can't be evil. I mean, we call him God of Colors, for heaven's sake."

"Flowers ain't evil," Mab said, adding something that looked like grass to her concoction, "assuming they're left where Austre put them. We shouldn't use Austre's beauty to make ourselves more important."

"A flower doesn't make me look more important."

"Oh?" Mab asked, adding the grass, tomatoes, and onions to one of her boiling pots. She banged the side of the pot with the flat of her knife, listening, then nodded to herself and began fishing under the counter for more vegetables. "You tell me," she continued, voice muffled. "You really think walking through the city with a flower like that didn't draw attention to yourself?"

"That's only because the city is so drab. If there were a bit of color around, nobody would notice a flower."

Mab reappeared, hefting a box filled with various tubers. "Is that so? You'd have us decorate the place like Hallandren? Maybe we should start inviting Awakeners into the city too? How'd you like that? Some devil sucking the souls out of children, strangling people with their own clothing? Bringing men back from the grave, then using their dead bodies for cheap labor? Sacrificing women on their unholy altars?"

Siri felt her hair whiten slightly with anxiety. *Stop that!* she thought. The hair seemed to have a mind of its own, responding to gut feelings.

"That sacrificing part is only a story," Siri said. "They don't really do that."

“Stories come from somewhere.”

“Yes, from old women sitting by the hearth in the winter. Either way, I don’t think we need to be so frightened of them. The Hallandrens will do what they want, which is fine by me, as long as they leave us alone.”

Mab chopped tubers, not looking up.

“We’ve got the treaty, Mab,” Siri said. “They *will* leave us alone.”

“And if they don’t?”

“They will. You don’t need to worry.”

“They have better armies,” Mab said, chopping, not looking up, “better steel, more food, and those... those *things* serving them. It makes people worry. Maybe not *you*, but sensible folk.”

The cook’s words were hard to dismiss out of hand. Mab had a sense for things, a wisdom beyond her instinct for spices and broths. However, she *also* tended to worry. “You’re worrying about nothing, Mab. You’ll see.”

“I’m just saying that this is a bad time for a royal princess to be running around with flowers, standin’ out and inviting Austre’s dislike.”

Siri sighed. “Fine, then,” she said, tossing her last flower into the stew pot. “Now we can all stand out together.”

Mab froze, then rolled her eyes, chopping a root. “I assume that was a vanavel flower?”

“Of course,” Siri said, sniffing at the steaming pot. “I know better than to ruin a good stew. I and still say you’re over reacting.”

Mab sniffed. “Here,” she said, pulling out another knife. “Make yourself useful. There’s roots that need choppin.”

“Shouldn’t I report to my father?” Siri said, grabbing a vanavel root and beginning to chop.

“He’ll just send you back here and make you work in the kitchens as a punishment,” Mab said, banging the pot with her knife again. She had the solemn belief that she could judge when a dish was done by the way the pot rang.

“Austre help me if father ever discovers I like it down here.”

“You just like being close to the food,” Mab said, fishing Siri’s flower out of the stew then tossing it aside. “Either way, you can’t report to him. He’s in conference with Yarda.”

Siri gave no reaction—she simply continued to chop. Her hair, however, grew yellow with excitement. Father’s conferences with Yarda usually last hours, she thought. Not much point in simply sitting around, waiting for him to get done...

Mab turned to get something off the table, and by the time she looked back, Siri had bolted out the door and was on her way toward the royal stables. Bare minutes later, she galloped away from the palace, wearing her favorite cloak, feeling an exhilarated thrill that sent her hair into a deep blonde. A nice quick ride would be a good way to round out the day.

After all, her punishment was likely to be the same either way.

#

Dedelin, king of Idris, set the letter down on his desk. He had stared at it long enough. It was time to decide whether or not to send his eldest daughter to her death.

Despite the advent of spring, his chamber was cold. Warmth was a rare thing in the Idris Highlands; it was coveted and enjoyed, for it lingered only briefly each summer. The chambers

were also stark. There was a beauty to simplicity. Even a king had no right to display arrogance by ostentation.

Dedelin stood up, looking out his window and into the courtyard. The palace was small by the world's standards—only a single story high, with a peaked wooden roof and squat stone walls. But it was large by Idris standards, and it bordered on flamboyant. This could be forgiven, for the palace was also a meeting hall and center of operations for his entire kingdom.

The king could see General Yarda out of the corner of his eye. The burly man stood waiting, his hands clasped behind his back, his thick beard tied in three places. He was the only other person in the room.

Dedelin glanced back at the letter. The paper was a bright reddish pink, and the garish color stood out on his desk like a drop of blood in the snow. The pink was a color one would never see in Idris. In Hallandren, however—center of the world's dye industry—such tasteless hues were commonplace.

"Well, old friend?" Dedelin asked. "Do you have any counsel for me?"

General Yarda shook his head. "War comes, your majesty. I feel it in the winds and read it in the reports of our spies. Hallandren still considers us rebels, and our passes to the north are too tempting. They will attack."

"Then I shouldn't send her," Dedelin said, looking back out his window. The courtyard bustled with people in furs and cloaks coming to market.

"We can't stop the war, your majesty," Yarda said. "But... we can slow it."

Dedelin turned back.

Yarda stepped forward, speaking softly. "This is not a good time. Our troops still haven't recovered from that Vendis raids last fall, and with the fires in the granary this winter..." Yarda shook his head. "We *cannot* afford to get into a defensive war in the summer. Our best advantage against the Hallandren are the snows. We can't let this conflict happen on their terms. If we do, we are dead."

The words all made sense.

"Your majesty," Yarda said, "they are *waiting* for us to break the treaty as an excuse to attack. If we move first, they will strike."

"If we keep the treaty, they will *still* strike," Dedelin said.

"But later. Perhaps months later. You know how slow Hallandren politics are. If we keep the treaty, there will be debates and arguments. If those last until the snows, then we will have gained time we need so badly."

It all made sense. Brutal, honest sense. All these years, Dedalin had stalled and watched as the Hallandren court grew more and more aggressive, more and more agitated. Every year, voices called for an assault on the 'Rebel Idrians' living up in the highlands. Every year, those voices grew louder and more plentiful. Every year, Dedalin's placating and politics kept the armies away.

But it could not last. Not with Idris ripe, not with the trade routes worth so much. Not with the current crop of Hallandren Gods, who seemed so much more malleable than their predecessors. He *knew* all of that. But he also knew that breaking the treaty would be foolish. When you were cast into the den of a beast, you did not provoke it to anger.

Unfortunately, keeping the treaty would require doing something he was not certain he could manage. He would have to send them Vivenna. His heart twisted at the thought. His firstborn, the woman who would—in a perfect world—have ruled when he died. He had to struggle to keep his hair under control as it started to bleach.

Yarda joined him beside the window, looking out, leaning one elbow against the side of the frame. He was a harsh man born of harsh winters. But, he was also as good a man as Dedelin had ever known—a piece of the king longed to marry Vivenna to the general's own son.

That was foolishness. Dedelin had always known this day would come. He'd crafted the treaty himself.

"If we send her, Yarda," Dedelin said, "we send her to her death."

The general continued to stare out the window. When war did come, Vivenna would be trapped in the palace of their enemies, married to their twisted God King. The Hallandren needed a daughter of the royal blood to reintroduce the traditional bloodline into their monarchy. It was something the depraved and vainglorious people of the lowlands had long coveted, and only that specific clause in the treaty had saved Idris these twenty years.

That treaty had been the first official act of Dedalin's rein, negotiated furiously following his father's assassination. Dedalin gritted his teeth. How quickly he'd bowed before the whims of his enemies. Yet he would do it again; an Idris monarch would do anything for his people.

That was one main difference between the Idris and the Hallandren.

"Maybe they won't harm her," Yarda finally said.

"You know better than that. The first thing they'll do when war comes is use her against me. This is the *Hallandren*. They invite Awakeners into their palaces, for Austre's sake!"

Yarda fell silent. Finally, he shook his head. "Reports say that they keep a standing army of some forty thousand Lifeless."

Lord God of Colors, Dedelin thought, glancing at the letter again. Its language was simple. Vivenna's twenty-second birthday had come, and the terms of the treaty stipulated that Dedelin could wait no longer. The Hallandren had every right to demand their bride.

"If that army attacks this summer, it will be a slaughter," Yarda said. "Sending Vivenna is a bad plan, but it's our only plan. With more time, I know I can bring the Natiees to our cause—not to mention the dissidents in Hallandren itself. You know that their leader has been executed. We can build, gather supplies, live another year." Yarda turned to him. "If we don't send the Hallandren their princess, the war will be seen as our fault. Who will support us? They will demand to know why we refused to follow the treaty our own king wrote!"

"And if we do send them Vivenna?" Dedalin said. "They will introduce the royal blood into their monarchy, and that will have an even *more* legitimate claim on the highlands!"

"Perhaps," Yarda said. "But if we both know they're going to attack anyway, then what do we care about their claim? At least this way, perhaps they will wait until an heir is born before the assault comes."

More time. The general always asked for more time. But what about when that time came at the cost of Dedalin's own child?

Yarda wouldn't hesitate to send one soldier to die if it would mean time enough to get the rest of his troops into better position to attack, Dedalin thought. We are Idris. How can I ask anything less of my daughter than I'd demand of one of my troops?

It was just that, thinking of Vivenna in the God King's arms, being forced to bear that creature's child: a stillborn monster who would become the next Returned God of the Hallandren. *There is another way*, a piece of his mind whispered.

A knock came at his door. Both he and Yarda turned, and Dedelin called for the visitor to enter. He should have been able to guess who it would be.

"Vivenna," Dedelin said.

She stood in a quiet grey dress, looking so young to him still. Yet, she was the perfect image of an Idris woman—hair kept in a modest knot, no makeup to draw attention to the face. She was not timid or soft, like some noblewoman from the northern kingdoms. She was just composed. Composed, simple, hard, and capable. Idrian.

“You have been in here for several hours, father,” Vivenna said, bowing her head respectfully to Yarda. “The servants speak of a colorful envelope carried by the general when he entered. I believe I know what it contained.”

Dedelin met her eyes, then waved for her to seat herself. She softly closed the door, then took one of the wooden chairs from the side of the room. Yarda remained standing, after the masculine fashion. Vivenna eyed the letter sitting on the desk. She was calm, her hair controlled and kept a respectful black. She was twice as devout as Dedelin, and—unlike her sister—she never drew attention to herself with fits of emotion.

“I assume that I should prepare myself for departure, then,” Vivenna said, hands in her lap.

Dedelin opened his mouth, but could find no objection. He glanced at Yarda, who just shook his head, resigned.

“I have prepared my entire life for this, father,” Vivenna said. “I am ready. Siri, however, will not take this well. She left on a ride an hour ago. I should depart the city before she gets back. That will avoid any potential scene she might make.”

“Too late,” Yarda said, grimacing and nodding toward the window. Just outside, people scattered in the courtyard as a figure galloped through the gates. She wore a deep brown cloak that bordered on being too colorful, and—of course—she had her hair down.

The hair was yellow.

Dedelin felt his rage and frustration growing. Only Siri could make him lose control, and—as if in ironic counterpoint to the source of his anger—he felt his hair change. To those watching, a few locks of hair on his head would have bled from black to red. It was the identifying mark of the royal family, who had fled to the Idris Highlands at the climax of the Manywar. Others could hide their emotions. The royals, however, manifest what they felt in the very hair on their heads.

Vivenna watched him, pristine as always, and her poise gave him strength as he forced his hair to turn black again. It took more willpower than any common man could understand to control the treasonous royal locks. Dedelin wasn’t sure how Vivenna managed it so well.

Poor girl never even had a childhood, he thought. From birth, Vivenna’s life had been pointed toward this single event. His firstborn child, the girl who had always seemed like a piece of himself. The girl who had always made him proud; the woman who had already earned the love and respect of her people. In his mind’s eye he saw the queen she could be come, stronger even than he. Someone who could guide them through the dark days ahead.

But only if she survived that long.

“I will prepare myself for the trip,” Vivenna said, rising.

“No,” Dedelin said.

Yarda and Vivenna both turned.

“Father,” Vivenna said. “If we break this treaty, it will mean war. I am prepared to sacrifice for our people. You taught me that.”

“You will *not* go,” Dedelin said firmly, turning back toward the window. Outside, Siri was laughing with one of the stablemen. Dedelin could hear her outburst even from a distance; her hair had turned a flame-colored red. He felt his own hair bleeding slightly white.

Lord God of Colors, forgive me, he thought. What a terrible choice for a father to make. But... anything for my kingdom. Or, at least, almost anything.

Dedelin turned back toward the room. “Vivenna, you will not go to wed the tyrant god of our enemies. I’m sending your sister in your place.”

Chapter Two

Siri sat, stunned, in a rattling carriage, her homeland growing more and more distant.

Two days had passed, and she still didn't understand. This was supposed to be Vivenna's task. Everybody understood that. Idris had thrown a celebration on the day of Vivenna's birth. The king had put her into lessons from the day she could walk, training her in the ways of court life and politics. Fafen, the second daughter, had taken the lessons in case Vivenna died before the day of the wedding. But not Siri. She'd been redundant. Unimportant. Just the way she liked it.

No more.

She glanced out the window. Her father had sent the kingdom's nicest carriage—along with an honor guard of twenty soldiers—to bear her southward. That, mixed with a steward and several serving boys, made for a procession as grand as Siri had ever seen. It bordered on ostentation, which might have thrilled her, had it not been bearing her away from Idris.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be, she thought. This isn't the way any of it is supposed to happen!

And yet, it had.

It couldn't have.

Nothing made sense. The carriage bumped, but she just sat, numb. *At the very least*, she thought, *they could have let me ride horseback, rather than forcing me to sit in this carriage*. That, unfortunately, wouldn't have been an appropriate way to enter Hallandren.

Hallandren.

She felt her hair bleach white with fear. She was being sent to *Hallandren*, a kingdom her people cursed with every second breath. She wouldn't see her father again for a long while, if ever. She wouldn't speak with Vivenna, or listen to the tutors, or be chided by Mab, or ride the royal horses, or go looking for flowers in the wilderness, or work in the kitchens. She'd...

Marry the God King. The terror of Hallandren, the monster that had never drawn a living breath. In Hallandren, his power was absolute. He could order an execution on a whim.

I'll be safe, though, won't I? she thought. I'll be his wife.

Wife. I'm getting married.

Oh Austre, God of Colors... She thought with sickness. She curled up with her legs against her chest—her hair growing so white that it seemed to shine—and lay down on the seat of the carriage, feeling herself shake as it continued its inevitable path southward.

#

"I think that you should reconsider your decision, Father," Vivenna said calmly, sitting—as she'd been trained—with hands in her lap.

"I've considered and reconsidered, Vivenna," King Dedalin said, waving his hand. "My mind is made up."

"Siri is not suited to this task."

“She’ll do fine,” her father said, looking through some papers on his desk. “All she really needs to do is have a baby. I’m certain she’s ‘suited’ to that task.”

What then of my training? Vivenna thought. Twenty-two years of preparation? What was that, if the only point in being sent was to provide a convenient womb?

She kept her hair black, her voice solemn, her face calm. “Siri must be very distraught,” she said. “I do not think she’s emotionally capable of dealing with this.”

Her father looked up, his hair fading a bit red—the black bleeding away like paint running off a canvas. It showed his annoyance.

He’s more distraught by her departure than he’s willing to admit.

“This is for the best of our people, Vivenna,” her father said, working—with obvious effort—to turn his hair black again. “If war comes, Idris will need you here to lead.”

“If war comes, what of Siri?”

Her father fell silent. “Perhaps it won’t come,” he finally said.

Austre... Vivenna thought with shock. He doesn’t believe that. He thinks he’s sent her to her death.

“I know what you are thinking,” her father said, drawing her attention back to his eyes. So solemn. “How could I choose one over the other? How could I send Siri to die and leave you here to live. I didn’t do it based on personal preference, no matter what people may think. I did what was best for Idris when this war comes.”

When this war comes. Vivenna looked up, meeting his eyes. “I was going to stop the war, Father. I was to be the God King’s bride! I was going to speak with him, persuade him. I’ve been trained with the political knowledge, the understanding of customs, the—”

“Stop the war?” her father asked, cutting in. Only then did Vivenna realize how brash she must have sounded. She looked away.

“Vivenna, child,” her father said. “There is no stopping this war. Only the promise of a daughter of the Royal line kept them away this long. If I’d refused to send one, they would have attacked immediately. Sending Siri may buy us time. Who knows. Perhaps I’ve sent her to safety. Perhaps they will value her bloodline to the point that they leave her alive—a back up should the heir she bears pass away.”

He grew distant. “Yes,” he continued, “perhaps it is not Siri we should be fearing for, but...”

But ourselves, Vivenna finished in her mind. She was not privy to all of her father’s war planning, but she knew enough. War would not favor Idris. In a conflict with Hallandren, there was little chance they would win. It would be devastating for their people and their way of life.

“Father, I—

“Please, Vivenna,” he said quietly. “I cannot speak of this further. Go now. We will discuss later.”

Later. After Siri had traveled even further away, after it would be much more difficult to bring her back without looking the fools. Yet, Vivenna rose. She was obedient; it was the way she had been trained. That was one of the things that had always separated her from her sister.

She left her father’s study, closing the door behind her, then walked through the wooden palace hallways, pretending that she didn’t see the stares or hear the whispers. She made her way to her room—which was in a small, unadorned palace corner—and sat down on her bed, hands in her lap.

She didn’t agree at all with her father’s assessment. She *could* have done something. She was to have been the God King’s bride. That would have given her influence, in the court, wouldn’t it?

Everyone knew that the God King himself was distant when it came to the politics of his nation, but surely his wife could have played a role in defending the interests of her people.

And her father had thrown that away?

He really must believe that there is nothing that can be done to stop the invasion. That turned Siri into simply another political maneuver to buy time. Something Idris had been doing for decades.

And... so what if that was all that Siri would do? If the sacrifice of a Royal daughter to the Hallandren was that important, then it still should have been Vivenna's place to go. It had always been *her* duty to prepare for her marriage to the God King. Not Siri's, not Fafen's. Vivenna's. It was her place to sacrifice for her people.

In being saved, she didn't feel grateful. Nor did she feel that she would better serve Idris. If her father died, Yarda would be far better suited to rule during wartime than Vivenna. Besides, Ridger—Vivenna's younger brother—had been groomed as heir for years.

She had been preserved for no reason. It seemed a punishment, in some ways. She'd listened, prepared, learned, and practiced. Everyone said that was perfect. Why, then, wasn't she good enough to serve in her place?

She had no good answer for herself. She could simply sit and fret, hands in her lap, and face the awful truth. Her purpose in life had been stolen and given to another. She was redundant now. Useless.

Unimportant.

#

"What was he *thinking!*" Siri snapped, hanging half out the window of her carriage as it bounced along. A young soldier marched beside the vehicle, looking uncomfortable in the afternoon light.

"I mean really," Siri said. "Sending *me* to be married to the Hallandren king. That's silly, isn't it? Surely you've heard about the kinds of things I do. Wandering off when nobody's looking. Ignoring my lessons. I throw angry fits, for Color's sake—and not *just* when I've been exiled to some Lifeless monster's bed!"

The guard glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise gave no reaction. Siri didn't really care. She hung precariously from the window, feeling the wind play with her hair—long, red, straight—and stoking her anger. Fury kept her from weeping.

The green spring hills of the Idris highlands had slowly faded away as the days had passed. In fact, they were probably in Hallandren already—the border between the two kingdoms was vague, which wasn't surprising, considering that they'd been one nation up until the Manywar.

She eyed the poor guard—whose only way of dealing with a raving princess appeared to be by ignoring her. Then she finally slumped back into the carriage. She shouldn't have treated him so, she knew. But, well, she'd just been sold off like some hunk of mutton—ransomed by a document that had been written years before she'd even been born. If anyone had a right to a tantrum, it was Siri.

Maybe that's the reason for all of this, she thought, crossing her arms on the windowsill. Maybe father was tired of my tantrums, and just wanted to get rid of me.

That seemed a little far-fetched. There were easier ways to deal with Siri—ways that didn't include sending her to represent Idris in a foreign court. Why send her, then? Did he really think she'd do a good job?

That gave her pause for a moment. Then she considered how ridiculous it was. Her father wouldn't have assumed that she'd do a better job than Vivenna. Nobody did *anything* better than Vivenna.

Siri sighed, feeling her hair turn a pensive brown. She turned from her frustrations and let herself get distracted by the passing landscape. At least it was interesting. Hallandren was in the lowlands, a place of tropical forests and strange, colorful animals. Siri had heard the descriptions from ramblemen, and even read of the forests in the occasional book she'd been forced to read.

She'd figured she knew what to expect. Yet, as the hills gave way to deep grasslands and the trees finally began to sprout up, Siri had begun to realize that there was something no tome or tale could adequately describe.

Colors.

In the highlands, flowers flower patches were rare and unconnected, as if they understood how poorly they fit with Idris philosophy. Here, they appeared to be everywhere. Tiny flowers grew in great blanketing swaths on the ground. Large, drooping blossoms hung from trees. Even the weeds appeared to have flowers. Siri would have picked some of them, if not for the way that the soldiers regarded them with hostility.

If I feel this anxious, she realized, *they must feel more so*. She wasn't the only one who had been sent away from family and friends. When would these men be allowed to return? Ever? Suddenly, she felt even more guilty for subjecting the young soldier to her outburst.

I'll send them back when I arrive, she thought. Then she immediately felt her hair grow white. Sending the men back would leave her alone in a city filled with Lifeless, Awakeners, and pagans.

Yet, what good would twenty soldiers do her? Better that someone, at least, be allowed to return home.

#

"One would think," Fafen said, "that you would be happy. After all, you no longer have to marry a tyrant."

Vivenna plopped a berry into her basket, then moved on to a different bush. Fafen worked on one nearby. She wore the white robes of a monk, her hair completely shorn. Fafen was the middle sister in almost every way—midway between Siri and Vivenna in height, less proper than Vivenna, yet hardly as careless as Siri. Fafen was a bit curvier than either of them, which had earned her the eye of several young men in the village. However, the fact that they would have to become monks themselves if they wanted to marry her kept them in check.

If Fafen noticed how popular she was, she'd never shown it. She'd made the decision to become a monk before her tenth birthday, and her father had wholeheartedly approved. Every family was traditionally obligated to provide one person for the monasteries. It was against the Five Visions to be selfish, even with one's own blood.

The two sisters continued to work, gathering berries which Fafen would later distribute to those in need. The monk's fingers were dyed slightly red by the work. Vivenna wore gloves. That much color on her hands would be unseemly.

"Yes," Fafen said, "I do think you're taking this all wrong. Why, you act as if you *want* to go down and be married to that Lifeless monster."

"He's not Lifeless," Vivenna said. "Susebron is Returned, and there is a large difference."

"Yes, but he's a false god. Besides, everyone knows what a terrible creature he is."

"But it was my *place* to go and marry him. That is who I am, Fafen. Without it, I am nothing."

“Nonsense,” Fafen said. “You’ll inherit now, instead of Ridger.”

Thereby unsettling the order of things even further, Vivenna thought. *What right do I have to take his place from him?* She didn’t want to be queen. She just wanted to do what she’d been born, trained, and crafted to do.

She allowed the conversation to lapse, however. She’d been arguing the point for several minutes now, and it wouldn’t be polite to continue. Polite. Rarely before had Vivenna felt so frustrated at having to be polite. Her emotions were was growing rather... inconvenient.

She kept her hair black and her thoughts to herself. Fafen made good points—points that any Idrian would have made. Nobody would *want* to go and marry the God King. Vivenna should be relieved that she didn’t have to.

And yet, she wasn’t.

“What of Siri?” she found herself saying. “You’re happy that this happened to her?”

Fafen looked up, then frowned a little to herself. She had a tendency to avoid thinking things through unless she was confronted with them directly. Vivenna felt a little ashamed for making such a blunt comment, but with Fafen, there often wasn’t any other way.

“You do have a point,” Fafen said. “I don’t see why *anyone* had to be sent.”

“The treaty,” Vivenna said. “It protects our people.”

“Austre protects our people,” Fafen said, moving on to another bush.

Will he protect Siri? Vivenna thought. Poor, innocent, capricious Siri. She’d never learned to control herself; she’d be eaten alive in the Hallandren Court of Gods. Siri wouldn’t understand the politics, the backstabbing, the false faces and lies.

She would also be forced to bear Susebron’s child, the next God King of Hallandren. Performing that duty was not something Vivenna had looked forward to. It would have been a sacrifice. Yet it would have been *her* sacrifice, given willingly for the safety of her people. Even if her father was right and the war did come, even if that meant her execution by the Hallandren in an attempt to crush Idrian morale, she would have given it.

Such thoughts continued to pester Vivenna as she and Fafen finished with the berry picking, then moved down the hillside back toward the village. Fafen, like all monks, dedicated all of her work to the good of the people. She watched flocks, harvested food, and cleaned houses for those who could not do it themselves.

Without a duty of her own, Vivenna seemed to have little purpose. And yet, as she considered, there *was* someone who—perhaps—still needed her. Someone who had left a week before, teary-eyed and frightened, looking to her big sister with desperation.

Vivenna wasn’t needed in Hallandren; she’d determined that, whatever her father said. She was useless here. But she *did* know the people, cultures, and society of Hallandren. And—as she followed Fafen onto the village road—an idea began to form in Vivenna’s head.

One that was not, by any stretch of the imagination, polite.

Chapter Three

Lightsong didn't remember dying.

His priests, however, assured him that his death had been extremely brave. Noble. Grand. Heroic. But that was the case with all of the Hallandren gods. One did not Return unless one died in a way that exemplified the great virtues of human existence. That was why the Iridescent Tones sent the Returned back; they acted examples, and blessings, to the people who still lived.

Each God represented something. An ideal. Lightsong had died in a way that displayed extreme bravery. Or, at least, that was what his priests told him. It had always seemed convenient to Lightsong that he couldn't remember how he had died, just like he couldn't remember anything of his life before he had become a god.

Lightsong groaned softly, unable to sleep any longer. He rolled over, feeling weak as he sat up in his majestic bed. Visions and memories pestered his mind, and he shook his head, trying to clear away the fog of sleep.

Servants entered, responding wordlessly to their god's needs. God. He was one of the younger, for he'd Returned only five years before. There were some two dozen deities in the Court of Gods, and many were far more important—and far more politically savvy—than Lightsong. And above them all reigned Susebron, the God King of Hallandren.

Even a lesser deity such as Lightsong merited an enormous palace. He slept in a room draped with silks, dyed with bright reds and yellows. His palace held dozens of different chambers, decorated and furnished according to his whims. Hundreds of servants and priests to saw to his needs—whether he wanted them seen to or not.

All of this, he thought as he stood, *because I couldn't figure out how to die*. Standing made him just a bit dizzy. It was his feastday. He would lack strength until he was fed.

Servants approached carrying brilliant red and gold robes. As they entered his aura, each servant—skin, hair, clothing, and garments—burst with an inner color. The saturated hues grew far more resplendent than any dye or paint could produce. That was an effect of Lightsong's innate BioChroma: he had enough Breath to fill thousands of people. He saw little use to it. He couldn't use it animate objects or corpses; he was a god, not an Awakener. He couldn't give—or even loan—his deific Breath away.

Well, except once. That would, however, kill him.

The servants continued their ministrations, draping him with cloth. Lightsong was a good head and a half taller than anyone else in the room. He was also broad of shoulders, with a muscular physique that he didn't really deserve, considering the amount of time he spent idle.

"Did you sleep well, your grace?" a voice asked.

Lightsong turned. Llarimar, his high priest, was a tall, portly man with spectacles and a calm demeanor. His hands were nearly hidden by the deep sleeves of his gold and red robe, and he carried a thick tome. Both robes and tome burst with color as they entered Lightsong's aura.

"I slept fantastically, Scoot," Lightsong said, yawning. "A night full of nightmares and dreams, just like always. Terribly restful."

The priest raised an eyebrow. "Scoot?"

“Yes,” Lightsong said. “I’ve decided to give you a new nickname. Scoot. Seems to fit you, the way you’re always scooting around, poking into things and such.”

“I am honored, your grace,” Llarimar said, seating himself on a chair.

Colors, Lightsong thought. Doesn’t he ever get annoyed?

Llarimar opened his tome. “Shall we begin?”

“If we must,” Lightsong said. The servants finished tying ribbons, doing clasps, and draping silks. Each bowed and retreated to the sides of the room.

Llarimar picked up his quill. “What, then, do you remember of your dreams last night?”

“Oh, you know,” Lightsong flopped back onto one of his couches, lounging and relaxing. “Nothing really important.”

Llarimar pursed his lips in displeasure. Other servants began to file in, bearing various dishes of food. Mundane, human food. As a Returned, Lightsong didn’t need to eat such things—they would not give him strength or banish his fatigue. They were an indulgence, not a need. In a short time, he would dine on something far more... divine. It would give him strength enough to live for another week.

“Please try to remember the dreams, your grace,” Llarimar said in his polite, yet disapproving, way. “No matter how unremarkable they may seem.”

Lightsong sighed, looking up at the ceiling. It was painted with a mural, of course. This one depicted three fields enclosed by stone pastures. It was a vision one of his predecessors had seen, or so he was told. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to focus. “I... was walking by a beach,” he said. “And a ship was leaving without me. I don’t know where it was going.”

Llarimar’s pen began to scratch quickly. He was probably finding all kinds of symbolism in the memory. “Were there any colors?” the priest asked.

“The ship had a red sail,” Lightsong said. “The sand was brown, of course, and the trees green. For some reason, I think the ocean water was red, like the ship.”

Llarimar scribbled furiously—he always got excited when Lightsong remembered colors. Lightsong lounged back again, opening his eyes and looking up at the ceiling and its brightly colored fields. He reached over idly, plucking some cherries off a servant’s plate.

Lightsong was a terrible god. He knew it. Nobody told him so, but he was wise enough to see the truth.

Why should he begrudge the people his dreams? Even if he found divination foolish, he had no right to complain. He was remarkably fortunate. He had a deific BioChromatic aura, a physique that any man would envy, and enough luxury for ten kings. Of all the people in the world, he had the least right to be difficult.

It was just that... well, he was probably the world’s only god who didn’t believe in his own religion.

“Was there anything else to the dream, your grace?” Llarimar asked, looking up from his book.

“You were there, Scoot.”

Llarimar paused, paling just slightly. “I... was?”

Lightsong nodded. “You apologized for bothering me all the time and keeping me from my debauchery. Then, you brought me a big bottle of wine and did a dance. It was really quite remarkable.”

Llarimar regarded him with a flat stare.

Lightsong sighed. “No, there was nothing else. Just the boat. Even that is fading.”

Llarimar nodded, rising and shooing back the servants—though, of course, they remained in the room, hovering with their plates of food, wine, and fruit, should any of it be wanted. “Shall we be on with it then, your grace?” Llarimar asked.

Lightsong sighed, then rose, feeling exhausted. A servant scuttled forward to redo one of the clasps on his robe, which had come undone as he sat. Lightsong fell into step beside Llarimar, towering a good foot over the priest. The furniture and doorways, however, were built to fit Lightsong’s increased size, so it was the servants and priests who seemed out of place in the palace.

They passed from room to room. There were no hallways. Hallways were for servants, and they ran in a square around the outside of the building. Lightsong walked on rugs from the northern nations, passing the finest pottery from across the inner sea. Each room was hung with paintings and brightly written poems, created by Hallandren’s finest artists.

At the center of the palace was a small, square room that deviated from the standard reds and golds of Lightsong’s motif. This one was bright with ribbons of darker colors—deep blues, greens, and maroons. Each was a true color, directly on hue, as only a person who had obtained the Third Heightening could distinguish.

As Lightsong stepped into the room, the colors blazed to life. They became brighter, yet somehow remained dark. The maroon became a more true maroon, the navy a more powerful navy. Dark yet bright, a contrast only Breath could inspire.

In the center of the room was a child.

Why does it always have to be a child? Lightsong thought.

Llarimar and the servants waited. Lightsong stepped forward, and the little girl glanced to the side, where a couple of priests stood in red and gold robes. They nodded encouragingly. The girl looked back toward Lightsong, obviously nervous.

“Here now,” Lightsong said, trying to sound encouraging. “There’s nothing to fear.”

And yet, the girl trembled.

Lecture after lecture—delivered by Llarimar, who had claimed that they were *not* lectures, for one did not lecture gods—drifted through Lightsong’s head. There was nothing to fear from the Returned Gods of the Hallandren. The gods were a blessing. They provided visions of the future, as well as leadership and wisdom. All they needed to subsist was one thing.

Breath.

Lightsong hesitated, but his weakness was coming to a head. He felt dizzy. Cursing himself quietly, he knelt down on one knee, taking the girl’s face in his oversized hands. She began to cry, but she said the words, clear and distinct as she had been taught. “My life to yours. My Breath become yours.”

Her Breath flowed out, puffing in the air. It traveled along Lightsong’s arm—the touch was necessary—and he drew it in. His weakness vanished, the dizziness evaporated. Both were replaced with crisp clarity. He felt invigorated, revitalized, *alive*.

The girl grew dull. The color of her face and eyes faded slightly, though the change was very difficult to see. Her brown hair lost some of its luster, her cheeks became more bland.

It’s nothing, he thought. Most people say they can’t even notice that their Breath is gone. She’ll live a full life. Happy. Her family well paid for her sacrifice.

And Lightsong would live for another week. His aura didn’t grow stronger from Breath upon which he fed; that was another difference between a Returned and an Awakener. The latter were sometimes regarded as inferior, man-made approximations of the Returned.

Without a new Breath each week, Lightsong would die. Many Returned outside of Hallandren lived only eight days. Yet with a donated Breath a week, they could continue on, ageless, with perfect bodies and minds. They would live, seeing visions at night which would supposedly provide divinations of the future. Hence the Court of the Gods, filled with its palaces, where gods could be nurtured, protected, and—most importantly—fed.

Priests hustled forward to lead the girl out of the room. *It is nothing to her*, Lightsong told himself again. *Nothing at all...*

And still, as she met his eyes as she left, and he could see that the twinkle was gone from them. She had become a Drab. A Dull, or a Faded One. A person without Breath. It would never grow back.

The priests took her away. Lightsong turned to Llarimar, feeling guilty at his sudden energy. “All right,” he said. “Let’s see the Offerings.”

Llarimar raised an eyebrow over his bespectacled eyes. “You’re accommodating all of a sudden.”

I need to give something back, Lightsong thought. Even if it’s something useless.

They passed through several more rooms of red and gold, most of which were perfectly square with doors on all four sides. Near the eastern side of the palace, they entered a long, thin room. It was completely white—something very unusual in Hallandren. The walls were lined with paintings and poems. The servants stayed outside; only Llarimar joined Lightsong as he stepped up to the first painting.

“Well?” Llarimar asked.

It was a pastoral painting of the jungle, with drooping palms and colorful flowers. There were some of these plants in the courtyards around the Court of Gods, which was why Lightsong recognized them. He’d never actually been to the jungle. That he remembered.

“It’s all right,” Lightsong said. “Not my favorite. Makes me think of the outside. I wish I could visit.”

Llarimar raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Lightsong said. “The Court gets a bit old sometimes.”

“Not much wine in the forest, your grace.”

“I could make some, I’m sure. Ferment... something.”

“I’m sure,” Llarimar said, nodding to one of his aids outside the room. The lesser priest scribbled down what Lightsong had said about the painting. Somewhere, there was a city patron who sought a blessing from Lightsong. It probably had to do with bravery—perhaps the patron was planning to propose marriage, or maybe he was a merchant about to sign a risky business deal. The priests would interpret Lightsong’s opinion of the painting, then give the person an augury—either for good or for ill—along with the exact words Lightsong had said. Either way, the act of sending a painting to please the god would gain the patron some measure of good fortune.

Supposedly.

Lightsong moved away from the painting. A lesser priest rushed forward, removing it. Most likely, the patron hadn’t painted it himself, but had instead commissioned it. The better a painting was, the better a reaction it tended to get from the gods. One’s future, it appeared, could be influenced by how much one could pay one’s artist.

I shouldn’t be so cynical, Lightsong thought. Without this system, I’d have died five years ago.

Five years ago he *had* died. He still didn't know what had killed him, and nobody would tell him, even if they all agreed that it had been a heroic way to pass.

Or, was it all rhetoric? Perhaps the reason nobody was allowed to talk about his former life was because they didn't want anyone to know that Lightsong the Brave had actually died from a stomach cramp.

To the side, the lesser priest disappeared with the jungle painting. It would be burned. Such offerings were made specifically for the intended God, and only he—besides a few of his priests—was allowed to see them. He moved along to the next work of art on the wall. It was actually a poem, written in the artisan's script. The dots of color brightened as Lightsong approached. The Hallandren artisan's script was a specialized system of writing that wasn't based on form, but on color. A dot of one color meant one letter and a dot of a different color meant a different letter. That, combined with some double dots—one of each color—created an alphabet that was a nightmare for the colorblind.

Few people in Hallandren would admit to having *that* particular disease. At least, that was what Lightsong had heard. He wondered if the priests knew just how much their Gods gossiped about the outside world.

The poem wasn't a very good one, obviously composed by a peasant, who had then paid someone else to translate it to the artisan's script. The simple dots were a sign of this. True poets used more elaborate symbols, continuous lines that changed color or colorful glyphs that formed pictures. A lot could be done with letters that could change shape without losing their meaning.

Getting the colors right was a delicate art, one that required the Third Heightening or better to perfect. The Third Heightening—the level of Breath at which a person gained the ability to sense perfect hues of color, just like the Second Heightening gave someone perfect pitch. Returned were of the Eight Heightening. Lightsong didn't know what it was like to live without the ability to instantly recognize exact shades of color and sound. He could tell an ideal red from one that had been mixed with even one extra drop of white paint.

He gave the peasant's poem as good a review as he could, though he generally felt an impulse to be honest when he looked at Offerings. It seemed his duty, and for some reason it was one of the few things he took seriously.

They continued down the line, Lightsong giving reviews of the various paintings and poems. The wall was remarkably full this day. Was there a feast or celebration he hadn't heard about? By the time they neared the end of the line, Lightsong was getting tired of looking at art, though his body—fueled by the child's Breath—continued to feel strong and exhilarated.

Lightsong stopped before the final painting. It was an abstract work, a style that was growing more and more popular lately—particularly in paintings sent to him, since he'd given favorable reviews to others in the past. He almost gave this one a poor grade simply because of that. It was good to keep the priests guessing at what would please him, or so some of the gods said. Lightsong sensed that many of them were far more calculating in the way that they gave their reviews, intentionally adding cryptic meanings.

Lightsong didn't have the patience for things like that, especially since all anyone really ever seemed to want from him was honesty. He gave this last painting the time it deserved. The canvas was thick with paint, every inch colored with large, fat strokes of the brush. The prominent hue was a deep red, almost a crimson, that Lightsong immediately knew was a red-blue mixture with a hint of black in it.

The lines of color overlapped, one atop another, almost in a progression. Kind of like... waves. Lightsong frowned. If he looked at it right, it looked like a sea. And, could that be a ship in the center?

Vague impressions from his dream returned to him. A red sea. The ship, leaving.

I'm imagining things, he told himself. "Good color," he said. "Nice patterns. It puts me at peace, yet has a tension to it as well. I approve."

Llarimar seemed to like this response. He nodded as the lesser priest—who stood a distance away—recorded Lightsong's words.

"So," Lightsong said. "That's it, I assume?"

"Yes, your grace."

One duty left, he thought. Now that Offerings were done, it would be time to move on to the final—and least appealing—of his daily tasks. Petitions. He had to get through them before he could get to more important activities, like taking a nap.

Llarimar didn't lead the way toward the petition hall, however. He simply waved a lesser priest over, then began to flip through some pages on a clipboard.

"Well?" Lightsong asked.

"Well what, your grace?"

"Petitions."

Llarimar shook his head. "You aren't hearing Petitions today, your grace. Remember?"

"No. I have *you* to remember things like that for me."

"Well, then," Llarimar said, flipping a page over, "consider it officially remembered that you have no Petitions today. Your priests will be otherwise employed."

"They will?" Lightsong demanded. "Doing what?"

"Kneeling reverently in the courtyard, your grace. Our new queen arrives today."

Lightsong froze. I really need to pay more attention to politics. "Today?"

"Indeed, your grace. Our lord the God King will be married."

"So soon?"

"As soon as she arrives, your grace."

Interesting, Lightsong thought. *Susebron getting a wife*. The God King would be the only of the Returned who could marry. Returned couldn't parent children—save, of course, for the king, who had never drawn a breath as a living man. Lightsong had always found the distinction odd.

"Your grace," Llarimar said. "We will need a Lifeless Command in order to arrange our troops on the field outside the city to welcome the queen."

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. "We plan to attack her?"

Llarimar gave him a flat look.

Lightsong chuckled. "Fledgling fruit," he said, giving up one of the Command phrases that would let others control the city's Lifeless. It wasn't the core Command, of course. The phrase he'd given to Llarimar would only allow a person to control the Lifeless in non-combat situations, and it would expire one day after its first use. Lightsong often thought that the convoluted system of Commands used to control the Lifeless was needlessly complex. However, being one of the four Gods to hold Lifeless commands *did* make him rather important at times.

The priests began to chat quietly about preparations and the new queen. Lightsong waited, still thinking about Susebron and the impending wedding. He folded his arms and rested against the side of the doorway.

"Scoot?" he asked.

“Yes, your grace?”

“Did I have a wife? Before I died, I mean.”

Llarimar hesitated. “You know I cannot speak of your life before your Return, Lightsong. Knowledge of your past won’t do anyone any good.”

Lightsong leaned his head back, resting it against the wall, looking up at the white ceiling. “I... remember a face, sometimes,” he said softly. “A beautiful, youthful face. I think it might have been her.”

The priests hushed.

“Inviting brown hair,” Lightsong said. “Red lips, three shades shy of pure, but with a deep beauty of their own. Dark tan skin.”

A priest scuttled forward with the red tome, and Llarimar started writing furiously. He didn’t prompt for more information, he simply took down Lightsong’s words as they came.

Lightsong fell silent, turning away from the men and their scribbling pens. What does it matter? he thought. That life is gone. Instead, I get to be a god. Regardless of my belief in the religion itself, the perks are nice.

He walked away, leaving Llarimar. Yet, he was trailed by a fleet of servants and lesser priests who would see to his needs. Offerings done, dreams recorded, and petitions canceled, Lightsong was free to pursue his own activities.

He didn’t return to his main chambers. Instead, he made his way out onto his patio deck and waved for a pavilion to be set up for him.

If a new queen was going to arrive today, he wanted to get a good look at her.

Chapter Four

Siri's carriage rolled to a stop outside of T'Telir city, capital of Hallandren. She stared out the window and realized something very, very intimidating: her people had *no* idea what it meant to be ostentatious. Flowers weren't ostentatious. Ten soldiers protecting a carriage was not ostentatious. Throwing a tantrum in public wasn't ostentatious.

The field of forty thousand soldiers, dressed in brilliant blue and gold, standing in perfect rows, spears raised high with blue tassels flapping in the wind... *that* was ostentatious. The twin line of cavalymen atop enormous, thick-hoofed horses, both men and beasts draped with golden cloth that shimmered in the sun. *That* was ostentatious. The massive city, so large it made her mind numb to consider it, domes and spires and painted walls all competing to draw her attention. *That* was ostentatious.

She'd thought that she was prepared. The carriage had passed through cities as they'd made their way to T'Telir. She'd seen the painted houses, the bright colors and patterns. She'd stayed at inns with plush beds. She'd eaten foods mixed with spices that made her sneeze.

She hadn't been prepared for her reception at T'Telir. Not at all.

Blessed Lord of Colors... she thought.

Her soldiers pulled in tight around the carriage, as if wishing they could climb inside and hide from the overwhelming sight. T'Telir was built up against the shores of the Bright Sea, a large, landlocked body of water. She could see it in the distance, reflecting the sunlight, strikingly true to its name.

A figure in blue and silver rode up to her carriage. His deep robes weren't simple, like the monks wore back in Idris. These had massive, peaked shoulders that almost made the costume look like armor. He wore a matching headdress. That, combined with the brilliant colors and exaggerated layers of the robes, made Siri want to shrink back into her carriage. She felt her hair paling to a colorless white.

The figure bowed. "Lady Sisirinah Royal," the man said in a deep voice, "I am Tridees, high priest of his Grace, Susebron the Majestic, Returned God and King of Hallandren. You will accept this token honor guard to guide you to the Court of Gods."

Token? Siri thought.

The priest didn't wait for a response; Siri felt too unsettled to give one anyway. Tridees spun his horse and started back down the highway toward the city. Her carriage rolled after him, her soldiers marching uncomfortably around the vehicle. The jungle gave way to sporadic bunches of palm trees, and Siri was surprised to see how much sand was mixed with the dirt. Her view of the landscape soon grew obstructed by the vast field of soldiers who stood at attention on either side of the road.

"Austre, God of Colors!" one of Siri's guards whispered. "They're Lifeless!"

Siri's hair—which had begun to drift to auburn—snapped back to fearful white. He was right. Under their colorful uniforms, the Hallandren troops were a dull grey. Their eyes, their skin, even their hair: all had been drained completely of color, leaving behind a dull monochrome.

Those can't be Lifeless! she thought. They look like men!

She'd imagined Lifeless as skeletal creatures, the flesh rotting and falling from the bones. They were, after all, men who had died, then been brought back to life as mindless soldiers by BioChromatic Breath. But these soldiers that she passed looked so human. There was nothing to distinguish them save for their lack of color and the stiff expressions on their faces.

As she watched closer, she noticed other differences. They stood unnaturally motionless. No shuffling, no breathing, no quivers of muscle or limb. Even their eyes were still. They seemed like statues, particularly considering their grey skin.

And... I'm going to marry one of these things? Siri thought. But no, Returned were different from Lifeless, and both were different from Drabs, which were people who had lost their Breath. She could vaguely remember a time when someone back in her village had Returned. It had been nearly ten years back, and her father hadn't let her visit the man. She did recall that he'd been able to speak and interact with his family, even if he hadn't been able to remember them.

He'd died again a week later.

Eventually, her carriage passed through the ranks of Lifeless. The city walls were next; they were immense and daunting, yet they almost looked more artistic than functional. The walltop curved in massive half-circles, like rolling hills, and the rim was plated with a golden metal. The gates themselves were in the form of two twisting, lithe sea creatures who curved up in a massive archway. Siri passed through them, the guard of Hallandren cavalrymen—who appeared to be living men—accompanying her.

She had always thought of Hallandren as a place of death. Her impressions were based on stories told by passing ramblemen or by old women at the winter hearth. They spoke of city walls built from skulls, then painted with sloppy, ugly streaks of color. She'd imagined the buildings inside splattered with different clashing hues. Obscene.

She'd been wrong. True, there *was* an arrogance to T'Telir. A grandness. Each new wonder seemed as if it wanted to grab her attention and shake her about by her eyes. People lined the street—more people than Siri had seen in her entire life—crowding together to watch her carriage. If there were poor among them, Siri couldn't tell, for they all wore bright colored clothing. Some did wear more exaggerated outfits—probably merchants, since Hallandren was said to have no nobility beyond its Gods—but even the simplest of clothing had a cheerful brightness to it.

Many of the painted buildings were did clash to her eyes. Yet, none of it was sloppy. There was an eye for craftsmanship and art to everything from the storefronts, to the people, to the statures of mighty soldiers that frequently stood on comers. It was terribly overwhelming. Garish. A vibrant, enthusiastic garishness. Siri found herself smiling—her hair turning a tentative blonde—though she felt a headache coming on. She could almost see beauty in it all.

Maybe... maybe this is why Father sent me, Siri thought. Training or no training, Vivenna would have never been able to fit in, but I've always been far too interested in color.

It made sense. Strange sense, but everything about her life had been strange lately. Her father was a good king with good instincts. What if—after twenty years of raising and training Vivenna—he had come to the conclusion that she wasn't the right one to help Idris? Was that why, for the first time in their lives, Father had chosen Siri over Vivenna?

But what am I supposed to do? Siri thought as the carriage moved toward the southern section of the city. She knew that everyone feared that Hallandren would invade Idris. However, she couldn't see her father sending one of his daughters if he believed war were close. Perhaps he hoped that she'd be able to help tensions between the kingdoms?

She felt she was probably right in her guess, but that only added to her anxiety. Duty was something unfamiliar to her, and not a little unsettling. Her father had trusted her with the very fate and lives of his people. She couldn't run, escape, or hide.

Particularly from her own wedding.

As her hair tinged white with fear at what was coming, she turned her attention to the city again, trying to distract herself. That wasn't hard, considering how demanding the city's sights were. It was enormous, sprawling like a tired beast curled around and over hills. As the carriage climbed the southern section of town, she could see—through gaps in the buildings—that the Bright Sea broke into a bay before the city. T'Telir curved around the bay, running right up to the water, forming a crescent shape. The city wall, then, only had to run in a half-circle, abutting the sea, keeping the city boxed in.

It didn't seem cramped. There was a lot of open space in the city—walkways and gardens, large swaths of unused land. Palms lined many of the streets and other foliage was common. Plus, with the cool breeze coming over the sea, the air was a lot more temperate than she had expected. The road led toward something of a sea-side overlook, a small hill plateau that had an excellent view. Except, the entire plateau appeared to be surrounded by a large, obstructive wall. Siri watched with growing apprehension as the gates to this smaller, city-within-a-city opened up to let the carriage, soldiers, and priests enter.

The common people stayed outside.

There was another wall inside, a kind of barrier to keep anyone from seeing in through the gate. The procession turned left and rounded the blinding wall, entering the Hallandren Court of Gods: an enclosed, green-grassed courtyard. Several dozen enormous mansions dominated the enclosure, each one painted a distinct color. At the far end of the court was a massive black structure, much taller than the other building.

The walled courtyard was quiet and still. Siri could see figures sitting on balconies, watching her carriage roll across the grass. In front of each of the palaces, a small fleet of men and women knelt prostrate on the grass. The colors of their clothing matched that of their building. Siri spared little time to study them. Instead, she nervously peered at the large, black building. It was pyramidal, with step-like blocks on the outside.

Black, she thought. *In a city of color*. Her hair paled even further. She suddenly wished she'd been more devout during her life. She doubted Austre was all that pleased with her outbursts, and she even had trouble naming the Five Visions most days.

But, he'd watch over her in the name of her people, wouldn't he?

The procession pulled to a stop at the base of the enormous, triangular building. Siri looked up through the carriage window, seeing the clefts and knobs at the summit, which made the architecture seem top-heavy. She felt as if the dark blocks would come tumbling down in an avalanche to bury her.

The priest rode his horse back up to Siri's window. The cavalymen waited quietly, the shuffling of their beasts the only sound in the massive, open courtyard.

"We have arrived, Vessel," the man said. "As soon as we enter the building, you will be prepared and taken to your husband."

"Husband?" Siri asked uncomfortably. "Won't there be a wedding ceremony?"

The priest smirked. "A ceremony? The God King does not need ceremonial justification. You became his wife the moment he desired it."

Siri shivered. "I was just hoping that maybe I could see him, before, you know..."

The priest shot her a harsh look. "The God King does not perform for your whims, woman. You are blessed above all others, for you will be allowed to touch him—if only at *his* discretion. Do not pretend that you are anything other than you are. You have come because he desires it, and

you will obey. Otherwise, you will be put aside and another will chosen in your place—which, I think, might bode unfavorably for your rebel friends in the highlands.”

The priest spun his horse, then clopped his way toward a large stone ramp, leading up to the building. The carriage lurched into motion, and Siri was drawn toward her fate.

Chapter Five

This will complicate things, Vasher thought, standing in the shadows atop the wall that enclosed the Court of the Gods.

What's wrong? Nightblood asked. So the rebels actually sent a princess. Doesn't change your plans.

Vasher waited, watching, as the new queen's carriage crept up the incline and disappeared into the palace's maw.

What? Nightblood demanded. Even still, after all of these years, the sword reacted like a child in many ways.

She'll be used, Vasher thought. *I doubt we'll be able to get through this without dealing with her*. He hadn't believed that the Idris would actually send royal blood back to T'Telir. They'd given up a pawn of terrible value.

Vasher turned away from the Court, wrapping his sandaled foot around one of the banners that ran down the outside of the wall. Then he released his Breath.

"Lower me," he Commanded.

The large tapestry—crafted from wool threads—sucked hundreds of Breath from him. It hadn't the form of a man, and it was massive in size. Vasher now had enough Breath to spend in such ways.

The tapestry twisted, a thing alive, and formed a hand, which picked Vasher up. Like always, the Awakening tried to imitate the form of a human—looking closely at the twistings and undulations of the fabric, Vasher could see outlines of muscles and even veins. There was no reason for them; the Breath animated the fabric, and no muscles were necessary for it to move.

The tapestry carefully lowered Vasher down, pinching him by one shoulder, placing his feet on the street. "Your Breath to Mine," Vasher Commanded. The large banner-tapestry lost its form immediately, life vanishing, and it fluttered back against the wall.

Some few people paused in the street. Yet, they were interested, not awed. This was T'Telir, home of the gods themselves. Men with upwards of a thousand Breaths were uncommon, but not unheard of. The people gawked—like peasants in other kingdoms might pause to watch the carriage of a passing lord—but then they moved on with their daily activities.

The attention was unavoidable. Though Vasher still dressed in his standard outfit—ragged trousers, well-worn cloak despite the heat, a rope wrapped several times around his waist for a belt—he now caused colors to brighten dramatically when he was near. The change would be noticeable to normal people and blatantly obvious to those of at least the First Heightening.

His days of being able to hide and skulk were gone. He'd have to grow accustomed to being noticed again. That was one of the reasons he was glad to be in T'Telir. The city was large enough and filled with enough oddities—from Lifeless soldiers, to Awakened objects serving everyday functions—that he probably wouldn't stand out *too* much.

Of course, that didn't take Nightblood into account. Vasher moved through the crowds, carrying the overly-heavy sword in one hand, sheathed point nearly dragging on the ground behind him. The weapon drew its own reactions. Some people would shy away from it immediately.

Others would watch it, eyes lingering far too long. Perhaps it was time to stuff Nightblood back in the pack.

Oh, no you don't, Nightblood said. Don't even start thinking about that. I've been locked away for too long.

What does it matter to you? Vasher thought.

I need fresh air, Nightblood said. And sunlight.

You're a sword, Vasher thought, not a palm tree.

Nightblood fell silent. He was smart enough to realize that he was not a person, but he didn't like being confronted with that fact. It tended to put him in a sullen mood. That suited Vasher just fine.

He made his way to a restaurant a few streets down from the Court of Gods. This was one thing he *had* missed about T'Telir: restaurants. In most cities, there were few dining options. If you intended to stay for a while, you hired a local woman to give you meals at her table. If you stayed a short time, you ate what your innkeeper gave you.

In T'Telir, however, the population was large enough—and rich enough—to support dedicated food providers. Restaurants still hadn't caught on in the rest of the world, but in T'Telir, they were commonplace. Vasher already had a booth reserved, and the waiter nodded him to the spot. Vasher settled himself, resting Nightblood up beside the wall.

The sword was stolen within a minute of his letting go of it.

Vasher ignored the thievery, sitting quietly as the waiter brought him a warm cup of citrus tea. Vasher sipped at the sweetened liquid, sucking on the bit of a rind, wondering why in the world a people who lived in a tropical lowland preferred heated teas. After a few minutes, his life sense warned him that he was being watched. Eventually, that same sense alerted him that someone was approaching. Vasher slipped his dagger from his belt with his free hand as he sipped his tea.

The priest sat down opposite Vasher in the booth. He wore street clothing, rather than religious robes. However—perhaps unconsciously—he had still chosen to wear the white and green of his deity. Vasher slipped his dagger back into its sheath, masking the sound by taking a loud sip.

The priest, Bebid, looked about nervously. He had enough of a Breath Aura to indicate that he'd reached the First Heightening. It was where most people—those who could afford to buy Breath—stopped. That much Breath would extend their lifespan by a good decade or so and give them an increased life sense. It would also let them see Breath Auras and distinguish other Awakeners, and—in a pinch—let them to a little Awakening themselves. A decent trade for spending enough money to feed a peasant family for some fifty years.

"Well?" Vasher asked.

Bebid actually jumped at the sound. Vasher sighed, closing his eyes. The priest was not accustomed to these kinds of clandestine meetings. He wouldn't have come at all, had Vasher not exerted certain... pressures on him.

Vasher opened his eyes, staring at the priest as the waiter arrived with two plates of spiced rice. Textees food was the restaurant's specialty—the Hallandren liked foreign spices as much as they liked odd colors. Vasher had placed the order earlier, along with a payment that would keep the surrounding booths empty.

"Well?" Vasher repeated.

"I..." Bebid said. "I don't know. Haven't been able to find out much."

Vasher regarded the man with a flat stare.

“You have to give me more time.”

“Remember your daughter, friend,” Vasher said, drinking the last of his tea, feeling a twinge of annoyance. *Do we have to go through this again?*

Bebid was quiet for a time. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Vasher,” he said, leaning in. “I’m a priest of Brightvison the True. I can’t betray my oaths!”

“Good thing I’m not asking you to.”

“We’re not supposed to release information about Court politics.”

“Bah,” Vasher snapped. “Those Returned can’t so much as *look* at one another without half of the city learning about it within the hour.”

“Surely you’re not implying—” Bebid said.

Vasher gritted his teeth, bending his spoon with his finger in annoyance. “*Enough*, Bebid! We both know that your oaths are all just part of the game.” He leaned in. “And I *really* hate games.”

Bebid paled and didn’t touch his meal. Vasher eyed his spoon with annoyance, then bent it back, calming himself. He shoveled in a spoonful of rice, mouth burning from the spices. He’d didn’t believe in letting food sit around uneaten—you never knew when you’d have to leave in a hurry.

“There have been... rumors,” Bebid finally said. “This goes beyond simple Court politics, Vasher—beyond games played between gods. This is something very real, and *very* quiet. Quiet enough that even observant priests only hear hints of it.”

Vasher continued to eat.

“There is a faction of the Court who is pushing to attack Idris,” Bebid said. “Though I can’t fathom why.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Vasher said, wishing he had more tea to wash down the rice. “We both know why Hallandren has sound reasons to slaughter every person up in those highlands.”

“Royals,” Bebid said.

Vasher nodded. They were called rebels, but those ‘rebels’ were the true Hallandren royal family. Mortal men though they may be, their bloodline was a challenge to the Court of Gods. Any good monarch knew that the first thing you did to stabilize your throne was execute anyone who had a better claim to it than you did. After that, it was usually a good idea to execute everyone who *thought* they might have any claim.

“So,” Vasher said. “You fight, Hallandren wins. What’s the problem?”

“It’s a bad idea, that’s the problem,” Bebid said. “A *terrible* idea. Colors, man! Idris won’t go easily, no matter what people in the court say. They have allies from across the mountains and sympathies in dozens of kingdoms. What some are calling a ‘simple quelling of rebel factions’ could easily spin into another Manywar. Do you want that? Thousands upon thousands dead? Kingdoms falling to never rise again? All so we can grab a little bit of frozen land nobody really wants.”

“The trade passes are valuable,” Vasher noted.

Bebid snorted. “The Idrians aren’t dumb enough to tax us *too* heavily on them. This isn’t a money issue. It’s a fear issue. People in the court talk about what *might* happen if the Idrians cut off the passes or what *may* happen if the Idrians let enemies slip through and stage a siege against T’Telir. If this were about money, we’d never go to war. Hallandren thrives on its dye and textiles trade. You think that business would boom in war? We’d be lucky not to suffer a full economic collapse.”

“And you assume that I care about Hallandren’s economic well being?” Vasher asked.

“Ah, yes,” Bebid said dryly. “I forgot who I was talking to. What *do* you want, then? Tell me so we can get this over with.”

“Tell me about the rebels,” Vasher said, chewing on rice.

“The Idrians? We just talked—”

“Not them,” Vasher said. “The ones in the city.”

“They’re unimportant now that Vahr is dead,” the priest said with a wave of his hand. “Nobody knows who killed him, by the way. The rebels managed to get an agent into the prison, somehow. Guess they didn’t appreciate his getting himself captured, eh?”

Vasher said nothing.

“Is that it?” Bebid said impatiently.

“I need to contact the factions you mentioned,” Vasher said. “The ones who are pushing for war against Idris.”

“I won’t help you enrage the—”

“Do *not* presume to tell me what to do, Bebid. Just give me the information you promised, and you can be free of this all.”

“Vasher,” Bebid said, leaning in even further. “I *can*’t help. My lady isn’t interested in these kinds of politics, and I move in the wrong circles.”

Vasher ate some more, judging the man’s sincerity. “All right,” he finally said. “Who, then?”

Bebid relaxed, using his napkin to wipe his brow. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe one of Mercystar’s priests? You could also try Bluefingers, I suppose.”

“Bluefingers? That’s an odd name for a god.”

“Bluefingers isn’t a god,” Bebid said, chuckling. “That’s just a nickname. He’s the High Place steward, head of the scribes. He pretty much keeps the Court running; if anyone knows anything about this faction, it will be him. Of course, he’s so stiff and straight, you’ll have a hard time breaking him.”

“You’d be surprised,” Vasher said, shoveling the last bit of rice into his mouth. “I got you, didn’t I?”

“I guess.”

Vasher stood. “Pay the waiter when you leave,” he said, grabbing his cloak off its peg and wandering out. He could feel a... darkness to his right. He walked down the street, then turned down an alley, where he found Nightblood—still sheathed—sticking from the chest of the thief who had stolen him. Another cutpurse lay dead on the alley floor.

Vasher pulled the sword free, then snapped the sheath closed—it had only been opened a fraction of an inch—and did up the snap.

You lost your temper in there for a bit, Nightblood said with a chastising voice. I thought you were going to work on that.

Guess I’m relapsing, Vasher thought.

Nightblood paused. I don’t think you ever really unlapsed in the first place.

That’s not a word, Vasher said, leaving the alley.

So? Nightblood said. You’re too worried about words. That priest—you spent all those words on him, then you just let him go. It’s not really how I would have handled the situation.

Yes, I know, Vasher said. Your way would have involved making several more corpses.

Well, I am a sword, Nightblood said with a mental huff. Might as well stick to what you're good at...

#

Lightsong watched his new queen's carriage pull up to the palace. "Well, this has been a pleasant day," he noted, sitting on his patio. A few cups of wine—along with some time to avoid thinking about children without Breath—and he was beginning to feel more like his regular self.

"You're that happy to have a queen?" Llarimar asked.

"I'm that happy to have avoided Petitions for the day. Sit down and stop looming. You're giving me a headache."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. It was impossible for a god to feel most normal ailments, headaches included. However, the priest did sit on one of the patio's wooden lounging chairs. Two potted palms waved in the wind, and Lightsong smelled salt on the incoming sea breeze.

I wonder if I sailed the sea once, he thought. A man of the ocean? Is that how I died? Is that why I dreamed of a ship?

Llarimar relaxed as he sat, and Lightsong smiled to himself as the man removed the bulky mitre from his head. Underneath, Llarimar's dark hair was plastered to his head with sweat. He ran his hand through it. During the first few years, Llarimar had remained stiff and formal all the time. Eventually, however, Lightsong had worn him down. After all, Lightsong was the god. In his opinion, if he could lounge on the job, then so could his priests.

"I don't know, your Excellency," Llarimar said slowly, rubbing his chin. "I don't like this."

"Why not?" Lightsong asked.

"We haven't had a queen in the Court for some thirty years. I don't know how the factions will deal with her."

"Ah," Lightsong said, rubbing his forehead. "Politics, Llarimar? You know I frown on such things."

Llarimar eyed him. "Your Excellency, you are—by default—a politician."

"Don't remind me, please. I should very well like to extract myself from the situation. Do you think, perhaps, I could pay one of the other gods to take control of my Lifeless commands? They could have twice as much power, and I could have half as many stomach aches."

"I doubt that would be wise," Llarimar said.

"It's all part of my master plan to ensure that I become totally and redundantly useless to this city by the time I die. Again."

Llarimar cocked his head. "Redundantly useless?"

"Of course. Regular uselessness wouldn't be enough—I am, after all, a god. As for the Idris princess, I find her arrival to be a quite pleasant event. Now, perhaps, people will stop moaning about the lack of true Royal blood in the Divine Monarchy, and we can go back to complaining about more important things, such as why we—being gods—can't force cherries to be in season all year."

Lightsong glanced toward the High Palace, with its black stones. He knew what Llarimar was thinking—the gossip had arrived already. Old Dedelin hadn't sent his firstborn daughter. He'd sent the youngest. A Royal, true, but not the heir to the line.

It would mean more arguments. More hesitance. And, unfortunately, more headaches. Lightsong figured he *should* be able to feel those, even if his head itself refused to comply.

“Still,” Llarimar said, as if talking to himself. “They did send *someone*. That is a good sign. An outright refusal would have meant war.”

“War. The only thing worse than politics.”

“Some say the two are the same, your grace.”

Lightsong shrugged. “At least politics doesn’t make you march about on an empty stomach—unless you count the nausea I feel every time I have to deal with someone trying to pull me into their political faction.”

“What will the Idrian rebels do now, you think?” Llarimar said idly, ignoring—as usual—Lightsong’s witty remarks. Lightsong would have been offended if he hadn’t known there were three separate lesser priests standing at the back of the building, recording his words, searching for wisdom and meaning within them.

“Here’s the thing, Scoot,” Lightsong said, leaning back, closing his eyes and feeling the sun on his face. “The Idris don’t consider themselves to be rebels. They’re not sitting up in their hills, waiting for the day when they can be accepted back into Hallandren. This isn’t their homeland any more.”

“Those peaks are hardly a kingdom.”

“They’re enough of a kingdom to control the area’s best mineral deposits, four vital passes to the north, and the original royal line of Hallandren. They don’t need us, my friend.”

“And the talk of Idris dissidents in the city, ones rousing the people against the Court of Gods?”

“Rumors only,” Lightsong said. “Though, when I’m proven wrong and the underprivileged masses storm my palace and burn me to death, I’ll be sure to inform them that you were right all along. You’ll get the last laugh. Or... well, the last scream, since you’ll probably be tied up next to me.”

Llarimar’s sighed, and Lightsong opened his eyes to find the priest regarding him. The priest didn’t chastise Lightsong for his levity. Llarimar just reached down, putting his headdress back on. He was the priest; Lightsong the God. There would be no questioning of motives, no rebukes. If Lightsong gave an order, they would all do exactly as he said.

Sometimes, that terrified him.

But not this day. He was, instead, annoyed. Llarimar had somehow gotten him talking about politics—and the day had been going so well.

“More wine,” Lightsong said, raising his cup.

“You can’t get drunk, your grace,” Llarimar noted. “Your body is immune to all toxins.”

“I know,” Lightsong said as a lesser servant filled his cup. “But trust me—I’m *quite* good at pretending.”

Chapter Six

Siri stepped from the carriage. Immediately, dozens of servants in blue and silver swarmed around her, pulling her away. Siri turned, alarmed, looking back toward her soldiers. The men stepped forward, but Tridees held up his hand.

“The Vessel will go alone,” the priest declared.

Siri felt a stab of fear. This was the time. “Return to Idris,” she said to the men.

“But, my lady—” the lead soldier said.

“No,” Siri said. “You can do nothing more for me here. Please, return and tell my father that I arrived safely.”

The lead soldier glanced back at his men, uncertain. Siri didn’t get to see if they obeyed or not, for the servants shuffled her around a corner into a long, black hallway. Siri tried to show a resolved face. She’d come to the palace to be wedded, and was determined to make a favorable impression on the God King. She would act composed. Even if she really was just terrified. What was she doing? Why hadn’t she run? Why hadn’t she wiggled out of this somehow? Why couldn’t they have all just let her be?

There was no escape now. As the serving women led her down a corridor into the deep black palace, the last remnants of her former life disappeared behind her.

She was now alone.

Lanterns with colored glass lit the walls. Siri was led through several twists and turns in the dark passages. She tried to remember her way back to the carriage, but was soon hopelessly lost. The servants surrounded her like an honor guard, but did not push her, now that she was moving. Though all were female, they were of differing ages. Each wore a blue cap on the head, hair loose out the back, and they kept their eyes downcast. Their clothing was of a shimmering blue, and was loose-fitting, even through the bust. Siri blushed at the low-cut fronts. In Idris, women kept even their necks covered.

The black corridor eventually opened into a much larger room. Siri hesitated in the doorway. While the stone walls of this room were black, they had been draped in silks of a deep maroon. In fact, *everything* in the room was maroon, from the carpeting, to the furniture, to the tubs—surrounded by tile—in the center of the room.

The servants began to pick at her clothing, undressing her. Siri jumped, swatting at a few hands, causing them to pause in surprise. Then, they attacked with renewed vigor, and Siri realized that she didn’t have a choice except to grit her teeth and bear the treatment. She raised her arms up, letting the servants pull off her dress and underclothing, and felt her hair grow red as she blushed. At least the room was warm.

She shivered anyway. She was forced to stand, naked, as other servants approached, bearing measuring tapes. They poked and prodded, getting various measurements, including ones around Siri’s waist, bust, shoulders, and hips. When that was finished, the women backed away, and the room fell still. The bath continued to steam in the center of the chamber. Several of the serving women gestured toward it.

Guess I'm allowed to wash myself, Siri thought with relief, walking up the tile steps. She stepped carefully into the massive tub, and was pleased at how warm the water was. She lowered herself into the water, letting herself relax just a fraction.

Soft splashes sounded behind her, and she spun. Several other serving women—these ones wearing brown—were climbing down into the tub, fully clothed, holding brushes and soap. Siri sighed, yielding herself to their care as they began to scrub vigorously at her body and hair. She closed her eyes, enduring the treatment with as much dignity as she could manage.

That left her time to think, which was not good. That only allowed her to consider just what was happening too her. Her anxiety immediately returned.

The Lifeless weren't as bad as the stories, she thought, trying to reassure herself. And the city colors are far more pleasant than I expected. Maybe... maybe the God King isn't as terrible as everyone says.

"Ah, good," a voice said. "We're right on schedule. Perfect."

Siri froze. That was a *man's* voice. She snapped her eyes open to find an older man in brown robes standing beside the tub, writing something on a ledger. He was balding and had a round, pleasant face. A young boy stood next to him, bearing extra sheets of paper and a small jar of ink for the man to use in dipping his quill.

Siri screamed, startling several of her servants as she moved with a sudden splashing motion, covering herself with her arms.

The man with the ledger hesitated, looking down. "Is something wrong, vessel?"

"I'm *bathing*," she snapped.

"Yes," the man said. "I believe I can tell that."

"Well, why are you *watching*?"

The man cocked his head. "But, I'm a royal servant, far beneath your station..." he said, then trailed off. "Ah, yes. Idris sensibilities. I had forgotten. Ladies, please splash around, make some more bubbles in the bath."

The serving women did as asked, churning up bubbles and foam in the soapy water.

"There," the man said, turning back to his ledger. "I can't see a thing. Now, let us get on with this. It would not do to keep the God King waiting on his wedding day!"

Siri reluctantly allowed the bathing to continue, though she was careful to keep certain bits of anatomy well beneath the water. The women worked furiously, scrubbing hard enough that Siri was half-afraid they'd rub her skin right off.

"As you might guess," the man said, "we're on a *very* tight schedule. There's much to do, and I would like this all to go as smoothly as possible."

Siri frowned. "And... who exactly are you?"

The man glanced at her, causing her to duck down beneath the suds a little more. Her hair, she noticed, was as bright a red as it had ever been.

"My name is Havarseth, but everyone just calls me Bluefingers." He held up a hand and wiggled the fingers, which were all stained dark with blue ink from writing. "I am head scribe and steward to his Excellent Grace Susebron, God King of Hallandren. In simpler terms, I manage the palace attendants and oversee all servants in the Court of Gods."

He paused, eying her. "I also make certain that everyone stays on schedule and does what they are supposed to."

Some of the younger girls—wearing brown, like the ones bathing Siri—began bringing pitchers of water to the side of the tub, and the women used these to rinse Siri’s hair. She turned about to let them, though she tried to keep a waterlogged eye on Bluefingers and his serving boy.

“Now,” Bluefingers said. “The palace tailors are working very quickly on your gown. We had a good estimate of your size, but final measurements were necessary to complete the process. We should have the garment ready for you in a short time.”

The serving women dunked Siri’s head again.

“There are some things we need to discuss,” Bluefingers continued, voice distorted by the water in Siri’s ears. “I presume you have been taught the proper method of treating his Royal Excellency?”

Siri glanced at him, then looked away. She probably *had* been taught, but she didn’t really remember—and either way, wasn’t in a frame of mind to concentrate.

“Ah,” Bluefingers said, apparently reading her expression. “Well then, this could be... interesting. Allow me to give you some suggestions.”

Siri nodded.

“First, please understand that the God King’s will is law. He needs no reason or justification for what he does. Your life, like all of our lives, is in his hands. Second, please understand that the God King does not speak with people such as you or I. You will not talk to him when you go to him. Do you understand?”

Siri spit out a bit of soapy water. “You mean I’m not even able to be able to *speak* to my husband?”

“I’m afraid not,” Bluefingers said. “None of us can.”

“Then how does he make judgments and rulings?” she asked, wiping her eyes.

“The Council of Gods handles the kingdom’s more mundane needs,” Bluefingers explained. “The God King is above the day-to-day governance. When it *is* necessary for him to communicate, he gives his judgments to his priests, who then reveal them to the world.”

Great, Siri thought.

“It is unconventional that you are allowed to touch him,” Bluefingers continued. “Fathering a child is a necessary encumbrance for him. It is our job to present you in as pleasing a way as possible, and avoid—at all costs—irritating him.”

Austre, God of colors, she thought. What kind of creature is this?

Bluefingers eyed her. “I know something of your temperament, Vessel,” he said. “We have, of course, researched the children of the Idris monarchy. Allow me be a little more personal, and perhaps a little more direct, than I would prefer. If you speak directly to the God King, he will order you executed. Unlike your father, he is not a man of patience.

“I cannot stress this point enough, Vessel. I realize fully that you are accustomed to being a very important person. Indeed, you still *are* that important—if not more so. You are far above myself and these others. However, as far as you are above us, the God King is even *farther* above you.

“The God King is... special. The doctrines teach that the earth itself is too base for him. He is one who obtained transcendence before he was even born, but then Returned to bring his people blessings and visions. You are being given a special trust. Please, do not betray it—and please, *please* to not rile his anger. Do you understand?”

Siri nodded slowly, feeling her hair bleach back to white. She tried to steel herself, but any bit of courage she could gather felt like a sham. No, this creature wasn't going to be stomached as easily as the Lifeless or the city colors. His reputation in Idris wasn't exaggerated.

In a short time, he was going to take her body and do with it as he wished. Part of her felt a rage at that—but it was the rage of frustration. The rage that came from knowing that something horrible was coming, and from being unable to do anything at all about it.

The serving women backed away from her, leaving her half-floating in the soapy water. One of the servants looked to Bluefingers and nodded her head in respect.

“Ah, finished are we?” he asked. “Excellent. You and your ladies are efficient, as always, Jlan. Let us proceed, then.”

“Can't they speak?” Siri asked quietly.

“Of course they can,” Bluefingers said. “But they are dedicated servants of his Excellency. During their hours of service, their duty is to be as useful as possible without being distracting. Now, if you'll continue...”

Siri stayed in the water, even when the silent women tried to pull her out. Bluefingers turned around with a sigh, putting his back to her. He reached over and turned the serving boy around as well.

Siri finally allowed herself to be led out of the bath. The wet women left her, walking into a side room—probably to change—and several others approached, leading Siri toward a smaller tub, apparently intended for rinsing. She stepped down into the water, which was much colder than the other bath, and gasped. The women motioned for her to dunk, and she cringed, but did so, cleaning off most of the soap. After that, there was a final, third tub. As Siri approached, shivering, she could smell strong floral scents coming from it.

“What's this?” Siri asked.

“Perfumed bath,” Bluefingers said, still turned away. “If you prefer, you may have one of the palace masseuses rub perfume onto your body instead. I advise against that, however, considering time restraints...”

Siri blushed, imagining anyone—male or female—rubbing her body with perfume. “This will be fine,” she said, climbing down into the water. It was lukewarm, and the floral scents were so strong that she had to breathe through her mouth.

The women motioned downward, and—sighing—Siri dunked beneath the scented water. After that, she climbed out, and several women finally approached with fluffy towels. They began to pat Siri down, their touch as delicate and soft as the previous scrubbing had been hard. This took away some of the strong scent, for which Siri was glad. Other women approached with a deep blue robe, and she extended her arms, allowing them to put it on her, then tie it shut. “You may turn around,” she told the steward.

“Excellent,” Bluefingers said, doing so. He strode toward a door at the side of the room, waving for her. “Quickly, now. We still have much to do.”

Siri and the serving women followed, leaving the maroon room for one that was decorated in bright yellows. It held a lot more furniture, no bath, and a large plush chair in the center of the room.

“His majesty is associated with no single hue,” Bluefingers said, waving to the bright colors of the room as the women led Siri to the plush chair. “He represents all colors and each of the Iridescent Tones. Therefore, each room is decorated with a different color.”

Siri sat, and the women began to work on her nails. Another tried to brush out the snarls that had come from the hearty washing. Siri frowned. “Just cut it off,” she said.

They hesitated. “Vessel?” one asked.

“Cut off the hair,” she said.

Bluefingers gave them permission, and a few snips later, her hair was in a bunch on the floor. Then Siri closed her eyes and focused.

She wasn’t certain how she did it. The Royal Locks had always been part of her life; altering them was like moving any other muscle to her, if a little more difficult. In a few moments, she was able to get the hair to grow.

Several women gasped softly as the hair sprouted from Siri’s head and moved down to her shoulders. Growing it made her feel hungry and tired, but it was better than letting the women fight snarls. Finished, she opened her eyes.

Bluefingers was watching her with a curious expression, his ledger held loosely in his fingers. “That is... fascinating,” he said. “The Royal Locks. We have waited quite some time for them to grace the palace again, Vessel. You can change the color at will?”

“Yes,” Siri said. Though most of the time, it changes at its own will. “Is it too long?”

“Long hair is seen as a sign of beauty in Hallandren, my lady,” Bluefingers said. “I know you keep it bound up in Idris, but here, flowing hair is favored by many of the women—particularly the Goddesses.”

Part of her wanted to keep the hair short just out of spite. She was beginning to realize that such an attitude, however, could get her killed in Hallandren. Instead, she closed her eyes and focused again. The hair had been shoulder length, but she extended it for several minutes, making it grow until it would reach all the way down her back once she stood.

Siri opened her eyes.

“Beautiful,” one of the younger serving women whispered, then flushed, immediately returning to her work on Siri’s toenails.

“Very nice,” Bluefingers agreed. “I will leave you here—I have a few things to be about—but will return shortly.”

Siri nodded as he left, and several women moved in and began to apply makeup. Siri suffered it pensively, others still working on her nails and hair. This wasn’t how she had imagined her wedding day. Marriage had always seemed distant to her, something that would only happen after spouses had been chosen for her siblings. When she’d been very young, in fact, she’d always said that she intended to raise horses instead of getting married.

She’d grown out of that, but a piece of her felt a longing for such simple times. She *didn’t* want to be married. Not yet. She still felt like a child, even if her body had become that of a woman. She wanted to play in the hills and pick flowers and tease her father. She wanted time to experience more of life before she was forced into the responsibilities of child-bearing.

Fate had taken that opportunity away from her. Now she was faced by the imminent prospect of going to a man’s bed. A man who wouldn’t speak to her, and who wouldn’t care who she was or what she wanted. She knew the physical requirements of what would be involved—she could thank Mab the cook for some candid discussions on that point—but emotionally, she just felt petrified. Everything was all wrong. She wanted to run, hide, flee as far as she could.

Did all women feel this way, or was it only those who were being washed, cleaned, and sent to please a deity with the power to destroy nations?

Bluefingers eventually returned. Another person entered behind him, an elderly man in the blue and silver clothing Siri was beginning to associate with those who served the God King.

But... Bluefingers wears brown, Siri thought, frowning. Why is that?

“Ah, I see that my timing is perfect,” Bluefingers said as the women finished. They retreated to the sides of the room, heads bowed slightly.

Bluefingers nodded to the elderly man. “Vessel, this is one of the palace healers. Before you are taken to the God King, you will need to be inspected to determine if you are a maiden and to ensure that you don’t have certain diseases. It’s really just a formality, but one that I’m afraid I must insist upon. In consideration of your bashfulness, I did not bring the young healer I had originally assigned to the job. I assume an older healer will make you more comfortable?”

Siri sighed, but nodded. Bluefingers gestured toward a padded table on the side of the room, then he and his serving boy turned around. Siri undid her robe and went to the table, lying down to continue what was proving to be the most embarrassing day of her life.

It will only get worse, she thought as the doctor did his examination.

Susebron, the God King. Awesome, terrible, holy, majestic. He had been stillborn, but had Returned. What did that do to a man? Would he even be human? Would he be some monster, terrible to behold? He was said to be eternal, but obviously his reign would end, otherwise he wouldn’t need an heir.

She shivered, partially wishing it would just be over with, but also partially relieved for anything that stalled for just a little longer, even something as humiliating as the doctor’s prodding. It eventually finished, however, and Siri quickly did up her robe again, standing.

“She is quite healthy,” the healer said to Bluefingers. “And most likely still a maiden. She has a very strong Breath, as well.”

Siri froze. How could he tell...

And then she saw it. She had to look very closely, but the yellow floor around the surgeon looked a tad too bright. She felt herself pale, though the nervousness had already made her hair as white as it went.

The doctor is an Awakener, she thought. There is an Awakener here, in this room. And he touched me.

She cringed, skin writhing. It was wrong to take the Breath from another person. It was the ultimate in arrogance, the complete opposite of Idris philosophy. Others in Hallandren simply wore bright colors to draw attention to themselves, but Awakeners... they stole the life from human beings, and used *that* to make themselves stand out.

Use of Breath was one of the main reasons that the Royal line had moved to the highlands in the first place. Modern day Hallandren subsisted on the basis of extorting its people out of its Breath. Siri felt more naked now than she had been when unclothed. What could this Awakener tell about her, because of his unnatural life force? Was he tempted to steal Siri’s BioChroma? She tried to breathe as shallowly as possible, just in case.

Eventually, Bluefingers and the terrible doctor left the room. The women approached to undo her robe once again, some bearing undergarments.

He will be worse, she realized. The King. He’s not just an Awakener, he’s Returned. He needs to suck the Breath from people in order to survive.

Would he take away her Breath?

No, that won’t happen, she told herself firmly. He needs me to provide him with an heir of the Royal line. He won’t risk the child’s safety. He’ll leave me my Breath, if only until then.

But... what would happen to her when she was no longer needed?

Her attention was drawn away from such thoughts as several serving women approached with a large bundle of cloth. A dress. No, a gown—a gorgeous gown of blue and silver.

Siri waited quietly as the women put it on her. The fabric was amazingly soft on her skin, the velvet smooth like petals from a highland flower. As the women situated it on her, she noticed that—oddly—that it laced up the side, instead of the back. It had an extremely long train and sleeves that were so long that if she put her arms down at the sides, the cuffs hung several feet below her hands. It took several minutes for the women to get the ties done up right, the folds situated correctly, and the train arranged behind her. *All this so that it can be taken off again in a few minutes*, Siri thought with a detached sense of cold irony as a woman approached with a mirror.

Siri froze.

Where had all that color come from? The delicately red cheeks, the mysteriously dark eyes, the blue on the top of her eyelids? The deep red lips, the almost glowing skin? The gown shone silver upon blue, bulky yet beautiful, with ripples of deep, velvet cloth.

It was like nothing she'd seen in Idris. It was more amazing, even, than the colors she'd seen on the people in the city. Staring at herself in the mirror, Siri was almost able to forget her worries. "Thank you," she whispered.

That must have been the right response, for the serving women smiled, glancing at each other. Two took her hands, moving much more respectfully now than when they'd first rushed her from the carriage. Siri strode with them, train rustling behind her, and the other women stayed behind. Siri turned, and the women curtsied to her one at a time, heads bowed.

She turned away from them, and the last two—the ones leading her—opened a door, then gently pushed her out into the hallway beyond. They closed the door, leaving her.

The hallway was of the deepest black. She'd almost forgotten how dark the stone walls of the palace were. The hallway was empty, save for Bluefingers, who stood waiting for her with his ledger. He smiled at her, bowing his head in respect.

"The God King will be pleased, Vessel," he said. "We are exactly on time—the sun only just set."

Siri turned from Bluefingers. Directly across from her was a large, imposing door. It was plated entirely with gold. Four wall lamps shone without colored glass, and they reflected light off the gilded portal. She had no question as to who lie beyond such an impressive marker.

"This is the God King's sleeping chambers," Bluefingers said. "Rather, *one* of his sleeping chambers. Now, my lady, you *must* hear this again. Do nothing to offend the King. You are here at *his* sufferance, and are here to see to *his* needs. Not mine, not your own, and not even that of our kingdom."

"I understand," she said quietly, heart beating faster and faster.

"Thank you," Bluefingers said. "It is time to present yourself. Enter the room, then remove your dress and underclothing. Bow yourself to the ground before the King's bed, touching your head to the floor. When he wishes for you to approach, he will knock on the side post, and you may look up. He will then wave you forward."

She nodded.

"Just... try not to touch him too much."

Siri frowned, clenching and unclenching her increasingly nervous hands. "How exactly am I going to manage *that*? We're going to have sex, aren't we?"

Bluefingers flushed. "Yes, I guess you are. This is something of new ground for me, my lady. The God King... well, only a group of specially dedicated servants are supposed to touch him. My suggestion would be to avoid kissing him, caressing him, or doing anything else that might offend him. Simply let him do to you what he wishes, and you should be safe."

Siri took a deep breath, nodding.

“When you are finished,” Bluefingers said, “the King will withdraw. Take the bed linens and burn them in the hearth. As the Vessel, you are the only one allowed to handle such things. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Siri said, growing increasingly anxious.

“Very well then,” Bluefingers said, looking almost as nervous as she was. “Good luck.” With that, he reached forward and pushed the door open.

Oh, Austre, God of Colors, she thought, heart pounding, hands sweating, growing numb.

Bluefingers pushed her lightly on the back, and she stepped into the room.

Chapter Seven

The door shut behind her.

A large fire growled in a hearth to her left, bringing a shifting orange light to the large room. The black walls seemed to draw in and absorb the illumination, making deep shadows at the edges of the room.

Siri stood quietly in her ornate velvet dress, heart thumping, brow sweating. To her right, she could make out a massive bed, with sheets and covers of black to match the rest of the room. The bed appeared unoccupied. Siri peered into the darkness, eyes adjusting.

The fire crackled, throwing a flicker of light across a large, throne-like chair sitting beside the bed. It was occupied by a figure wearing black, bathed in darkness. He watched her, eyes twinkling, unblinking in the firelight.

Siri gasped, casting her eyes downward, her heartbeat surging as she remembered Bluefingers' warnings. *Vivenna should be here instead of me*, Siri thought desperately. *I can't deal with this! Father was wrong to send me!*

She squeezed her eyes shut, her breathing coming more quickly. She waved shaking fingers and pulled nervously at the strings on the side of her dress. Her hands were slick with sweat as she tried to undress. Was she taking too long? Would he be angered? Would she be killed before even the first night was out?

Would she maybe prefer that?

No, she thought with determination. No. I need to do this. For Idris. For the fields and the children who took flowers from me. For my father and Mab and everyone else in the palace.

She finally got the strings undone, and the gown fell away with surprising ease—she could now see that it had been constructed with that goal in mind. She dropped the dress to the floor then paused, looking at her undershift. The white fabric was throwing out a spectrum of colors, like light bent by a prism. She regarded this with shock, wondering what was causing the strange effect.

It didn't matter. She was too nervous to think about that. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to pull off her undershift, leaving her naked. She quickly knelt on the cold stone floor, curling up, heart thudding in her ears as she bowed with her forehead touching the floor.

The room fell silent save for the crackling hearth. The fire wasn't really necessary in the Hallandren warmth, but she was glad for it, unclothed as she was.

She waited, hair pure white, arrogance and stubbornness discarded, naked in more than one way. This is where she ended up—this is where all her 'independent' sense of freedom came to a halt. No matter what she claimed or how she felt, in the end, she had to bow to authority. Just like anyone else.

She gritted her teeth, imagining the God King sitting there, watching her subservient and naked before him. She hadn't seen much of him, other than to notice his size—he was a good foot taller than most other men she'd seen, and was wider of shoulders and more powerful of build as well. More significant than other, lesser men.

He was Returned.

Being Returned in and of itself wasn't a sin. After all, Returned came in Idris too. The Hallandren people, however, kept the Returned alive, feeding them on the souls of peasants, tearing away the Breath of hundreds of people each year...

Don't think of that, Siri told herself forcefully. Yet, as she tried to clear her mind, the God King's eyes returned to her memory. Those black eyes, which had almost seemed to glow in the firelight. She could feel them on her still, watching her, as cold as the stones upon which she knelt.

The fire crackled. Bluefingers had said that the King would knock for her. What if she missed it? But, she didn't dare glance upward. She'd already met his gaze once, if by accident. She couldn't risk upsetting him further. She just continued to kneel in place, elbows on the ground, back beginning to ache.

Why doesn't he do something?

Was he was displeased with her? Was she not as pretty as he'd desired, or was he angered that she'd met his eyes, then taken too long to undress? It would be particularly ironic if she offended him when trying so hard not to be her usual flippant self. Or was something else wrong? He had been promised the eldest daughter of the Idris king, but had instead received Siri. Would he know the difference? Would he even care?

The minutes passed, the room growing more dark as the fire burned away its logs.

He's toying with me, Siri thought. *Forcing me to wait on his whims*. Making her kneel in such an uncomfortable position was probably a message—one that showed who was in power. He would take her when *he* willed it, and not before.

Siri gritted her teeth as the time passed. How long had she been kneeling? An hour, maybe longer. And still, there wasn't a hint of sound—no knock, no cough, not even a shuffle from the God King. Perhaps it was a test, to see how long she would remain as she was. Perhaps she was just reading too much into things. Either way, she forced herself to remain in place, shifting only when she absolutely had to.

Vivenna had the training. Vivenna had the poise and the refinement. But Siri, she had the stubbornness. One only had to look back at her history of repeatedly ignoring lessons and duties to realize that. With time, she'd even broken down her father. He'd started letting her do as she pleased, if only to save his own sanity.

And so she continued to wait—naked in the light of the coals—as the night wore on.

#

Fireworks sprayed sparks up in a fountain of light. Some fell close to where Lightsong was sitting, and these blazed with an extra, frenzied light until they died away.

He reclined on a couch in the open air, watching the display. Servants waited around him, complete with parasols, a portable bar, wet towels to rub his face and hands should he feel the need, and a host of other luxuries that—to Lightsong—were simply commonplace.

He watched the fireworks with mild interest. The firemasters stood in a nervous cluster near his position. Beside them were a troop of minstrels that Lightsong had called for, yet hadn't yet asked to perform. While there were always entertainers in the Court of Gods for the Returned to enjoy, this night—the wedding night of their God King—was even more extravagant.

Susebron wasn't in attendance himself, of course. Such festivities were beneath him. Lightsong glanced to the side, where the King's palace rose above the Court of Gods. Eventually, Lightsong just shook his head and turned his attention back to the courtyard. The palaces of the gods formed a ring, and each building had a patio and balcony facing the central area. So, Lightsong basically sat in the front yard of his palace, though that yard also happened to be part of the massive courtyard.

Another firefountain sprayed into the air, throwing shadows across the courtyard. Lightsong sighed, accepting another fruited drink from a servant. The night was cool and pleasant, fit for a God. Or Gods. Lightsong could see other pavilions set up in front of other palaces. Different groups of performers cluttered the sides of the courtyard, waiting for their chance to please one of the Returned.

The fountain ran low, and the firemasters looked toward him, smiling hopefully by torchlight. Lightsong nodded with his best benevolent expression. “More fireworks,” he said. “You have pleased me.” This caused the three men to whisper in excitement and wave for their assistants.

As they set up, a familiar figure wandered into Lightsong’s ring of torches. Llarimar wore his priestly robes, as always. Even when he was out in the city—which was where he should have been this night—he represented Lightsong and his priesthood.

“Scoot?” Lightsong asked, sitting up.

“Your grace,” Llarimar said, bowing.

“What are you doing here?” Lightsong said. “You should be out with your family.”

“I just wanted to check to make certain everything was to your liking.”

Lightsong rubbed his forehead. “You’re giving me a headache, Scoot.”

“You can’t get headaches, your grace.”

“So you’re fond of telling me,” Lightsong said, waving for a servant to bring his priest a stool. “How are things outside the holy prison?”

Llarimar frowned at the choice of words. “His Excellency’s wedding celebrations are quite fantastic,” he said, adjusting his spectacles as another fountain of sparks began to spurt in the courtyard before them. “The city hasn’t seen a festival this grand in decades.”

“Then you should be out enjoying it.”

“I just—”

“Scoot,” Lightsong said, giving the man a pointed look, “if there’s *one* thing you can trust me to do competently on my own, it’s enjoy myself. I will—I promise in all solemnity—have a ravishingly good time drinking myself to excess and watching these nice men light things on fire. Now go be with your family.”

Llarimar paused, then stood, bowed, and withdrew.

That man, Lightsong thought, sipping his fruity drink, takes his work far too seriously.

The concept amused Lightsong, and he leaned back, enjoying the fireworks. However, he was soon distracted by the approach of someone else. Or, rather, one very important someone else leading a group of far less important someone elses. Lightsong sipped his drink again.

The newcomer was beautiful. She was a Goddess, after all. Dark black hair, pale skin, lush and curvaceous body. She wore far less clothing than Lightsong did, but that was common for most of the Court’s Goddesses. Her thin gown of green and silver was split on both sides, showing hips and thighs, and the neckline was draped down so low that very little was left to imagination.

Blushweaver the Beautiful, Goddess of Honesty.

She was trailed by about thirty servants, not to mention her high priest and a good six lesser priests. The firemasters grew excited, noticing that they now had not one, but two divine attendants. The apprentices went about in a flurry of motion, setting up another series of firefountains. A group of Blushweaver’s servants rushed forward, carrying an ornate couch, which they set on the grass beside Lightsong.

Blushweaver lay down with customary litheness, crossing perfect legs and resting on her side in a seductive, lady-like pose. The orientation left her capable of watching the fireworks should she wish, but her attention was obviously focused on Lightsong.

“My dear Lightsong,” she said as a servant approached with a bunch of grapes. “Aren’t you even going to acknowledge me?”

Here we go, Lightsong thought with resignation. “My dear Blushweaver,” he said, setting aside his cup and lacing his fingers before him. “Why would I go and do something rude like that?”

“Rude?” she asked, amused.

“Of course. You obviously make quite a determined effort to draw attention to yourself—the details are magnificent, by the way. Is that makeup on your thighs?”

She smiled, biting into a grape. “It’s a kind of paint, my dear. The designs were drawn by some of the most talented artists in my priesthood.”

“My compliments to them,” Lightsong said. “The patterns certainly draw the eye. And, they are a point unto my argument. You need no acknowledgement, my dear. Your mere presence is its own acknowledgement. Were I to go so far as to *point out* your display, then I would simply be undermining it. It would be like... shouting encouragement to the puppeteer as he gives his show.”

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “But, didn’t your very explanation do just that?”

“Only because you forced my hand, my dear,” Lightsong said as the fireworks went off again. With two Gods and their auras, the colors of the sparks grew quite powerful indeed. On the far side, some sparks left the Breath Auras, and these fell to the ground looking dull and weak. as if their fire were cool and insignificant enough that it could be picked up and tucked away.

“I see,” Blushweaver said, eyeing the fireworks. “You seem captivated by the fire show. Is it that much more fascinating than I?”

“Not at all. It simply seems far less likely to burn me.”

Blushweaver smiled. “Then you admit that you find me beautiful?”

“Of course. Why, my dear, you’re positively *rank* with beauty. You’re literally part of the definition of the word—it’s in your name somewhere, I do believe.”

“My dear Lightsong, *I* do believe that you’re making sport of me.”

“I never make fun of ladies, Blushweaver,” Lightsong said, picking up his drink again. “Mocking a woman is like drinking too much wine. It may be fun for a short time, but the hangover is hell.”

Blushweaver paused. “But we don’t get hangovers.”

“Yes, of course. And that, my dear, is why I had to mock you. Please forgive me. It was but an inevitability forced on an unwilling servant.”

Blushweaver opened her mouth to reply, then closed it. “Sometimes,” she finally said, “I’m not certain when you are being silly and when you’re being serious, Lightsong.”

“Well, I can help you with that one easily enough,” he said. “If you *ever* think I’m being serious, then you can know that you’ve been working too hard on the problem.”

“I see,” she said, twisting on her couch so that she was face down. She leaned on her elbows with breasts pushed up between them, fireworks lighting her exposed back. “So, then. You admit that I’m captivating and beautiful. Would you then care to retire from the festivities this evening? Find... other entertainments?”

Lightsong hesitated. Being unable to bear children didn’t stop the Gods from seeking intimacy, particularly with other Returned. In fact, from what Lightsong could guess, the

impossibility of offspring only increased the laxness of the Court in these matters. Many a God took mortal lovers—Blushweaver was known to have a few of her own among her priests. Distractions with mortals were never seen as infidelity among Gods.

Blushweaver lounged on her couch, supple, inviting. Lightsong opened his mouth, but in his mind, he saw... her. The woman of vision from his dreams, the face he'd mentioned to Llarimar. Who was she?

Probably nothing. A flash from his former life, or perhaps simply an image crafted by his subconscious. Maybe even, as the priests claimed, some kind of prophetic symbol. The face shouldn't give him pause. Not when faced with perfection.

"I... must decline," he found himself saying. "I am, unfortunately, too lazy for such things."

"Too lazy for sex?" Blushweaver asked, rolling back onto her side and regarding him.

"I'm really quite indolent. A poor example of a God, as I keep telling my high priest. Nobody seems to listen to me, so I fear that I must continue to be diligent in proving my point. Dallying with you would, unfortunately, undermine my entire basis for argument."

Blushweaver shook her head. "You confuse me sometimes, Lightsong. If it weren't for your reputation, I'd simply presume you to be shy. How could you have slept with Calmseer, but consistently ignore me?"

Calmseer was the last honorable Returned this city has known, Lightsong thought, sipping his drink. Nobody left has a shred of her decency. Myself included.

Blushweaver fell silent, watching the latest display from the firemasters. The show had grown progressively more ornate, and Lightsong was considering calling the men off, lest they use all of their fireworks on him and not have any left should another God call upon them.

Blushweaver didn't make any moves to return to her own pavilion, and Lightsong let her be. He suspected that she hadn't come simply for verbal sparring, or even to try and bed him. No, Blushweaver had her plans. In Lightsong's experience, there was more depth to the woman than at first glance.

Eventually, his hunch paid off. She turned from the fireworks, eying the dark palace of the God King. "We have a new queen."

"I noticed," Lightsong said. "Though, admittedly, only because I was reminded several times."

They fell silent.

"Have you no thoughts on the matter?" Blushweaver finally asked.

"I try to avoid having thoughts. They lead to other thoughts, and—if you're not careful—those lead to actions. Actions make you tired. I have this on rather good authority from someone who once read it in a book."

Blushweaver sighed. "You avoid thinking, you avoid me, you avoid effort... is there anything you *don't* avoid?"

"Breakfast."

Blushweaver didn't react to this, which Lightsong found disappointing. She was too focused on the King's palace. Lightsong often tried to ignore the large black building; he didn't like how it seemed to tower over him.

"Perhaps you should make an exception," Blushweaver said, "and give some thought to *this* particular situation. This queen means something."

"We've had queens before."

“Never one of the Royal line,” Blushweaver said. “At least, there hasn’t been one since the days of Klad the Usurper.”

Klad. The man who had started the Manywar, the one who had used his knowledge of BioChromatic Breath to create a vast army of Lifeless and seize power in Hallandren. He had protected the kingdom, yet shattered it, driving the Royals into the highlands.

Now they were back. Or, at least, one of them was.

“This is a dangerous day, Lightsong,” Blushweaver said quietly. “What happens if that woman bears a child who isn’t Returned?”

“Impossible,” Lightsong said.

“Oh? You are that confident?”

Lightsong nodded. “Of the Returned, only the God King can bear children, and they’re always stillborn.”

Blushweaver shook her head. “The only word we have on that is from the palace priests themselves. Yet, I’ve heard of... discrepancies in the records. Even if we don’t worry about those, there are plenty of other considerations. Why do we need a Royal to ‘legitimize’ our throne? Isn’t three hundred years of rule by the Court of Gods enough to make the kingdom legitimate?”

Lightsong shrugged.

“This marriage says that we still accept Royal authority,” Blushweaver said. “What happens if that king up in the highlands decides to take his kingdom back? What happens if that queen of ours in there has a child by another man? Who is the heir? Who rules?”

“The God King rules. Everyone knows that.”

“He didn’t rule three hundred years ago,” Blushweaver said. “The Royals did. Then, after them, Klad did—and after him, Peacegiver. Change can happen quickly. By inviting that woman into our city, we could have initiated the end of Returned rule in Hallandren.”

She fell silent, pensive. Lightsong studied the beautiful Goddess. It had been fifteen years since her Return—which made her old, for a Returned. Old, wise, and incredibly crafty.

Blushweaver glanced at him. “I don’t intend to find myself caught, surprised, like the Royals were when Klad seized their throne. Some of us are planning, Lightsong. You can join us, if you wish.”

“Politics, my dear,” he said with a sigh. “You know how I loathe them.”

“You’re the God of bravery. We could use your confidence.”

“At this point, I’m only confident that I’ll be of no use to you.”

Her face grew impassive. Eventually, she sighed and stood, stretching, showing off her perfect figure once again. “You’ll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong,” she said. “You’re a god to this people.”

“Not by choice, my dear.”

She smiled, then bent down and kissed him softly. “Just consider what I said. You’re a better man than you give yourself credit for being. You think I’d offer myself to just anyone?”

He hesitated, then frowned. “Actually... yes. I do.”

She laughed, turning as her servants picked up her couch. “Oh, come now! There’ve got to be at least *three* of the other Gods I wouldn’t *think* of letting touch me. Enjoy the party, and do try to imagine what our King is doing to our legacy up in his chambers right now. She glanced back at

him. “Particularly if that imagining reminds you of what you just missed out on.” She winked, then trailed away.

Lightsong sat back on his couch, then dismissed the firemasters with words of praise. As the minstrels began to play, he tried to empty his mind of Blushweaver’s ominous words.

He failed.

Chapter Eight

Siri groaned, rolling over. Her back hurt, her arms hurt, and her head hurt. In fact, she was so uncomfortable that she couldn't stay asleep, despite her fatigue. She sat up, holding her head.

She'd spent the night on the floor of the God King's bed chamber—sleeping, kind of. Sunlight poured into the room, reflecting off of the marble where the floor wasn't covered with rugs.

Black rugs, she thought, sitting in the middle of the rumpled blue dress, which she'd used as both blanket and pillow. Black rugs on a black floor with black furniture. These Hallandrens certainly know how to run with a motif.

The God King wasn't in the room. Siri glanced toward the oversized black leather chair where he'd spent much of the night. She hadn't seen him leave.

She yawned, then rose, pulling her shift out of the wadded mound of dress and putting it on. She pulled her hair out, flipping it behind her. Keeping it so long was going to take some getting used to. It fell down against her back, a contented blonde in color.

She'd survived the night untouched. Somehow.

She walked on bare feet over to the leather chair, running her fingers along its smooth surface. She'd been less than respectful. She'd dozed off. She'd curled up and pulled her dress close for warmth. She'd even glanced over at the chair a few times. Not because of defiance or a disobedient heart; she'd simply been too drowsy to remember that she wasn't supposed to look at the God King.

He hadn't ordered her executed. Bluefingers had had made her worry that the God King was volatile and quick to anger. Yet, if that were the case, then he had held his temper with her. What else was he going to do? The Hallandren had waited for decades to get a Royal princess to marry into their line of God Kings. She smiled. *I do have some power*. He couldn't kill her—not until he had what he wanted.

It wasn't much. But, it did give her a bit more confidence. She walked around the chair, noting its size. Everything in the room was built as if to be just a little too large, skewing her perspective, making her feel shorter than she was. She rested her hand on the arm of the chair, and found herself wondering why he hadn't decided to take her. What was wrong with her? Wasn't she desirable?

Foolish girl, she told herself, shaking her head and walking over to the still-undisturbed bed. You spent most of the trip here worrying about what would happen on your wedding night, and then when nothing happens, you complain about that too?

She knew she wasn't free. He would take her eventually—that was the point of the entire arrangement. But, it hadn't happened last night. She smiled, yawning. Then, she climbed up into the bed and curled up in the covers, drifting off.

#

The next time she woke was a great deal more pleasant than the previous had been. Siri stretched, and then noticed something.

Her dress, which she'd left sitting in a heap on the floor, was gone. Also, the fire in the hearth had been stoked—though why that was necessary was beyond her. The day was warm, and she'd kicked off most of the covers as she'd slept.

I'm supposed to burn the sheets, she remembered. That's the reason they rebuilt the fire.

She sat up in her shift, alone in the black room. The servants and priests wouldn't know that she'd spent the night on the floor unless the God King had told someone. How likely would a man of his power be to speak with his priests about intimate details?

Slowly, Siri climbed out of bed and pulled the sheets free. She wadded them up, walked over, and threw them into the large hearth. Then she watched the flames. She still didn't know why the God King had left her alone. Until she knew, it seemed better to just let everyone assume that the wedding had been consummated.

After the sheets were finished burning, Siri scanned the room, looking for something to wear. She found nothing. Sighing, she walked to the door, clothed only in her shift. She pulled it open, and jumped slightly. Two dozen serving women of varying ages knelt outside.

God of Colors! Siri thought. *How long have they been kneeling out here?* Suddenly, she didn't feel quite so indignant at being forced to wait upon the God King's whims. Apparently, she'd just done something similar to these women.

The women stood up, heads bowed, and walked into the room. Siri backed up, cocking her head she noticed that several of the women carried in large chests. *They're dressed in different colors from the day before,* Siri thought. The cut was the same—divided skirts, like flowing trousers, topped with sleeveless blouses and small caps, their hair coming out the back. Instead of the blue and silver, the outfits were now yellow and copper.

The women opened the trunks, removing various layers of clothing. All were of bright colors, and each was of a different cut. The women spread them out on the floor before Siri, then settled back on their knees, waiting.

Siri hesitated. She'd grown up the daughter of a king, so she'd never really lacked. Yet, life in Idris was austere. She'd owned five dresses, which had been nearly been an extravagant number. One had been white, and the other four had been the same wan blue.

Being confronted by so many colors and options felt overwhelming. She stood, trying to imagine how each would look on her. Many of them were dangerously low cut, even more so than the shirts the serving women wore—and those were already scandalous by Idris standards.

Finally, hesitantly, Siri pointed at one outfit. It was a dress in two pieces, red skirt and matching blouse. As Siri pointed, the serving women stood, some putting away the unchosen outfits, others walking over to carefully remove Siri's shift.

In a few minutes, Siri was dressed. She was embarrassed to find that—while the clothing fit her perfectly—the blouse was designed to reveal her midriff. Still, it wasn't as low cut as the others, and the skirt went all the way down to her calves. The silky red material was far lighter than the thick wools and linen she was accustomed to wearing. The skirt flared and ruffled when she turned, and Siri couldn't be completely certain it wasn't sheer. Standing in it, she almost felt as naked as she'd been during the night.

That appears to be a recurring theme for me here, she thought wryly as the serving women backed away, bowing. Others approached with a stool, and she sat, waiting as the women cleaned her face and arms with a pleasantly warm cloth. When that was done, they re-applied her makeup, did her hair, then sprayed her with a few puffs of perfume.

When she opened her eyes—perfume misting down around her—Bluefingers was standing in the room. "Ah, excellent," he said, servant boy standing obediently behind with ink, quill, and paper. "You're up already."

Already? Siri thought. *It has to be well past noon.*

Bluefingers looked her over, nodded to himself, then glanced at the bed, obviously checking to see that the linens had been destroyed. “Well,” he said. “I trust that your servants will see to your needs, Vessel.” With that, he began to walk away with the anxious feet of a man who felt he had far too much to do.

“Wait!” Siri said, standing, jostling several of her serving women.

Bluefingers hesitated. “Vessel?”

Siri floundered, uncertain how to express what she was feeling. “Do you know... what I’m supposed to do?”

“Do, Vessel?” the scribe asked. “You mean, in regards to...” he glanced at the bed.

Siri flushed. “No, not that. I mean with my time. What are my duties? What is expected of me?”

“To provide an heir.”

“Beyond that.”

Bluefingers frowned. “I... well, to be honest, Vessel, I really don’t know. I must say, your marriage has certainly caused a level of... disruption in the Court of Gods.”

In my life, too, she thought.

“In the past,” Bluefingers said, “the God King always married a Goddess. She, therefore, could live in her own palace and attend her own duties, watched by her own servants. She only needed to visit the palace at night. You, however, have neither palace nor servants. We could provide you with a palace in Court—there are several that are unoccupied—but, you’re not Returned, so it probably wouldn’t be appropriate.”

He paused, eyeing her—as if all of this were her fault. “My lady, you are—I’m afraid—a bureaucratic nightmare.”

Siri fell silent, flushing slightly, hair turning red.

“Not that you’re to blame, of course,” Bluefingers said quickly. “But, then... well, I certainly wish I’d had more forewarning.”

“More forewarning?” Siri asked. “This marriage was arranged by treaty over twenty years ago!”

“Yes, well, but nobody thought...” he trailed off. “Ahem. Well, either way, we shall do our best to accommodate you here in the King’s palace.”

What was that? Siri thought. Nobody thought... that the marriage would really happen? Why not? Did they assume that Idris wouldn’t keep it’s part of the bargain?

“Anyway,” Bluefingers said, inching toward the door again, “if you have no further need of me...”

“I still don’t know what I’m supposed to *do*,” Siri said, sitting down on the stool again. “Am I to sit here in the palace and stare at the fire all day?”

Bluefingers chuckled. “Oh, Colors no! My lady, this is the Court of the Gods! You’ll find plenty to occupy you. Each day, performers are allowed to enter the Court and display their talents for their deities. You may have any of these brought to you for a private performance.”

“Ah,” Siri said. “Can I, maybe, go horseback riding?”

Bluefingers rubbed his chin. “I suppose we could bring some horses into the Court for you. Of course, we’d have to wait until the Wedding Jubilations are over.”

“Wedding Jubilations?” she asked.

“You... don’t know, then? Were you not prepared for any of this?”

Siri flushed.

“No offense intended, Vessel,” Bluefingers said. “The Wedding Jubilation is a week long period in which we celebrate the God King’s marriage. During that time, you are not to leave this palace. At the end of it, you will officially be presented to the Court of Gods.”

“Oh,” she said. “And, after that, I can go out of the city?”

“Out of the city!” Bluefingers said. “Vessel, you can’t leave the Court of Gods!”

“*What?*”

“You may not be a God yourself,” Bluefingers continued. “But you’re the wife of the God King. It would be far too dangerous to let you out. But do not fret—anything and everything you might request can be provided for you.”

Except freedom, she thought, feeling a bit sick.

“I assure you, once the Wedding Jubilation is over, you will find little to complain about. Everything you could want is here: every type of indulgence, every luxury, every diversion.”

Siri nodded numbly, still feeling trapped.

“Also,” Bluefingers said, holding up an ink stained finger. “If you wish, the Court of Judgment meets to provide decisions to the people. Full court meets once a week, though daily there are smaller judgments to be made. You aren’t to sit on the court itself, of course, but you will certainly be allowed to attend, once the Jubilation is over. If none of this suits you, you may request an artist of the God King’s priesthood to attend you. His priests include devout and accomplished artists from all genres: music, painting, dance, poetry, sculpture, puppetry, play performance, sandpainting, or any of the lesser genres.”

Siri blinked. *God of Colors!* she thought. *Even being idle is daunting here.* “But,” she said, “there isn’t any of this that I’m *required* to attend?”

“No, I shouldn’t think so,” Bluefingers said. “Vessel, you look displeased.”

“I...” How could she explain? Her entire life, she’d been expected to be something—and for most of her life she’d intentionally avoided being it. Now that was gone from her. She couldn’t disobey lest she get herself killed and get Idris into a war. For once, she was willing to serve, to try and be obedient.

But, ironically, there didn’t seem to be anything for her to do. Except, of course, bear a child and not antagonize the God King. “Very well,” she said with a sigh. “Where are my rooms? I’ll go there and situate myself.”

“Your rooms, Vessel?”

“Yes. I assume I’m not to reside in this chamber itself.”

“No,” Bluefingers said, chuckling. “The Conception room? Of course not.”

“Then where?” Siri asked.

“Vessel,” Bluefingers said. “This entire place is, in a way, yours. I don’t see why you’d need specific rooms. Ask to eat, and your servants will set up a table. If you wish to rest, they will bring you a couch or a chair. Seek entertainment, and they will fetch for you performers.”

Suddenly, the strange actions of her servants—simply bringing her an array of colors to choose from, then doing her makeup and hair right there—made more sense. “I see,” she said, almost to herself. “And, the soldiers I brought with me? Did they do as I commanded?”

“Yes, Vessel,” Bluefingers said. “They left this morning. It was a wise decision; they are not dedicated servants of the Tones, and would not have been allowed to stay here in the Court. They could do you no further service.”

Siri nodded, though knowing they were gone made her feel even more alone.

“Vessel, if I might be excused... ?” Bluefingers asked.

Siri nodded distractedly, and Bluefingers bustled away, leaving her to think about how terribly alone she suddenly was. *Can't focus on that*, she thought. Instead, she turned to one of her serving women—a younger one, about Siri's own age. “Well, that really doesn't tell me what to spend my time on, does it?”

The servant blushed quietly, bowing her head.

“I mean, there seems to be a lot to do, if I want,” Siri said. “Maybe too much.”

The girl bowed again.

That's going to get very annoying very quickly, Siri thought, gritting her teeth. Part of her wanted to do something shocking to get a reaction out of the servant, but she knew she was just being foolish. In fact, it seemed that many of her natural impulses and reactions wouldn't work here in Hallandren. So, too keep herself from doing something silly, Siri stood up, determined to examine her new home. She left the overly-black room, poking her head out into the hallway. She turned back to her servants, who stood obediently in a line behind her.

“Is there any place I'm forbidden to go?” she asked.

The one she was addressing shook her head.

Fine, then, she thought. *I'd better not end up stumbling upon the God King in the bath*. She crossed the hallway, opened the door, then stepped into the yellow room she'd been in the day before. The chair and bench she'd used had been removed, replaced by a group of yellow couches. Siri raised an eyebrow, then walked through into the tub room beyond.

The tub was gone. She started. The room was the one she remembered, with same red colorings. Yet, the sloped tile platforms with their inset tubs were gone. The entire contraption must have been portable, brought in for her bath, then removed.

They really can transform any room, she thought with amazement. They must have chambers full of furniture, tubs, and draping, each of a different color, waiting upon the whims of their God.

Curious, she left the tub-less room and moved in a random direction. Each room appeared to have four doors, one on each wall. Some rooms were larger than others. Some had windows to the outside, while others were locked in the middle of the palace. Each was a different color. Yet it was still difficult to tell the difference between them. Endless rooms, pristine with their decorations following a single color's theme. Soon, she was hopelessly lost—but it didn't seem to matter. Every room was, in a way, the same as any other.

She turned to her servants. “I would like breakfast.”

And it happened. Far faster than Siri would have thought possible. Several of the women ducked out and returned with a stuffed green chair to match her current room. Siri sat down, waiting as a table, chairs, and finally food were produced as if out of nowhere. In less than fifteen minutes, she had a hot meal waiting for her.

Hesitantly, she picked up a fork and tried a bite. It wasn't until that moment that she realized how hungry she was. The meal was composed primarily of a group of sausages mixed with vegetables. The flavors were far stronger than she was accustomed to. However, the more she ate the spicy Hallandren food, the more she found herself liking it.

Hungry or not, it was strange to eat in silence. Siri was accustomed to either eating in the kitchens with the servants or at the table with her father, his generals, and whatever local people or monks he had invited to his table that evening. It was never a silent affair.

Yet here in Hallandren—land of colors, sounds, and ostentation—she found herself eating alone, quietly, in a room that felt dull despite its bright decorations.

Her servants watched. None of them spoke to her. Their silence was supposed to be respectful, she knew, but Siri just found it intimidating. She tried several times to draw them into conversation, but she managed to get only terse replies.

She chewed on a spiced caper. Is this what my life is to be from now on? she thought. A night spent feeling half-used, half-ignored by my husband, then days spent surrounded by people, yet somehow still alone?

She shivered, her appetite waning. She set down the fork, and her food slowly grew cold on the table before her. She stared at it, a piece of her wishing she's simply remained in the comfortable, oversized black bed.

Chapter Nine

Three days later, Lightsong had to hear Petitions. It was annoying, since the Wedding Jubilation wasn't even over.

Yet, the people needed their Gods. He knew he shouldn't feel annoyed. He'd gotten three days off for the royal wedding—copiously unattended by either the bride or groom—and that was enough. All he had to do was spend a few hours each day looking at art and listening to the woes of the people. It wasn't much. Even if it did wear away at his sanity.

He sighed, sitting back in his throne-like chair. He wore an embroidered cap on his head, matched by a loose robe of gold and red. The garment wrapped over both shoulders, twisted about his body, and was hung with ruffled golden tassels. Like all of his clothing, it was even *more* complicated to put on than it looked.

If my servants were to suddenly leave me, he thought with amusement, *I'd be totally incapable of getting dressed.*

He leaned his head on one fist, elbow on the throne's arm rest. This room of his palace opened directly out onto the lawn—harsh weather was rare in Hallandren, and a cool breeze blew in off of the sea, smelling of brine. He closed his eyes, breathing in.

He'd dreamed of the waters again last night. Llarimar had found that particularly meaningful.

"Next petition, your grace," Llarimar whispered from his side.

Lightsong sighed, opening his eyes. Both edges of the room were lined with priests in their coifs and robes. Where had he gotten so many? Did any god need that much attention?

He could see a line of people extending outside on the lawn. They were a sorry, forlorn lot, several coughing from some malady or another. *So many*, he thought as a woman was led into the room. He'd been seeing petitioners for over an hour already. *I guess I should have expected this. It's been four days.*

"Scoot," he said, turning to his priest. "Go tell those waiting people to sit down in the grass. There's no reason for them to all stand there like that. This could take some time."

Llarimar hesitated. Standing was, of course, a sign of respect. However, he nodded, waving over a lesser priest to carry the message.

Such a crowd, waiting to see me, Lightsong thought. *What will it take to convince the people that I'm useless?* What would it take to get them to stop coming to him? After five years of petitions, he honestly wasn't certain if he could take another five.

The newest petitioner approached his throne. She carried a child in her arms.

Not a child... Lightsong thought, cringing mentally.

"Great One," the woman said, falling to her knees on the carpet. "Lord of Bravery."

Lightsong didn't speak.

"This is my child, Halan," the woman said holding out the baby. His blanket burst with a sharp blue color—two and half steps from pure—as it got close enough to Lightsong's aura. He could easily see that the child was suffering from a terrible sickness. It had lost so much weight that its skin almost seemed shriveled.

Lightsong took a deep breath. The baby's Breath was so weak that it flickered like a candle running out of wick. It would be dead before the day was out. Perhaps before the hour was out.

"The healers, they say he has deathfeaver," the woman said. "I know that he's going to die." The baby made a sound—a kind of half-cough, perhaps the closest it could get to a cry.

"Please, Great One," the woman said. She sniffled, then bowed her head. "Oh, please. He was brave, like you. My Breath, it would be yours. The Breaths of my entire family. Service for a hundred years, anything. Please, just heal him."

Lightsong closed his eyes.

"Please," the woman whispered.

"I cannot," Lightsong said.

Silence.

"I *cannot*," Lightsong said.

"Thank you, my lord," the woman finally whispered.

Lightsong opened his eyes to see the woman being led away, weeping quietly, child clutched close to her breast. The line of people watched her go, looking miserable yet hopeful at the same time. One more petitioner had failed. That meant they would get a chance.

A chance to beg Lightsong to kill himself.

Lightsong stood suddenly, grabbing the cap off his head and tossing it asked. He rushed away, throwing open a door at the back of the room. It slammed against the wall as he stumbled through the doorway.

Servants and priests immediately followed after him. He turned on them. "Go!" he said, waving them away. Many of them showed looks of surprise, unaccustomed to any kind of forcefulness on their master's part.

"Leave me *be*!" he shouted, towering over them. Colors in the room flared brighter in response to his emotion, and the servants backed down, confused, stumbling back out into the petition hall and pulling the door closed.

Lightsong stood alone. He placed one hand against the wall, breathing in and out, other hand against his forehead. Why was he sweating so? He'd been through thousands of petitions, and many had been worse than the one he'd just seen. He'd sent pregnant women to their deaths, doomed children and parents, consigned misery to the innocent and the faithful.

There was no reason to over-react. He could take it. It was a little thing, really. Just like eating the Breath of a new person every week. A small price to pay...

The door opened and a figure stepped in.

Lightsong didn't turn. "What do they want of me, Llarimar?" he demanded. "Do they really think I'll do it? Lightsong, the selfish? Do they really think I'd give my life for one of them?"

Llarimar was quiet for a few moments. "You offer hope, your grace," he finally said. "A last, unlikely hope. Hope is part of faith—part of the knowledge that someday, *one* of your followers will receive a miracle."

"And if they're wrong?" Lightsong asked. "I have no desire to die. I'm an idle man, fond of luxury. People like me don't give up their lives, even if they do happen to be gods."

Llarimar didn't reply.

“The good ones are all already dead, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “Calmseer, Brighthue: those were Gods who would give themselves away. The rest of us are selfish. There hasn’t been a petition granted in what, three years?”

“About that, your grace,” Llarimar said quietly.

“And, why should it be different?” Lightsong said, laughing a bit. “I mean, we have to *die* to heal one of them. Doesn’t that strike you as ridiculous? What kind of religion encourages its members to come and petition for their god’s life?” Lightsong shook his head. “It’s ironic. We’re gods to them only until they kill us. And I think I might know why it happens. It’s those petitions, being forced to sit day after day, knowing that you *could* save one of them—that you probably should, since your life isn’t really worth anything. That’s enough to drive a man mad. Enough to drive him to kill himself!”

He smiled, glancing at his high priest. “Suicide by Divine manifestation. Very dramatic.”

“Shall I call off the rest of the Petitions, your grace?” Llarimar gave no sign of being annoyed by the outburst.

“Sure, why not,” Lightsong said, waving a hand. “They really need a lesson in theology. They should *already* know what a useless god I am. Send them away, tell them to come back tomorrow—assuming that they are foolish enough to do so.”

“Yes, your grace,” Llarimar said, bowing.

Doesn’t that man ever get mad at me? Lightsong thought. He, more than any, should know that I’m not a person to rely upon!

Lightsong turned, walking away as Llarimar went back into the petition room. No servants tried to follow him. Lightsong pushed his way through red-hued room after red-hued room, eventually finding his way to a stairwell and climbing up to the second story. This floor was open on all sides, really nothing more than a large covered patio. He walked to the far side—the one opposite the line of people.

The breeze was strong here. He felt it ruffling at his robes, bringing with it scents that had likely traveled hundreds of miles, across the ocean, twisting around palm trees and finally entering the Court of Gods. He stood there for a long time, looking out over the city, toward the sea beyond. He had no desire, despite what he said, to leave his comfortable home in the Court. He was not a man of jungles; he was a man of parties.

But, sometimes he wished that he could at least *want* to be something else. Blushweaver’s words still weighed upon him. *You’ll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong.*

You’re a god to this people...

He was. Whether he wanted to be or not. That was the frustrating part. He’d tried his best to be useless and vain. And still they came.

We could use your confidence... you’re a better man than you give yourself credit.

Why did it seem that the more he proved himself to be an idiot, the more convinced people became that there had some kind of hidden depth? They called him a liar in the same breath that they complimented his presumed inner virtue. Did no one understand that a man could be both likable *and* useless? Not every quick-tongued fool was a hidden hero.

His life sense alerted him of Llarimar’s return long before footsteps did. The priest walked up to join Lightsong at the side of the wall. Llarimar folded his arms on the railing—which, being built for a god, was about a foot too high for the priest.

“They’re gone,” Llarimar said.

“Ah, very good,” Lightsong said. “I do believe that we’ve accomplished something today. I’ve run from my responsibly, screamed at my servants, and sat about pouting. Undoubtedly, this will convince everyone that I’m *far* more noble and honorable than assumed. Tomorrow, there will be twice as many petitions, and I shall continue my inexorable march toward utter madness.”

“You can’t go mad,” Llarimar said softly. “It’s impossible.”

“Sure I can,” Lightsong said. “I just have to concentrate long enough. You see, the great thing about madness is that it’s all in your head, so to speak.”

Llarimar shook his head. “I see you’ve been restored to your usual humor.”

“But of course.” They stood for a few more minutes, Llarimar making no chastisement or commentary on his God’s actions. Just like a good little priest.

That made Lightsong think of something. “Scoot,” Lightsong said. “You’re my high priest.”

“Yes, your grace.”

Lightsong sighed. “You really need to pay attention to the opportunities I’m giving you, Scoot. The proper, sarcastic response to my comment would have been ‘I’m your priest? Really? Is that what this big hat is doing on my head? I thought it was for neck support.’”

“I apologize, your grace.”

“Just try harder next time. Anyway, you know about theology and that sort of thing, correct?”

“I’ve studied my share, your grace.”

“Well then, what *is* the point—religiously—of having Gods that can only heal one person, then die? It seems counter-productive to me. Easy way to depopulate your pantheon.”

Llarimar leaned forward, staring out over the city. “It’s complicated, your grace. Returned aren’t just gods—they’re men who died, but who decided to come back and offer blessings and knowledge. After all, only one who has died can have anything useful to say about the other side.”

“True, I guess.”

“The thing is, your grace, Returned aren’t meant to stay. We extend their lives, giving them extra time to bless us. But, they’re really only supposed to remain alive as long as it takes them to do what they need to.”

“Need to?” Lightsong said. “Seems nebulous.”

Llarimar shrugged. “Returned have... goals. Objectives which are their own. You knew of yours before you decided to come back, but the process of jumping across the Iridescent Wave leaves the memory fragmented. Stay long enough, and you’ll remember what you came to accomplish. The petitions... they’re a way helping you remember.”

“So, I’ve come back to save one person’s life?” Lightsong said, frowning, but feeling a little embarrassed. In five years, he’d spent relatively little time studying his own theology. But, well, that was the sort of thing priests were for.

“Not necessarily, your grace,” Llarimar said. “You could have come back to save one person. But, more likely, there is information about the future or the afterlife that you felt you needed to share. Remember, it was the heroic way in which you died that gave you the power to Return in the first place. It might related to that, somehow.”

Llarimar trailed off slightly, his eyes growing unfocused. “You saw something, Lightsong. On the other side, the future is visible, like a painting that stretches into the eternal harmonics of all the cosmos. Something you saw—something about the future—worried you. Rather than remaining at peace, you took the opportunity that your brave death afforded you, then Returned to

the world. Determined to fix a problem, share information, or otherwise right something that has gone wrong.

“Anyway, once you feel that you’ve accomplished your task, you can use the Petitions to find someone who deserves your Breath. Then you can continue your journey across the Iridescent Wave. Our job, as your followers, is to provide Breath for you and keep you alive until you can accomplish your goal, whatever it may be. In the meantime, we pray for auguries and blessings, which can be gleaned only from one who has touched the future as you have.”

Lightsong didn’t respond immediately. “And, if I don’t believe?”

“In what, your grace?”

“In any of it,” Lightsong said. “That Returned are gods, that these visions are anything more than random imaginings of my brain. What if I don’t believe that I had any purpose or plan in Returning?”

“Then maybe that’s what you came back to discover.”

“So... wait. You’re saying that on the other side—where I obviously *believed* in the other side—I realized that if I Returned I wouldn’t believe in the other side, so I came back with the purpose of discovering faith in the other side, which I only lost because I Returned in the first place?”

Llarimar paused. Then, he smiled. “That last one breaks down a little bit in the face of logic, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, a little bit,” Lightsong said, smiling back. He turned, eyes falling on the God King’s palace, standing like a monument above the other Court structures. “What do you think of her?”

“The new queen?” Llarimar asked. “I haven’t met her, your grace. She won’t be presented for another few days.”

“Not the person. The implications.”

Llarimar glanced at him. “Your grace. That smells of an interest in politics!”

“Blah blah, yes, I know. Lightsong is a hypocrite. I’ll do penance for it later. Now answer the blasted question.”

Llarimar smiled. “I don’t know what to think of her, your grace. The Court twenty years ago thought bringing a Royal daughter here was a good idea.”

Yes, Lightsong thought. But those that court is gone. The Gods who had made the treaty had thought melding the Royal line back into Hallandren would be a good idea. But, those gods—the ones who knew how to deal with the Idrian girl’s arrival—arrival were now dead. They’d left inferior replacements.

“The full court meets in judgment tomorrow, doesn’t it?” Lightsong said, still looking at the black palace.

“Yes, your grace.”

“Contact Blushweaver. See if I can share a box with her during the judgments. Perhaps she will distract me. You know what a headache politics gives me.”

“You can’t get headaches, your grace.”

Lightsong stood for a few moments. In the distance, he could see the rejected petitioners trailing out of the gates, returning to the city, leaving their gods behind.

“Could have fooled me,” Lightsong said quietly.

Chapter Ten

“But surely we can bend the rules a little bit,” Siri said, walking quickly beside Tridees.

Tridees eyed her. The priest—high priest of the God King—would have been tall even without the elaborate miter on his head. With it, he seemed to tower over her like one of the Returned.

Well, a spindly, obnoxious, disdainful Returned.

“An exception?” he asked with his droll Hallandren accent. “No, I do not think that will be possible, Vessel.”

“I don’t see why not,” Siri said as a servant pulled open the door in front of them, allowing them to leave a green-colored room and pass into a blue one. Tridees respectfully let her pass through the doorway first, though she could see that he was displeased he had to do so.

Well, she thought. If he finds that displeasing, he should try spending an entire week cooped up in a stone palace with nobody to talk to but mute servants, disdainful priests, and overworked scribes.

Siri ground her teeth, trying to think of another avenue of attack. *Vivenna would be calm and logical*, she thought. *She’d explain the situation in a way that made sense, so that the priest listened to her.* Siri took a deep breath, trying to ease the red from her hair and the frustration from her attitude.

“Look. Couldn’t I, maybe, just go on *one* trip outside? Just into the Court itself?”

“Impossible,” Tridees said. “If you lack for entertainment, why not have your servants send for minstrels or jugglers? I’m sure they could keep you occupied.” *And out of my hair*, his tone seemed to imply.

Couldn’t he understand? It wasn’t lack of something to do that frustrated her. It was that she shouldn’t see the sky. Couldn’t feel free, couldn’t run away from walls and locks and rules.

Barring that, she would have settled for someone to talk to. “At least let me meet with one of the Gods. I mean, really—what is accomplished by keeping me locked up like this?”

“You’re not ‘locked up’, Vessel,” Tridees said. “You are observing a period of isolation in which you can dedicate yourself wholly to your new husband. It is an ancient and worthy ritual, one that shows respect for the God King and his monarchy.”

“Yes, but this is Hallandren,” Siri said. “It’s the land of laxness and frivolity! Surely you can see your way to making an exception.”

Tridees stopped up short. “We do *not* make exceptions in matters of religion, Vessel. I must assume that you are testing me in some way, for I find it hard to believe that anyone worthy of touching our God King could harbor such vulgar thoughts.”

Siri cringed. *Four days in the city*, she thought, *and I’ve already started letting my tongue get me into trouble.* That was something she should have learned from Vivenna. Siri didn’t dislike people—she loved to talk to them, spend time with them, laugh with them. However, she couldn’t make them do what she wanted, not in the way that a politician was supposed to be able to do.

She and Tridees continued walking. Siri wore a long, flowing brown skirt that covered up her feet and had a train that trailed behind her. The priest was wearing golds and maroons—colors

matched by the servants. It still amazed her that everyone in the palace had so many costumes, even if they were identical save for color.

She knew that she shouldn't let herself get annoyed with the priests. They already didn't seem to like her, and getting snappy wouldn't help. It was just that the last few days had been so *dull*. Trapped in the palace, unable to leave, unable to find anyone to talk to, she found herself nearly going mad.

But there would be no exceptions. Apparently.

"Will that be all, Vessel?" Tridees asked, pausing beside a door. It almost seemed like he found it a chore to remain civil toward her.

Siri sighed, but nodded. The priest bowed, then opened the door and quickly rushed away. Siri watched him go, tapping her foot, arms folded. Her servants stood arrayed behind her, silent as always. She considered finding Bluefingers, but... no. He always had so much to do, and she felt bad distracting him.

That left her with nothing. Sighing again, she motioned for her servants to prepare the evening meal. Two fetched a chair from the side of the room. Siri sat, resting as food was gathered. The chair was plush, but it was still difficult to sit in a way that didn't aggravate one of her aches or cramps. Each of the last four nights, she had been forced to kneel on the floor, naked, until she finally grew so drowsy that she drifted off. Sleeping on the hard stone had left a dull, almost ever-present, pain in her back and neck.

Each morning, once the God King was gone, she moved to the bed. When she awoke the second time, she burned the sheets. After that, she chose her clothing. There was a new array each time, with no repeated outfits. She wasn't sure where the servants got such a steady supply of clothing in Siri's size, but it made her a little apprehensive about choosing her daily costume. She knew that she'd likely never see any of the options again.

After dressing, she was free to do as she wished—assuming she didn't leave the palace. When night came, she was bathed, then given a choice of luxurious gowns to wear into the bed chamber. As a matter of comfort, she had started requesting more and more ornate gowns, with more fabric to use in sleeping. She often wondered what the dressmakers would think if they knew that their gowns were only worn for a few brief moments before being discarded to the floor, then eventually used as blankets.

She didn't own anything, yet could have whatever she wanted. Exotic foods, furniture, entertainers, books, art... anything she asked for was provided. And yet, when she was finished, it was removed. She had everything and nothing at the same time.

She yawned. The irregular sleep schedule left her bleary-eyed and tired. The completely empty days didn't help much either. *If only there were someone to talk to.* But servants, priests, and scribes had all proven uninterested. That accounted for everyone she interacted with.

Well, except *him*.

Could she even call that interacting? The God King appeared to enjoy looking at her body, but he'd never given her any indication that he wanted more. He simply let her kneel, those eyes of his watching her and dissecting her. That was the sum total of their marriage.

The servants finished putting out her dinner then lined up by the wall. It was getting late—almost time for her nightly bathing. *I'll have to eat quickly*, she thought, sitting at the table. *After all, I wouldn't want to be late for the evening's ogling.*

A few hours later, Siri stood bathed, perfumed, and dressed before the massive golden door that led into the God King's bed chamber. She breathed deeply, calming herself, anxiety bringing her hair to a pale brown. She still hadn't gotten used to this part.

It was silly. She knew what would happen. And yet, the anticipation—the fear—was still there. God King. His actions proved the power he had over her. One day he would take her, and it could come at any time. Part of her wished he'd just be done with it. The extended dread was even worse than that first single evening of terror.

She shivered. Bluefingers eyed her. Perhaps eventually he'd trust her to arrive at the bed chambers on time. Each night so far, he'd come to escort her to the bed chamber.

At least he hasn't shown up while I'm bathing again. The warm water and pleasant scents should have made her relax—unfortunately, she tended to spend the each bath worrying about either her impending visit to the God King, or about some male servant walking in on her.

She glanced at Bluefingers.

"A few more minutes, Vessel," he said.

How does he know? she thought. The man seemed to have a supernatural sense of time. She hadn't seen any form of timepiece in the palace—neither sundial, metered candle, nor water clock. In Hallandren, apparently, gods and queens didn't worry about such things. They had servants to remind them of appointments.

Bluefingers glanced at the door, then at her. When he saw that she was watching him, he immediately turned away. As he stood, he started shuffling his weight from foot to foot.

What does he have to be nervous about? she thought with annoyance, turning to stare at the door's intricate gold designs. He's not the one who has to go through this every night.

"Do... things go well with the God King, then?" Bluefingers asked suddenly.

Siri frowned.

"I can see that you're tired a lot of the time," Bluefingers said. "I... guess that means you are very... active at night."

"That's good, right? Everyone wants an heir as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course," Bluefingers said, wringing his hands. "It's just that..." he trailed off, then glanced at her, meeting her eyes. "You just might want to be careful, Vessel. Keep your wits about you. Try to stay alert."

Her hair bleached the rest of the way white. "You... make it sound as if I'm in danger," she said softly.

"What? Danger?" Bluefingers said, glancing to the side. "Nonsense. What would you have to fear? I was simply suggesting that you remain alert, should the God King have needs you should fulfill. Ah, see, now it's time. Enjoy your evening, Vessel."

With that, he pushed open the door, placed a hand on her back, and guided her into the room. At the last moment, however, he moved his head up next to hers. "You should watch yourself, child," he whispered. "Not all here in the palace is as it seems."

Siri frowned, turning, but Bluefingers plastered on a false smile and pushed the door shut.

What in Austre's name was that? she thought, pausing for what was probably too long a time as she stared at the door. Finally, she sighed, turning away. The usual fire crackled in the hearth, but it was smaller than normal. That left the room a bit chilly.

He was there. Siri didn't need to look to see him. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, she could notice that the fire's colors—blue, orange, even black—were far too true, far

too *vibrant*. Her gown, a brilliant golden satin, seemed to burn with its own inner color. Anything that was too white—some of the laces on her dress, for instance—bent slightly, giving off a rainbow of colors as if seen through the distortion of a prism. Part of her wished for a well-lit room, where she could experience the full beauty of BioChroma.

But, of course, that was not right. The God King's Breath was a perversion. He was fed on the souls of his people, and the colors he created came at their expense.

Shivering, Siri undid the side of her dress then let the garment fall to pieces around her—the long sleeves slipping free, bodice falling forward, skirt and gown rustling as they dropped to the floor. She completed the ritual, sliding the straps of her shift off her shoulders, then dropping the garment to the floor beside the gown. She stepped free of both, then bowed herself down into her customary posture.

Her back complained, and she ruefully contemplated another uncomfortable night. *The least they could do*, she thought, *is make certain the fire is large enough*. At night in the large stone palace, it could get a little chilly despite the Hallandren tropical climate. Particularly if one were naked.

Focus on Bluefingers, she thought, trying to distract herself from the discomfort. What did he mean? Things are not what they seem in the palace?

Was he referring to the God King and his ability to have her killed? She was well aware of the God King's power. How could she forget it, with him sitting not fifteen feet away, watching from the shadows? No, that wasn't it. He'd felt he'd needed to give this warning quietly, without others hearing. *Watch yourself...*

It smelt of politics, something Siri hadn't been trained for—though she should have been. She gritted her teeth. If she'd paid more attention to the tutors, would she—perhaps—have been able to pick out a more subtle meaning to Bluefinger's warning?

As if I needed something else to be confused about, she thought. If Bluefingers had something to tell her, why hadn't he just said it? As the minutes passed, she thought about his comments again and again. The words were like an insomniac, turning over repeatedly, unable to simply rest in her mind. Yet, at the same time, she felt too tired—too uncomfortable and cold—to come to any conclusions. That only left her feeling *more* annoyed.

Vivenna would have figured it out. Vivenna probably would have known instinctively why the God King hadn't chosen to sleep with her. She would have fixed it the first night.

But Siri was incompetent. She tried so *hard* to do as Vivenna would have—to be the best wife she could, to serve Idris. To be the woman that everyone expected her to be.

But, she wasn't. She *couldn't* just keep doing this. She felt trapped in the palace. She couldn't get the priests to do more than roll their eyes at her. She couldn't even tempt the God King to bed her. On top of that, she could very well be in danger, and she couldn't even understand why or how.

In simpler terms, she was just plain frustrated.

Groaning at her aching limbs, Siri sat up in the dark room and looked at the shadowy form in the corner. "Will you please just get *on* with it?" she found herself snapping.

Silence.

Siri felt her hair bleach a terrible bone white as she realized what she'd just done. She stiffened, casting her eyes down, tiredness fleeing in the face of sudden anxiety.

What had she been *thinking*? The God King could call servants to execute her. In fact, he didn't even need that. He could bring her own dress to life, Awakening it, making it leap on her

and strangle her. He could make the rug rise up and attack her. He could probably bring the ceiling down on her, all without moving from his chair.

Siri waited, breathing with shallow anxiety, anticipating the fury and retribution. But... nothing happened. Minutes passed.

Finally, Siri glanced up. The God King had moved, sitting up straighter, regarding her from his darkened chair beside the bed. She could see his eyes reflecting the firelight. She couldn't make out much of his face, but he didn't *seem* angry. He just seemed cold and distant.

She almost cast her eyes down again, but hesitated. If snapping at him wouldn't provoke a reaction, then looking at him wasn't likely to either. So she turned her chin up and met his eyes, knowing full well that she was being foolish. Vivenna would never have provoked the man in such a way. Vivenna would have remained quiet and demure, either solving the problem or—if there was no solution—kneeling every night until her patience impressed even the God King of Hallandren.

But, Siri was not Vivenna. She was just going to have to accept that fact.

The God King continued to look at her, and Siri found herself blushing. She'd knelt before him naked four nights in a row, but facing him unclothed seemed more embarrassing. Still, she didn't back down. She continued to kneel, watching him, forcing herself to stay awake.

It was difficult. She was tired, and the position was actually less comfortable than bowing had been. She watched anyway, waiting, the hours passing.

Eventually—at about the same time that he left the room every night—the God King stood up. Siri stiffened, shocked alert. However, he simply walked to the door. He tapped quietly, and it opened for him, servants apparently waiting on the other side. He stepped out and the door closed.

Siri waited tensely. No soldiers came to arrest her; no priests came to chastise her. Eventually, she just walked over to the bed and burrowed into its covers, savoring the warmth.

The God King's wrath, she thought drowsily, is decidedly less wrathful than reported.

With that, she fell asleep.

Chapter Eleven

Vivenna—first child of Dedelin, King of Idris—gazed upon the grand city of T'Telir. It was the ugliest place she had ever seen.

People jostled about in the streets, draped flagrantly in colors, yelling, and talking, and moving, and stinking, and coughing, and bumping. She pulled her shawl close, her hair lightened to gray as she continued her imitation—such that it was—of a woman of advancing years. She had thought that she might stand out. She needn't have been worried. Who could ever stand out in this mess of people?

She maintained the disguise. It was best to be safe. She had come—arriving in T'Telir just hours ago—to rescue her sister, not get to herself kidnapped.

It was a bold plan. Vivenna still had trouble believing that she'd come up with it. Still, of the many things that her tutors had taught her, one remained foremost in her mind. A leader was someone who acted. Nobody else was going to help Siri, and so it came down to Vivenna.

She realized that she was inexperienced. She hoped that awareness would keep her from being *too* foolhardy. She also had the best education and political tutelage that her kingdom could provide, and much of her training had focused on life in Hallandren. She'd practiced all of her life to avoid standing out. She could hide in a massive, unwieldy city like T'Telir.

And massive it was. She'd memorized maps of it, but that hadn't prepared her for the sight, sound, scent, and *colors* of the city on market day. Even the livestock wore bright ribbons. Vivenna stood to the side of the road, stooped beside a building draped in flapping cloth. The fabric had been tied to the awning, covering it in streamers. In front of her, a herdsman drove a small flock of sheep toward the market square. They had each been dyed a different color. *Won't that ruin the wool?* Vivenna thought sourly. The different colors on the animals clashed so terribly that she had to look away.

Poor Siri, she thought. Caught up in all of this, locked in the Court of Gods, probably so overwhelmed that she can barely think. Vivenna had been prepared to deal with the terrors of Hallandren. Though the colors sickened her, she had the fortitude to withstand them. How would little Siri manage?

Vivenna pulled her shawl closer as she stood beside the building in the shadow of a large stone statue, *Where is that man?* she thought. Parlin had yet to return from his scouting.

There was nothing to do but wait beside the statue, one of the famous D'Denir Celabrin: a special group of statues which had been commissioned to commemorate the end of the Manywar. Most were of warriors; they stood in all poses across the entire city, armed with weapons and often dressed in colorful clothing. According to her lessons, the people of T'Telir found dressing the statues to be an amusing pastime, one that supposedly showed respect.

Lore said that the first ones had been commissioned by Peacegiver the Blessed, the Returned who had taken command of Hallandren at the end of the Manywar. The number of statues had increased each year as new ones were paid for by the Returned—whose money, of course, came from the people themselves.

Excess and waste, Vivenna thought, shaking her head.

Finally, she noticed Parlin coming back down the street. She frowned as she saw that he was wearing some ridiculous contraption on his head—it looked a little like a sock, though much larger.

The bright green hat flopped down one side of his square face, and looked very out of place against his dull brown Idris traveling clothing.

Tall enough to be lanky, Parlin was only a few years Vivenna's senior. She'd known him for most of her life; General Yarda's son had practically grown up in the palace. When he hadn't been out in the forests, watching the Hallandren border, or guarding one of the northern passes.

"Parlin?" she said as he approached, carefully keeping the annoyance out of her voice and her hair. "What is that on your head?"

"A hat," he said, characteristically terse. It wasn't that Parlin was rude; it just seemed to Vivenna that he rarely felt he had much to say.

"I can see that it's a hat, Parlin. Where did you get it?"

"The man in the market said they're very popular," Parlin noted.

Vivenna sighed. She'd hesitated to bring Parlin into the city. He was a good man—as solid as she'd ever known—but his life had been one of living in the wilderness and guarding isolated outposts. The city was probably overwhelming to him.

"The hat is ridiculous, Parlin," Vivenna said, hair controlled to keep the red out of it. "It makes you stand out."

Parlin removed the hat, tucking it in his pocket. He said nothing further, but did turn, watching the crowds of people pass. They seemed to make him as nervous as they did Vivenna. Perhaps more so. However, she was glad to have him. He was one of the few people she trusted not to go to her father; she knew that Parlin fancied her. Often, during their youths, he'd brought her gifts from the forest. Generally, they'd been some animal he'd killed.

In Parlin's opinion, nothing showed affection like a hunk of something dead and bleeding on the table.

"This place is strange," Parlin said. "People move here like herds." His eyes followed a pretty Hallandren girl as she walked by. The hussy was—like most of the women in T'Telir—wearing practically no clothing. Blouses that revealed well below the neck, skirts well above the knees—some women even wore pants, just like men.

"What did you discover in the market?" she asked, drawing his attention back.

"There are a lot of Idrians here," he said.

"*What?*" Vivenna said, forgetting herself and showing a bit of shock.

"Idrians," Parlin said. "In the market. Some were trading goods; many looked like common workers. I watched them."

Vivenna frowned, tapping her foot. She trusted He was as trustworthy a man as his father, and while he wasn't himself a soldier, he was an accomplished woodsman. Plus, he was rather devoted to her.

"And the restaurant?" Vivenna asked. "Did you scout it as I asked?"

He nodded. "Looks clean. Feels strange to me that people eat food made by strangers.

"Did you see anyone suspicious there?"

Parlin shook his head. "What would be 'suspicious' in this city?"

"I don't know. You're the one who insisted on scouting ahead."

"It's always a good idea when hunting. Less likely to scare away the animals."

"Unfortunately, Parlin," Vivenna said, "people aren't like animals."

"I am aware of that," Parlin said. "Animals make more sense."

Vivenna sighed. However, she did notice that Parlin had been right on at least one count. She caught sight of a group of Idrians walking down the street, one pulling a cart that had probably once held farm goods. It surprised her that they would come so far to trade. But, then, commerce hadn't been particularly robust in Idris lately.

Reluctantly, she closed her eyes and—using the shawl to hide the transformation—changed her hair from gray to brown. Then, she moved the shawl to her shoulders. Now that she knew there were Idrians in town, it was unlikely that she would stand out. Trying to act like an old woman would be more suspicious.

It still felt wrong to be exposed. In Bevalis, she would have been recognized instantly. However, Bevalis had only a few thousand people in it—and it was extremely large by Idris standards. It wasn't that the kingdom itself lacked people, they were just spread out.

No ports, she thought, nodding to Parlin and—gritting her teeth—joining the crowd and making her way toward the marketplace.

The inland sea made all the difference. T'Telir was a prime port, and the dyes it sold—made from the Tears of Edgli, a local flower—made it a popular place of trade. She could see the evidence all around her. Exotic silks and clothing. Fresh foodstuffs from cities along the coast. In Idris, the population had to be spread out to support farms and herds. In Hallandren—a country which controlled a good third of the coast of the inland sea—things could be different. They could burgeon. Grow.

Get flamboyant.

In the distance, she could see the plateau that marked the Court of Gods, most profane place beneath Austre's colorful eyes. Inside its walls, within the God King's terrible palace, Siri was being held captive. She would be the prisoner of Susebron himself.

Vivenna understood, logically, why her father had done what he had. In terms of raw politics, Vivenna was more valuable to Idris. If there was going to be war for certain, then it made sense to send the less useful daughter as a stalling tactic.

It was hard for Vivenna to think of Siri as "Less Useful," however. True, the girl was frustrating—but she was Vivenna's baby sister. She was gregarious, but she'd also been the one who smiled when others were down. She was the one who brought gifts when nobody was expecting. She was infuriating, but innocent. And someone had to look out for her.

The God King would demand an heir. That was to have been Vivenna's duty—her sacrifice for her people. She had been prepared and willing. It felt *wrong* for Siri to have to do something so terrible.

Her father had made his decision; the best one for Idris. Vivenna had made her own. If there was going to be war, then Vivenna wanted to be ready to get her sister out of the city the moment it got dangerous. In fact, Vivenna felt that there *had* to be a way to rescue Siri before the war came—a way of fooling the Hallandrens, making them think that Siri had died. Something that would save Vivenna's sister, yet not provoke the war any further.

This wasn't the sort of thing her father could condone. So she hadn't told him. Better for him to be able to deny involvement if things went wrong.

Vivenna moved down the street, eyes downcast, careful to not draw attention to herself. Getting away from Idris had been surprisingly easy. Who would suspect such a brash move from Vivenna—she who had lived her life perfect? Nobody questioned when she'd asked for food and supplies, explaining that she wanted to make emergency kits. Nobody questioned when she'd proposed an expedition to the higher reaches to gather important roots, an excuse to hide the first few weeks of her disappearance.

Parlin had been easy enough to persuade. He trusted her, perhaps too much, and he had intimate knowledge of the paths and trails leading down to Hallandren. He'd been as far as the city walls on one scouting trip a year back. With him on her side, she'd been able to gather a few of his friends—also woodsmen—to protect her and be part of her 'expedition'. Instead, they'd all made the trek down from the highlands into Hallandren.

She'd sent the rest of them back earlier in the morning. They would be of little use in the city, where she had already arranged for other allies to be her protection. Parlin's friends would carry word to her father, who would already have word of what she'd done. Before leaving, she'd arranged for her maid to deliver a letter to him about the time when her disappearance would begin to grow suspicious. Counting off the days, she realized that her letter would be delivered this very evening.

She didn't know what her father's reaction would be. Perhaps he would send soldiers to retrieve her—if he did, they would have to be covert. Any large-scale rescue force would be seen as a sign of war. Perhaps he'd leave her be. In an attempt to ensure this result, she'd warned him that if she wasn't given time to assess whether or not Siri could be rescued, she would simply go to the Court of Gods, explaining that there had been a mistake, and trade herself for her sister. She'd warned that if she saw any hint of Idris soldiers searching for her in the city, she'd take that step immediately.

She sincerely hoped she didn't have to. The God King was not to be trusted; he might take Vivenna captive and keep Siri, thereby providing him with two princesses to provide pleasure instead of one...

Don't think about that, Vivenna told herself, pulling her shawl closer.

Better to find another way. Fake Siri's death, or make it look like she'd been kidnapped by someone else. Even if she got Siri out but was afraid of the political complications, Vivenna could always offer herself up as a replacement.

Part of Vivenna acknowledged that there was a chance she wouldn't be able to manage any of that, and would return home to Idris on her own after a few months of trying. She'd had to come though. She *had* to do something, to at least try.

The first step toward any sort of plan was to find Lemks, her father's head spy in Hallandren. Vivenna had corresponded with him on several occasions. Her father had wanted her to be familiar with the chief Idris intelligence agent in T'Telir, should she need him during her life in the city. Her father's foresight would work against him. Lemks knew Vivenna, and had been told to take orders from her. The spy wouldn't question her—indeed, he hadn't questioned when Vivenna had sent him a letter to request a meeting. Her messenger had left Idris just before she herself, but had been able to travel much faster. Lemks's reply to her had come when she was still a few days out of T'Telir.

A meeting arranged. In a restaurant at the market. It sounded logical. Her plan seemed good. She was prepared. Why, then, did she feel so utterly daunted when she entered the market?

She stood quietly, a rock in the flow of human traffic down the street. Nothing had adequately prepared her for the sight of such an enormous swath of land, covered in tents, pens, buildings, and people. There didn't appear to be much reason or direction to the organization. There were no cobblestones here, only sand and dirt with the occasional patch of grass. The streets appeared to have simply been made where people felt like going.

Merchants yelled out what they sold, banners waved in the wind, and entertainers vied for attention. It was an orgy of color and motion.

"Wow," Parlin said quietly.

Vivenna turned, shaking off her stupor. "Didn't you just come here?"

“Yeah,” Parlin said, eyes a little glazed over. “Wow again.”

Vivenna shook her head. “Let’s go to the restaurant.”

Parlin nodded. “This way.”

Vivenna followed him, annoyed at herself. This was Hallandren—she shouldn’t be awed by it. She should be disgusted. Yet she felt almost too overwhelmed to be disgusted. It was hard to feel anything beyond a slight sense of sickness. She’d never realized how much she took for granted Idris’ beautiful simplicity.

Parlin did a good job of leading her through the throng—his height made him easy to keep track of, and his familiar presence was welcome as the overload of scents, sounds, and sights tried to drown her. In some places the crowds grew so thick that they practically had to shove their way through. On occasion, Vivenna found herself on the edge of panic, pressed in by dirty, repulsively colored bodies.

Blessedly, the restaurant wasn’t too far in. It had a picture of a boat sailing merrily on its board, and if the scents coming from inside were any indication, then the ship represented the restaurant’s cuisine: Fish. She barely kept herself from gagging. She’d eaten fish several times in preparation for her life in Hallandren. She’d never grown to like it.

Parlin walked, immediately stepping to the side and crouching, almost like a wolf, as he let his eyes adjust to the dimness. Vivenna gave the restaurant keeper the fake name Lemks had indicated in his letter. The restaurant keeper eyed Parlin, then shrugged and led the two of them to one of the tables on the far side of the room. Vivenna sat down at the table, a little uncertain what one did at a restaurant despite her training. It said something meaningful to her that places like restaurants could exist in Hallandren—places meant to feed not travelers, but the local population who couldn’t be bothered to dine at their own homes.

Parlin didn’t sit, but remained standing beside her seat, watching the room. He looked as tense as she felt. “Vivenna,” he said softly, leaning down. “Your hair.”

She started, realizing that her hair had lightened slightly from the trauma of pushing her way through the crowd. It hadn’t bleached completely white —she was far too well trained for that. It had grown somewhat whiter, like it had been powdered.

Feeling a jolt of paranoia, Vivenna replaced the shawl on her head, looking away as the restaurant owner approached to take their order. A short list of meals was scratched into the table, and Parlin finally sat down, drawing the restaurant owner’s attention.

You’re better than this, she told herself sternly. You’ve studied Hallandren for most of your life. You can deal with this.

Her hair darkened again, returning to its brown. The change was subtle enough that if someone had been watching, they would have probably thought it to be a trick of the light. She kept the shawl up, feeling ashamed. One walk through the market, and she lost control? What was wrong with her?

Think of Siri, she told herself. That gave her strength. Her mission was impromptu, even reckless, but it was important. Calm once again, she put the shawl back down and waited while Parlin chose a dish—a seafood stew—and the innkeeper walked away.

“Now what?” Parlin asked.

“We wait,” Vivenna said. “Lemks said he’d check the restaurant each day at noon. It is approaching noon. We will sit here until he arrives.”

Parlin nodded, fidgeting slightly.

“What is it?” Vivenna asked calmly.

He glanced toward the door. "I don't trust this place, Vivenna. I can't smell anything but bodies and spices, can't hear anything but the chatter of people. There's no wind, no rivers, just... *people*."

"I know," she said.

"I want to go back out," he said.

"What?" she said. "Why?"

"If you aren't familiar with a place," he said awkwardly, "you need to make yourself familiar." He gave no other explanation.

Vivenna felt a stab of fear at the thought of being left alone. However, it wasn't proper to demand Parlin stay and attend her. "Do you promise to stay close?"

He nodded.

"Then go."

He did, walking from the room. He didn't move like one of the Hallandrens—his motions were too fluid, too much like a prowling beast. *Perhaps I should have left him*, she thought. *Sent him back with the others.*

But the thought of being completely alone had been too much. She needed *someone* to help her find Lemks. As it was, she felt that she was probably taking too great a risk at entering the city with only one guard, even a soldier as skilled as Peprin.

But it was done. No use worrying now. She sat, arms folded on the table, thinking. Back in Idris, her plan to save Siri had seemed more simple. Now the full nature of it lay before her. Somehow, she had to get into the Court of Gods and sneak her sister out. How would one accomplish something like that? Surely the Court of Gods was well guarded.

Lemks will have ideas, she told herself. We don't have to do anything yet. I'm—

A man sat down at her table. Less colorfully dressed than most Hallandrens, he wore an outfit made mostly of brown leather, though he did have a token red vest thrown over the top.

This was not Lemks. The spy was an older man in his fifties. The one sitting with her had a long face and styled hair, and couldn't have been older than thirty-five.

"I hate being a mercenary," the man said. "You know why?"

Vivenna sat, shocked, mouth opened slightly.

"The prejudice," the man said. "Everyone else, they do a job, they ask for recompense, and they are respected for it. Not mercenaries. We get a bad name just for doing our job. How many minstrels get spat on for accepting payment from the highest bidder? How many bakers feel guilty for selling pastries to one man, then selling those same pastries to the man's enemies?" He eyed her. "No. Only the mercenary. Unfair, wouldn't you say?"

"W... who are you?" Vivenna finally managed to ask. She jumped as another man sat down on her other side. Large of girth, this man had a cudgel strapped to his back. A colorful bird was sitting on the end of it.

"I'm Denth," the first man said, taking her hand and shaking it. "That's Tonk Fah."

"Pleased," Tonk Fah said, taking her hand once Denth was through with it.

"Unfortunately, princess," Denth said, "we're here to kill you."

Chapter Twelve

Vivenna's hair bleached a cool, stark white.

Think! she told herself. You've been trained in politics! You studied hostage negotiation. But... what do you do when you are the hostage?

Suddenly, the two men burst out laughing. The larger man thumped the table several times with his hand, causing his bird to squawk.

"Sorry, princess," Denth—the thinner man—said, shaking his head. "Just a bit of mercenary humor."

"We don't kill," Tonk Fah said. "That's assassin work."

"Assassins," Denth said, holding up a finger. "Now, *they* get respect. Why do you suppose that is? They're really just mercenaries with fancier names. Institutional bias, I tell you."

Vivenna blinked, struggling to keep control of her nerves. "You're not here to kill me," she said, voice stiff. "So you're just going to kidnap me?"

"Gods, no," Denth said. "Bad business, that. How do you make money at it? Every time you kidnap someone worth the ransom, you upset people a whole lot more powerful than you are."

"Don't make important people angry," Tonk Fah said, yawning. "Unless you're getting paid by people who are even *more* powerful."

Denth nodded. "And that isn't even considering the feeding and care of captives, the exchanging of ransom notes, and the arranging of drop-offs. It's a headache, I tell you. Terrible way to make money."

The table fell silent. Vivenna placed her hands flat on its top to keep them from quivering. *They know who I am*, she thought, forcing herself to think logically. *Either they recognize me, or...*

"You work for Lemks," she said.

Denth smiled widely. "See Tonk? He said she was a clever one."

"Guess that's why she's a princess and we're just mercenaries," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna frowned. *Are they mocking me or not?* "Where is Lemks? Why didn't he come himself?"

Denth smiled again, nodding toward the restaurant owner as the man brought a large pot of steaming stew to the table. It smelt of hot spices, and had what appeared to be crab claws floating in it. The owner dropped a group of wooden spoons to the table, then retreated.

Denth and Tonk Fah didn't wait for permission to eat her meal. "Your friend," Denth said, grabbing a spoon, "Lemks—our employer—isn't doing so well."

"Fevers," Tonk Fah said between slurps.

"He requested that we bring you to him," Denth said. He handed her a folded piece of paper with one hand, cracking a claw between three fingers of the other. Vivenna cringed as he slurped the insides out.

Princess, the paper read. Please trust these men. Denth has served me well for some measure now, and he is loyal—if any mercenary can be called loyal. He and his men have been paid, and I

am confident he will stay true to us for the duration of his contract. I offer proof of authenticity by virtue of this password: Bluemask.

The writing was in Lemks' hand. More than that, he had given the proper password. Not 'bluemask'—that was misdirection. The true password was using the word 'measure' instead of time. She glanced at Denth, who slurped out the insides of another claw.

"Ah, now," he said, tossing aside the shell. "This is the tricky part; she has to make a decision. Are we telling her the truth, or are we fooling her? Have we fabricated that letter? Or, maybe we took the old spy captive and tortured him, forcing him to write the words."

"We could bring you his fingers as proof of our good faith," Tonk Fah said. "Would that help?"

Vivenna raised an eyebrow. "Mercenary humor?"

"Such that it is," Denth said with a sigh. "We're not generally a clever lot. Otherwise, we'd probably have selected a profession without such a high mortality rate."

"Like the profession of princess," Tonks said. "Good life-span, those. I've often wondered if I should apprentice myself to one."

Vivenna frowned as the two men chuckled. Lemks wouldn't have broken under torture, she thought. He's too well trained. Even if he had broken, he wouldn't have included both the real password and the false one.

"Let's go," she said, standing.

"Wait," Tonk Fah said, spoon to lips, "we're skipping our meal?"

Vivenna eyed the red-colored soup and its bobbing crustacean limbs. "Definitely."

#

Siri stood in the dark black bedroom, wearing her shift, looking out the window. The God King's palace was the only structure in the Court of Gods higher than the surrounding wall, and the bedroom faced east. Out over the sea.

She watched the distant waves, feeling the heat of the afternoon sun. It didn't bother her. While wearing the shift, the warmth was actually pleasant, and it was tempered by a cool breeze blowing in off the ocean. The wind teased her long hair, ruffling the fabric of her shift.

She should be dead. She had spoken directly to the God King, had sat up and made a demand of him. She'd waited all morning for some kind of punishment. There had been none.

She leaned down against the windowsill, arms crossed on the stone, closing her eyes and feeling the sea breeze. A part of her was still aghast at the way she had acted. That part was growing smaller and smaller. *I've been going about things wrong here*, she thought. *I've let myself be pushed about by my fears and worries.*

That wasn't her. She didn't usually take time to bother with fears and worries. She just did what seemed right. She was beginning to feel that she should have stood up to the God King days ago. Perhaps she wasn't being cautious enough. Perhaps punishment would still come. However, for the moment, she felt as if she'd accomplished something.

She smiled, opening her eyes, and let her hair change to a determined golden yellow.

It was time to stop being afraid.

#

Lemks coughed quietly. His face was streaked with sweat, his skin clammy and pale, and he occasionally gave a whispered mumble of delirious ramblings.

Vivenna sat on a stool beside his bed, hands in her lap. The two mercenaries stood with Parlin at the back of the room. The only other person present was a solemn nurse—the same woman who had informed Vivenna in a quiet voice that nothing more could be done.

Lemks was dying. It was unlikely that he would last the day.

This was the first Vivenna had seen Lemk's face, though she'd often corresponded with him. The face looked... wrong. She knew that Lemks was growing old; that made him a better spy, for fewer people looked for spies in the elderly. Yet he wasn't supposed to be this frail stick of a person, shaking and coughing. He was supposed to be a spry, quick-tongued old gentleman. That was what she had imagined.

She felt like she was losing one of her dearest friends, though she had never really known him. With him went her refuge in Hallandren, her secret advantage. He was the one who was supposed to have made this insane plan of hers work. The skilled, crafty mentor that she had counted on having at her side.

He coughed again. The nurse glanced at Vivenna. "He goes in and out of lucidity, my lady. Just this morning, he spoke of you, but now he's getting worse and worse..."

"Thank you," Vivenna said quietly. "You are excused."

The woman bowed and left.

Now it is time to be princess, Vivenna thought, rising and leaning over Lemks' bed.

"Lemks," she said. "I need your help; you need to pass on your knowledge. How do I contact your spy networks? Where are the other Idris agents in the city? What are the passcodes that will get them to listen to me?"

He coughed, staring unseeingly, whispering something. She leaned closer.

"... never say it," he said. "You can torture me all that you want. I won't give in."

Vivenna sat back. By design, the Idris spy network in Hallandren had loose organization. Her father knew all of their agents, but Vivenna had only ever interacted with Lemks, the leader and coordinator of the network. She gritted her teeth, leaning forward again. She felt like a grave robber as she shook Lemks' head slightly.

"Lemks, look at me. I'm not here to torture you. I'm the princess. You wrote me a letter earlier. Now I've come to you."

"Can't fool me," the old man whispered. "Your torture is nothing. I won't give it up. Not to you."

Vivenna sighed, looking away.

Suddenly, Lemks shuddered, and a wave of color washed across the bed, over Vivenna, and pulsed along the floor before fading. Despite herself, Vivenna stepped back in shock.

Another pulse came. It wasn't color itself. It was a wave of *enhanced* color—a ripple that made the hues in the room stand out more as it passed. The floor, the sheets, her own dress—it all flared to vibrant brightness for a second, then faded back to the original colors.

"What in Austre's name was *that*?" Vivenna asked.

"BioChromatic Breath, princess," Denth said as he stood, leaning against the door out. "Old Lemks has a lot of it. Couple hundred Breaths, I'd guess."

"That's impossible," Vivenna said. "He's Idrian. He'd never accept Breath."

Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, who was scratching his parrot's neck. The bulky soldier just shrugged.

Another wave of color came from Lemks.

“He’s dying, princess,” Denth said. “His Breath is going irregular.”

Vivenna glanced at Denth. “He doesn’t have—”

Something grabbed her arm. She jumped, looking down at Lemks, who had managed to reach up and take hold of her. He was focused on her face. “Princess Vivenna,” he said, eyes showing a bit of lucidity.

“Lemks,” she said. “Your contacts. You have to give them to me!”

“I’ve done something bad, princess.”

She froze.

“Breath, princess,” he said. “I inherited it from my predecessor, and I’ve bought more. A lot more...”

God of Colors... Vivenna thought with a sick feeling in her stomach.

“I know it was wrong,” Lemks whispered. “But... I felt so powerful. I could make the very dust of the earth obey my command. It was for the good of Idris! Men with Breath are respected here in Hallandren. I could get into parties where I normally would have been forbidden. I could go to the Court of Gods when I wished. The Breath extended my life, made me spry despite my age. I...”

He blinked, eyes unfocusing.

“Oh, Austre,” he whispered. “I’ve damned myself. I’ve gained notoriety through abusing the souls of others. And now I’m dying...”

“Lemks!” Vivenna said. “Don’t think about that now. Names! I need names and passcodes. Don’t leave me alone!”

“Damned,” he whispered. “Someone take it. Please take it away from me!”

Vivenna tried to pull back, but he still had a hold on her arm. She shuddered, thinking about the Breath he held.

“You know, princess,” Denth said from behind. “Nobody really tells mercenaries anything. It’s an unfortunate—but very realistic—drawback of our profession. Never trusted. Never looked to for advice.”

She glanced back at him. He leaned against the door, Tonk Fah a short distance away. Parlin stood there as well, holding that ridiculous green hat in his fingers.

“Now, if someone *were* to ask my opinion,” Denth continued, “I’d point out how much those Breaths are worth. Sell them, and you’d have enough money to buy your *own* spy network—or pretty much anything else you wanted.”

Vivenna looked back at the dying man. He was mumbling to himself.

“If he dies,” Denth said, “that Breath dies with him. All of it.”

“A shame,” Tonk Fah said.

“Truly,” Denth said.

Vivenna paled. “I will not traffic in the souls of men! I don’t care how much they’re worth.”

“Suit yourself,” Denth said. “Hope nobody suffers when your mission fails, though.”

Siri...

“No,” Vivenna said, partially to herself. “I couldn’t take them.” It was true. Even the thought of letting someone else’s Breath mingle with her own—the idea of drawing another person’s soul into her own body—made her sick.

Vivenna turned back to the dying spy. His BioChroma was burning bright now, and his sheets practically glowed. It was better to let that Breath die with him.

Yet, without Lemks, she would have no help in the city. No one to guide her. She’d barely brought enough money to see to lodging and meals, let alone bribes or supplies. It was like the goods one found in a bandit’s cavern. Did you throw it away just because it had originally been earned through crime? Her training and lessons whispered that she needed resources badly, and that the damage had already been done...

No! she thought again. It just isn’t right! I can’t hold it. I couldn’t.

Of course, perhaps it would be wise to let someone *else* hold the Breaths for a time. Then she could think about what to do with them at her leisure. Maybe... maybe even find the people they had been taken from in the first place. She turned back, glancing at Denth and Tonk Fah.

“Don’t look at me like that, princess,” Denth said, chuckling. “I see the glint in your eyes. I’m not going to keep that Breath for you. Having that much BioChroma makes a man far too important.”

Tonk Fah nodded. “It’d be like hiking about the city with a bag of gold on your back.”

“I like my Breath the way it is,” Denth said. “I only need one, and it’s functioning just fine. Keeps me alive, doesn’t draw attention to me, and sits there waiting to be sold if I need it.”

Vivenna glanced at Parlin. But... no, she couldn’t force the Breath on him. She turned back to Denth. “What kind of things does your agreement with Lemks provide for?”

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, then glanced back at her. The look in his eyes was enough. He was paid to obey. He’d take the Breath if she commanded it.

“Come here,” she said, nodding to a stool beside her.

Denth approached reluctantly. “You know, princess,” he said, sitting. “If you give me that Breath, then I could just run off with it. I’d be a wealthy man. You wouldn’t want to put that kind of temptation into the hands of an unscrupulous mercenary now, would you?”

She hesitated.

If he runs off with it, then what do I lose? That would solve a lot of problems for her. “Take it,” she ordered.

He shook his head. “That’s not the way it works. Our friend there has to give it to me.”

She looked at the old man. “I...”

He has to give it to me.

She began to command Lemks to do just that, but she had second thoughts. Austre wouldn’t want her to take the Breath, no matter what the circumstances—a man who took Breath from others was worse than a slaver.

“No,” she said. “No, I’ve changed my mind. We won’t take the Breath.”

At that moment, Lemks stopped his mumbling. He looked up, meeting Vivenna’s eyes.

His hand was still on her arm.

“My life to yours,” he said in an eerily clear voice, grip tight on her arm as she jumped back. “*My Breath become yours!*”

A vibrant cloud of shifting, oil-on-water air burst from his mouth, puffing toward her. Vivenna closed her mouth, eyes wide, hair white. She ripped her arm free from Lemks' grip, his face dull, his eyes losing of their luster, colors fading around him.

The Breath shot toward her. She kept her mouth closed, but that did nothing. The Breath had been Commanded, and it found its new host. Within a second of being released, it struck, hitting her like a physical force, washing across her body.

She gasped, falling to her knees, body quivering with a perverse pleasure. She could suddenly *feel* the other people in the room. She could sense them watching her. And—like a light turning on—everything around her become more vibrant, more real, and more alive.

She gasped, shaking in awe. She vaguely heard Parlin rushing to her side, speaking her name. But, oddly, the only thing she could think of was the melodic quality of his voice. She could pick out each tone in every word he spoke. She knew them instinctively. She could name them all.

Austre, God of Colors! she thought, steadying herself with one hand against the wooden floor as the shakes subsided. *What have I done?*

Chapter Thirteen

Siri sat nervously, blonde with excitement, trying to contain herself as the serving women did her hair. Her Marriage Jubilation—something she found rather inappropriately named—was finally over, and it was time for her formal presentation before the Hallandren gods.

She was probably too excited. It hadn't really been that long. Yet the prospect of leaving—if only to attend court—made her almost giddy. She would finally get to interact with someone other than priests, scribes, and servants. She'd finally get to meet some of the Gods that she'd always heard about.

Plus, He'd be there as the presentation. The only times she'd been able to see the God King had been during their nightly staring matches, when he was shrouded in shadow. Today, she would see him in the light.

She smiled, inspecting herself in a large mirror. The servants had done her hair in an amazingly intricate style, with part of it braided, the rest still allowed to flow free. They'd tied several ribbons into the braids and woven them into her free-flowing hair. The ribbons shimmered as she turned her head, inspecting herself in the mirror. Her family would have been mortified at the ostentatious colors. Siri smiled mischievously, making her hair turn a brighter shade of golden blonde to contrast the ribbons.

The serving women smiled approvingly, a couple letting out quiet 'ooo's at the transformation. Siri sat back, hands in lap as she inspected her clothing choices for the court appearance. The garments were ornate—not as complex as the ones she wore to the bedchambers, but far more formal than her everyday choices.

Red was the theme for the serving women and priests today. That made Siri want to choose something else. Eventually, she decided on gold, and she pointed at the two golden gowns, having the women bring them forward so she could look at them more closely. Unfortunately, as she did so, the women fetched three more golden dresses from a rolling wardrobe out in the hallway.

Siri sighed. It was as if they were determined to keep her from having a reasonably simple choice. She just hated seeing so many options disappear each day. If only...

She paused. "Could I try them *all* on?"

The serving women glanced at each other, a little confused. They nodded toward her, their expressions conveying a simple message. *Of course you can.* Siri felt foolish, but in Idris, she'd never had a choice before. She'd simply worn what she was given.

She was a queen now. She smiled, standing and letting them take off her robe then dress her in the first of the gowns, careful not to mess up her hair. Siri inspected herself, noting that the neckline was rather low. She was willing to splurge on color, but the amount of flesh Hallandrens showed still felt scandalous to her.

She nodded, letting them take off the gown. Then, they dressed her in the next one—a two-piece garment with a separate corset. Once they were finished, Siri eyed this new outfit in the mirror. She liked it, but she wanted to try the others as well. So, after spinning about and inspecting the back, she nodded and moved on.

It was frivolous. But why was she so worried about being frivolous? Her father wasn't around to regard her with that stern, disapproving face of his. Vivenna was an entire kingdom away. None of the people in the room would be corrupted by her bad example.

Siri was queen of the Hallandren people. Shouldn't she try to learn their ways? She smiled at the ridiculous justification, but went on to the next gown anyway.

#

"I'll give it away," Vivenna said firmly.

She sat with the mercenaries in Lemks's home. They had moved from the bed chamber—where the corpse still lay—down to the sitting room. Like most in Hallandren, the place was swollen with colors; the walls were made from thin strips of reed-like wood, stained with bright yellows and greens. Vivenna couldn't help but notice that she saw each color more vibrantly now. She had a strange sense for color—she could divide its shades and hues, understanding instinctively how close each color was to the ideal. It was like perfect pitch for the eyes.

It was very, *very* difficult not to see beauty in the colors.

Denth leaned against the far wall. Tonk Fah lounged on a couch, yawning periodically, his colorful bird perched on his foot. Parlin had gone to stand watch outside.

"Give it away, Princess?" Denth asked.

"The Breath," Vivenna said. She sat on a kitchen stool instead of one of the overly-plush chairs or couches. "We will go out and find unfortunate people who have been raped by your culture, their Breath stolen, and I will give each one a Breath."

Denth shot a glance at Tonk Fah, who simply yawned.

"Princess," Denth said, "you can't give Breath away one at a time. You have to give it all away at once."

"Including your own Breath," Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. "That would leave you as a Drab."

Vivenna's stomach churned at that. The thought of not only losing the new beauty and color, but her own Breath, her soul... well, it was almost enough to turn her hair white. "No," she said. "That's not an option, then."

The room fell silent.

"She could Awaken stuff," Tonk Fah noted, wiggling his foot, making his bird squawk. "Stick the Breath inside of a pair of pants or something."

"That's a good point," Denth said.

"What... does that entail?" Vivenna asked.

"You bring something to life, princess," Denth said. "An inanimate object. That'll draw out some of your Breath and leave the object kind of alive. Most Awakeners do it temporarily, but I don't see why you couldn't just leave the Breath there."

Awakening. Taking the souls of men and using them to create unliving monstrosities. Somehow, Vivenna felt that Austre would find that an even greater sin than simply bearing the Breath. She sighed, shaking her head. The problem with the Breath was, in a way, just a distraction—one she feared she was using to keep herself from dwelling on the corpse upstairs.

She could no longer count on Lemks to guide her. What was she going to do?

Denth sat down in a chair beside her, resting his feet up on the sitting table. He kept himself better groomed than Tonk Fah, his dark hair pulled back into a neat tail, his face clean-shaven. "I hate being a mercenary," he said. "You know why?"

She raised an eyebrow.

“No job security,” Denth said, leaning back in his chair. “The kinds of things we do, they tend to be dangerous and unpredictable. Our employers have a habit of dying off on us.”

“Though usually not from the chills,” Tonk Fah noted. “Swords tend to be the method of choice.”

“Take our current predicament,” Denth said. “No more employer. That leaves us without any real direction.”

Vivenna froze. No direction. Does that mean their contract is over? They know I’m a princess of Idris. What will they do with that information?

Denth eyed her. “You see that?” he asked, turning to Tonk Fah.

“Yeah,” Tonk Fah said. “She’s thinking it.”

Denth leaned back further in his chair. “See, this is *exactly* what I’m talking about. Why does everyone assume that when a mercenary’s contract is over, he’ll immediately betray them? I mean, do you think a surgeon has this problem? Do people worry that the moment they’re done paying him, he’ll laugh maniacally and cut off their toes?”

“I like cutting off toes,” Tonk Fah noted.

“That’s different,” Denth said. “It makes sense for you. Either way, you wouldn’t do it simply because your contract ran out, would you?”

“Nah,” Tonk Fah said. “Toes is toes.”

Vivenna rolled her eyes. “Is there a point to this?”

“The point is, princess,” Denth said. “You were just thinking that we were going to betray you. Maybe rob you blind or sell you to slavery or something.”

“Nonsense,” Vivenna said. “I was thinking nothing of the sort.”

“I’m sure,” Denth replied. “Why does everyone assume that we’ll stab them in the belly the moment we get an opportunity? Why does everyone assume that we’re criminals? Mercenary work is very respectable—it’s legal in almost every kingdom I know. We’re just as much a part of the community as the baker or the fishmonger.”

“Not that we pay the tax collectors,” Tonk Fah added. “We tend to stab them in the belly the moment we get an opportunity.”

Vivenna just shook her head.

Denth leaned forward, speaking in a more serious tone. “What I’m trying to say, princess, is that we’re not criminals. We’re employees. Your friend Lemks was our boss. Now he’s dead. I figure that our contract transfers to you now, if you want it.”

Vivenna felt a slight glimmer of hope. *They aren’t Lemks*, she thought, *but they do obviously know a lot about the city*. But could she trust them? Despite Denth’s speech, she found it hard to have faith in the motives and altruism of a couple men who fought for money.

Yet, they *had* come to get her and hadn’t taken advantage of Lemks’s sickness. There was no reason to assume that simply because they were mercenaries, they were also thieves.

“All right,” she said. “How much is left on your contract?”

“No idea,” Denth said. “Jewels handles that kind of thing.”

“Jewels?” Vivenna asked.

“Third member of the group,” Tonk Fah said. “She’s off doing Jewels stuff.”

Vivenna frowned. “How many of you are there?”

“Just three,” Denth said.

“Unless you count pets,” Tonk Fah said, balancing his bird on his foot.

“She’ll be back in a bit,” Denth said. “I know we’ve got at least a few months left on our contract, and we were paid half up front. Even if you decide not to pay the rest, we probably owe you a few more weeks.”

Tonk Fah nodded. “So if there’s anyone you want killed, now would be the time.”

Vivenna paused, and Tonk Fah chuckled.

“You’re really going to have to get used to our terrible senses of humor, princess,” Denth said. “Assuming, of course, you’re going to keep us around.”

“I’ve already implied that I’ll keep you,” Vivenna said.

“All right,” Denth replied. “But what are you going to do with us? Why did you even come to the city?”

Vivenna didn’t answer immediately. *No point in holding back*, she thought. *They know the most dangerous secret—my identity—already.* “I’m here to rescue my sister,” she said. “To sneak her out of the God King’s palace and see her returned to Idris unharmed.”

The mercenaries fell silent. Finally, Tonk Fah whistled. “Ambitious,” he noted as his parrot mimicked the whistle.

“She *is* a princess,” Denth said. “They tend to be ambitious sorts, I hear.”

“Siri isn’t ready to deal with Hallandren,” Vivenna said, leaning forward. “My father sent her in my place, but I cannot stand the thought of her serving as the God King’s wife. Unfortunately, if we simply grab her and go, Hallandren will likely attack my homeland. We need to make her disappear in a way that isn’t damning to my people. Then, if necessary, we can substitute me in Siri’s place.”

Denth scratched his head.

“Well?” Vivenna asked.

“Little bit out of our realm of expertise,” Denth said.

“We usually hit things,” Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. “Or, at least, keep things from getting hit. Lemks kept us on as partially just as bodyguards.”

“Why wouldn’t he just send for a couple of Idris soldiers to protect him?”

Denth and Tonk Fah exchanged a look.

“How can I put this delicately?” Denth said. “Princess, your Lemks was embezzling money from the king and spending it on Breath.”

“Lemks was a patriot!” Vivenna said immediately.

“That may have been the case,” Denth said. “But even a good priest isn’t above slipping himself a few coins out of the coffer, so to speak. I think your Lemks figured it would be better to have outside muscle, rather than inside loyalists, protecting him.”

Vivenna fell silent. It was still hard to imagine the thoughtful, clever, and passionate man represented in Lemk’s letters as a thief. Yet, it was also hard to imagine Lemks holding as much Breath as he obviously had.

But embezzling? Stealing from Idris itself?

“You know, you learn things as a mercenary,” Denth said, resting back with hands behind his head. “You fight enough people, and you figure you start to understand them a bit. It’s a strange thing. You stay alive by anticipating others. The thing is, people aren’t simple, princess. Even Idris.”

“Boring, yes,” Tonk Fah added. “But not simple.”

“Your Lemks, he was involved in some big things,” Denth said. “I honestly think he *was* a patriot. There are plans and intrigues going on in this city, princess—some of the projects Lemks had us working on looked toward a much bigger picture. Many of those seem to be for the good of Idris. I guess he just thought he should be compensated a little for that patriotism.”

“Quite an amiable fellow, actually,” Tonk Fah said. “Didn’t want to bother your father. So he just did the figures on his own, gave himself a raise, and indicated in his reports that his costs were far greater than they really were.”

Vivenna fell silent, letting herself digest the words. How could anyone who stole money from Idris also be a patriot? How could a person faithful to Austre end up with several hundred BioChromatic Breaths?

She shook her head wryly. *I saw men who placed themselves above others, and I saw them cast down*, she thought. It was one of the Five Visions, prime tenets of her religion. She shouldn’t judge Lemks, particularly now that he was dead. “Wait a moment,” she said, eying the mercenaries. “You said that you were just bodyguards. What, then, were you doing helping Lemks with ‘projects’?”

The two men shared a look.

“Told you she was smart,” Tonk Fah said. “Comes from not being a mercenary.”

“We *are* bodyguards, princess,” Denth said. “However, we’re not unpossessing of certain... skills. We can make things happen.”

“Things?” Vivenna asked.

“Projects, problems, situations,” Denth said. “We know people. That’s part of what makes us useful. Let me think about this issue with your sister. Maybe I’ll be able to come up with some ideas. It’s a little like kidnapping...”

“Which,” Tonk Fah said, “we’re not too fond of. Did we mention that?”

“Yes,” Vivenna said. “Bad business. No money.”

“Exactly,” Tonk Fah said, resting back and yawning again.

“What were these ‘projects’ Lemks was working on,” Vivenna asked, turning back to Denth.

“I’m not exactly sure of the whole scope, Princess,” he admitted. “We only saw pieces—running errands, arranging meetings, intimidating people. It had something to do with work for your father. We can find out for you, if you want.”

Vivenna nodded. “I do.”

Denth stood. “All right,” he said. He walked past Tonk Fah’s couch, smacking the larger man’s leg, causing the bird to squawk. “Tonk. Come on. Time to ransack the house.”

Tonk Fah yawned and sat up.

“Wait!” Vivenna said. “Ransack the house?”

“Sure,” Denth said, heading up the stairs. “Break out any hidden safes. Search through papers and files. Figure out what old Lemks was up to.”

“He won’t care much,” Tonk Fah said, standing. “If you want, we’ll turn the body face down so he doesn’t have to watch.”

Vivenna shivered. She still wasn’t certain what to do with the body, but having a pair of toughs search his belongings felt a little unseemly.

Denth must have noticed her discomfort. “We don’t have to, if you don’t want us to.”

“Sure,” Tonk Fah said. “We’ll never know what Lemks was up to, though.”

“Continue,” Vivenna said. “But I’m going to supervise.”

“Actually, I doubt that you will,” Denth said.

“And why is that?”

“Because,” Denth said. “Now, I know nobody ever asks mercenaries for their opinion. You see—”

“Oh, just get on with it,” Vivenna said with annoyance, though she immediately chastised herself for her ostentatious snappishness. What was wrong with her? The last few days must be wearing on her.

Denth just smiled, as if he found her outburst incredibly amusing. “Today’s the day when the Returned hold judicial court, princess.”

“So?” Vivenna asked with forced calmness.

“So,” Denth replied, “it’s also the day when your sister will be presented to the Court of Gods. I suspect that you’ll want to go get a good look at her, see how she’s holding up. If you’re going to do that, you’ll want to get moving. Court will begin pretty soon here.”

Vivenna folded her arms, not moving. “I’ve been tutored all about the court, Denth. I know things—like the fact that regular people can’t just walk into the Court of Gods. If you want to watch judgments, you either have to be favored of one of the Gods, be extremely influential, or you have to draw lottery.”

“True,” Denth said, leaning against the banister. “If only we knew someone with enough - BioChromatic Breath to instantly be considered important, and therefore gain entrance to the court without being questioned.”

“Ah, Denth,” Tonk Fah said. “Someone has to have at least fifty Breath to be considered worthy of watching judgments! That’s a terribly high number.”

Vivenna paused. “And... how many Breaths do I have?”

“Oh, around five hundred or so,” Denth said. “At least, that’s what Lemks claimed he had. I’m inclined to believe him. You are, after all, making the carpet shine.”

She glanced down, noticing for the first time that she was creating a pocket of enhanced color around her. It wasn’t very distinct, but it *was* noticeable.

“You’d better get going, princess,” Denth said, continuing to clomp up the stairs. “You’ll be late.”

Chapter Fourteen

“It’s raining,” Lightsong noted.

“Very astute, your grace,” Llarimar said, walking beside his god.

“I’m not fond of rain.”

“So you have often noted, your grace.”

“I’m a god,” Lightsong said. “Shouldn’t I have power over the weather? How can it rain if I don’t want it to?”

“There are currently twenty-five Gods in the Court, your grace. Perhaps there are more who desire rain than those who don’t.”

Lightsong’s robes of gold and red rustled as he walked. The grass was cool and damp beneath his sandaled toes, but a group of servants carried a wide pavilion over him. Rain fell softly on the cloth above. In T’Telir, rainfalls were common, but they were never very strong.

Lightsong would have liked to have seen a true rainstorm, like people said happened out in the jungles. “I’ll take a poll then,” Lightsong said. “Of the other Gods. See how many them wanted it to rain today.”

“If you wish, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It won’t prove much.”

“It’ll prove who’s fault this is,” Lightsong said. “And... if it turns out that most of us want it to stop raining, perhaps that will start a theological crisis.”

Llarimar, of course, didn’t seem bothered by the concept of a god trying to undermine his own religion. “Your grace,” he said, “our doctrine is *quite* sound, I assure you.”

“And if the Gods don’t want it to rain, yet it still does?”

“Would you like it to be sunny all the time, your grace?”

Lightsong shrugged. “Sure.”

“And the farmers?” Llarimar said. “Their crops would die without the rain.

“It can rain on the crops,” Lightsong said, “just not in the city. A few selective weather patterns shouldn’t be too much for a god to accomplish.”

“The people need water to drink, your grace,” Llarimar said. “The streets need to be washed clean. And what of the plants in the city? The beautiful trees—even this grass that you enjoy walking across—would die if the rain did not fall.”

“Well,” Lightsong said, “I could just *will* them to continue living.”

“And that is what you do, your grace,” Llarimar said. “Your soul knows that rain in the city is best for it, and so it rains. Despite what your consciousness thinks.”

Lightsong frowned. “By that argument, you could claim that *anyone* was a god, Llarimar.”

“Not just *anyone* comes back from the dead, your grace. Nor do they have the power to heal the sick, and they certainly don’t have your ability to foresee the future.”

Good points, those, Lightsong thought as they approached the arena. The large, circular structure was at the back of the Court of Gods, outside of the ring of palaces that surrounded the courtyard. Lightsong's entourage moved inside—red pavilion still held above him—and entered the sand-covered arena yard. Then they moved up a ramp toward the seating area.

The arena had four rows of seats for regular people—stone benches, accommodating T'Telir citizens who were favored, lucky, or rich enough to get themselves into a judgment session. The upper reaches of the arena were reserved for the Returned. Here—close enough to hear what was said on the arena floor, yet far enough back to remain stately—were the boxes. Large, ornate, and stone, they were large enough to hold a god's entire entourage.

Lightsong could see that several of his colleagues had arrived, marked by the colorful pavilions which sat above their boxes. Windreader was there, as was Mercystar. They passed by the empty box usually reserved for Lightsong. Instead, they made their way around the ring and approached a box topped by a green pavilion.

Blushweaver lounged inside. Her green and silver dress was lavish and revealing, as always. Despite its rich trim and embroidery, it was little more than a long swath of cloth with a hole in the center for her head. That left it completely open on both sides from shoulder to calf, and Blushweaver's thighs curved out lusciously on either side. She sat up, smiling.

I asked for this, Lightsong thought. He wasn't certain what made him so hesitant. Blushweaver always treated him kindly and she certainly did have a high opinion of him. It was just that he felt like he had to be on guard at all times when he was around her. A man could be taken in by a woman such as she.

Taken in, then never released.

"Lightsong, dear," she said, smiling more deeply as Lightsong's servants scuttled forward, setting up his chair, footrest, and snack table.

"Blushweaver," Lightsong replied. "My high priest tells me that you're to blame for this dreary weather."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, and to the side—standing with the other priests—Llarimar flushed. "I like the rain," Blushweaver finally said, lounging back on her couch. "It's... different. I like things that are different."

"Then you should be thoroughly bored by me, my dear," Lightsong said, seating himself and taking a handful of grapes—already peeled—from the bowl on his snack table.

"Bored?" Blushweaver asked.

"I strive for nothing if not mediocrity, and mediocrity is hardly original. If it were, I believe that the universe should find the word far too ironic to exist."

"You bow before the whims of the universe, then?" Blushweaver said, stretching back, tips of her fingers wiggling as she sighed in contentment.

"What else would I do?"

"Fight it," Blushweaver said, finishing her stretch. She narrowed her eyes, absently reaching to take one of the grapes from Lightsong's hand. "Fight with everything, force the universe to bow to you instead."

"I don't know if I can do that, Blushweaver."

"You're a *god*."

"A god who can't even make it stop raining."

"I want it to storm and tempest. Maybe this drizzle is the compromise between us."

Lightsong popped another grape in his mouth, squishing it between his teeth, feeling the sweet juice leak onto his palate. He thought for a moment, chewing. “Blushweaver, dear,” he finally said. “Is there some kind of subtext to our current conversation? Because, as you might know, I am absolutely *terrible* with subtext. It gives me a headache.”

“You can’t get headaches,” Blushweaver said.

“Well I can’t get subtext either. Far too subtle for me. It takes effort to understand, and effort is—unfortunately—against my religion.”

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “A new tenet for those who worship you?”

“Oh, not that religion,” Lightsong said. “I mean the one that I’m going to convert to. I’m thinking of becoming a worshipper of Austre. His seems a rather blunt theology—black, white, no bothering with complications. Faith without any bothersome thinking.”

Blushweaver stole another grape. “You just don’t know Austrism well enough. It’s complex. If you’re looking for something *really* simple, you should try the Pahn Kahl faith.”

Lightsong frowned. “Don’t they just worship the Returned, like the rest of us?”

“No. They have their own religion.”

“But everyone knows the Pahn Kahl are practically Hallandrens.”

Blushweaver shrugged, watching the stadium floor below.

“And... how exactly did we get onto this tangent, anyway?” Lightsong said. “I swear, my dear. Sometimes our conversations remind me of a broken longsword.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Sharp as hell,” Lightsong said, “but lacking a point.”

Blushweaver snorted quietly. “You’re the one who asked to meet with me, Lightsong.”

“Yes, but we both know that you wanted me to. What are you planning, Blushweaver?”

Blushweaver rolled her grape between her fingers. “Wait,” she said.

Lightsong sighed, waving for a servant to bring him some nuts. One placed a bowl on the table, then another came forward and began to crack them for him.

“Wait?” he asked. “First you imply that I should join with you, now you won’t tell me what you want me to do? I swear, woman. Someday, your ridiculous sense of drama is going to cause cataclysmic problems—like, for instance, boredom in your companions.”

“It’s not drama,” she said, huffing slightly. “It’s respect.” She nodded directly across the arena, where the God King’s box still stood empty, golden throne sitting on a pedestal above the box itself.

“Ah. Feeling patriotic today, are we?”

“It’s more that I’m curious.”

“About?”

“Her.”

“The queen?”

Blushweaver gave him a flat stare. “Of course, her. Who else would I be speaking about?”

“Dear, they call me Lightsong the Brave, not Lightsong the Clever. Don’t expect me to figure things out on my own. The queen’s period of isolation is over, then?”

Blushweaver nodded.

“So soon?”

“It’s been a week.”

Lightsong counted off the days. It *had* been a week. “Huh,” he said to himself.

“You really should pay more attention, Lightsong.”

He shrugged. “Time tends to pass you by more quickly when take no notice of it, my dear. In that, it’s remarkably similar to most women I know.” With that, he accepted a handful of nuts, then settled back to wait.

#

Apparently, the people of T’Telir weren’t fond of carriages—not even to carry gods. Siri sat, a little bit amused, as a group of serving men carried her chair across the grass toward a large, circular structure at the back of the Court of Gods. It was raining. She didn’t care. She’d been cooped up for far too long.

She turned, twisting in her chair, looking back over a group of serving women who carried her dress’s long golden train, keeping it off the wet grass. Around them all walked another group of women who carried a large pavilion, using several poles to keep it up and shade Siri from the rain.

“Could you... move that aside?” Siri asked. “Let the rain fall on me?”

The serving women glanced at each other.

“Just for a little bit,” Siri said. “I promise.”

The women shared frowns, but slowed, allowing Siri’s porters to pull ahead and expose her to the rain. She looked up, smiling as the drizzle fell on her face. *Seven days is far too long to spend indoors*, she decided.

She basked for a long moment, enjoying the cool wetness on her skin and clothing. The grass looked inviting. She glanced back again. “I could walk, you know.” *Feel my toes on that blades...*

The serving women looked very, very uncomfortable about that concept.

“Or not,” Siri said, turning around as the women hurried up, again covering the sky with their pavilion. They were probably right—walking was a bad idea. Particularly since Siri had eventually chosen a dress with such a long train. Despite her hesitance back in the palace, she’d eventually chosen a dress far more daring than anything she’d ever worn. The neckline was a bit low, and it had no sleeves. It also had a curious shape that covered the front of her legs with only a short skirt, yet had a long dress in the back. She’d picked it half because of the novelty, though she blushed every time she thought of how much leg it showed.

They soon arrived at the round building and her porters carried her up into it. Siri was interested to see that it had no ceiling and had a sand-covered floor. Just above the floor, a colorful group of people were gathering on a series of benches. Though some of them carried umbrellas, many were heedless of the light rain, chatting amiably amongst themselves. Siri smiled at the collection; a hundred different colors and as many different clothing styles were represented. It was good to see some variety again, even if that variety was a little garish.

Her porters carried her up to a large stone cleft built into the side of the building. Here, her women slid the pavilion poles into slots in the stone, letting it stand freely to cover the entire box. Servants scuttled about, getting things ready, and her porters put her down. She stood, frowning. She was finally free of the palace. And yet it appeared as if she were going to have to sit above everyone else. Even the other gods—which she assumed were in the other pavilioned boxes—were distant from her, separated by walls.

How is it that they can make me feel alone, even when surrounded by hundreds of people? She turned to one of her serving women. “The God King. Where is he?”

The woman gestured toward the other pavilions set into boxes like Siri’s.

“He’s in one of them?” Siri asked.

“No, Vessel,” the woman said very, eyes downcast. “He will not arrive until the gods are all here.”

Ah, Siri thought. Makes sense, I guess.

She sat back in her chair as several servants prepared food. To the side, a minstrel began to play a flute, as if to drown out the sounds of the talking below. She would rather have heard the people. Still, she decided not to let herself get into a bad mood. At least she was outside, and she could *see* other people, even if she couldn’t interact with them. She smiled to herself, leaning forward, elbows on knees as she studied the exotic colors below.

What was she to make of T’Telir people? They were just so remarkably diverse. Some had dark skin, which meant they were from the edges of the Hallandren kingdom. Others had yellow hair, or even strange hair colors—blue and green—that came, Siri assumed, from dyes.

All wore brilliant clothing, as if there were no other option. Ornate hats were popular, both on men and women. Clothing ranged from vests and shorts to deep robes and gowns. *How much time must they spend shopping!* It was difficult enough for her to choose what to wear, and she only had about a dozen choices each day—and no hats. After she’d refused the first few, the servants had stopped offering them.

As she watched, entourage after entourage arrived, each bearing a different set of colors—a hue and a metallic, usually. She counted the pavilions. There were room for some fifty gods, but the Court only had a couple dozen. Twenty five, was it? In each procession, she saw a figure standing taller than the others. Some—mostly the women—were carried on chairs or couches. The men generally walked, some wearing intricate robes, others wearing nothing more than sandals and skirt.

They stood out. It wasn’t just their height. There was a... radiance to them. Not a glow like the sun or a lantern; the colors around them just seemed more vibrant, the people near them more healthy. Siri leaned forward, studying one god as he walked right by her box. His bare chest made her blush, but it let her see his well-muscled body and toned flesh.

He glanced at her, then nodded his head slightly in respect. His servants and priests bowed almost to the ground. The god continued on, having said nothing.

She sat back in her chair, shaking her head to as one of the servants tried to bring her food. There were still four or five gods left to arrive. Apparently, the Hallandren deities weren’t as punctual as Bluefingers’ schedule-keeping had led her to believe.

#

Vivenna stepped through the gates, passing into the Hallandren Court of Gods. She hesitated, and small groups of people passed through on either side of her, though there wasn’t much of a crowd.

Denth had been right; it had been easy for her to get into the Court. The priests at the gate had waved Vivenna through without even asking her identity. She turned back, glancing at the men in their blue robes. She could see bubbles of colorfulness around them, indications of their strong BioChroma.

She’d been tutored about this. The priests guarding the gates had enough Breath to get them to the First Heightening, the state at which a person gained the ability to distinguish levels of Breath in

other people. Vivenna had it too. It wasn't that auras or colors looked different to her. In fact, the ability to distinguish Breath was similar to the perfect pitch she had gained. Other people heard the same sounds she did, she just had the ability to pick them apart.

She saw how close a person had to get to one of the priests before the colors increased, and she exactly how much more colorful those hues became. This information let her know intrinsically that each of the priests was of the First Heightening. Parlin had one Breath, as did the regular peasants who had to present papers to gain entrance to the Court. She could tell how strong that Breath was, and if the person was sick or not.

The priests each had exactly fifty Breaths, as did the majority of the more wealthy individuals entering through the gates. A reasonable number had two or three hundred Breaths, enough for the Second Heightening and the perfect pitch it granted. Only a couple had more than Vivenna, who had apparently reached all the way to the Third Heightening and the perfect color recognition it granted.

She turned away. She'd been tutored about the Heightenings, but she'd never expected to experience one first hand. She felt dirty. Profane. Particularly because the colors were just so *beautiful*.

She looked up. The court contained a wide circle of palaces, just like her tutors had explained. Those tutors had not mentioned how each palace was so perfectly balanced in color and hue. Each was a work of art, containing subtle color gradients that normal people just wouldn't be able to appreciate. These sat on a pure, uniformly green lawn. It was trimmed carefully, and it was marred by neither road nor pathway. Vivenna stepped onto it, Parlin at her side, and part of her wished to kick off her shoes and walk in the wet, dew-covered grass. That wouldn't be appropriate at all, and she stifled the impulse.

The drizzle was finally starting to let up, and Parlin lowered the parasol he'd bought—against her wishes—to keep them both dry. "So, this is it," he said, shaking off the parasol. "The Court of Gods."

Vivenna nodded.

"Good place to graze sheep."

"I doubt that," she said quietly.

Parlin frowned. "Goats, then?" he finally said.

Vivenna sighed, and they joined the small procession walking across the grass toward a structure outside of the circle of palaces. She'd been worried about standing out—after all, she still wore her simple Idris dress, with its high neck, functional fabric, and muted colors. Yet, she was beginning to realize that there just *wasn't* a way to stand out in T'Telir.

The people around her wore such a stunning variety of outfits that she wondered who had the imagination to design them all. Some were as covering as Vivenna's but others had muted colors—though these were usually accented by bright scarves or hats. Modesty in both design and color was obviously unpopular, but not non-existent.

It's all about drawing attention, she realized. The whites and faded colors are a reaction against the bright colors. But, because everyone tries so hard to look distinctive, nobody does!

Which meant, probably, that she was safe. Feeling a little more secure, she glanced at Parlin, who seemed more at peace now that they were away from the larger crowds below. "Interesting buildings," he said. "The people wear so much color, but that palace is just one color. Wonder why that is."

"It's not one color. It's many different shades of the same color."

Parlin shrugged. "Red is red."

How could she explain? Each red was different, like notes on a musical scale. The walls were of pure red. The roof tiles, side columns, and other ornamentations were of slightly different shades, each distinct and intentional. The columns, for instance, formed stepping fifths of color, harmonizing with the base tint of the walls.

It was like a symphony of hues. The building had obviously been constructed for a person who had obtained the Third Heightening, for only one such as Vivenna would be able to see the ideal resonance. To others... well, it was just a bunch of red.

They passed the red palace, approaching the arena, which had also been part of Vivenna's lessons. Central to the lives of the Hallandren gods was entertainment. After all, one couldn't expect gods to do anything useful with their time. Much of the time, they were entertained in their palaces or on the courtyard law. For particularly large events, there was the arena—which also served as the location of Hallandren legislative debates. Today, the priests of various gods would argue for the sport of their deities.

Vivenna and Parlin waited their turn as the people crowded around the arena entrance. Vivenna glanced to the side, toward another gateway, wondering why nobody used it. The answer was made manifest as a figure approached. He was surrounded by servants, some carrying a canopy. All were dressed in blue and silver, matching their leader, who stood a good head taller than the others.

And he gave off a BioChromatic aura like Vivenna had never seen—though, admittedly, she'd only been able to see them for a few hours. His bubble of enhanced color was enormous; it extended some thirty feet. To her First Heightening senses, the god's Breath registered as infinite. Undistinguishable. For the first time, Vivenna could see that there *was* something different about Returned. They weren't just Awakeners with more power.

The god entered the arena through the open gateway. As she watched him, Vivenna's sense of awe wore off. There was an arrogance to this man's posture, a dismissiveness about the way he entered freely while others waited their turn at a small, cramped opening.

To keep him alive, Vivenna thought, he has to absorb a person's Breath each week.

She'd let herself become too sympathetic, and she felt her former revulsion returning. Color and beauty couldn't cover up such lavish conceit, nor could it hide parasitic sins. There was nothing wrong with BioChroma and nothing evil about being a Returned. It was the way the Hallandren people used such things that was wrong.

The god disappeared into the arena. Vivenna waited, thinking for a time on her own BioChroma and what it meant. She was completely shocked when a man beside her suddenly lifted off the ground.

She jumped. The man was rose into the air, lifted by his overly long cloak. The cloth was stiff, looking a little like a hand as it held the man up high so he could look over the crowd. *How does it do that?* She'd been told that Breath could give life to objects, but what did 'life' mean? It seemed as if each of the threads in the cloak were taught, like muscles, but how did it lift something so much heavier than it was?

The man lowered to the ground. He said something Vivenna couldn't hear, and his BioChromatic aura grew stronger as he recovered his Breath from the cloak. "We should be moving again soon," the man said to his friends. "Crowd is thinning up above."

Indeed, soon the crowd started to progress. It wasn't long before Vivenna and Parlin entered the arena itself. They scanned the stone benches, selecting a place that wasn't too crowded. Parlin seemed nervous to be around so many people, but Vivenna ignored him. She was too busy searching the arena.

The building was ornate, but not very big. It didn't take her long to locate Siri, and when she did, her heart sank. *My... sister*, Vivenna thought with a chill. *My poor sister*.

Siri was dressed in a scandalous golden dress that didn't even come down to her knees. It had a plunging neckline as well. Siri's hair, which even she should have been able to keep a dark brown, was instead the golden yellow of enjoyment, and it had been woven with deep red ribbons. She was being attended by dozens of servants.

"Look what they've done to her," Vivenna said. "She must be frightened senseless, forced to wear something like that, forced to keep her hair a color that matches her clothing..." *Forced to be slave to the God King*.

Peprin's face grew hard.

Siri was being exploited, they were carrying her around and displaying her like some kind of victory trophy. It seemed to Vivenna a statement. They wanted to prove that they could take a chaste, innocent Idris woman and do whatever they wished with her.

Seeing her sister treated that way roused every protective instinct Vivenna had, irritating her already swollen feelings of guilt. *What I'm doing is right*, Vivenna thought. *Coming to Hallandren was the best thing to do. Lemks might be dead, but I have to press onward. I have to find a way.*

I have to save my sister.

"Vivenna?" Parlin said.

"Hum?" Vivenna asked, distracted.

"Why is everyone starting to bow?"

#

Siri played idly with one of the tassels on her dress. The final god was seating himself in his pavilion. *That's twenty-five*, she thought. *It should be all of them*.

Suddenly, out in the audience, people began to rise, then kneel to the ground. Siri stood, searching anxiously. She didn't see anything. What was she missing? Had the God King arrived, or was this something else? Even the gods had gone down on their knees, though they didn't bow themselves down as far as the people.

And they all seemed to be bowing toward Siri. *Some sort of ritual greeting for their new queen?* Then she saw it. Her dress exploded with color, the stone at her feet gained luster, and her very skin became more vibrant. In front of her, a white serving bowl began to shine, then it seemed to stretch, the white color splitting into the colors of the rainbow.

A serving woman tugged on Siri's sleeve from where she knelt below. "Vessel," the woman whispered, "behind you!"

Chapter Fifteen

Breath catching in her chest, Siri turned. She found *him* standing behind her, though she had no idea how he had arrived. There was no entrance from behind, just the stone wall.

He wore white. She hadn't expected that. Something about his BioChroma made the pure white split as she'd seen before, breaking like light passing through a prism. She could finally see this properly, during the light. His clothing seemed to stretch, forming a robe-shaded rainbow in a colorful aura around him.

And he was young. Far younger than her shadowed meetings had prepared her for. He had supposedly reigned in Hallandren for decades, yet the man standing behind her couldn't be more than twenty. She stared at him, awed, mouth opening slightly, and any words she had thought to say escaped her. This man *was* a god. The very air distorted before him. How could she have not seen it? How could she possibly have treated him as she had? She felt like a fool.

He regarded her, expression flat and unreadable, face so controlled that he reminded Siri of Vivenna. Vivenna. She wouldn't have been so belligerent. She would have deserved marriage to such a majestic creature.

The serving woman hissed quietly, tugging again at Siri's dress. Belatedly, Siri dropped to her knees on the stone, long dress train flapping slightly in the wind behind her.

#

Blushweaver knelt obediently on her cushion. Lightsong, however, remained standing. He looked across the stadium toward a man he could barely see. The God King wore white, as he often did, for dramatic effect. As the only man to have achieved the Tenth Heightening, the God King had such a strong aura that he could draw color even from something colorless.

Blushweaver glanced up at Lightsong.

"Why do we kneel?" Lightsong asked.

"That's our king!" Blushweaver hissed. "Kneel, fool."

"What will happen if I don't?" Lightsong said. "They can't execute me. I'm a god."

"You could hurt our cause!"

Our cause? Lightsong thought. One meeting and I'm already part of her plans?

But, he wasn't so foolish that he would earn the God King's ire. Who was he to risk his perfect life, full of people who would carry his chair through the rain and shell his nuts for him? He knelt down on his cushion. The God King's superiority was arbitrary, much like Lightsong's divinity. Both were, in his view, part of a grand game of make-believe.

But he'd found that imaginary items were often the only things of real substance in people's lives.

#

Siri breathed quickly, kneeling on the stone before her husband. The entire arena was hushed and still. Eyes downcast, she could still see Susebron's white-clothed feet in front of her. Even they gave off an aura of color, the white straps of his sandals bending out colorful ribbons of light.

Finally, two piles of colorful rope hit the ground on either side of the God King. Siri glanced up as the ropes twisted with a life of their own, wrapping around Susebron and pulling him into the air. His white robes fluttered as he was towed up through the space between the canopy and the back wall. Siri leaned forward, watching the ropes deposit her husband on a stone outcropping above. He sat back into a golden throne. Beside him, a pair of Awakener priests commanded their living ropes to roll up around their arms.

The God King outstretched his hand. The people stood up—their chatter beginning again—and reseated themselves. Frowning to herself, Siri rose. *So... he's not going to sit with me*, she thought. A part of her was relieved, though an equally strong part was frustrated. She'd been getting over her awe of being in Hallandren and being married to a god. Now, he'd gone and impressed her again.

This time it was different. Before, she'd been quelled by the God King's reputation. Now that she'd seen him, she could tell that he *was* majestic. Troubled, she sat and stared out over the crowds, barely watching as a group of priests entered the arena below.

What was she to make of Susebron? He couldn't be a God. Not really. Could he?

She'd always been taught of Austre. He was the true God of men, the one who sent the Returned. The Hallandren had worshiped him as well, before the Manywar and the exile of the Royal family. The Hallandren had fallen to become pagans, worshipping the Iridescent Tones: BioChromatic Breath, the Returned, and art in general.

And yet, Siri had never seen Austre. She'd been taught, and she'd learned, but what was one to make of a creature like the God King? That divine halo of color wasn't something that she could ignore. She began to understand just how the people of Hallandren—after nearly being destroyed by their enemies, then being saved by the diplomatic skills of Peacegiver the Blessed—could look toward the Returned for divine guidance.

She sighed, glancing to the side as a figure walked up the steps toward her box. It was Bluefingers—hands stained with ink, characteristically scribbling away on a ledger even as he entered her pavilion. He glanced up at the God King, nodded to himself, then made another annotation on his ledger. “I see that the God King is positioned and that you are properly displayed, Vessel.”

“Displayed?”

“Of course,” Bluefingers said. “That is the main purpose of your visit here. Most of the Returned didn't get a chance to study you when you first came to us. You need to be presented before them.”

Siri shivered at the thought, trying to maintain a better posture. “Shouldn't they be paying attention to the priests down there? Instead of studying me, I mean.”

“Probably,” Bluefingers said, not looking up from his ledger. “In my experience, they rarely do what they're supposed to.”

Siri let the conversation lapse. There was something she'd been meaning to ask Bluefingers. He'd never explained his odd warning the other night. *Things are not what they seem*. She glanced at the scribe. “Bluefingers,” she said. “About the thing you told me the other night. The—”

He immediately shot her a look—eyes wide and insistent—cutting her off. He turned back to his ledger. The message was obvious. Not right now.

Siri sighed, resisting the urge to slump down. Below, priests of various colors stood on short platforms, debating. She could hear them quite well. Yet, little of what they said made sense to her—the current debate appeared to have something to do with the way refuse and sewage was handled in the city.

“Bluefingers,” she asked. “Are they really gods?”

The scribe hesitated, then finally looked up from his ledger. “Vessel?”

“The Returned. Do you really think that they’re divine? That they can see the future?”

“I... don’t think I’m the right one to ask about these things, Vessel. Let me fetch one of the priests. He can answer your questions. Just give me a—”

“No,” Siri said, causing him to stop. “I don’t want a priest’s opinion—I want the opinion of a regular person, like you. A typical follower.”

Bluefingers frowned. “All apologies, Vessel, but I’m *not* a follower of the Returned.”

“But you work in the palace.”

“And *you* live there, Vessel. Yet neither of us worship the Iridescent Tones. You are from Idris. I am from Pahn Kahl.”

“Pahn Kahl is the same as Hallandren.”

Bluefingers raised an eyebrow, pursing his lips. “Actually, Vessel, it’s quite different.”

“But you’re ruled by the God King.”

“We can accept him as king without worshipping him as our god,” Bluefingers said. “That is one of the reasons why I’m a steward in the palace instead of a priest.

His robes, Siri thought. Maybe that’s why he always wears brown. She turned, glancing down at the priests upon their pedestals in the sand. Each wore a different set of colors, each representing—she assumed—a different one of the Returned. “So what do you think of them?”

“Good people,” Bluefingers said, “but misguided. A little like I think of you, Vessel.”

She glanced at him. He, however, had already turned back to his ledgers. He wasn’t exactly the easiest man with whom to have a conversation. “But, how do you explain the God King’s radiance?”

“BioChroma,” Bluefingers said, still scribbling, not sounding at all annoyed by her questions. He was obviously a man accustomed to dealing with interruption.

“But the rest of the Returned don’t bend white into colors like he does, do they?”

“No,” Bluefingers said, “indeed they do not. They, however, don’t hold the wealth of Breaths that he does.”

“So he *is* different,” Siri said. “Why was he born with more?”

“He wasn’t, Vessel. The God King’s power does not from the inherent BioChroma of being a Returned—in that, he is identical to the others. However, he holds something else. The Light of Peace, they call it. A fancy word for a treasure trove of Breath that numbers somewhere in the tens of thousands.”

Tens of thousands? Siri thought. “That much?”

Bluefingers nodded distractedly. “The God Kings are said to be the only ones to ever achieve the Tenth Heightening. *That* is what makes light fracture around him; it is less a symbol of divinity, and more a simple function of holding so much Breath.”

“But where did he get it?”

“The largest bulk of it was originally gathered by Peacegiver the Blessed,” Bluefingers said. “He collected thousands of Breaths during the days of the Manywar. He passed those on to the first Hallandren God King. That inheritance has been transferred from father to son for centuries—and

has been enlarged, since each God King is given two Breaths a week, instead of the one that regular Returned receive.”

“Oh,” Siri said, sitting back, finding herself oddly disappointed by the news. Susebron was not a god, he was simply a man with far more BioChroma than normal.

But... what of the Returned themselves? Siri folded her arms again. She’d never been forced to look objectively at what she believed. Austre was simply... well, God. You didn’t question people when they talked about God. The Returned were usurpers, who had cast the followers of Austre out of Hallandren.

Yet the Returned themselves were so majestic. Why *had* the Royal family been cast out of Hallandren? She knew the official story taught in Idris—that the Royals hadn’t supported the conflicts that led up to the Manywar. For that, the people had revolted against them. That revolt had been led by Klad the Usurper.

Klad. Though Siri had avoided most of her tutorial sessions, even she knew the stories of that man. He was the one who had led the people of Hallandren in the heresy of building Lifeless, the one who had taught them how to reanimate a body using a single BioChromatic Breath. Before that, Lifeless had been far more expensive. After Klad’s discovery, each person could effectively become two soldiers: a man with a sword in his own hand, and a Lifeless bearing his Breath.

She hadn’t, at least, seen any Lifeless in the palace.

Klad had created a powerful army of the creatures, one the likes of which had never been seen in the land. She didn’t know a lot about it. Klad’s Lifeless had been more dangerous somehow, but that was all she remembered. He’d eventually been defeated by Peacegiver, who had then ended the Manywar through diplomacy. Yet, Peacegiver had not restored Hallandren to its rightful rulers. Idris histories claimed betrayal and treachery. The monks spoke of heresies that were too deeply ingrained into Hallandren.

Surely the Hallandren people had their own story of events. Watching the Returned in their pavilions made Siri wonder. One fact seemed obvious: things in Hallandren were a whole lot less terrible than she had been taught.

#

Vivenna shivered, cringing as the people in their colorful outfits crowded around her.

Things here are worse, even, than my tutors said, she decided, wiggling in her seat. Parlin seemed to have lost much of his nervousness about being in such a crowd. He was focused on the arguing priests on the floor of the arena.

Vivenna found herself feeling annoyed at him. She still couldn’t decide if she thought the Breath she held to be horrible or wonderful. More and more, she was coming to realize that it was horrible *because* of how wonderful it felt. The more people that surged around her, the more overwhelmed she felt. Surely if Parlin could sense the sheer scope of all those colors, he wouldn’t gawk so dumbly at the costumes. Surely if he could *feel* the people, he would feel boxed in like she did, unable to breathe.

That’s it, she thought. I’ve seen Siri, and I know what they’ve done with her. It’s time to go. She stood, turning, and froze.

A man was standing two rows back, and he was staring directly at Vivenna. She normally wouldn’t have paid him any attention. He was wearing ragged brown clothing, ripped in places, his loose trousers tied at the waist by a simple rope. He wore facial hair that was half-way between being a beard and scruff. His hair was unkempt and came down to his shoulders.

And he created a bubble of color around him so bright that he had to be of the Fifth Heightening. He stared at her, meeting her eyes, and she had a sudden and awful panicked sense that he knew who she was.

She stumbled back. The strange man didn't take his eyes off of her. He shifted, pushing back his cloak and exposing a large, black-hilted sword at his belt. Few people in Hallandren wore weapons. This man didn't seem to care. The people to the sides gave him a wide berth, and Vivenna swore she could sense *something* about that sword. It seemed to darken colors. Deepen them. Make tans into browns, reds into maroons, blues into navies.

"Parlin," she said, more sharply than she'd intended. "We're leaving."

"But—"

"*Now*," Vivenna said, turning and rushing away, head bowed. Something about her newfound BioChroma whispered to her that the man's eyes were still upon her. Now that she realized it, she understood that his eyes on her were probably what had made her so uncomfortable in the first place.

The tutors spoke of this, she thought as she and Parlin made their way to one of the stone exit passages. Life sense, the ability to tell when there are people nearby, and to tell when they're watching you. Everyone has it in a small amount. BioChroma enhances that.

As soon as they entered the passage, the sense of being watched vanished, and Vivenna let out a relieved breath.

"I don't see why you wanted to leave," Parlin said.

"We've seen what we needed to," Vivenna said.

"I guess," Parlin said. "I thought you might want to listen to what the priests were saying about Idris."

Vivenna froze. "What?"

Parlin frowned, looking distraught. "I think they might be declaring war. Don't we have a treaty?"

Lord God of Colors! Vivenna thought, turning and scrambling back up into the open theater.

Chapter Sixteen

“... still say that we cannot *possibly* justify military action against Idris!” a priest yelled. The man wore blue and gold. It was Stillmark’s high priest—Lightsong couldn’t quite remember the man’s name. Nanrovah?

The argument was not unexpected. Still, Lightsong leaned forward, interested. Nanrovah and his master, Stillmark, were both staunch traditionalists. They tended to argue against pretty much every topic, but were well-respected. Stillmark was nearly as old as Blushweaver, and was spoken of as wise. Lightsong rubbed his chin.

Arguing with Nanrovah was Blushweaver’s own high priestess, Inhanna. “Oh, come now,” the woman said from the sands down below. “Do we really need to have *this* argument again? Idris is nothing more than a rebel enclave set up inside the borders of our own kingdom!”

“They keep to themselves,” Nanrovah said. “Holding lands we don’t really want anyway.”

“Lands we don’t want?” Blushweaver’s priestess said, sputtering. “They hold every single pass to the northern kingdoms! Every workable copper mine in the area! They have military garrisons within striking distance of T’Telir! And they *still* claim to be the rightful kings of Hallandren!”

Nanrovah fell silent, and there was a surprisingly large rumble of assent from the watching priests. Lightsong eyed them. “You’ve seeded the group with people sympathetic to your cause?”

“Of course,” Blushweaver said. “But so did the others. I just did a better job.”

The debate continued, other priests stepping up to argue for and against an assault on Idris. It was not a new topic. However, Lightsong never seen the discussion become so explicit. Sanctions had been discussed. Blockades. Even some military pressure. But war? Nobody had said the word yet, but they all knew what the priests were discussing.

Arguments in the court were meant to bring information to the Gods. The priests listened to the people and studied issues of national import, then discussed them in the arena. That way, the gods—who didn’t have the opportunity to go out among the people—could be informed. If an issue came to head, the gods would make their judgments. They were divided into sub-groups, each one having responsibility in a certain area. Some Gods were in charge of civic problems; others were over trade agreements and treaties.

Some, like Lightsong, held votes regarding the use of Hallandren’s Lifeless armies. “You’re behind this, then,” he said.

“Behind it?” Blushweaver said sweetly. “Dear Lightsong, the priests decide the issues to be discussed. Gods don’t bother with such mundanity.”

“I’m sure,” Lightsong said, resting back. “You need my Lifeless Commands.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Blushweaver said, “I just want you to be informed should you...”

She trailed off as Lightsong gave her a flat look.

“Aw, Colors,” she swore. “Of *course* I need your commands, Lightsong. Why else would I go to all the trouble to get you up here? You’re a very difficult person to manipulate, you know.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “You just have to promise me that I won’t have to do a thing, and then I’ll do anything you want—provided that anything is nothing, of course. Nothing bothers me more than doing things.”

Blushweaver rolled her eyes.

Lightsong was more troubled than he let on. The arguments for attack had never been so strong. There was proof of a military buildup in Idris and the highlanders had been particularly stingy with the northern passes lately. Beyond that, there was a growing belief that the Returned were weaker than they’d been in previous generations. Not less powerful in BioChroma, just less... divine. Less benevolent, less wise. Lightsong happened to agree.

It had been three years since a Returned had given up his or her life to heal someone. The people were growing impatient with their gods. “There’s more, isn’t there?” he said, glancing at Blushweaver, who was still lounging back, eating cherries with delicate fingers. “What aren’t they saying?”

“Lightsong, dear,” she said. “You were right. Bring you to court, and it absolutely corrupts you.”

“I just don’t like secrets,” he said. “They itch at the brain, keep you awake at nights. Engaging in politics is like pulling off a bandage—best to get the pain over with quickly.”

Blushweaver pursed her lips. “Forced metaphor, dear.”

“Best I can do at the moment, I’m afraid. Nothing dulls the wit quicker than politics. Now, you were saying...”

She snorted. “I’ve told you already. The focus of this all is that woman.”

“The queen,” he said, glancing at the God King’s pavilion.

“They sent the wrong one,” Blushweaver said. “Changed plans at the last moment. They picked the youngest daughter, wrapped her up, and shipped her off instead of the eldest, who had been going through training to become queen.”

Lightsong paused. “Clever,” he admitted.

“Clever?” Blushweaver said. “It’s downright brilliant. Do you know what a fortune most of us all paid these last twenty years to spy upon, study, and learn about the eldest daughter? Those of us who thought to make a backup studied the second daughter, the one they’ve made a monk. But the youngest? Nobody gave her half a thought.”

And so the Idrians send a random element into court, Lightsong thought. One that upsets plans and conniving that our politicians have been working on for decades.

It was brilliant.

“Nobody knows *anything* about her,” Blushweaver said, frowning deeply. She obviously did not like being taken by surprise. “My spies in Idris say the girl is of little consequence—which makes me worry that she is even more dangerous than I’d feared.”

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. “And you don’t think, maybe, that you might be over-reacting a tad?”

“Oh?” Blushweaver asked. “And tell me, what would *you* do if you wanted to inject an agent into the court? Would you do what everyone expected you to? Or, would you set up a dummy that you could show off, drawing attention away from the *real* agent, who you can train secretly? Someone you can send off to achieve an agenda that nobody thought to investigate?”

Lightsong rubbed his chin. *She has a point.* Maybe. Living among so many scheming people tended to make one see plots everywhere. Real or imagined, however, the plot that Blushweaver

suggested had a very serious chance of being dangerous. What better way to get an assassin close to the God King than to send someone to marry him?

No, that wouldn't be it. Killing the God King would just cause Hallandren to go on the rampage. But if they'd sent a woman trained in the art of skilled manipulation—a woman who could secretly poison the mind of the God King...

"We need to be ready to act," Blushweaver said. "I won't sit and let my kingdom be pulled away from me—I won't idly be cast out as the Royals once were. You command a fourth of our Lifeless. That's ten thousand soldiers who don't need to eat, and who can march tirelessly. If we convince the other three Returned with Commands to join us..."

Lightsong thought for a moment, then nodded and stood.

"What are you doing?" Blushweaver asked, sitting up.

"I think I'll go for a stroll," Lightsong said.

"Where?"

Lightsong glanced over at the queen.

"Oh, blessed colors," Blushweaver said with a sigh. "Lightsong, do *not* ruin this. We walk a very delicate line, here."

"I'll do my best."

"I don't suppose I can talk you out of interacting with her?"

"My dear," Lightsong said, glancing backward. "That queen just became a thousand times more fascinating to me. I at least have to chat with her. Nothing would be more intolerable than being overthrown by a person with whom I'd never had a nice conversation."

#

Bluefingers wandered off sometime during the court proceedings. Siri didn't notice—she was too busy watching the priests argue.

She had to be misinterpreting. Surely they couldn't be thinking about attacking Idris. She knew that some of her people feared it would happen, but she'd never believed it herself. What would be the point? What would Hallandren gain? As the priests finished their discussion, moving to another topic, Siri turned to one of her serving women. "What was that about?"

The woman glanced down, not answering.

"They sounded like they were discussing war," Siri said. "They wouldn't really invade, would they?"

The woman shuffled uncomfortably, then glanced at one of her companions. That woman rushed away. A few moments later, the servant returned with Tridees. Siri frowned slightly. She did *not* like speaking with the man.

"Yes, Vessel?" the tall man said, eyeing her with his usual air of disdain.

She swallowed, refusing to be intimidated. "The priests," she said. "What were they just discussing?"

"Your homeland of Idris, Vessel."

"I know that much," Siri said. "What do they want with Idris?"

"It seemed to me, Vessel, that they were arguing about whether or not to attack the rebel province and bring it back under governmental control."

"Rebel province?"

“Yes, Vessel. Your people are in a state of rebellion from the rest of the kingdom.”

“But you rebelled against us!”

Tridees raised an eyebrow.

Different viewpoints on history indeed, Siri thought. In the eyes of this man, apparently, the Idris people were simply an unruly faction waiting to be quelled. “I can see how somebody might think like you do,” she said. “But... you wouldn’t really attack us, would you? We sent you a queen, just like you demanded. The next God King will have Royal blood.”

Assuming the current God King ever decides to consummate our wedding...

Tridees simply shrugged. “It is likely nothing, Vessel. The priests debate matters that are being discussed by the people of the city. I doubt anything will come of it. The gods simply needed to be appraised of the current political climate of T’Telir.”

His words didn’t offer Siri much comfort. She shivered. Should she be doing something? Trying to politic in Idris’s defense?

“Vessel,” Tridees said.

She glanced at him. His tall peaked hat was so large it brushed the top of the canopy. In a city full of colors and beauty, for some reason Tridees’s long face seemed even bleaker for the contrast. “Yes?” she asked.

“There is a matter of some delicacy I fear that I must discuss with you.”

“What is that?”

“You are familiar with monarchies,” he said. “Indeed, you are the daughter of a king. I assume that you know how important it is to a government that there be a secure, stable plan for succession.”

“I guess.”

“Therefore,” Tridees said, “you realize that it is of no small importance that an heir be provided as *quickly* as possible.”

Siri blushed. “We’re working on that.”

“With all due respect, Vessel,” Tridees said. “There is some measure of disagreement upon whether or not you actually are.”

Siri blushed further, hair reddening as she glanced away from those callous eyes.

“Such arguments, of course, are limited to those inside the palace,” Tridees said. “You can trust in the discretion of our staff and priests.”

“How do you know?” Siri said, looking up. “I mean, about us. Maybe we *are*... working on it. Maybe you’ll have your heir before you know it.”

Tridees blinked once, slowly, regarding her like she were a ledger to be added up and accounted. “Vessel,” he said. “Do you honestly think that we would take an unfamiliar, foreign woman and place her in close proximity to our most holy of gods without keeping watch?”

Siri felt her breath catch, and she had a moment of horror. Of course! she thought. Of course they were watching. To make sure I didn’t hurt the God King, to make certain things went according to plan.

Being naked before her husband was bad enough. To be so exposed before men like Tridees—men who saw her not as a woman, but as an annoyance—felt even worse, somehow. She found herself slouching, arms wrapping around her chest and its overly-exposed neckline.

“Now,” Tridees said, leaning in. “We understand that the God King may not be what you expected. He may even be... difficult to work with. You are a woman, however, and should know how to use your charms to motivate.”

“How can I ‘motivate’ if I can’t talk to him or look at him?” she snapped.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Tridees said. “You only have one task in this palace. You want to make certain Idris is protected? Well, give the God King’s priesthood what we desire, and your rebels will earn our appreciation. My colleagues and I have no small influence in the court, and we can do much to safeguard your homeland. All we ask is that you perform this single duty. Give us an heir. Give the kingdom stability. Not everything in Hallandren is as... cohesive as it may appear to you at first.”

Siri remained slouched down, not looking at Tridees.

“I see that you understand,” he said. “I feel that...” he trailed off, turning to the side. A procession was approaching Siri’s pavilion. Its members wore gold and red, and a figure at the front caused them to shine with vibrant color.

Tridees frowned, then glanced at her. “We will speak further, if it becomes necessary. Do your duty, Vessel. Or there will be consequences.”

With that, the priest withdrew.

#

She didn’t *look* dangerous. That, more than anything else, made Lightsong inclined to believe Blushweaver’s concerns. *I’ve been in the court for far too long*, he thought to himself as he smiled pleasantly to the queen. *All my life, actually.*

She was a small thing, much younger than he had expected. Barely a woman. She looked rather intimidated as he nodded his head to her, waiting while his priests arranged furniture for him. Then, he sat, accepting some grapes from the queen’s serving women, even though he wasn’t hungry.

“Your majesty,” he said. “It is a pleasure to meet with you, I’m sure.”

The girl hesitated. “You’re sure?”

“Figure of speech my dear,” Lightsong said. “A rather redundant one—which is quite appropriate, since *I* am a rather redundant person.”

The girl cocked her head slightly. *Colors*, Lightsong thought, remembering that she’d just finished with her period of isolation. *I’m probably the only Returned that she’s met besides the God King. Talk about a bad first impression.* Still, there was nothing to be done about it. Lightsong was who he was. Whoever that was.

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, your Grace,” the queen said slowly. She turned as a serving woman whispered his name to her. “Lightsong the Brave, Lord of Heroes,” she said, smiling at him.

There was a hesitance about her. Either she had not been trained for formal situations—witch Lightsong found difficult to believe, since she’d been raised in a palace—or she was a rather good actress. He frowned inwardly.

On the outside, he simply gave her his third most charming smile and popped a grape into his mouth. “No need to be so formal, your majesty. You will soon realize that among Returned, I am by far the least. If cows could Return, they’d undoubtedly be higher ranked than I.”

She wavered again, obviously uncertain how to deal with him. It was a common reaction. “Might I inquire as to the nature of your visitation?” she finally asked.

Too formal. Not at ease. Uncomfortable around those high ranked. Could it be possible that she *was* genuine? No. It was likely an act to put him at ease. To make him underestimate her.

Or was he just thinking about things too hard?

Colors take you, Blushweaver! he thought. I really don't want to be part of this.

He almost withdrew. But, then, that wouldn't be very pleasant of him—and contrary to some of the things he said, Lightsong *did* like being pleasant. *Best to be kind*, he thought, smiling idly to himself. *That way, if she ever does take over the kingdom, perhaps she'll behead me last.*

"You ask after the nature of my visitation?" Lightsong said. "I believe it has no nature, your majesty, other than to be natural—at which nature I have already failed by staring at you for far too long while thinking to myself about your place in this mess."

The queen frowned again.

Lightsong popped a grape in his mouth. "Wonderful things," he said, holding up another one. "Delightfully sweet, wrapped in their own little package. Deceptive, really. So rough and course on the outside, but so delectable on the inside. Don't you think?"

"We... don't have many grapes in Idris, your grace."

"I'm rather the opposite, you know," he said. "Fluffy and pretty on the outside, without much of import on the inside. But I guess that is beside the point, since it is about me—and anything about me is always beside the point. You, my dear, are a very welcome sight. Much more so than a grape."

"I... How is that, your grace?"

"We haven't had a queen in such a long time," Lightsong said. "Since before my Return, in fact. And, old Susebron up there really *has* been moping about the palace lately. Looking forlorn. It's good he has a woman in his life."

"Thank you for the compliment, your Grace," the queen said.

"You do seem a little boring, however."

She fell silent.

Well, then, that's it, he thought, sighing. Blushweaver was right. I probably shouldn't have come.

"All right," the queen said, hair suddenly turning red as she threw her hands up in the air. "*What* is going on here?"

He hesitated. "Your majesty?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Probably."

"But you're supposed to be a god!" she said, leaning back, staring up at the canopy. "Just when I thought things in this city were staring to make sense, the priests start yelling at me, *then* you come along! What am I supposed to do with you? Banter? You seem more like a schoolboy than you do a God!"

Lightsong paused, then settled back into his seat, smiling. "You have me found out," he said, opening his hands. "I killed the real god and took his place. I've come to hold you ransom for your sweets."

"There," the queen said, pointing. "Aren't you supposed to be... I don't know, distinguished or something?"

He spread his hands out. "My dear, this *is* what goes for being distinguished in Hallandren."

She didn't seem convinced.

"I am, of course, lying through my teeth," he said, eating another grape. "You shouldn't base your opinion of the others upon what you think of me. They're all much more deific than I am."

The queen sat back. "I thought you were the god of bravery."

"Technically."

"You seem more like the god of jesters to me."

"I've applied for the position and been turned down," he said. "You should see the person they have doing the job. Dull as a rock and twice as ugly."

Siri paused.

"I wasn't lying that time," Lightsong said. "Mirthgiver, God of Laughter. If ever there was a God more poorly suited to his position than I, it's him."

"I don't understand you," she said. "It appears there's a *lot* I don't understand in this city."

This woman is no fake, Lightsong thought, staring into her youthful, confused eyes. Or, if she is, then she's far better an actress than any I've ever met.

That meant something. Something important. It was possible there were mundane reasons this girl had been sent instead of her sister. Sickness on the part of the elder daughter, perhaps. But Lightsong didn't buy that. She was part of something. A plot, or perhaps several. And whatever those plots were, she didn't know about them.

Colors! Lightsong thought. This child is going to get ripped apart and fed to the wolves.

But what could he really do about it? He sighed, standing, causing his priests to begin packing his things. He had, by his own choice, little part in the politics of court. If this child were ignorant of the plots she moved amongst, then he was hardly any better.

The girl watched with confusion as he nodded to her, giving her a wan smile of farewell. She stood and curtsied slightly, though she probably didn't need to. She was his queen, even if she wasn't herself Returned.

Lightsong turned to go, then stopped. He reached over, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Don't let them get to you, child," he whispered.

And with that, he withdrew.

Chapter Seventeen

Vivenna walked quietly, thoughtful, dissecting the argument she'd heard at the Court of Gods. Which of the priests had made the best point? Those for war, or those against? Her tutors had trained her that a discussion in the Court was just that. Just because they discussed war didn't mean that there *would* be war.

This discussion, however, seemed to mean more to Vivenna. It seemed too passionate, with too many voices for one side. It seemed to indicate that her father was right, and that war was inevitable. Could she determine how long Idris had by the way the priests had talked? Worries about this consumed her as she made her way back to Lemk's house.

She walked with her head down on a mostly-empty street. She was beginning to learn that she could avoid the masses by walking through more residential sections of the city. It appeared that people in T'Telir liked to be where everybody else was. Her path led her through an upscale neighborhood. The homes were larger, and there was more space between them. In Idris, each would have been considered a mansion, but here they were only of modest size—probably the homes of merchants.

The street had a cobbled sidewalk running along the side of it, something else she'd never seen back in Idris. It made for pleasant walking. Parlin walked beside her, occasionally pausing to study ferns or palm trees. The Hallandrens liked plants; most of the homes were shaded by trees, vines, and exotic blooming shrubs.

I need to stay focused, she thought. Is Hallandren are going to attack soon? Or is this just a prelude to something still months and months away?

A discussion was just a discussion—the real action would occur once the gods decided to vote, but Vivenna wasn't sure what it would take to get them to that point. She shook her head. Only one day in T'Telir, and already she knew that her training and tutorials hadn't prepared her half as well as she'd assumed.

She felt as if she knew nothing. And that left her feeling very lost. She was not the proud, competent woman she'd assumed herself to be. The frightening truth was, should she have been sent to become the God King's bride, she would have turned out to be nearly as ineffective and confused as poor Siri undoubtedly was.

They turned a corner, Vivenna trusting in Parlin's amazing sense of direction to get them back to Lemks' house, and they passed beneath the gaze of one of the silent D'Denir statues. The proud warrior stood with sword raised above his stone head, his armor—carved into the statue—augmented by a red scarf tied and flapping around his neck. He looked dramatic, as if he were going gloriously to war. She thought she recognized the statue.

Indeed, it wasn't long before they approached the steps to Lemks' house. Vivenna froze, however, when she saw that the door was hanging from one hinge. The lower portion of its wood was cracked, as if it had been kicked very hard.

Parlin pulled up beside her, then hissed, holding up a hand for her to be silent. His hand went to the long hunting knife at his belt and he glanced around. Vivenna stepped back, nerves itching to flee. And yet... where would she go? The mercenaries were her only connection in the city. Denth and Tonk Fah could have handled an attack, right?

Someone approached from the other side of the door. Her BioChromatic senses warned her of the proximity. She laid a hand on Parlin's arm, preparing to bolt.

Denth pushed the broken door open, sticking his head out. "Oh," he said. "It's you."

"What happened?" she asked. "Were you attacked?"

Denth glanced at the door and chuckled to himself. "Nah," he said, pushing the door open and waving her in. Through the broken door she could see that furniture had been ripped apart, there were holes in the walls, and pictures were slashed and broken. Denth wandered back inside, kicking aside some stuffing from a cushion, making his way toward the stairs. Several of the steps had been broken.

He glanced back, noting her confusion. "Well, we *did* say we were going to search the house, princess. Figured we might as well do a good job of it."

#

Vivenna sat down very carefully, half-expecting the chair to collapse beneath her. Tonk Fah and Denth had been *very* thorough in their search—they had broken every bit of wood in the house, it seemed, including chair legs. Fortunately, her current chair had been propped up reasonably well, and it held her weight.

The desk in front of her—Lemks' desk—was splintered. The drawers had been removed, and a false back had been revealed, the compartment emptied. A group of papers and several bags sat on the desktop.

"That's everything," Denth said, leaning against the room's door frame. Tonk Fah lounged on a broken couch, its stuffing sticking out at awkward angles.

"Did you have to break so much?" Vivenna asked.

"Had to be certain," Denth said, shrugging. "You'd be surprised where people hide things."

"Inside the front door?" Vivenna asked flatly.

Denth just shrugged again. "Would *you* have thought to look there?"

"Of course not."

"Sounds like a pretty good hiding place to me, then."

"People get really clever when it comes to hiding important stuff," Tonk Fah said with a yawn.

"You know the thing I hate most about being a mercenary?" Denth asked, holding up a hand.

Vivenna raised an eyebrow.

"Splinters," he said, wiggling several red fingers.

"No hazard pay for those," Tonk Fah added.

"Oh, now you're just being silly," Vivenna said, sorting through the items on the table. One of the bags clinked suggestively. Vivenna undid the drawstring and pulled open the top.

Gold glistened inside. A lot of it.

"Little over five hundred marks in there," Denth said lazily. "Lemks had it stashed all over the house. Found one bar of it in the leg of your chair."

"Got easier when we discovered the paper he'd used to remind himself of where he hid it," Tonk Fah noted.

"*Five hundred marks?*" Vivenna said, feeling her hair lighten slightly in shock.

“Seems like old Lemks was storing up quite the little nest egg,” Denth said, chuckling. “That, mixed with the amount of Breath he held... he must have extorted even more from Idris than I assumed.”

Vivenna stared at the bag. Then, she looked up at Denth. “You... gave it to me,” she said. “You could have taken it and spent it!”

“Actually, we did,” Denth said. “Took about ten bits for lunch. Should be here any minute.”

Vivenna met his eyes.

“Now there’s what I’m talking about, eh Tonks?” Denth said, glancing down at the larger man. “If I’d been, say, a butler, would she be looking at me like that? Just because I didn’t take the money and run? Why does everyone expect a mercenary to rob them?”

Tonk Fah grunted, stretching again.

“Look through those papers, princess,” Denth said, kicking Tonk Fah’s couch, then nodding toward the door. “We’ll wait for you downstairs.”

Vivenna watched them retreat, Tonk Fah grumbling as he had to rise, bits of stuffing sticking to the back of his clothing. They thumped their way down the stairs, and soon she heard dishes rattling. They’d likely sent one of the street boys—who passed periodically yelling that they would bring food from a local restaurant—for the meal.

Vivenna didn’t move for a long moment. She was increasingly uncertain of her purpose in the city. Yet she still had Denth and Tonk Fah, and—surprisingly—she was finding herself growing attached to them after just a short time. How many soldiers in her father’s army—good men, all of them—would have been able to resist running off with five hundred marks? There was more to these mercenaries than they implied.

Eventually, she turned her attention to the books, letters, and papers on the desk.

#

Several hours later, Vivenna still sat alone, a solitary candle burning and dripping wax onto the splintered desk corner. She had long since stopped reading. A plate of food sat uneaten by the door, brought by Parlin some time before.

Letters lay spread out on the desk before her. It had taken time to put them in order. Most were penned in her father’s familiar hand. Not the hand of her father’s scribe. Her father’s *own* hand. That had been her first clue. He only wrote his most personal, or most secret, communications on his own.

Vivenna kept her hair under control. She breathed in and out. She didn’t look out the darkened window at the lights of a city that should have been asleep. She simply sat.

Numb.

The final letter—last before Lemks’ death—sat on top of the pile. It was only a few weeks old.

My friend, her father’s scrawl read.

Our conversations have worried me more than I care to admit. I have spoken with Yorda at length. We can see no solution.

War is coming. We all know that now. The continued—and increasingly vigorous—arguments in the Court of Gods show a disturbing trend. The money we sent to buy you enough Breath to attend those meetings is some of the best I have ever spent.

All signs point to the inevitability of Hallandren Lifeless marching to our mountains. Therefore, I give you leave to do as we have discussed. Any disruptions you can cause in the city—

any delays you can earn us—will be extremely valuable. The additional funds you requested should have arrived by now.

My friend, I must admit a weakness in myself. I will never be able to send Vivenna to be a hostage in that dragon's nest of a city. To send her would be to kill her, and I cannot do that. Even though I know it would be best for Idris if I did.

I'm not yet sure what I will do. I will not send her, for I love her too much. However, breaking the treaty would bring the Hallandren wrath against my people even more quickly. I fear I may have to make a very difficult decision in the days to come.

But that is the soul of a king's duty.

Until we correspond again,

Dedelin, your liege and your friend.

Vivenna looked away from the letter. The room's silence seemed too perfect to her. She wanted to scream at the letter and her father, who was now so far away. And yet, she could not. She had been trained for better. Tantrums were useless showings of arrogance.

Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't set yourself above others. He who makes himself high will be cast down low. But what of the man who murders one of his daughters to save the other? What of the man who does that, but claims—to your face—that it was for other reasons? That it was for the good of Idris? That it wasn't about favoritism at all?

What of the king who betrayed the very most dear tenets of his religion by purchasing Breath for one of his spies?

Vivenna blinked a tear in her eye, then gritted her teeth, angry at herself and the world. Her father was supposed to be a good man. The perfect king. Wise and knowing, always sure of himself and always right in that surety.

The man she read in these letters was far more human. Why should she be so shocked to hear that?

It doesn't matter, she told herself, gritting her teeth. *None of that matters*. Factions in the Hallandren government were rallying the nation for war. Reading her father's candid words, she finally believed him completely. War was inevitable. Hallandren troops would likely march on her homeland before the year was out. And then, the Hallandren—so colorful yet so deceptive—would take Siri hostage and threaten to kill her unless Dedelin surrendered.

Her father would not give up his kingdom. Siri would be executed.

And that is what I'm here to stop, Vivenna thought. Her hands grew tighter, gripping the wood of the desktop, jaw set. She brushed away the traitorous tear. She had been trained to be strong when surrounded by an unfamiliar city and people. She had work to do.

She rose, leaving the letters on the table with the bag of coins and Lemks' journal. She made her way down the stairs, avoiding the broken steps, to where the mercenaries were teaching Parlin how to play a game with wooden cards. The three men looked up as Vivenna approached. She settled herself carefully on the floor, sitting with her legs beneath her in an unassuming posture.

She met their eyes as she spoke. "I know where some of Lemks' money came from," she said. "Idris and Hallandren will soon go to war. Because of this threat, my father gave much more support to Lemks than I had assumed. He sent enough money for Lemks to buy fifty Breaths, allowing him to enter and spy on court proceedings. Obviously, my father didn't know that Lemks already *had* a sizable amount of Breath."

The three men were silent. Tonk Fah shot a glance at Denth, who sat back, resting against an overturned, broken chair.

"I believe that Lemks was still loyal to Idris," she said. "His personal writings make that relatively clear. He was not a traitor; he was simply greedy. He wanted as much Breath as possible because he had heard that it extended a person's life. Lemks and my father had planned to hinder the war preparations from inside Hallandren. Lemks promised he would find a way to sabotage the Lifeless armies, damage the city's supplies, and generally undermine their ability to wage war. For him to accomplish this, my father sent him a large sum of money."

"About five hundred marks worth?" Denth asked, rubbing his chin.

"Less than that," Vivenna said. "But a large chunk nonetheless. I believe that you are right about Lemks, Denth—he has been extorting the crown for some time."

She fell silent. Parlin looked confused. That wasn't uncommon. The mercenaries, however, didn't look surprised.

"I don't know if Lemks intended to do as my father asked," Vivenna said, keeping her voice even. "The way he hid the money, some of the things he wrote... well, maybe he was finally planning to turn traitor and run. We can't know what he would eventually have decided. We do, however, have a vague list of things he planned to accomplish. Those plans were convincing enough to persuade my father, and the urgency of his letters have convinced me. We are going to continue Lemks' work and undermine Hallandren's ability to wage war."

The room fell silent. "And... your sister?" Parlin finally asked.

"We will get her out," Vivenna said firmly. "Her rescue and safety is our first priority."

"That is all easier discussed than accomplished, princess," Denth said.

"I know."

The mercenaries shared a look. "Well," Denth finally said, standing up. "Better get back to work, then." He nodded at Tonk Fah, who sighed and grumbled, standing.

"Wait," Vivenna said, frowning. "What?"

"I figured once you saw those papers that you'd want to continue," Denth said, stretching. "Now that I've seen what he was up to, I can piece together why he had us do some of the things we were involved in. One of those things was contact and support for some rebellious factions here in the city, including one that was finally stamped out just a few weeks back. Cult of dissatisfaction centered on a guy named Vahr."

"Always wondered why Lemks gave him support," Tonk Fah said.

"That faction's dead," Denth said. "But a lot of its members are still around. Waiting for trouble to come their way. We can contact them. There are a few other leads I think we can look into, things Lemks didn't tell us about completely, but which I might be able to sort through."

"And... you can handle something like this?" Vivenna asked. "You just said it wouldn't be easy."

Denth shrugged. "Won't be. But, we don't ask questions. We do what we're told. If you haven't figured it out yet, this kind of thing is why Lemks hired us in the first place. Men like him don't ordinarily need a team of three high-priced, specialist mercenaries. We're not exactly the type of men you keep around to serve you tea."

"Unless you want the tea rammed up someplace uncomfortable," Tonk Fah noted.

Three mercenaries? Vivenna thought, pausing. *That's right. There's another one. A woman.* "Where's the other member of your team?"

"Jewels?" Denth asked. "You'll meet her soon enough."

"Unfortunately," Tonk Fah said under his breath.

Denth elbowed his friend. “For now, let us go back out and see how things stand on our projects. Gather what you want from this house. We’ll move out tomorrow.”

“Move out?” Vivenna said.

“Unless you want to sleep on a mattress Tonk Fah ripped into five pieces,” Denth noted. “He has a thing about mattresses.”

“And chairs,” Tonk Fah said cheerfully, “and tables, and doors, and walls, actually. Oh, and people.”

“Either way, princess,” Denth said. “This building was well known to people who worked with Lemks. As you’ve discovered, he wasn’t exactly the most honest fellow around. I doubt you want the baggage that comes with being associated with him.”

“Best to move to another house,” Tonk Fah agreed.

“We’ll try not to break up the next one quite so badly,” Denth said.

“No promises though,” Tonk Fah said with a wink.

And then the two left.

Chapter Eighteen

Siri stood before the door to her husband's bed chambers, shuffling nervously. As usual, Bluefingers stood beside her, and he was the only other one in the hallway. He scribbled on his pad, giving no indication how he always knew when it was time for her to enter.

For once, she didn't mind the delay, nervous though she was. It gave her more time to think about what she was going to do. The day's events still buzzed about in her head: Tridees, telling her that she needed to provide an heir. Lightsong the Bold, talking in circles, then leaving her with what had seemed like a heartfelt farewell. Her king and husband, sitting on his tower above, bending light around him. The priests below, arguing about whether or not to invade her homeland.

A lot of people wanted to shove her in different directions, yet none of them were really willing to tell her how to do what they wanted—and some didn't even bother to tell her *what* they wanted. The only thing they were succeeding at was making her annoyed. She was not a seductress. She had no idea how to make the God King lust after her—particularly since she was terrified of him doing just that. She didn't know what people needed of her, and she didn't particularly want to do what she was told.

High Priest Tridees had given her a command. Therefore, she intended to show him how she responded to commands, particularly when they had threats attached to them. Tonight, she would go into the king's bed chamber, sit down on the floor, and refuse to strip. She'd confront the God King. He didn't want her. Well, she was tired of being ogled every night.

She intended to explain this all to him in no uncertain terms. If he wanted to see her naked, he'd have to order servants to force her clothing off. She doubted that he'd do that. He'd made no move toward her. Even during his reign over the court proceedings, he hadn't done more than sit and watch.

She was getting a new image in her head of this king. He was a man with so much power, he had grown lazy. He was a man who had everything, and so he bothered with nothing. He was a man who liked others to do everything for him. People like him annoyed her. She had known a guard captain in Idris who had insisted making his men work hard, but who had spent his afternoons playing cards.

It was time the God King was defied. More than that, it was time that his priests learned that they couldn't bully her. She was tired of being used. Tonight, she would react. That was her decision. And it made her nervous as all Colors.

She glanced at Bluefingers. Eventually, she caught his eye. "Do they really watch me each night?" she asked, leaning in and whispering.

He paused, paling slightly. Then, he glanced to either side, then shook his head.

She frowned. But, Tridees knew that I hadn't been bedded by the God King.

Bluefingers raised a finger, pointing to his eyes, then shook his head. Then he pointed to his ears and nodded. He pointed to a doorway down the hall.

They listen, Siri thought.

Bluefingers leaned in closer. "They would never watch, Vessel," he whispered. "Remember, the God King is their most holy of deities. Seeing him in his nudity, watching him with his wife... no, they wouldn't dare. However, they aren't above *listening*."

She nodded. “They are very concerned about an heir.”

Bluefingers glanced about nervously.

“Am I really in danger from them?” she asked.

He met her eyes, then nodded sharply. “More danger than you know, Vessel.” Then, he backed away, gesturing at the doorway.

You have to help me! she mouthed at him.

He shook his head, holding up his hands. *I cannot. Not now.* With that, he pushed open the door, bowed, and scuttled away, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

Siri glared at him. The time was swiftly approaching when she’d need to corner him and find out what he really knew. Until then, she had other people to annoy. She turned and glanced into the dark room. Her nerves started up again.

Is this wise? Being belligerent had never bothered her before. And yet... her life wasn’t like it had been before. Bluefinger’s fear had left her even more on edge.

Defiance. It had always been her way to gain attention. She hadn’t been obstinate out of spite, not usually. She’d simply been unable to measure up to Vivenna, so she’d just done the opposite of what was expected. Her defiance had worked in the past. Or had it? Her father had been perpetually angry at her, and Vivenna had always treated her as a child. The city’s people had loved her, but their love had seemed suffering.

No, Siri thought suddenly. No, I can’t go back to that. The people in this palace—this court—they aren’t the types you defy just because you’re annoyed. Spurn the palace priests, and they wouldn’t grumble at her like her father had. They’d show her what it really meant to be in their power.

But what to do then? She couldn’t keep throwing off her clothing and kneeling on the floor, naked, could she?

Feeling confused, and a little angry at herself, she stepped into the dark room, then pulled the door closed. The God King waited in his corner, shadowed as always. Siri looked at him, staring at that too-calm face. She knew that she should disrobe and kneel, but she didn’t.

Not because she felt defiant. Not even because she felt angry or petulant. Because she was tired of wondering. Who was this man who could rule gods and bend light with the force of his BioChroma? Was he really just a spoiled indolent?

He stared back at her. Like before, he didn’t grow angry at her insolence. Watching him, Siri pulled at the strings on her dress, dropping the bulky garment to the floor. She reached for the shoulders of her shift, but hesitated.

No, she thought. This isn’t right either.

She glanced down at the shift; the edges of the white garment fuzzed, the white bending into color. She looked up at the God King’s impassive face.

Then—gritting her teeth against her nervousness—Siri took a step forward.

He tensed. She could see it in the edges of his eyes and around his lips. She took another step forward, the white of her garment bending further into prismatic colors. The God King didn’t do anything. He just watched as she drew closer and closer.

She stopped right in front of him. Then she turned from him and climbed up onto the bed, feeling the deep softness beneath her as she crawled to the middle of its mattress. She sat up on her knees, regarding the black marble wall with its obsidian sheen. The God King’s priest waited just beyond, listening carefully to hear things that were really none of their business.

This, she thought, taking a deep breath, *is going to be exceptionally embarrassing*. But she'd been forced to lay prostrate, naked, before the God King for over a week. Was now really the time to start feeling self-conscious?

She began to bounce up and down on the bed, making its springs creak. Then, cringing slightly, she started to moan.

She hoped it was convincing. She didn't really know what it was supposed to sound like. And how long did it usually continue? So, she tried to make her moans get louder and louder, her bouncing more furious, for what she assumed was a proper amount of time. Then, she stopped sharply, let out a final moan, and fell back onto the bed.

All was still. She glanced up, eying the God King. Some of his emotional mask had softened, and he displayed a very human look of confusion. She almost laughed out loud at how perplexed he seemed. She just met his eyes and shook her head. Then—her heart beating, her skin a bit sweaty—she rested back on the bed.

It wasn't long after that—tired of the day's events and intrigues—she found herself rolled up in the luxurious comforter and dozing soundly. The God King left her alone, and as she drifted off, she considered something.

He'd grown tense at her approach, almost as if he were worried. Frightened of her. That couldn't be. He was the God and King of Hallandren, and she was just a silly girl, swimming in water that was far over her head.

No, he wasn't frightened. The concept was enough to again make her feel like laughing. She kept it in, maintaining the illusion for the listening priests as she drifted off in the comfort of the bed.

#

The next morning, Lightsong did not get out of bed.

His servants stood around the perimeter of his room like a flock of birds waiting for seed. As noon approached, they began to shuffle uncomfortably, shooting glances at one another.

He remained in bed, staring up at the ornate red canopy. Some servants approached tentatively, placing a tray of food atop a pedestal beside him. Lightsong did not reach for it.

Finally, a figure approached. Large of girth and draped in his priestly robes, Llarimar looked down at his God, betraying none of the annoyance that Lightsong was sure that he felt.

"Leave us, please," Llarimar said to the servants.

They hesitated, uncertain. When was a god without his servants?

"Please," Llarimar repeated, though somehow his tone indicated that it was not a request. Slowly, the servants filed from the room. Llarimar moved the tray of food, then sat down on the stool. He studied Lightsong, expression thoughtful.

What did I ever do to earn a priest like him? Lightsong thought. He knew many of the high priests of other Returned, and most of them were various levels of insufferable. Some were easy to bring to anger, others quick to point out fault, and still others were so effusive toward their gods that it was downright maddening. Tridees, the God King's own high priest, was so stuck up that he made even *gods* feel inferior.

And then there was Llarimar. Patient, understanding. He deserved a better god.

"All right, your grace," Llarimar said. "What is it this time?"

"I'm sick," Lightsong said.

“You can’t get sick, your grace.”

Lightsong gave a few weak coughs, to which Llarimar just rolled his eyes.

“Oh come on, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “Can’t you just play along a little bit?”

“Play along that you are sick?” Llarimar asked, showing a hint of amusement. “Your grace, to do that would be to pretend that you’re not a god. I do not believe that’s a good precedent for your high priest to set.”

“It’s the truth,” Lightsong whispered. “I’m no god.”

Again, there was no sign of annoyance or anger from Llarimar. He just leaned down. “Please don’t say such things, your grace. Even if you yourself do not believe, you should not say so.”

“Why not?”

“Because there are many who *do* believe.”

“And I should continue to deceive them?”

Llarimar shook his head. “It is no deception. It’s not so uncommon for others to have more faith in a man than he has in himself.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as a little odd in my case?”

Llarimar smiled. “Not knowing your temperament, it doesn’t. Now, what brought this on?”

Lightsong turned, looking up at the ceiling again. “Blushweaver wants my Commands for the Lifeless.”

“Yes.”

“She’ll destroy that new queen of ours,” Lightsong said. “Blushweaver worries that the Idris Royals are making a play for the Hallandren throne.”

“Do you disagree?”

Lightsong shook his head. “No. They probably are. But the thing is, I don’t think the girl—the queen—knows that she’s part of anything. I’m worried that Blushweaver will crush the child out of fear.”

“It seems that you have a remarkably good handle on this all, your grace,” Llarimar said.

“I don’t want to be part of it, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “I feel myself getting sucked in.”

“You are a political being, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It is your duty to be involved in these things so that you can lead your kingdom. You can’t avoid politics.”

“I can avoid it if I don’t get out of bed.”

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. “You don’t honestly believe that, do you your grace?”

Lightsong sighed. “You’re not going to give me a lecture about how even my inaction affects politics, are you?”

Llarimar hesitated. “Perhaps. You are a part of the workings of this kingdom—and you produce effects even if you stay in bed. If you do nothing, then the problems are as much your fault as if you had caused them.”

“No,” Lightsong said. “No, I think you’re wrong. If I don’t do anything, then at least I can’t ruin things. Sure, I can *let* them go wrong, but that’s not the same thing. It really isn’t, no matter what people say.”

“And if, by acting, you could make things better?”

Lightsong shook his head. “Not going to happen. You know me better than that.”

"I do, your grace," Llarimar said. "I know you better, perhaps, than you think I do. You've always been one of the best men I have ever known."

Lightsong rolled his eyes, but then stopped, noting the expression on Llarimar's face.

Best men I have ever known...

Lightsong sat up. "You knew me!" he accused. "*That's* why you chose to be my priest. You did know me before! Before I died!"

Llarimar said nothing.

"Who was I?" Lightsong asked. "A good man, you claim. What was it about me that made me a good man?"

"I can say nothing, your grace."

"You've already said something," Lightsong said, raising a finger. "You might as well go on. No turning back."

"I've said too much already."

"Come on," Lightsong said. "Just a little bit. Was I from T'Telir, then? How did I die?" *Who is she, the woman I see in my dreams?*

Llarimar said nothing further.

"I could command you, as your god, to speak..."

"No you couldn't," Llarimar said, smiling as he stood up. "It's like the rain, your grace. You can *say* you want to command the weather change, but you don't believe it, deep down. It doesn't obey, and neither would I."

Convenient bit of theology, that, Lightsong thought. Particularly when you want to hide things from your gods.

Llarimar turned to go. "You have paintings waiting to be judged, your grace. I suggest that you let your servants bathe and dress you so that you can get through the day's work."

Lightsong sighed, stretching. *How exactly did he just do that to me?* he thought. Llarimar hadn't really even revealed anything, yet Lightsong had overcome his bout of melancholy. He eyed Llarimar as the man reached the door and waved for the servants to return. Perhaps dealing with sullen deities was part of his job description.

But... he knew me before, Lightsong thought. *And now he's my priest. How did that happen?* "Scoot," Lightsong said, drawing the priest's attention. Llarimar turned, guarded, obviously expecting Lightsong to pry further into his past.

"What should I do?" Lightsong asked. "About Blushweaver and the queen?"

"I cannot tell you, your grace," Llarimar said. "You see, it is by what *you* do that we learn. If I guide you, then we gain nothing."

"Except perhaps the life of a young girl who is being used as a pawn."

Llarimar paused. "Do your best, your grace," he said. "That is all I can suggest."

Great, Lightsong thought as he stood. He didn't really know what his 'best' was.

The truth was, he'd never bothered to find out.

Chapter Nineteen

“This is nice,” Denth said, looking over the house. “Strong wood paneling. Will break very cleanly.”

“Yeah,” Tonk Fah added, peeking into a closet. “And it has good shelf space. Bet we could fit a good half-dozen bodies in here alone.”

Vivenna shot the two mercenaries a flat look, causing them to chuckle to themselves. The house wasn’t as nice as Lemks’ had been; she didn’t want to be ostentatious. It was one of many that were built in a row along a well-maintained street. More long than it was wide, the building was fenced on either side with large palm trees, obscuring the view should someone try to spy from the neighboring buildings.

She was pleased. A piece of her worried at living in a home that was—despite being relatively modest by Hallandren standards—nearly as large as the king’s palace back in Idris. However, she and Parlin had looked in cheaper sections of town. She didn’t want to live in a place where she was afraid to go out at night, particularly since she worried that her Breath might make her a target.

She trailed down the stairs, the mercenaries following. The home had three stories—a small upper story with sleeping chambers, the main story with a kitchen and sitting room, and a cellar for storage. The entire building was sparsely furnished, though Parlin had gone to the market to investigate furnishings. She hadn’t wanted to spend money on them, but Denth had pointed out that if they didn’t at least *try* to keep up appearances, they could end up drawing even more attention.

“Old Lemks’s body will soon be taken care of soon,” Denth said. “We left some hints in the underground, mentioning that the old man was dead. Whatever we didn’t ransack, a gang of burglars will take care of tonight. By tomorrow, the city watch will be there, and they’ll take care of the corpse.”

Vivenna stopped at the bottom of the stairs, paling. “That doesn’t sound very... respectful.”

Denth shrugged. “What do you want to do? Go turn him in at the charnel house yourself?”

“Good way to get people asking questions, that,” Tonk Fah said.

“Better to just let others deal with it,” Denth said.

“I suppose,” Vivenna said, turning away from the stairs and walking into the sitting room. “It just sets me a little on edge, letting his body be cared for by...”

“By what?” Denth said, amused. “Heathens?”

Vivenna didn’t look at him.

“The old man didn’t seem to care much about heathen ways,” Tonk Fah noted. “Not with the number of Breaths he held. Of course, didn’t your daddy give him the money to buy them?”

Vivenna closed her eyes.

You hold those same Breaths, she told herself. You’re not innocent in all of this.

She hadn’t been given a choice. She could only hope and assume that her father had felt he was in a similar position—no choice but to do what seemed wrong. Either way, she was finding it harder and harder to look at things in the black and white ways she’d been taught. Those blasted colors kept working their way in.

Lacking furniture, Vivenna arranged her dress and knelt on the wooden floor, hands in her lap. Denth and Tonk Fah sat back against the wall, looking just as comfortable sitting on hardwood as they were when lounging in plush chairs. “All right, princess,” Denth said, folding a paper out of his pocket. “We’ve got some plans for you.”

“Please continue, then.”

“First,” Denth said, “we can get you a meeting with some of Vahr’s allies.”

“Who exactly was this man?” Vivenna said, frowning. For some reason, she didn’t like the idea of working with revolutionaries.

“Vahr was a worker in the dye fields,” Denth said. “Things can get bad out in those fields—long hours, little more than food for pay. About five years back, Vahr got the bright idea that if he could convince enough of the other workers to give him their Breath, he might be able to use the power to start a revolt against the overseers. Became something of a hero to the people in the outer flower plantations to the point that he actually drew the attention of the Court of Gods.”

“Never really had a chance of starting a real rebellion,” Tonk Fah said.

“So what good are they to us?” Vivenna asked.

“Well,” Denth said, “you didn’t say anything about a rebellion or anything like that. You just want to make it tough for the Hallandrens when they go to war.”

“Revolts in the fields would sure be a pain during war,” Tonk Fah added.

Vivenna nodded. “All right,” she said. “Let’s meet with them.”

“Just so you know, Princess,” Denth said. “These aren’t particularly... upscale kinds of folks.”

“I am not offended by poverty or people of small means. Austre regards all people equally.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Denth said, rubbing his chin. “It’s not that they’re peasants, it’s that... well, when Vahr’s little insurrection went bad, these are the people who were smart enough to get out quickly. That means they weren’t all that committed to him in the first place.”

“In other words,” Tonk Fah said, “they were really just a bunch of thugs and crime lords who thought Vahr might be the source of some easy influence or money.”

Great, Vivenna thought. “And... do we want to associate with people like that?”

Denth shrugged. “We have to start somewhere.”

“The other things on the list are a bit more fun,” Tonk Fah said.

“And they are?” Vivenna asked.

“Raid the Lifeless storage warehouse, for one,” Denth said, smiling. “We won’t be able to kill the things—not without drawing the rest of them down on us. But, we might be able to muck up the way the creatures work.”

“That sounds a little dangerous,” Vivenna said.

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah, who opened his eyes. They shared a smile.

“What?” Vivenna asked.

“Hazard pay,” Tonk Fah said. “We may not steal your money, but we have nothing against overcharging you for extremely dangerous stunts!”

Great, Vivenna thought.

“Beyond that,” Denth added, “from what I can tell, Lemks wanted to undermine the food supply situation in the city. It’s a good idea, I suppose. Lifeless don’t need to eat, but the humans

who form the support structure of the army *do*. Disrupt supply, and perhaps people here will begin to worry if they can afford a long-term war.”

“That sounds more reasonable,” Vivenna said. “What did you come up with?”

“We raid merchant caravans,” Denth said. “Burn things up, cost them a bunch. We make it look like bandits or maybe even remnants of Vahr’s supporters. That ought to confuse people in T’Telir and maybe make it more difficult for the priests to go to war.”

“Priests run a lot of the trade in the city,” Tonk Fah added. “They have all the money so they tend to own the supplies. Burn away the stuff they intended to use for the war, and they’ll be more hesitant to attack. It’ll buy your people more time.”

Vivenna swallowed. “Your plans are a bit more... violent than I had anticipated.”

The mercenaries shared a look.

“You see,” Denth said. “This is where we get our bad reputation. People hire us to do difficult things—like undermine a country’s ability to wage war—then complain that we’re too violent.”

“Very unfair,” Tonk Fah agreed.

“Perhaps she’d rather we buy puppies for all of her enemies, then send them with nice apologetic notes, asking them to stop being so mean.”

“And then,” Tonk Fah said, “when they *don’t* stop, we could kill the puppies!”

“All right,” Vivenna said. “I understand that we’ll have to use a firm hand, but...really. I don’t want the Hallandrens to starve because of what we do.”

“Princess,” Denth said, sounding more serious. “These people want to attack your homeland. They see your family as the greatest existing threat to their power—and they’re going to make certain that nobody of the Royal blood lives to challenge them.”

“They get a child by your sister to be the next God King,” Tonk Fah said, “then they kill every other person of Royal blood. They never have to worry about you again.”

Denth nodded. “Your father and Lemks were right. The Hallandrens have *everything* to lose by not attacking you. And, from I can see, your people are going to need every bit of help you can give them. That means doing everything we can—scaring the priests, breaking their supply reserves, weakening their armies—to help out.”

“We can’t stop the war,” Tonk Fah added. “We can just make the fight a little more fair.”

Vivenna took a deep breath, then nodded. “All right, then, we’ll—”

At that moment, the door to the building flew open, slamming against the other side of the wall. Vivenna looked up. A figure stood in the doorway—a tall, bulky man with unusually large muscles and flat features. It took her a moment to register the other oddity about him.

His skin was grey. His eyes too. There was no color to him at all, and her Heightenings told her that he didn’t have a single Breath. A Lifeless soldier.

Vivenna scrambled to her feet, barely keeping in a cry of distress. She backed away from the large soldier. It just stood there, immobile, not even breathing. Its eyes tracked her—they didn’t just stare ahead, like those of a dead man.

For some reason, she found that the most unnerving.

“Denth!” Vivenna said. “What are you doing? Attack!”

The mercenaries remained where they were, lounging on the floor. Tonk Fah barely cracked an eye open. “Ah well,” Denth said. “Looks like we’ve been discovered by the city watch.”

“Pity,” Tonk Fah said. “This was looking like it would be a fun job.”

“Nothing but execution for us now,” Denth said.

“Attack!” Vivenna cried. “You’re my bodyguards, you’re...” She trailed off, noticing as the two men began to chuckle.

Oh, Colors, not again, she thought. “What?” she said. “Some kind of joke? Did you paint that man grey? What’s going on?”

“Move it, you rock on legs,” a voice said from behind the Lifeless. The creature walked into the room, carrying a couple of canvas bags over its shoulders. As it entered, it revealed a shorter woman standing behind. Thick through the thighs and through the bust, she had light brown hair that came down to her shoulders. She stood with hands on hips, looking upset.

“Denth,” she snapped, “he’s here. In the city.”

“Good,” Denth said, lounging back. “I owe that man a sword through the gut.”

The woman snorted. “He killed Arsteel. What makes you think you can beat him?”

“I’ve always been the better swordsman,” Denth said calmly.

“Arsteel was good too. Now he’s dead. Who’s the woman?”

“New employer.”

“Hope she lives longer than the last one,” the woman grumbled. “Clod, put those down and go get the other bag.”

The Lifeless responded, setting down his bags then walking back out. Vivenna watched, by now having figured out that the short woman must be Jewels, the third member of Denth’s team. What was she doing with a Lifeless?

“What’s wrong with you?” Jewels said, glancing at Vivenna. “Some Awakener come by and steal your colors?”

Vivenna paused. “What?”

“She means,” Denth said, “why do you look so surprised?”

“That, and her hair is white,” Jewels said, walking over to the canvas bags.

Vivenna flushed, realizing that her shock had gotten the better of her. She returned her hair to its proper dark color. The Lifeless was returning, carrying another bag.

“Where did that creature come from?” Vivenna asked.

“What?” Jewels asked. “Clod? Made him from a dead body, obviously. I didn’t do it myself—I just paid money for someone else to.”

“Too much money,” Tonk Fah added.

The creature clomped back into the room. He wasn’t unnaturally tall—not like a Returned. He could have been a normal, if well muscled, man. Only the skin coloring, mixed with the emotionless face, was different.

“She bought him?” Vivenna asked. “When? Just now?”

“Nah,” Tonk Fah said, “we’ve had Clod for months.”

“It’s useful to have a Lifeless around,” Denth said.

“And you didn’t tell me about this?” Vivenna asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice. First she’d had to deal with the city and all of its colors and people. Then she was given a batch of unwanted Breath. Now she was confronted by the most unholy of abominations.

“The topic didn’t come up,” Denth said, shrugging. “They’re pretty common in T’Telir.”

“We were just talking about defeating these things,” Vivenna said. “Not embracing them!”

“We talked about defeating *some* of them,” Denth said. “Princess, Lifeless are like swords. They’re tools. We can’t destroy *all* of them in the city, nor would we want to. Just the ones being used by your enemies.”

Vivenna slid down, sitting on the wooden floor. The Lifeless set down its final bag, then Jewels pointed toward the corner. It walked over and stood there, patiently waiting for further orders.

“Here,” Jewels said to the other two, unzipping the final bag. “You wanted these.” She turned it on its side, exposing glittering metal shining within.

Denth smiled, rising. He kicked Tonk Fah back awake—the large man had an uncanny ability to fall asleep at a moment’s notice—and walked over to the bag. He pulled out several swords, shiny and new-looking with long, thin blades. Denth made a few practice swings while Tonk Fah wandered over, pulling out wicked-looking daggers, some shorter swords, and then some leather jerkins.

Vivenna sat, back against the wall, using her breathing to calm herself. She tried not to feel threatened by the Lifeless in the corner. How could they just go about, ignoring it like that? It was so unnatural that it made her itch and squirm. Eventually, Denth noticed her. He told Tonk Fah to oil the blades, then walked over and sat down in front of Vivenna, leaning back with hands against the floor behind him.

“That Lifeless is going to be a problem, princess?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said curtly.

“Then we’ll need to work it out,” he said, meeting her eyes. “My team can’t function if you try to tie our hands. Jewels has invested a lot of effort into learning the proper Commands to use a Lifeless, not to mention learning to maintain the thing.”

“We don’t need her.”

“Yes,” Denth said. “Yes we *do*. Princess, you’ve brought a lot of biases into this city. It’s not my place to tell you what to do with them. I’m just your employee. A mercenary. But I will tell you that you don’t know half the things you think you do.”

“It’s not about what I ‘think I know’ Denth,” Vivenna said. “It’s what I *believe*. A person’s body shouldn’t be abused by making it come back to life and serve you.”

“Why not?” he asked. “Your own theology says a soul leaves when the body dies. The corpse is just dirt, recycled. Why not use it?”

“It’s wrong,” Vivenna said.

“The family of the corpse was well paid for the body.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Vivenna said.

Denth leaned forward. “Well, fine then. But if you order Jewels away, you order us all away. I’ll give your money back, then we’ll go hire you another team of bodyguards. You can use them instead.”

“I thought you were my employee,” Vivenna snapped.

“I am,” Denth said. “But I can quit whenever I want.”

She sat quietly, stomach unsettled.

“Your father was willing to use means that he didn’t agree with,” Denth said. “Judge him if you must, but tell me this. If using a Lifeless saves your kingdom, who are you to ignore the opportunity?”

“Why do you care?” Vivenna asked.

Denth shrugged. “I just don’t like to leave things unfinished.”

Vivenna glanced away.

“Look at it this way, Princess,” he said. “You can work with us—which will give you chances to explain your views, maybe change our minds on things like Lifeless and BioChroma. Or you can send us away. But if you reject us because of our sins, aren’t you acting ostentatious? Don’t the Five Visions say something about that?”

Vivenna frowned. *How does he know so much about Austrism?* “I’ll think about it,” she said. “Why did Jewels bring all those swords?”

“We’ll need weapons,” Denth said. “You know, has to do with that violence thing we mentioned earlier.”

“You don’t have any already?”

Denth shrugged. “Tonk usually has a cudgel or knife on him, but a full sword draws attention in T’Telir. It’s best not to stand out, sometimes. Your people have some interesting wisdom in that area.”

“But now...”

“Now we don’t really have a choice,” he said. “If we keep moving on with Lemks’ plans, things are going to get dangerous.” He eyed her. “Which reminds me. I have something else for you to think about.”

“What?”

“Those Breaths you hold,” Denth said. “They’re a tool. Just like the Lifeless. Now, I know you don’t agree with how they were obtained. The fact is, you have them. If a dozen slaves die to forge a sword, does it do any good to melt down the sword and refuse to use it? Or is it better to use that sword and try to stop the men who did such evil in the first place?”

“What are you saying?” Vivenna said, feeling that she probably already knew.

“You should learn to use the Breaths,” Denth said. “Tonks and I could sure use an Awakener backing us up.”

Vivenna closed her eyes. Did he have to hit her with that now, right after twisting around her concerns about the Lifeless? She had expected to find uncertainties and obstacles T’Telir. She just hadn’t expected so many difficult decisions. And she hadn’t expected them to endanger her soul.

“I’m not going to become an Awakener, Denth,” Vivenna said quietly. “I might turn a blind eye toward that Lifeless, for now. But I will *not* Awaken. I expect to take these Breaths to my death so that nobody else can benefit from harvesting them. No matter what you say, if you buy that sword forged by overworked slaves, then you’ll just encourage the merchants.”

Denth fell silent. Then, he nodded, standing. “You’re the boss, and it’s your kingdom. If we fail, the only thing *I* lose is an employer.”

“Denth,” Jewels said, approaching. She barely gave Vivenna a glance. “I don’t like this. I don’t like the fact that *he* got here first. He has Breath—reports say he looked to have reached at least the Fourth Heightening. Maybe the Fifth. I’ll bet he got it from that rebel, Vahr.”

“How do you know it’s even him?” Denth asked.

Jewels snorted. “Word’s all over. People being found slaughtered in alleyways, the wounds corrupt and black. Sightings of a new, powerful Awakener roaming the city carrying a black-handled sword in a silver sheath. It’s Tax, all right. Goes by a different name now.”

Denth nodded. “Vasher. He’s used it for a while. It’s a joke on his part.”

Vivenna frowned. *Black handled sword. Silver sheath.* “Who are we talking about?”

Jewels shot her an annoyed look, but Denth just shrugged. “Old... friend of ours.”

“He’s bad trouble,” Tonk Fah said, walking up. “Tax tends to leave a lot of bodies wherever he goes. Has strange motivations—doesn’t think like other people.”

“He’s interested in the war for some reason, Denth,” Jewels said.

“Let him be,” Denth snapped. “That will just bring him across my path all the more quickly.” He turned away, waving a hand indifferently. Vivenna watched him go, noting the frustration in his step, the curtness of his motions.

“What is wrong with him?” she asked Tonk Fah.

“Tax—or, I guess, Vasher—” Tonk Fah said. “He killed a good friend of ours over in Yarn Dred a couple months back. Denth used to have four people in his team.”

“It shouldn’t have happened,” Jewels said. “Arsteel was a brilliant duelist—almost as good as Denth. Vasher’s never been able to beat either of them.”

“He used that... sword of his,” Tonk Fah grumbled.

“There was no blackness around the wound,” Jewels said.

“Then he cut the blackness out,” Tonk Fah snapped, watching Denth belt a sword to his waist. “There’s no way Vasher beat Arsteel in a fair duel. *No way.*”

“This Vasher,” Vivenna found herself saying. “I saw him.”

Jewels and Tonk Fah turned sharply.

“He was at the court yesterday,” Vivenna said. “Tall man, carrying a sword when nobody else did. It had a black hilt and a silver sheath. He looked... ragged. Hair unkempt, beard scraggly, clothing ripped in places. Only a rope for a belt. He was watching me from behind. He looked... dangerous.”

Tonk Fah cursed quietly.

“That’s him,” Jewels said. “Denth!”

“What?” Denth asked.

Jewels gestured at Vivenna. “He’s a step ahead of us. Been tailing your princess here. She saw him watching her at the court.”

“Colors!” Denth swore, snapping a dueling blade into the sheath at his waist. “Colors, colors, *Colors!*”

“What?” Vivenna asked, paling. “Maybe it was just a coincidence. He could have just come to watch the court.”

Denth shook his head. “There *are* no coincidences where that man is concerned, Princess. If he was watching you, then you can bet on the Colors that he knows exactly who you are and where you came from.” He met her eyes. “And he’s probably planning to kill you.”

Vivenna fell silent.

Tonk Fah laid a hand on her shoulder. “Ah, don’t worry, Vivenna. He wants to kill *us* too. At least you’re in pleasant company.”

Chapter Twenty

For the first time in her several weeks at the palace, Siri stood before the God King's door and felt neither worried nor tired.

Bluefingers, oddly, wasn't scribbling on his pad. He watched her silently, expression unreadable.

Siri almost smiled to herself. Gone were the days when she'd had to lie on the floor, awkwardly trying to kneel while her back complained. Gone were the days when she had to fall asleep on the marble, her discarded dress her only comfort. Ever since she'd grown daring enough to climb into the bed the previous week, she'd slept comfortable and warm each night. And not once had she been touched by the God King.

It was actually a nice arrangement. The priests—apparently satisfied that she was doing her wifely duty—left her alone. She didn't have to be naked in front of anyone, and she was beginning to learn the social dynamic of the palace. She'd even gone to a few more sessions of the court, though she hadn't interacted with the Returned.

"Vessel," Bluefingers said quietly.

She turned toward him, raising an eyebrow.

He shuffled uncomfortably. "You... have found a way to make the king respond to your advances, then?"

"That got out, did it?" she asked, looking back at the door. Inside, her smile deepened.

"Indeed it did, Vessel," Bluefingers said, tapping his ledger from beneath. "Only those in the palace know about any of this, of course."

Good, Siri thought. She glanced to the side.

Bluefingers did not look pleased.

"What?" she asked. "I'm out of danger. The priests can stop worrying about an heir." *For a few months, at least. They'll get suspicious eventually.*

"Vessel," Bluefingers said with a harsh whisper. "Doing your duty as the Vessel *was* the danger!"

She frowned, looking at Bluefingers as the little scribe tapped his board. "Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods..." he whispered to himself.

"What?" she asked.

"I shouldn't say."

"Then what is the point of bringing it up in the first place! Honestly, Bluefingers, you're getting a little frustrating. Leave me too confused, and I might just start asking questions—"

"No!" Bluefingers said sharply, then immediately glanced behind him, cringing slightly. "Vessel, you must not speak to others of my fears. They're silly, really, nothing to bother anyone else with. Just..."

"What?" she asked.

“You *must* not bear him a child,” Bluefingers said. “That is the danger, both to yourself and to God King himself. This all... everything here in the palace... it is not what it appears to be.”

“That’s what everyone says,” she snapped. “If it’s not what it seems, then tell me what it *is*.”

“There is no need,” Bluefingers said. “And I will not speak of this again. After tonight, you will lead yourself to the bed chambers—you obviously have the pattern down well enough.”

“You have to tell me something!” Siri said.

“Vessel,” Bluefingers said, leaning in. “I advise you to please keep your voice down. You don’t know how many factions shift and move inside the palace. I am part of a large number of them, and a stray word on your part could... no, *would*... mean my death. Do you understand that. *Can* you understand that?”

She hesitated.

“I should *not* be putting my life in danger because of you,” he said. “But... there are things about this arrangement with which I do not agree. And so, I give my warning. Avoid giving the God King a child. If you want to know more than that, read your histories. Honestly, I would think that you’d have come to this all a little more prepared.”

And with that, the little man left.

Siri shook her head, then sighed and pushed open the door and entered the God King’s chamber. She closed the door, then eyed the God King—who watched her, as always—and pulled off her dress, leaving her shift on. She went to the bed and sat down, waiting a few minutes before climbing up on her knees to do her bouncing, moaning act. She varied it sometimes, doing several different rhythms, getting creative.

Once she was done, she snuggled down in the blankets and lay back in the pillows to think. *Could Bluefingers have been any more obscure?* she thought with frustration. Perhaps Vivenna would have known how to read him. What little Siri knew of political intrigue told her that people preferred to be subtle—obscure, even—to protect themselves from implication.

Read your histories...

It seemed an odd suggestion. If the secrets were that visible, then why would they be dangerous?

Still, as she thought, she did find herself feeling grateful for Bluefingers. She couldn’t really blame him for his hesitance. He’d probably already endangered himself far more than he really should have. Without him, she wouldn’t have known she was in danger.

In a way, he was the only friend she had in the city—a person like herself, a person drawn in from another country. A country that was overshadowed by beautiful, bold Hallandren. A man who...

She trailed off she felt something odd. She opened her eyes.

Someone loomed over her in the darkness.

Despite herself, Siri screamed in surprise. The God King jumped back, stumbling. Heart thumping, Siri shuffled backward on the bed, pulling the covers up over her chest—though, of course, he had seen her unclothed so often that it was a ridiculous gesture.

The God King stood in his dark black clothing, looking uncertain. She’d never asked her servants why he wore it. It seemed that he would prefer white, which he could affect with his BioChroma so dramatically.

Siri sat for a few moments, blankets clutched before her, before forcing herself to relax. *Stop being so silly*, she told herself. *He’s never even so much as threatened you.*

“It’s all right,” she said softly. “You just startled me.”

He glanced at her. And—with a jolt of surprise—she realized that was the first time she’d addressed him since her outburst the week before. Now that he stood, she could see even better how... heroic he looked. Tall, broad shouldered, like a statue. Human, but of more dramatic proportions. Carefully, showing more uncertainty than she’d ever expected from a man who had the title of God King, he moved back to the bed. He sat down on its side.

Then, he reached to his shirt, pulling it up.

Oh, Austre, she thought with sudden shock. Oh, God, Lord of Colors! This is it! He’s finally coming for me!

She couldn’t fight off the trembles. She’d convinced herself that she was safe, comfortable. She shouldn’t have to go through this. Not again!

I can’t do it! I can’t! I—

The God King pulled something out from underneath his shirt, then let the garment drape back down. Siri sat, breath coming in gasps, slowly realizing that he was making no further moves toward her.

She calmed herself, forcing the color back into her hair. The God King laid the object on the bed, and the firelight revealed it to be... a book. Siri’s mind was immediately drawn to the histories Bluefingers had mentioned, but she immediately discarded the connection. This book, from the title on the spine, was a book of stories told to children.

The God King let his fingers rest on it, then he delicately opened to the first page. The white parchment bent in the force of his BioChroma, shooting out prismatic colors. This didn’t distort the text, and Siri carefully inched forward, looking at the words.

She looked up at the God King. His face seemed less controlled than usual. He nodded down at the page, then pointed at the first word.

“You want me to read this?” Siri asked in a quiet whisper, mindful of the priests who might be listening.

The God King nodded.

“It says ‘Stories for Children,’” Siri said, confused.

He turned the book around, looking at it himself. He rubbed his chin in thought.

What’s going on? she thought. It didn’t seem like he was going to bed her. Did he, instead, expect her to read a story to him? She couldn’t imagine him asking for something that childish. She looked up at him again. He turned the book around, pointing at the first word. He nodded toward it.

“Stories?” Siri asked.

He pointed at the word. She looked closely, trying to discern some hidden meaning or mysterious text. She sighed, looking up at him. “Why don’t you just tell me?”

He paused, cocking his head. Then he opened his mouth. By the waning light of the hearth’s fire, Siri saw something very disturbing.

The God King of Hallandren had no tongue.

There was a scar. She could see it if she squinted closely. Something had happened to him, some terrible accident had ripped it free. Or... had it been taken purposefully? Why would anyone take out the tongue of the king himself?

The answer came to her almost immediately.

BioChromatic Breath, she realized, thinking back a half-remembered lesson from her childhood. To Awaken objects, a person must give a Command. Words spoken in a crisp, clear voice. No slurring or mumbling allowed, or the Breath will not function.

The God King looked away, suddenly, seeming ashamed. He picked up the book, holding it to his chest, and moved to stand.

“No, please,” Siri said, edging forward. She reached her hand forward and touched his arm.

The God King froze. She immediately pulled her hand back. “I didn’t mean to look so disgusted,” Siri said in her whispered voice. “That wasn’t because of... your mouth. It was because I was thinking about why it must have been done to you.”

The God King studied her, then slowly seated himself again. He held himself back far enough that they were not touching, and she did not reach for him again. However, he did carefully—almost reverently—put his book back down on the bed. He opened to the first page again, then looked at her, his eyes pleading.

“You can’t read, can you?” Siri asked.

He shook his head.

“That’s the secret,” she whispered. “The thing that scares Bluefingers so much. You’re not king, you’re a puppet. A *figurehead*. You’re paraded about by your priests, given a BioChromatic aura so strong that it makes people fall to their knees in wonder. Yet they took your tongue so that you couldn’t ever use it, and they never taught you to read, lest you learn too much or manage to communicate with others.”

He sat looked away.

“All so that they could control you.” No wonder Bluefingers is so scared. If they would do that to their own God... then the rest of us are nothing to them.

It made sense, now, why they had been so adamant about her not talking to—or even kissing—the king. It made sense why they would dislike her so much. They were worried about someone spending time alone with the God King. Someone who might discover the truth.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He shook his head, then met her eyes. There was a strength in them she wouldn’t have expected of a man who had been sheltered and isolated as he must have been. Finally, he looked down, pointing back at the words on the page. The first word. The first letter, actually.

“That is the letter ‘shash’” Siri said, smiling. “I can teach you them all, if you wish.”

The priests had been right to be worried.

Chapter Twenty-one

Vasher stood atop the palace of the God King, watching the sun set above the western rainforest. The sunset was vibrant against the clouds, colors flaring, beautiful reds and oranges painting the trees. Then the sun died and the colors faded.

Some said that before a man died, his BioChromatic aura flared with sudden brightness. Like a heart giving its last beat, like the final surge of a wave before the tide retreats. Vasher had seen it happen, but not with every death. The event was rare, much like a perfect sunset.

Dramatic, Nightblood noted.

The sunset? Vasher asked.

Yes.

You can't see it, he said to the sword.

But I can feel you seeing it. Crimson. Like blood in the air.

Vasher didn't respond. The sword couldn't see. But with its powerful, twisted BioChroma, it could sense life and people. Both were things Nightblood had been created to protect. It was strange, how easily and quickly protection could cause destruction. Sometimes, Vasher wondered if the two weren't really the same thing. Protect a flower, destroy the pests who wanted to feed on it. Protect a building, destroy the plants that could have grown in the soil.

Protect a man. Live with the destruction he creates.

It was dark, yet Vasher's life sense was strong. He could just faintly feel the grass growing below and knew how far away it was. With more Breath, he might even have been able to sense the lichen growing on the palace stones. He knelt down, laying one hand on his trouser leg and one on the stone of the palace.

"Strengthen me," he Commanded, Breathing. His trouser legs stiffened, and a patch of color bled from the black stone beside him. Black was a color. He'd never considered that before he'd become an Awakener. Tassels hanging at his cuffs stiffened, wrapping around his ankle. Kneeling as he was, they could also twist around the bottoms of his feet.

Vasher placed a hand on the shoulder of his shirt, touching another patch of marble as he formed an image in his mind. "Upon call, become my fingers and grip," he Commanded. The shirt quivered and a group of tassels curled up around his hand. Five of them. Like fingers.

It was a difficult Command. It required far more Breath to Awaken than he would have liked—his remaining Breath barely allowed him the Second Heightening—and the visualization of the Command in his head taken practice to perfect. The finger tassels were worth it; they had proven very useful, and he was loath to engage in the night's activities without them.

He stood up straight, noting the scar of gray marble on the otherwise perfectly black palace outcropping. He smiled to think of the indignation the priests would feel when they discovered it.

He tested the strength in his legs. He gripped Nightblood, then took a careful step off the side of the palace. He fell some ten feet; the palace was constructed from massive, stone blocks in a steep pyramidal shape. He landed hard on the next block, but his Awakened clothing absorbed some of the shock, acting like a second set of bones. He stood up, nodding to himself, then jumped down the other pyramid steps.

Eventually, he landed down on the soft grass north of the palace, close to the wall that surrounded the entire plateau. He crouched, watching quietly.

Sneaking, Vasher? Nightblood said. You're terrible at sneaking.

Vasher didn't respond.

You should just attack, Nightblood said. You're good at that.

You just want to prove how strong you are, Vasher thought.

Well, yes, the sword replied. But you do have to admit that you're bad at sneaking.

Vasher ignored the sword. A lone man in ragged clothing carrying a sword across the grounds would be more than a little suspicious. So he surveyed.

The Court of Gods at night was still a busy place. Vasher had picked a night where the gods hadn't planned grand celebrations out in the courtyard, but there were still small groups of priests, minstrels, or servants moving between palaces.

How sure are you about this information of yours? Nightblood said. Because, honestly, I don't trust priests.

He isn't a priest, Vasher thought, still watching the grounds. He moved, creeping through the dark starlight shadow of the wall's overhang. His contact had warned him to stay away from the palaces of influential Gods like Blushweaver and Stillmark. But he had also said that the palace of a lesser God—like Giftbeacon or Peaceyearning—wouldn't work for Vasher's purpose. Instead, Vasher sought out the home of Mercystar, a Returned known for her involvement in politics, yet who wasn't all that influential.

Her palace looked relatively dark this evening, but there would still be guards. Hallandren Returned had servants to burn. Sure enough, Vasher located two men watching the door he wanted. They wore the extravagant costumes of court servants, colored yellow and gold after the pattern of their mistress.

The men weren't armed. Who would attack the home of a Returned? They were simply there to keep anyone from wandering in and bothering their lady while she slept. They stood by their lanterns, alert and attentive, but more for the sake of presentation than anything else.

Vasher obscured Nightblood beneath his cloak, then walked out of the darkness, looking from side to side anxiously, mumbling to himself. The hunch of his body helped hide the overly-large sword hidden beneath the cloak.

Oh, please, Nightblood said flatly. The crazy routine? You're more clever than that.

It'll work, Vasher thought. This is the Court of the Gods. Nothing attracts the unbalanced more than the prospect of meeting deities.

The two guards looked up when they saw him approaching, but they didn't seem surprised. They had probably dealt with marginally insane people every day of their professional careers. Vasher had seen the types who ended up in the lines for Returned petitions.

"Here now," one of the men said as Vasher approached. "How'd you get in here?"

Vasher stepped up to them, mumbling to himself about talking to the goddess. The second man put a hand on Vasher's shoulder. "Come on, friend. Let's get you back to the gates and see if there's a shelter that's still taking people in for the night."

Vasher hesitated. Kindness. He hadn't expected that, for some reason. The emotion made him feel a tad guilty for what he had to do next.

He snapped his arm to the side, twitching his thumb twice to make the long finger tassels on his shirt sleeve begin mimicking the motions of his real fingers. He formed a fist. The tassels snapped forward, wrapping around the first guard's neck.

The man choked out a soft gasp of surprise. Before the second guard could react, Vasher brought Nightblood up, ramming the hilt into the guard's stomach. The man stumbled, and Vasher swept his feet out from beneath him. Vasher's boot followed, coming down slowly but firmly on the man's neck. He wiggled, but Vasher's legs bore Awakened strength.

Vasher stood for a long moment, both men struggling, neither managing to escape their strangulation. A short time later, Vasher stepped off the second guard's neck, then lowered the first guard to the grass, twitching his thumb twice and releasing the finger tassels.

You didn't use me much, Nightblood said, sounding hurt. You could have used me. I'm better than a shirt. I'm a sword.

Vasher ignored the comments, scanning the darkness to see if he had been spotted.

I really am better than a shirt. I would have killed them. Look, they're still breathing. Stupid shirt.

That was the point, Vasher thought. Corpses cause more trouble than men who get knocked out.

I could knock people out, Nightblood said immediately.

Vasher shook his head, ducking into the building. Returned palaces—this one included—were generally just connections of open rooms with colorful sheets on the doorways. The weather was so temperate in Hallandren that the building could be open to the air at all times.

He didn't go through the central rooms, but instead stayed in the servant hallway—the one that ran around the outside perimeter of the square building. If Vasher's informant had been truthful, then what he wanted could be found on the northeast side of the building. As he walked, he unraveled the rope from his waist.

Belts are stupid too, Nightblood said. They—

At that moment, a group of four servants rounded the corner directly ahead of Vasher. Vasher looked up, shocked but not really surprised.

The servants' shock lasted a second longer than his own. Within a heartbeat, Vasher snapped the rope forward. "Hold things," he Commanded, giving up most of his remaining Breath. The rope rapped around the arm of one of the servants, though Vasher had been aiming for the neck. Vasher cursed, yanking the person forward. The man cried out as Vasher knocked him against the side of the corner. The others moved to run.

Vasher whipped out Nightblood with his other hand.

Yes! the sword thought.

Vasher didn't draw the sword. He simply tossed it forward. The blade skidded against the floor, then came to rest before the three men. One of the group froze, looking down at the sword, transfixed. He reached out tentatively, eyes awed.

The other two took off running, yelling about an intruder.

Blast! Vasher thought. He yanked the rope, knocking the entangled servant off of his feet again, then dashed forward. As the servant tried to stumble to his feet, Vasher wrapped the rope around the man's hands and body. To his side, the remaining servant ignored both Vasher and his friend. This man picked up Nightblood, eyes alight. He undid the snap on the hilt, moving to pull the sword.

When he got barely a thin sliver of blade free, a dark, water-like smoke began to stream out. Some dripped to the ground; other tendrils of it snaked out and wrapped around the man's arm, drawing the color from his skin.

Vasher kicked out with an Awakened leg, knocking the man down, forcing him to drop Nightblood. Vasher left the first man squirming, tied up, then grabbed the man who had held the sword and rammed his head against the wall.

Breathing hard, Vasher grabbed Nightblood, closed the sheath, and did up the snap. Then he reached over, touching the rope that tied the dazed servant. "Your Breath to mine," he said, recovering the Breath from the rope, leaving the man bound.

You didn't let me kill him, Nightblood said, annoyed.

No, Vasher said. Corpses, remember?

And... two ran away from me. That's not right.

You cannot tempt the hearts of men who are pure, Nightblood. No matter how much he explained that concept, it seemed beyond the sword's ability to comprehend.

Vasher moved quickly, dashing down the hallway. He only had a little further to go, but there were already cries and calls for help. He had no desire to fight an army of servants and soldiers. He stopped, uncertain, in the unadorned hallway. He noticed, idly, that Awakening the rope had inadvertently stolen the color from his boots and cloak—the only pieces of clothing he wore that weren't themselves Awakened.

The grey clothing would instantly brand him for what he was. But the thought of backing down made him cringe. He gritted his teeth in frustration, punching the wall. This was supposed to have gone a lot more smoothly.

I told you that you aren't sneaky, Nightblood said.

Shut up, Vasher thought, determined not to run. He reached into a pouch at his belt, pulling out the object within: a dead squirrel.

Yuck, Nightblood said with a sniffing sound.

Vasher knelt, putting a hand on the creature.

"Awaken to my Breath," he Commanded, "serve my needs, live at my Command and my word. Fallen Rope."

Those last words, fallen rope, formed the security phrase. Vasher could have chosen anything, but he picked the first thing that came to mind.

One Breath was leached from his body, going down into the small rodent's corpse. The thing began to twitch. That was a Breath Vasher would never be able to recover, for creating a Lifeless was a permanent event. The squirrel lost all color, bleeding to grey, the Awakening feeding off the body's own colors to fuel the transformation. The squirrel had been grey in the first place, so the difference was tough to see. That's why Vasher preferred to use them.

"Fallen Rope," he said to the creature, its grey eyes looking up at him. The security phrase said, Vasher could imprint it with an order, much like he did when performing a standard Awakening. "Make noise. Bite people. Fallen Rope." The last use of the word closed its impressionability, so it could no longer be Commanded.

The squirrel hopped up to its feet then scampered down the hallway, heading for the open doorway the fleeing servants had disappeared into. Vasher stood and began to run again, hoping that his distraction would earn him time. Indeed, a few moments later he heard cries coming from the doorway. Clangs and screams followed. Lifeless could be difficult to stop, particularly a fresh one with orders to bite.

Vasher smiled.

We could have taken them, Nightblood said.

Vasher rushed to the place his information had indicated. The location was marked by a splintered board in the wall, ostensibly just normal wear of the building. Vasher crouched, hoping that his informant had not lied. He searched around on the floor, then froze, finding the hidden latch.

He pulled it open, revealing a trap door. Returned palaces were only supposed to be one story. He smiled.

What if this tunnel doesn't have another way out? Nightblood asked as Vasher dropped into the hole, trusting on his Awakened clothing to absorb the fall.

Then you'll probably get to kill a lot of people, Vasher thought. He didn't have many worries in that regard. His information had been good so far. He suspected that the rest was good as well.

The priests of the Returned, it appeared, were hiding things from the rest of the kingdom. And from their gods.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The man was small, almost skeletal, and each shellfish he slurped made Vivenna cringe for two reasons. Not only did she have trouble believing that anyone would enjoy such slimy, slug-like food, but the mussels were also of a very rare and expensive variety.

And she was paying.

The afternoon restaurant crowd was large—people usually ate out at mid-day, when it made more sense to buy food than return home for a meal. The entire concept of restaurants still seemed strange to her. Didn't these men have wives or servants to make them meals? Didn't they feel uncomfortable eating in such a public place? It was so... impersonal.

Denth and Tonk Fah sat on either side of her. And, of course, they helped themselves to the plate of mussels as well. Vivenna wasn't certain—she'd pointedly not asked—but she thought that the shellfish were raw.

The thin man across from her slurped another one down. He didn't seem to be enjoying himself much despite the expensive surroundings and free food. He had a sneer on his lips and while he didn't appear nervous, she did notice that he kept an eye on the restaurant entrance.

"So," Denth said, setting another empty shell on the table, then wiping his fingers on the tablecloth—a common practice in T'Telir. "Can you help us or not?"

The little man—he simply called himself Fob—shrugged. "You tell a wild tell, mercenary."

"You know me, Fob. When have I lied to you?"

"Whenever you've been paid to do it," Fob said with a snort. "I've just never been able to catch you."

Tonk Fah chuckled, reaching for another mussels. It slipped free of the shell as he brought it to his lips; Vivenna had to steel herself to keep from gagging at the slimy plop it made when it hit the table.

"You don't disagree that war is coming, though," Denth said.

"Of course not," Fob said. "But it's been coming for decades now. What makes you think that it will finally happen this year?"

"Can you afford to ignore that chance?" Denth asked.

Fob squirmed a bit, then began eating mussels again. Tonk Fah began stacking the shells, seeing how many he could get balanced on top of one another. Vivenna said nothing for the moment. Her minor part in the meetings didn't bother her. She watched, she learned, and she thought.

Fob was a landowner. He cleared forests, then rented the land to workers. He often relied on Lifeless to help with his clearing—workers loaned to him via the government. There was only one stipulation upon the lending. Should war come, all of the food produced on his holdings during wartime immediately became the property of the Returned.

It was a good deal. The government would probably seize his lands during a war anyway, so he didn't really lose anything in the deal save for his right to complain.

He ate another mussel. *How does he keep packing them down?* she thought. Fob had managed to slurp away nearly twice as many of the disgusting little creatures as Tonk Fah.

“That harvest won’t come in, Fob,” Denth said. “You will lose quite a bit this year, should we prove right.”

“But,” Tonk Fah said, adding another shell to his stack, “harvest early, sell your stockpiles, and you stand to get ahead of your competitors.”

“And what do you gain?” Fob asked. “How do I know those same competitors haven’t hired you to *convince* me a war is coming?”

The table fell silent—other diners clattering at their own meals. Denth finally turned, eyeing Vivenna, and nodded.

She put up her shawl—not the matronly one she’d brought from Idris, but a silken, gossamer one that Denth had found for her. She met Fob’s eyes, then changed her hair to a deep red.

He froze. “Do that again,” he said.

She changed it to blonde.

Fob sat back, letting his mussel slip free of its shell. It slatted against the table a short distance from the one Tonk Fah had dropped. “The *queen*?” he asked with shock.

“No,” Vivenna said. “Her sister.”

“What’s going on here?” Fob asked.

Denth smiled. “She’s here to organize a resistance against the Returned gods and to prepare Idrian interests here in T’Telir for the coming war.”

“You don’t think that old Royal up in the highlands would send his daughter for nothing?” Tonk Fah said. “War. It’s the only thing that would call for such desperation.”

“Your sister,” Fob said, eying Vivenna. “They sent the younger one into the court. Why?”

“The king’s plans are his own, Fob,” Denth said.

Fob looked thoughtful. Finally, he flipped the fallen muscle onto the plate of shells and reached for a fresh one. “I *knew* there was more behind that girl’s arrival than simple chance.”

“So you’ll harvest?” Denth asked.

“I’ll think about it,” Fob said.

Denth nodded. “Good enough, I guess.”

He nodded to Vivenna and Tonk Fah, and the three of them left Fob eating his shellfish. Vivenna settled the tab—which was even higher than she’d feared—and then they joined Parlin, Jewels, and Clod the Lifeless waiting outside. The group moved away from the restaurant, pushing through the crowd easily, if only for the massive Lifeless that walked before them.

“Where now?” Vivenna asked.

Denth eyed her. “Not even tired a little?”

Vivenna didn’t acknowledge her sore feet or her drowsiness. “We’re working for the good of my people, Denth. A little tiredness is a small price.”

Denth shot a glance toward Tonk Fah, but the overweight mercenary had split off into the crowd toward a merchant’s stand, Parlin tagging along behind. Parlin, Vivenna noticed, had gone back to wearing his ridiculous green hat despite her disapproval. What was wrong with that man? He wasn’t terribly bright, true, but he had always been level headed.

“Jewels,” Denth called up ahead. “Take us to the Raymar place.”

Jewels nodded, giving instructions to Clod that Vivenna couldn’t hear. The group turned another direction through the crowd.

“It only responds to her?” Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. “It has basic commands to do what Tonks and I say and I’ve got a security phrase I can give if I need more control.”

Vivenna frowned. “Security phrase?”

Denth eyed her. “This is a rather heretical discussion we’re getting into. You sure you want to continue?”

Vivenna ignored the amusement in his tone. “I still do *not* like the idea of that thing being with us, particularly if I don’t have any way to control it.”

“All Awakening works by way of the Command, Princess,” Denth said. “You infuse something with life, then give it an order. Lifeless are valuable because you can give them Commands *after* you create them, unlike regular Awakened objects, which you can only Command once. Plus, Lifeless can remember a long list of complicated orders and are generally good about not misunderstanding them. They retain a bit of their humanity, I guess.”

Vivenna shivered. That made them seem far too sentient for her likes.

“However, that means pretty much anyone can control a Lifeless,” Denth said. “Not just the person who created them. So, we give them security phrases. A couple words you can say that will let you imprint the creature with new Commands.”

“So, what’s the security phrase for Clod?”

“I’ll have to ask Jewels if you can have it.”

Vivenna opened her mouth to complain, but thought better of it. Denth obviously didn’t like interfering with Jewels or her work. Vivenna would simply have to make a point of it later, once they were in a more private location and she could hold his attention. Instead, she just eyed Clod. He was dressed in simple clothing. Grey trousers and grey shirt, with a leather jerkin that had been drained of color. He carried a large blade at his waist. Not a dueling sword—a more brutal, wide-bladed weapon.

All in grey, Vivenna thought. Is that because they want everyone to recognize Clod for a Lifeless? Despite what Denth said about Lifeless being common, many people gave the thing a wide berth. Snakes might be common in the jungle, she thought, but that doesn’t mean that people are excited about seeing them.

Jewels chatted quietly at the Lifeless, though it never responded. It simply walked, face forward, inhuman in the steady rhythm of its steps.

“Does she always... talk to it like that?” Vivenna asked, shivering.

“Yeah,” Denth said.

“That doesn’t seem very healthy.”

Denth looked troubled, though he said nothing. A few moments later, Tonk Fah and Parlin returned. Tonk Fah, Vivenna was displeased to see, had a small monkey on his shoulder. It chattered a bit, then ran behind Tonk Fah’s neck, moving to the other shoulder.

“A new pet?” Vivenna asked. “What happened to that parrot of yours, anyway?”

Tonk Fah looked ashamed, and Denth just shook his head. “Tonks isn’t very good with pets.”

“That parrot was boring anyway,” Tonk Fah said. “Monkeys are *much* more interesting.”

Vivenna shook her head. It wasn’t long before they arrived at the next restaurant, one far less lavish than the previous one. Jewels, Parlin, and the Lifeless took up places outside, as usual, and Vivenna and the two male mercenaries walked in.

The meetings were becoming routine. During the last couple of weeks, they'd met with a good dozen people of varying usefulness. Some were underground leaders Denth thought might be capable of making a ruckus. Others were merchants, like Fob. All in all, Vivenna was impressed with the variety of quiet ways Denth had come up with to disrupt things in T'Telir.

Most of the plans did, however, require a display of Vivenna's Royal Locks. Most people instantly grasped the importance of a Royal daughter being in the city, and she was left wondering just how Lemks had intended to achieve results without such convincing proof.

Denth led them to a table in the corner, and Vivenna frowned at how dimly lit and dirty the restaurant was. Despite her hunger, she quickly determined that she would not be eating anything at *this* establishment. "Why is it that we keep switching restaurants, anyway?" she said, sitting down—but only after wiping off the stool with her handkerchief.

"Harder to spy on us that way," Denth said. "I keep warning you, princess. This is more dangerous than it seems. Don't let the simple meal conversations throw you off. In any other city, we'd be meeting in lairs, gambling parlors, or alleyways. Best to keep moving."

They settled down, and as if they hadn't just come from their second lunch of the day, Denth and Tonk Fah ordered food. Vivenna sat quietly in her chair, preparing for the next meeting. Gods Feast was something of a holy day in Hallandren—though, from what she'd seen, the people of the pagan city had no real concept of what a 'Holy Day' was supposed to be. Instead of helping the monks in their fields or caring for the needy, the people took the evening off and splurged on meals—as if the Gods wanted them to be lavish.

And, perhaps they did. From what she'd heard, the Returned were wasteful beings. It made sense for their followers to spend their 'holy day' being idle and gluttonous.

Their contact arrived before the food did. He walked in with two bodyguards of his own. He wore nice clothing—which meant bright clothing, in T'Telir—but his beard was long and greasy, and he appeared to be missing several teeth. He pointed, and his bodyguards pulled a second table over next to Vivenna's, then arranged three chairs at it. The man took a seat, careful to keep his distance from Denth and Tonk Fah.

"A little paranoid, aren't we?" Denth said.

The man raised his hands. "Cautiousness never hurt a man."

"More food for us, then," Tonk Fah said as the plate arrived. It was covered with bits of... something that had been battered and fried. The monkey immediately scrambled down Tonk Fah's arm and snatched a few pieces.

"So," the man said, "you're the infamous Denth."

"I am. I assume you're Garble?"

The man nodded.

One of the city's less reputable thieving lords, Vivenna thought. A strong ally of Vahr's rebellion. They had been waiting weeks to set up this meeting.

"Good," Denth said. "We have some interest in making certain supply carts disappear on the way to the city." He said it so openly. Vivenna glanced about, making certain no other tables were close.

"Garble owns this restaurant, princess," Tonk Fah whispered. "Every second man in this room is probably a bodyguard."

Great, she thought, annoyed they hadn't told her that before they entered. She glanced around again, feeling far more jumpy this time.

“Is that so?” Garble asked, bringing Vivenna’s attention back to the conversation. “You want to make things disappear? Caravans of food?”

“It’s a difficult job we ask,” Denth said grimly. “These aren’t long distance caravans. Most of them will simply be coming into the city from the outlying farms.” He nodded to Vivenna, and she pulled out a small pouch of coins. She handed them to him, and he tossed them to a nearby table.

One of the bodyguards investigated.

“For your trouble of coming today,” Denth said.

Vivenna watched the money go with a crimp in her stomach. It felt downright *wrong* to be using royal funds to bribe men like Garble. What she had just given away wasn’t even a real bribe—it was simply ‘grease money’ as Denth put it.

“Now,” Denth said, “the carts we’re talking about—”

“Wait,” Garble said. “Let’s see the hair first.”

Vivenna sighed, moving to put up the shawl.

“No shawl,” Garble said. “No tricks. The men in this room are loyal.”

Vivenna shot a glance at Denth, and he nodded. So she shifted colors a couple of times. Garble watched intently, scratching at his beard.

“Nice,” he finally said. “Nice indeed. Where’d you find her?”

Denth frowned. “What?”

“A person with enough Royal blood to imitate one of the princesses.”

“She’s no imposter,” Denth said as Tonk Fah continued to work on the plate of fried somethings.

“Come now,” Garble said, smiling with a wide, uneven smile. “You can tell me.”

“It’s true,” Vivenna said. “Being Royal is about more than just blood. It’s about lineage and the holy calling of Austre. My children will not have the Royal Locks unless I become queen of Idris. Only potential heirs have the ability to change their hair color.”

“Superstitious nonsense,” Garble said. He leaned forward, ignoring her and focusing on Denth. “I don’t care about your caravans or supply offers, Denth. I want to buy the girl from you. How much?”

Denth was silent.

“Word of her is moving about town,” Garble said. “I see what you’re doing. You could move a lot of people, make a lot of noise, with a person who seemed to be of the Royal family. I don’t know where you found her, or how you trained her so well, but I want her.”

Denth stood up slowly. “We’re leaving,” he said. Garble’s bodyguards stood up too.

Denth moved.

There were flashes—reflections of sunlight, and bodies moving too fast for Vivenna’s shocked mind to follow. Then the motion stopped. Garble remained in his chair. Denth stood poised, his dueling blade sticking through the neck of one of the bodyguards.

The bodyguard looked surprised, his hand still on his sword. Vivenna hadn’t even seen Denth draw his weapon. The other bodyguard stumbled, blood staining the front of his jerkin from where—shockingly—Denth seemed to have managed to stab him.

He slipped to the ground, bumping Garble’s table in his death throws.

Lord of Colors... Vivenna thought. So fast!

“So, you *are* as good as they say,” Garble said, still looking unconcerned. Around the room, other men had stood. Some twenty of them. Tonk Fah grabbed another handful of fried things, then nudged Vivenna. “We might want to get up,” he whispered.

Denth pulled his sword free of the bodyguard’s neck, and the man joined his friend, bleeding and dying on the floor. Denth slammed his sword into its sheath without wiping it, never breaking Garble’s gaze.

“People speak of you,” Garble said. “Say you appeared out of nowhere a decade or so back. Gathered yourself a team of the best—stole them from important men. Or important prisons. Nobody knows much about you, other than the fact that you’re fast. Some say inhumanly so.”

Denth nodded toward the doorway. Vivenna stood nervously, then let Tonk Fah pull her through the room. The guards stood with their hands on their swords, but nobody attacked.

“It’s a pity we couldn’t do business,” Garble said, sighing. “I hope you’ll think of me for future dealings.”

Denth finally turned away, joining Vivenna and Tonk Fah as they left the restaurant and moved out onto the street. Parlin and Jewels hurried to catch up.

“He’s letting us go?” Vivenna asked, heart thumping.

“He just wanted to see my blade,” Denth said. He still seemed tense. “It happens sometimes.”

“Barring that, he wanted to steal himself a princess,” Tonk Fah added. “Either way, he won. He either got to verify Denth’s skill or he got you.”

“But... you could have killed him!” Vivenna said.

Tonk Fah snorted. “And bring down the wrath of half the thieves, assassins, and burglars in the city? No, Garble knew he wasn’t ever in any danger from us.”

Denth looked back at her. “I’m sorry for wasting your time—I thought he’d be more useful.”

She frowned, noting for the first time the careful mask that Denth kept on his emotions. She’d always thought of him as carefree, like Tonk Fah, but now she saw hints of something else. Control. Control that was, for the first time since they’d met, in danger of cracking.

“Well, no harm done,” she said.

“Except for those slobs that Denth poked,” Tonk Fah added, happily feeding another morsel to his monkey.

“We need to—”

“Princess?” a voice asked from the crowd.

Denth and Tonk Fah both spun. Once again, Denth’s sword was out before Vivenna could track. This time, however, he didn’t strike. The man behind them didn’t seem much of a threat. He wore ragged brown clothing, and had a dirty face. He had the look of a farmer.

“Oh, princess,” the man said, hurrying forward, ignoring the blades. “It is you. I heard rumors, but... oh, you’re here!”

Denth shot a look at Tonk Fah, and the larger mercenary reached out, putting a hand in front of the newcomer before he got too close to Vivenna. She would have thought the caution unnecessary had she just not seen Denth kill two men in an eye blink. The danger Denth always talked about was slowly seeping into her mind. If this man had a hidden weapon and a little skill, he could kill her before she realized what was happening.

It was a chilling realization.

“Princess,” the man said, falling to his knees.

“Please,” she said. “Do not put me above others.”

“Oh,” the man said, looking up. “I’m sorry. It’s been so long since I left Idris! But, it *is* you!”

“How did you know I was here?”

“The Idrians in T’Telir,” the man said. “They say... you’ve come to take the throne back. We’ve been oppressed here for so long... I thought people were just making up stories. But it’s true! You’re here!”

Denth glanced at her, then at Garble’s restaurant, which was still close behind them. He nodded to Tonk Fah. “Grab him, search him, and we’ll talk somewhere else.”

#

The ‘somewhere else’ turned out to be a ragged dump of a building in a poor section of town about a fifteen minutes from the restaurant.

Vivenna found the slums of T’Telir to be very interesting, on an intellectual level at least. Even here, there was color. People wore faded clothing. Bright strips of cloth hung from windows, crossed overhangs, and even sat in puddles on the street. Colors, muted or dirty. Like a carnival that had been hit by a mudslide.

Vivenna stood outside the shack with Jewels, Parlin, and the Idrian, waiting as Denth and Tonk Fah made certain the building wasn’t hiding any unseen threats. She wrapped her arms about herself, feeling an odd sense of despair. The faded colors in the alley-like street felt wrong. They were dead things. Like a beautiful bird that had fallen motionless to the ground, its shape intact, but the magic somehow gone.

Ruined reds, stained yellows, broken greens. In T’Telir, even simple things—like chair legs and storage sacks—were dyed bright colors. How much must the people of the city spend on dyes and inks? If it hadn’t been for the Tears of Edgli, the vibrant flowers that grew only in the T’Telir climate, it would have been impossible. Hallandren had made an entire economy out of growing, harvesting, and producing dyes from the majestic flowers.

Vivenna wrinkled her nose at the smell of refuse. Scents were more vibrant to her now, much like colors. It wasn’t that her ability to smell was any better, the things that she smelled just seemed more rich. She shivered. Even still, weeks after the infusion of Breath, she didn’t feel normal. She could *sense* the teeming people of the city, could sense Parlin beside her, watching the alleys nearby with suspicion. He could sense Denth and Tonk Fah inside—one of them appeared to be inspecting the basement.

She could...

She froze. She *couldn’t* feel Jewels. She glanced to the side, but the shorter woman was there, hands on hips, muttering to herself at being left with the ‘kids.’ Her Lifeless abomination was beside her; Vivenna hadn’t expected to be able to feel it. Why couldn’t she feel Jewels? Vivenna had a sharp moment of panic, thinking that Jewels might be some twisted Lifeless creation. Then, however, she realized that there was a simple explanation.

Jewels had no Breath. She was a Drab.

Now that Vivenna knew what to look for, it seemed obvious. She should have seen it earlier; she had the BioChroma. Even without the Breath, Vivenna thought she might have been able to tell. There wasn’t as much of a sparkle of life in Jewels’ eyes. She seemed more grumpy, less pleasant. She seemed to put others on edge.

Plus Jewels never noticed that Vivenna was watching her. Whatever sense it was that made others glance about if they were watched for too long, Jewels didn’t have it. Vivenna turned away,

and found herself blushing. Seeing a person without Breath... it felt like looking at someone when they were changing. Seeing them exposed.

Poor woman, she thought. *I wonder how it happened.* Had she sold it herself? Or had it been taken from her? Suddenly, Vivenna felt awkward. *Why should I have so much, when she has such little?* It seemed so ostentatious.

She felt Denth approach before he actually pushed the door open. It looked ready to fall off its hinges. "Safe," he said. Then he eyed Vivenna. "You don't have to be involved with this, if you don't want to waste your time, Princess. Jewels can take you back to the house. We'll question the man and bring you word."

She shook her head. "No. I want to hear what he has to say."

"I figured as much," Denth said. "We'll want to cancel our next appointment, though. Jewels, you—"

"I'll do it," Parlin said.

Denth paused, glancing at Vivenna.

"Look, I may not understand everything going on in this city," Parlin said, sighing, "but I can deliver a simple message. I'm not an idiot."

"Let him go," Vivenna said. "I trust him."

Denth shrugged, but gave Parlin a set of instructions and sent him off. Then Denth waved for Vivenna and the others to enter the building. The nervous Idrian man—Thame—went first. Vivenna followed him in, and was surprised to find the inside of the building looked quite a bit more sturdy than the outside had indicated.

Tonk Fah found a stool, and he placed it down in the center of the room.

"Have a seat, friend," Denth said, gesturing.

Thame nervously settled down on the stool.

"Now," Denth said, "why don't you tell us how you found out that the princess was going to be in that particular restaurant today?"

Thame glanced from side to side. "I just happened to be walking in the area and I—"

Tonk Fah cracked his knuckles. Vivenna glanced at him, suddenly noticing that Tonk Fah seemed more... dangerous. The idle, overweight man who liked to nap seemed to have vanished. In his place was a thug with sleeves rolled up, showing off muscles that bulged beneath his girth.

Thame was sweating. To the side, Clod the Lifeless stepped into the room, his inhuman eyes falling into shadow, his face looking like something crafted from wax. An impersonation of a human.

"I... run jobs for one of the bosses in the city," Thame said. "Little things. Nothing big. When you're one of us, you take the jobs you can get."

"One of us?" Denth asked, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Idrian."

"I've seen Idrians in good positions in the city, friend," Denth said. "Merchants. Moneylenders."

"The lucky ones, sir," Thame said, gulping. "They have their own money. People will work with anyone who has money. If you're just a regular man, things are different. People look at your clothing, listen to your accent, and they find others to do their work. Say we're not trustworthy. Or that we're boring. Or that we steal."

“And do you?” Vivenna found herself asking.

Thame looked at her, then glanced down at the building’s dirt floor. “Sometimes,” he said. “But not at first. I only do it now, when my boss asks me to.”

“That still doesn’t answer how you knew where to find us, Friend,” Denth said quietly. His inviting use of the word ‘friend,’ when contrasted with Tonk Fah on one side and the Lifeless on the other, made Vivenna shiver.

“My boss talks too much,” Thame said. “He knew what was happening at that restaurant—he sold the information to a couple of people. I heard for free.”

Denth glanced at Tonk Fah.

“Everyone knows she’s in the city,” Thame said quickly. “We’ve all heard the rumors. It’s no coincidence. Things are bad for us. Worse than they’ve ever been. The princess came to help, right?”

“Friend,” Denth said. “I think it’s best that you forget this entire meeting. I realize that there will be temptation to sell information. I promise you, we can find out if you did that. And, we can—”

“Denth, that’s enough,” Vivenna said. “Stop scaring the man.”

The mercenary glanced at her, causing Thame to jump.

“Oh, for the Colors sake,” she said walking forward, kneeling beside Thame’s stool. “No harm will come to you, Thame. You have done well in seeking me out, and I trust you to keep news of our meeting quiet. But, tell me, if things are so bad in T’Telir, why not return to Idris?”

“Travel costs money, your highness,” he said. “You have to buy food for the weeks it takes to climb to the highlands. I can’t afford it—most of us can’t.”

“Are there many of you here?” Vivenna asked.

“Yes, your highness.”

Vivenna nodded. “I want to meet with the others.”

“Princess—” Denth said, but she shot him a glance.

“I can gather some together,” Thame said, nodding eagerly. “I promise. I’m known to a lot of the Idrians.”

“Good,” Vivenna said. “Because I *have* come to help. How shall we contact you?”

“Ask around for Yeg,” he said. “That’s my boss.”

Vivenna rose then gestured toward the doorway. Thame fled without needing any further prompting. Jewels, who stood guarding the doorway, reluctantly stepped aside and let the man scuttle away.

The room was silent for a moment.

“Jewels,” Denth said. “Follow him.”

She nodded and was gone.

Vivenna glanced back at the two mercenaries, expecting to find them angry at her.

“Aw, did you have to let him go so fast?” Tonk Fah said, sitting down on the floor, looking morose. Whatever he’d done to look dangerous was gone, evaporating faster than water on metal in the sun.

“There, now you’ve done it,” Denth said. “He’ll be sullen for the rest of the day.”

"I *never* get to be the bad guy any more," Tonk Fah said, falling back and staring up at the ceiling. His monkey wandered over and sat on the top of his ample stomach.

"You'll get over it," Vivenna said, rolling her eyes. "Why were you so hard on him, anyway?"

Denth shrugged. "You know what I like least about being a mercenary?"

"I suspect that you're going to tell me," Vivenna said, tapping her foot.

"People are always trying to fool you," he said, sitting down on the floor beside Tonk Fah. "They all think that, because you're hired muscle, you're an idiot."

He paused, as if expecting Tonk Fah to give his usual counterpoint. Instead, however, the bulky mercenary just continued to stare at the ceiling. "Arsteel *always* got to be the mean one," he said.

Denth sighed, shooting her a "This is your fault" look. "Anyway," he continued. "I couldn't be sure that our friend there wasn't a plant arranged by Garble. He could have pretended to be a loyal subject, gotten inside our defenses, then knifed you in the back. Best to be safe, princess."

She sat down on the stool, and was tempted to say that he was over-reacting, but... well, she had just seen him kill two men in her defense. *I'm paying them*, she thought. *I should probably just let them do their job*. "Tonk Fah," she said. "You can be the mean one next time."

He looked up. "You promise?"

"Yes," she said.

"Can I yell at the person we are interrogating?"

"Sure," she said.

"Can I growl at him?" he asked.

"I... guess," she said.

"Can I break his fingers?"

She frowned. "No!"

"Not even the unimportant ones?" Tonk Fah asked. "I mean, people have *five* after all. The little ones don't even do that much."

Vivenna paused, then Tonk Fah and Denth started laughing.

"Oh, honestly," she said, turning away. "I can never tell when you move from being serious to being ridiculous."

"That's what makes it so funny," Tonk Fah said, still chuckling.

"Are we leaving, then?" Vivenna said, rising.

"Nah," Denth said. "Let's wait a bit. I'm still not sure that Garble isn't looking for us. Best to lay low for a few hours."

She frowned, glancing at Denth. Tonk Fah, amazingly, was already snoring softly.

"I thought you said that Garble would let us go," she said. "That he was just testing us—that he wanted to see how good you were."

"It's likely," Denth said. "But I've been known to be wrong. He might have let us go because he was worried about my sword being so close to him. He could be having second thoughts. We'll give it a few hours, then head back and ask my watchers if anyone has been poking around the house."

"Watchers?" Vivenna asked. "You have people watching our house?"

"Of course," Denth said. "Kids work cheap in the city. Worth the coin, even when you're not protecting a princess from a rival kingdom."

She folded her arms, standing. She didn't feel like sitting, so she began to pace.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Garble," Denth said, eyes closed as he sat back, leaning against the wall. "This is just a precaution."

She shook her head. "It makes sense that he'd want revenge, Denth," she said. "You killed two of his men."

"Men can be cheap in this city too, Princess."

"You say he was testing you," Vivenna said. "But what would be the point of that? Provoking you to action just to let you go?"

"To see how much of a threat I was," Denth said, shrugging, eyes still closed. "Or, more likely, to see if I was worth the pay I usually demand. Again, I wouldn't worry so much."

She sighed, then wandered over to the window so she could watch the street.

"You should probably stay away from the window," Denth said. "Just to be safe."

First he tells me not to worry, then he tells me not to let myself be seen, she thought with frustration, walking toward the back of the room, moving toward the door down to the cellar.

"I wouldn't do that, either," Denth noted. "Stairs are broken in a few places. Not much to see, anyway. Dirt floor. Dirt walls. Dirt ceiling."

She sighed again, turning away from the door.

"What is with you, anyway?" he asked, still not opening his eyes. "You're not usually this nervous."

"I don't know," she said. "Being locked in like this makes me anxious."

"Doesn't sound like a very princessly attribute," Denth noted.

It isn't, she realized. *That sounded like something Siri would say. What is wrong with me lately?* She forced herself to sit down on the stool, folding her hands in her lap, reasserting control of her hair which had rebelliously started to lighten to a brown. "Please," she said, forcing herself to sound patient, "tell me of this place. Why did you select this building?"

Denth cracked an eyelid. "We rent it," he finally said. "It's nice to have safehouses around the city. Since we don't use them very often, we find the cheapest ones we can."

I noticed, Vivenna thought, but fell silent, recognizing how stilted her attempt at conversation had sounded. She sat quietly, looking down at her hands, trying to figure out just what had set her on edge.

It was more than the fight. The truth was, she was worried about how long things in T'Telir were taking. Her father would have received her letter two weeks before and would know that *two* of his daughters were in Hallandren,. She could only hope that the logic of her letter, mixed with her threats, would keep him from doing anything foolish.

She was glad Denth had made her abandon Lemks' house. If her father did send agents to retrieve her, they would probably try to find Lemks first—just as she had. However, a piece of her wished that Denth hadn't been so insightful. If they were still living in Lemks' home, she might very well have been discovered already.

And she might be on her way back to Idris.

She acted so determined. Indeed, sometimes she *felt* quite determined. Those were the times when she thought about Siri or her kingdom's needs. However, those times—the princess times—were actually rather rare. The rest of the time, she wondered.

What was she doing? She didn't know about subterfuge or warfare. Denth was really behind everything she was 'doing' to help Idris. What she had suspected on that first day had prove true. Her preparation and learning amounted to little. She didn't know how to go about saving Siri. She didn't know what to do about the Breath within her. She didn't even, really, know if she wanted to stay in this insane, over-crowded, over-*colored* city.

In short, she was useless. And that was one thing, above all else, that her training had never prepared her to deal with.

"You really want to meet with the Idrians?" Denth asked. Vivenna looked up. Outside, it was growing darker as evening approached.

Do I? she thought. If my father has agents in the city, they might be there. But, if there's something I can do for those people...

"I'd like to," she said.

He fell silent.

"You don't like it," she said.

He shook his head. "It will be hard to arrange, hard to keep quiet, and will make you hard to protect. These meetings we've been having—they've all been in controlled areas. If you meet with the common folk, it will be different."

She nodded quietly. "I want to do it anyway. I... have to do something, Denth. Something useful. Being paraded before these contacts of yours is helping. But I need to do more. If war is coming, we need to prepare these people. Help them, somehow."

She looked up, staring out toward the windows. Clod the Lifeless stood in the corner where Jewels had left him. Vivenna shivered, looking away. "I want to help my sister," she said. "And I want to be useful to my people. But, I can't help feeling that I'm not doing much for Idris by staying in the city."

"Better than leaving," Denth said.

"Why?"

"Because if you left, there wouldn't be anyone to pay me."

She rolled her eyes.

"I wasn't joking," Denth noted. "I really do like getting paid. However, there are better reasons to stay."

"Like what?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Depends, I guess. Look, princess, I'm not the type to give brilliant advice or deep council. I'm a mercenary. You pay me, you point, and I go stab things. But I figure that if you think about it, you'll find that running off to Idris is about the *least* useful thing you could do. You won't be able to do anything there other than sit about and knit doilies. Your father has other heirs. Here, you might be largely ineffective—but there you're redundant."

He fell silent, stretching, resting back a little more. *Tough man to have a conversation with, sometimes*, Vivenna thought to herself, shaking her head. Still, she found the words comforting. She smiled, turning.

And found Clod standing right beside her stool.

She yelped, half-scrambling, half-falling backward. Denth was on his feet in a heartbeat, sword drawn, and Tonk Fah wasn't far behind.

Vivenna stumbled to her feet, her skirts getting in the way, and placed a hand against her chest, stilling her heartbeat. The Lifeless stood, watching her.

"He does that sometimes," Denth said, chuckling, though it sounded fake to Vivenna. "Just walks up to people."

"Like he was curious about them," Tonk Fah.

"They *can't* be curious," Denth said. "No emotion at all. Clod. Go back to your corner."

The Lifeless turned and began to walk.

"No," Vivenna said, shivering. "Put it in the basement."

"But, the stairs—" Denth said.

"*Now!*" Vivenna snapped, hair tingeing red at the tips.

Denth sighed. "Clod, to the cellar."

The Lifeless turned and walked to the door at the back. As he went down the steps, Vivenna heard one crack slightly, but the creature made it safely, judging by the sound of his footsteps. She sat back down, trying to calm her breathing.

"Sorry about that," Denth said.

"I can't feel him," Vivenna said. "It's unnerving. I... forget that he's there, and don't notice when he approaches."

Denth nodded. "I know."

"Jewels, too," she said, glancing at him. "She is a Drab."

"Yeah," Denth said, settling back down. "Has been since she was a child. Her parents sold her Breath to one of the gods."

"They each need a Breath each week to survive," Tonk Fah added.

"How horrible," Vivenna said. I really need to show her more kindness.

"It's really not so bad," Denth said. "I've been without Breath before."

"You have?"

He nodded. "Everyone goes through times when they're a little bit short on coin. The nice thing about Breath is that you can always buy one off someone else."

"Somebody is always selling," Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna shook her head, shivering. "But you have to live without it for a time. Have no soul."

Denth laughed—and this time it was definitely genuine. "Oh, most of that is superstition, Princess. Lacking Breath doesn't change you that much."

"It makes you less kind," Vivenna said. "More irritable. Like..."

"Jewels?" Denth asked, amused. "Nah, she'd be like that anyway. I'm sure of it. Either way, when I've sold my Breath, I didn't feel much different. You really have to pay attention to even notice it's missing."

Vivenna turned away. She didn't expect him to understand. It was easy to call her beliefs superstition, but she could just as easily turn the words back on Denth. People saw what they wanted to see. If he felt the same without Breath, it seemed a fairly easy way to rationalize the selling of it—and then buying of another Breath off of an innocent person.

The conversation died off until Jewels returned. She walked in and, once again, Vivenna barely noticed her. *I'm starting to rely on that life sense far too much*, she thought with annoyance, standing as Jewels nodded to Denth.

"He is who he says he is," Jewels said. "I asked around, got three confirmations from people I kind of trust."

"All right, then," Denth said, stretching and climbing to his feet. He kicked Tonk Fah awake. "Let's *carefully* head back to the house."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lightsong found Blushweaver in the grassy portion of the courtyard behind her palace. She was enjoying the art of one of the city's master gardeners.

Lightsong strolled through the grass, his entourage hovering about, holding up a parasol to keep away the sun, and generally seeing that he was overly pampered. He passed planters, pots, and even vases filled with various kinds of growing things. There were hundreds of different items, and many had been arranged into patterns and rows.

Temporary flowerbeds. The gods were too godly to leave the Court and visit gardens, so the gardens had to be brought to them. Such an enormous undertaking required dozens of workers and carts full of plants. Nothing was too grand to deny the gods.

Except, perhaps, the ability to leave.

Blushweaver stood admiring one of the patterns of vases. She noticed Lightsong as he approached, his BioChroma making the flowers shine more vibrantly in the afternoon sunlight. She was wearing an amazingly modest dress, for her. It had no sleeves and looked to be constructed entirely out of a single wrap of green silk, but it covered up the essential bits and then some.

"Lightsong, dear," she said, smiling. "Visiting a lady in her home? How forward. Well, enough of this small talk. Let us retire to the bedroom."

He smiled, holding up a sheet of paper as he approached her.

She paused, then accepted it. The front was covered with colored dots—the Artisan's Language. "What is this?" she asked.

"I figured I knew how our conversation would begin," he said. "And so I saved us the trouble of having to go through it. I had it written out beforehand."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, then read. "'First off, Blushweaver says something that is mildly suggestive.'" She glanced at him. "Mildly? I mentioned the bedroom. I'd call that blatant."

"I underestimated you," Lightsong said. "Please continue."

"Then Lightsong says something to deflect her," Blushweaver read. "'It is so incredibly charming and clever that she is left stunned by his brilliance and cannot speak for several minutes...' Oh, honestly, Lightsong. Do I have to read this?"

"It's a masterpiece," he said. "Best work I've ever done. Please, the next part is important."

She sighed. "Blushweaver says something about politics which is dreadfully boring but she offsets it by wiggling her chest. After that, Lightsong apologizes for being so distant lately. He explains that he had to work out some things." She paused, eyeing him. "Does this mean that you're finally ready to be part of my plans?"

He nodded. To the side, a group of gardeners removed the flowers. They returned in waves, building a pattern of blossoming trees in large pots around Blushweaver and Lightsong.

"I don't think that the queen is involved in a plot to take the throne," Lightsong said. "I've spoken with her only briefly, but I am convinced."

"Then why agree to join with me?"

He stood quietly for a moment, enjoying the blossoms. “Because,” he said. “I intend to see that you don’t crush her.”

“My dear Lightsong,” Blushweaver said, pursing bright red lips. “I’m harmless.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I doubt that.”

“Now, now,” she said, “you should never point out a lady’s lies. Anyway, I’m glad you came. We have work to do.”

“Work?” he said. “That sounds like... work.”

“Of course, dear,” she said, walking away. Gardeners immediately ran forward, pulling aside the small trees and clearing a path for her. The master gardener himself stood directing the composition.

Lightsong hurried and caught up. “Work,” he said. “You know what my philosophy on that word is?”

“I am under the subtle impression that you do not support it,” Blushweaver said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Work, my dear Blushweaver, is like fertilizer.”

“It makes people stink?”

He smiled. “Well, I suppose though that comparison is rather valid to. No, I was thinking that work is like fertilizer in that I’m very glad it exists; I just don’t ever want to get stuck in it.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Blushweaver said. “Because you just agreed to do so.”

He sighed. “I thought I smelled something.”

“Don’t be so boring,” she said, smiling to some workers as they lined her path with vases of flowers. “This is going to be fun.” She turned back, eyes twinkling. “Mercystar got attacked last night.”

#

“Oh, my dear Blushweaver. It was positively *tragic*.”

Lightsong raised an eyebrow. Mercystar was a voluptuous woman with more weight on her than Blushweaver. Both were, of course, perfect examples of feminine beauty. Blushweaver was simply the lithe—yet busty—type and Mercystar the curvaceous—yet busty—type. Mercystar lounged back on a couch, being fanned with large fern leaves by several of her serving men.

She didn’t have Blushweaver’s subtle sense of style. There was a skill to choosing bright clothing that didn’t edge into garishness. Lightsong didn’t have it—but he had servants who did. Mercystar, likely, didn’t know that such a skill even existed.

Though, he thought, orange and gold aren’t exactly the easiest colors to make look dignified.

“Mercystar, dear,” Blushweaver said. One of the servants provided a plush stool, sliding it beneath Blushweaver just as she sat. “I can understand how you must feel.”

“Can you?” Mercystar asked. “Can you possibly? This is terrible. Some... some *miscreant* snuck into my very home, accosting my servants! The home of a goddess! Who would do such a thing?”

“Indeed, he must have been deranged,” Blushweaver said soothingly. Lightsong stood beside her, hands clasped behind his back. An afternoon breeze blew across the courtyard and through the pavilion. Some of Blushweaver’s garden workers had brought flowers and trees over, surrounding the canopy, making it smell of pollen.

"I can't understand it," Mercystar said. "The men at the gates are supposed to stop these kinds of things! Why do we have walls if people can just walk in and break into our homes? I just don't feel safe any more."

"I'm certain the guards will be more diligent in the future," Blushweaver said.

Lightsong frowned. Something felt... off to him about the entire experience. He glanced toward Mercystar's mansion, where servants buzzed about. "What was the intruder after, do you suppose?" he said, almost to himself. "Pieces of art, perhaps? Surely there are merchants who would be much easier to rob."

"We know what they were after," Blushweaver said smoothly.

"We do?" Mercystar said, perking up.

"Yes, dear," Blushweaver said. "Only someone with no respect for tradition, propriety, or religion would dare trespass in the home of a god. Someone base. Disrespectful. Unbelieving..."

"An Idrian?" Mercystar asked.

"Did you ever wonder, dear," Blushweaver said, "why they sent their *youngest* daughter to the God King instead of their eldest?"

Mercystar frowned. "They did?"

"Yes, dear," Blushweaver said.

"That's rather suspicious now, isn't it."

"Something is going on in the Court of Gods, Mercystar," Blushweaver said, leaning down. "Times could be dangerous for the crown in the future."

"Blushweaver," Lightsong said. "Might I speak with you for a moment?"

She eyed him in annoyance. He met the gaze, which eventually caused her to sigh. She patted Mercystar's hand and then retreated with Lightsong from the pavilion, their servants and priests trailing behind.

"What are you doing?" Lightsong said as soon as they were out of Mercystar's earshot.

"Recruitment," Blushweaver said, a glint in her eye. "We're going to need her Lifeless Commands."

"We don't know that an Idrian was the one who broke into her palace."

"Oh?" Blushweaver asked. "And you think it's coincidence that this would happen now? Someone sneaks into one of our palaces *now*, with the war approaching?"

"Coincidence."

"And the intruder just *happened* to pick one of the four Returned who have Lifeless access Commands?"

Lightsong glanced back at the palace. Blushweaver's arguments held some merit, but... they weren't enough. He had an odd itch to look into things more. However, that sounded like work. He couldn't really afford to begin involving himself in such bad habits, particularly without a lot of complaining. It sat a poor precedent. So he just nodded his head, and Blushweaver led them back to the pavilion.

"Dear," Blushweaver said, sitting quickly beside Mercystar, looking a little bit more anxious. She leaned in. "We've discussed and we have decided to trust you."

Mercystar sat up. "Trust me? With what?"

“Knowledge,” Blushweaver whispered. “There are those of us who are worried that the Idrians aren’t content with their mountains and are determined to infiltrate the lowlands as well.”

“But... we’ll be joined by blood,” Mercystar said. “There will be a Hallandren God King with Royal blood on our throne.”

“Oh?” Blushweaver said. “And could that not also be interpreted as an *Idris* king with Hallandren blood on the throne?”

Mercystar wavered. Then, oddly, she glanced at Lightsong. “Do you believe this?”

Why did people look toward him? He did his best to discourage such behavior, but they still tended to act like he was some kind of moral authority. “I think that... preparation would be wise,” he said. “Though, of course, the same can be said for dinner.”

Blushweaver shot him an annoyed look, though by the time she looked back at Mercystar, she had her consoling face on again. “We understand that you’ve had a difficult day,” she said. “But please, consider our offer. We would like you to join with us in our preparations.”

“What kind of preparations are you talking about?” Mercystar asked.

“Simple ones,” Blushweaver said quickly. “Thinking, talking, planning. Eventually, if we think we have enough evidence, we will bring what we know to the God King.”

This seemed to ease Mercystar’s mind. She nodded. “Yes, I can see. Preparation. It *would* be wise.”

“Rest now, dear,” Blushweaver said, rising, leading Lightsong retreated from the pavilion. They walked leisurely across the field of grass back toward Blushweaver’s own palace. He felt a hesitation to go, however. Something about the meeting itched at him.

“She’s a dear,” Blushweaver said, smiling.

“You just say that because she’s easy to manipulate.”

“Of course,” Blushweaver said. “I positively *love* people who do as they should. ‘Should’ being defined as whatever I think is best.”

“At least you’re open about it,” Lightsong said.

“To you, my dear, I’m as easy to read as a book.”

He snorted. “Maybe one that hasn’t been translated to Hallandren yet.”

“You just say that because you’ve never really *tried* reading me,” she said, smiling at him. “Though, I must say that there is one thing about dear Mercystar that positively annoys me.”

“And that is?”

“Armies,” Blushweaver said, folding her arms. “Why did *she* get command of ten thousand Lifeless? It’s obviously a dire error in judgment. Particularly since I don’t have command of *any* troops.”

“Blushweaver,” he said with amusement, “you’re the Goddess of honesty, communication, and interpersonal relationships. Why in the world would you be given stewardship over armies?”

“There are lots of interpersonal relationships related to armies,” she said. “After all, what do you call one man hitting another with a sword? That’s interpersonal.”

“I’m sure,” Lightsong said, glancing back at Mercystar’s pavilion.

“Now,” Blushweaver said, “I should think that you’d appreciate my arguments, since relationships are—in fact—war. As established by *our* relationship, dear Lightsong. We...” She trailed off, then poked him in the shoulder. “Lightsong? Pay attention to me!”

“Yes?”

She folded her arms petulantly. “I must say, your banter has been decidedly weak today. I might just have to go find someone else to play with.”

“Humm, yes,” he said, studying Mercystar’s palace. “Tragic. Now, the break in at Mercystar’s. It was just one person?”

“Supposedly,” Blushweaver said. “It’s not important.”

“Was anyone injured?”

“A couple of servants,” Blushweaver said with a wave of the hand. “One was found dead. You should be paying attention to *me*, not that—”

Lightsong froze in place. “Someone was *killed*?”

She shrugged. “So they say.”

He turned around. “I’m going to go back and talk to her some more.”

“Fine,” Blushweaver snapped. “But you’ll do it without me. I have gardens to enjoy.”

“All right,” Lightsong said, already walking. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Blushweaver let out a huff of indignation, and a piece of him could imagine her, hands on hips, watching him go. The rest of him, however, was more focused on...

What? So some servants had been hurt. It wasn’t his place to be involved in criminal disturbances. And yet, he did not slow. He walked Mercystar’s pavilion again, his servants and priests trailing behind.

She was still reclining on her couch. “Lightsong?” she asked with a frown.

“I... just returned because I heard that one of your servants was killed in the attack.”

“Ah, yes,” she said. “The poor man. What a terrible occurrence. He will be blessed in the eternities, of course.”

“How did it happen?”

“It’s very odd, actually,” she said. “The two guards at the door were knocked unconscious. The intruder was discovered by four of my servants who were walking through the service hallway. He fought them, knocked out one, killed another, and two escaped.”

“What did he use?” Lightsong asked. “How was the man killed?”

Mercystar sighed. “I really don’t know,” she said with a wave of the hand. “My priests know more about it. I fear I am too traumatized to pay attention to details.”

“Would it be all right if I talked to the priests?”

“If you must,” Mercystar said. “Though one would think that you’d rather stay and comfort me. Have I mentioned exactly how out of peace I am?”

“My dear Mercystar,” he said. “If you know anything of me, then you will realize that leaving you alone is by far the best comfort I can offer. If you wish, I shall have one of my priests throw rocks at you—that is reportedly more pleasant than speaking with me.”

She frowned, looking up. “That... won’t be necessary.”

“It was a joke, my dear,” he said. “I am, unfortunately, quite bad at them. Scoot, you coming?”

Llarimar, who stood—as always—with the rest of the priests, looked over at him. “Your grace?”

“No need to upset the others any further,” Lightsong said. “I think that you and I alone will be sufficient for this exercise.”

“As you command, your grace,” Llarimar said. Once again, Lightsong’s servants found themselves separated from their god. They clustered uncertainly on the grass—like a group of children abandoned by their parents.

“What is this about, your grace?” Llarimar asked quietly as they walked up to the palace.

“I honestly have no idea,” Lightsong said. “I just... feel like there’s more to what is going on here. The break in. The death of that man. Something is wrong.”

Llarimar looked at him, a strange expression on the man’s face.

“What?” Lightsong asked.

“It is nothing, your grace,” Llarimar finally said. “This is just a very odd action for you to take.”

“I know,” Lightsong said, feeling confident about the decision nonetheless. “I honestly can’t say what prompted it. Curiosity, I guess.”

“Curiosity that outweighs your desire to avoid doing... well, anything at all?”

Lightsong shrugged. He felt energized as he walked into the palace. His normal lethargy retreated, and instead he felt an excitement. Almost a familiarity. He found a group of priests chatting inside the servant’s corridor. Lightsong walked right up to them, and they turned to regard him with shock.

“Ah, good,” Lightsong said. “I assume you can tell me more of this break in?”

“Your grace,” one said, all three bowing their heads. “I assure you, we have everything under control. There is no danger to you or your people.”

“Yes, yes,” Lightsong said, looking over the corridor. “Is this where the man was killed, then?”

They glanced at each other. “Over there,” one of them reluctantly said, pointing to a turn in the hallway.

“Wonderful. Accompany me, if you please.” Lightsong walked up to the indicated section. A group of workers were removing the boards from the floor, probably to be replaced. Bloodstained wood, no matter how well-cleaned, would not do for a goddess’s home.

“Hum,” Lightsong said. “Looks messy. How did it happen?”

“We... aren’t sure, your grace,” said one of the priests. “The intruder knocked the men at the doorway unconscious, but did not otherwise harm them.”

“Yes, Mercystar mentioned that,” Lightsong said. “But then he fought with four of the servants?”

“Well, ‘fought’ isn’t the right word,” the priest said, sighing. Though he wasn’t their god, he was *a* god. They would be bound by oath to answer his questions.

“He immobilized one of them with an Awakened rope,” the priest continued. “Then, while one remained behind to distract the intruder, the other two ran for aid. The intruder quickly knocked the remaining man unconscious. At that time, the one who had been tied up was still alive.” The priest glanced at his colleagues. “When help finally came—delayed by a Lifeless animal that was causing confusion—they found the one man unconscious. The other, still tied in the rope, was dead. Stabbed through the heart with a dueling blade.”

Lightsong nodded, kneeling beside the broken boards. The servants who had been working there retreated, bowing their heads before him. He wasn’t certain what he expected to find. The

ground had been scrubbed clean, then torn apart. However, there was a patch of... something a short distance away. He walked over.

The wood was grayed slightly in a patch on the floor. He knelt, inspecting it.

Completely devoid of color, he thought. He looked up, focusing on the priests. “An Awakener, you say?”

“Undoubtedly, your grace.”

He looked back down at the grey patch. There’s little chance an Idrian did this, he realized. Not if he used Awakening. And... what was that about a Lifeless? “What was this creature you discovered?”

“A Lifeless squirrel, your grace,” one of the men said. “The intruder used it as a distraction.”

“Well made?” he asked.

They nodded. “Using modern Command words,” one said, “and it even has ichor-alcohol instead of blood. Took us the better part of the night to catch the thing!”

“I see,” Lightsong said, standing. “But the intruder escaped? Ran away, did he?”

“Yes, your grace,” one of them said.

“What do you suppose he was after?”

The priests wavered. “We don’t know, your grace,” one of them said. “We scared him away before he could obtain his goal—one of our men saw him fleeing back out the way he had come. Apparently, the resistance was too much for him.”

“We think that he must have been a petty thief, your grace,” another said. “Here to try and sneak into the gallery and steal the art.”

“Sounds likely enough to me,” Lightsong said, standing. “Good work with this, and all that.” He turned, walking down the hallway. He felt a strange sense of surrealness.

The priests were lying to him.

He wasn’t even certain how he could tell. Yet he knew it—knew it deep inside, with some instincts he hadn’t realized that he possessed. Instead of bothering him, for some reason the lies excited him.

“Your grace,” Llarimar said, hurrying up. “Did you find what you wanted?”

“That was no Idrian who broke in,” Lightsong said quietly as they walked into the sunlight. “It was an Awakener.”

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. “There have been cases of Idrians coming to Hallandren and buying themselves Breath, your grace.”

“And have you ever heard of one making a Lifeless?”

Llarimar fell quiet. “No, your grace,” he finally admitted.

“Idrians hate Lifeless. Consider them abominations, or some nonsense. Either way, it wouldn’t make sense for an Idrian to try and get in like that. What would be the point? Assassinating a Returned? That would only bring retaliation.”

“So you believe that it was a thief?”

“Of course not,” Lightsong said. “A ‘petty thief’ with enough Breath that he can *waste* one creating a permanent Lifeless, just for a distraction? Whoever broke in, he was already rich. Besides, why sneak through the servant’s hallway? There are no valuables there. The *inside* of the palace would have held far more wealth.”

Llarimar fell quiet again. He looked over at Lightsong, that same curious expression from before showing on his face. “That’s... some very clever reasoning, your grace.”

“I know,” Lightsong said. “I feel positively unlike myself. Perhaps I need to go get drunk.”

“You can’t get drunk.”

“Ah, but I certainly enjoy trying.”

They walked back toward his palace, picking up his servants on the way. Llarimar seemed unsettled. Lightsong, however, simply felt excited. *Murder in the Court of Gods*, he thought. *True, it was only a servant—but I’m supposed to be a God for all people, not just important ones. I wonder how long it’s been since someone was killed in the Court? Hasn’t happened in my lifetime, certainly.*

Those priests were hiding things. Why had the intruder released a distraction—particularly such an expensive one—if he was simply going to run away? The servants of the Returned were not soldiers or warriors. So why had he turned back so easily?

All good questions. Good questions that he, of all people, shouldn’t have bothered to wonder about. And yet, he did.

All the way back to the palace, through a nice meal, and even into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Siri's servants clustered around her uncertainly as she walked into the chaotic room. She wore a blue and white gown with a ten-foot train. Scribes and priests looked up in shock; some immediately scrambled to their feet, bowing. Others just stared as she passed, her serving women doing their best to hold her train in a dignified manner.

Siri continued, determined, through the chamber—which seemed more like a hallway than a proper room. Tables lined the walls, stacks of paper cluttered those tables, and scribes—some in brown, some in the day's colors—worked the papers. The walls were, of course, black. Colored rooms were only in the center of the palace, where the God King and Siri spent most of their time. Separately, of course.

Though, things are a little different at night, she thought, smiling. It felt very... conspiratorial of her to be teaching him letters. She had a secret that she was keeping from the rest of the kingdom, a secret that involved one of the most powerful men in the entire world. That gave her a thrill.

She supposed that she should have been more worried. At times—when she was more thoughtful—the reality of Bluefingers' warnings did worry her. That's why she had come to the scribes' quarters.

I wonder why the bed chamber is out here, she thought. Outside the main body of the palace, in the black part.

Either way, the servants' section of the palace—God King's bedchamber excluded—was the last place that the scribes expected to be disturbed by their queen. Siri noticed that some of her serving women shot apologetic glances at the men in the room as Siri arrived at the doors on the other side. A servant pushed open the door for her, and she entered the room beyond.

A group of priests stood leafing through books in the medium sized chamber. They looked over at her. One dropped his book to the floor in shock.

"I," Siri proclaimed, "want some books!"

The priests stared at her. "Books?" one finally asked.

"Yes," Siri said, hands on hips. "This is the palace library, is it not?"

"Well, yes," the priest said, glancing at his companions. All wore the robes of their office, and this day's colors were violet and silver.

"Well, then," Siri said. "I'd like to take some of the books. I am bored with normal entertainment and shall be reading to myself in my spare time."

"Surely you don't want *these* books, Vessel," another priest said. "They are about boring topics like religion or city finances. Surely a book of stories would be more appropriate."

Siri raised an eyebrow. "And where might I find such a 'more appropriate' volume?"

"We could have a reader bring the book from the city collection," the priest said, stepping forward with a smooth gait. "He'd be here shortly."

Siri hesitated. "No. I do not think I like that option. I shall take some of these books here."

"No, you shall not," a new voice said from behind.

Siri turned. Tridees, High Priest of the God King, stood behind her, fingers laced, miter on his head, frown on his face.

“You cannot refuse me,” Siri said. “I am your queen.”

“I can and *will* refuse you, Vessel,” Tridees said. “You see, these books are quite valuable, and should something happen to them, the kingdom would suffer grave consequences. Even our priests are not allowed to bear them out of the room.” He paused, eying her. “If you absolutely must read them, you can stay in here and do it.”

She glanced at the room and thought of the stuffy priests standing in a flock around her, listening to her sound out words, making a fool of herself.

“Are there any books on history?” she asked.

“Alas, Vessel,” Tridees said. “Those are kept in the city collection. We could have a reader come and—”

“No,” Siri said. “Perhaps another time.” She eyed the stacks on shelves. There weren’t as many as she had expected, but still, she was so close... “And if I ordered you to let me take some of these?” she said to Tridees.

“You are our queen, Vessel,” he said. “But you are *not* Returned. These are the property of a god. Susebron has made it clear that he wishes the books to stay here.”

Oh he has, has he? Siri thought, remembering her conversation—written, halting, yet open—with the God King the night before. He was getting quite good at his letters. For Tridees and the priests, having a tongueless god was very convenient. The priests could claim that he’d told them whatever seemed good at the moment, and he could never correct them.

“I’ll be going, then,” she said, trailing out of the cramped room.

#

I told you that they would not let you have the books, the God King wrote.

Siri rolled her eyes. Flopping back on the bed. She still wore her bulky evening dress. For some reason, being able to communicate with the God King made her even more shy. She only took off the dresses right before she went to sleep—which, lately, was getting later and later.

She looked up. Susebron sat in his usual place—not on the mattress, as he had that first night. Instead, he had pulled his chair up beside the bed. He still seemed so large and imposing. At least, he did until he looked at her, his face open, honest. He waved her back toward him where he sat with a board, writing with a bit of charcoal that she’d smuggled in.

You shud not anger the prests so, he wrote. His spelling, as one might expect, was awful.

Priests. She had pilfered a cup then had hidden in the room. If she used it and listened against the wall, she could sometimes faintly hear talking on the other sides. After she did her nightly moaning show, she could usually hear chairs moving and a door closing. After that, it grew silent in the room.

Either the priests left each night once they were sure the deed was done or they were suspicious and trying to fool her into thinking they were gone. Her instinct said the former, though she made certain to whisper when she spoke to the God King, just in case.

Siri? he wrote. *What are you thinking about?*

“Your priests,” she whispered. “They frustrate me! They intentionally do things to spite me.”

They are good men, he wrote. *They work very hard to mayntayn my kingdom.*

“They cut out your tongue,” she said.

The God King sat quietly for a few moments. *It was nesisary*, he wrote. *I have too much power.*

She moved over. As usual, he shied back when she approached, moving his arm out of the way, keeping her from touching him. There was no arrogance in the posture. She was beginning to think that he just had very little experience with touching.

“Susebron,” she whispered. “These men, they are *not* looking after your best interests. They did more than cut out your tongue. They refused to teach you to read and they speak in your name, doing whatever they please.”

They are not my enemes, he wrote stubbornly. *They are good men.*

“Oh?” she said. “And then why do you hide from them the fact that you’re learning to read?”

He paused again, glancing downward.

So much humility for one who has ruled Hallandren for fifty years, she thought. In many ways, he’s like a child.

I do not want them to no, he finally wrote. *I do not want to upset them.*

“I’m sure,” Siri said flatly.

He paused. *You are shur?* he wrote. *Does that mean you beleve me?*

“No,” Siri said. “That was sarcasm, Susebron.”

He frowned. *I do not know this thing. Sarkazm.*

“Sarcasm,” she said, spelling it. “It’s...” she trailed off. “It’s when you say one thing, but you mean the opposite.”

He frowned at her, then furiously erased his board and began writing again. *This thing makes no sense. Why not say what you mean?*

“Because,” Siri said. “It’s just like... oh, I don’t know. It’s a way to be clever when you make fun of people.”

Make fun of people? he wrote.

God of Colors! Siri thought, trying to think of how to explain. It seemed ridiculous to her that he would know nothing of mockery. And yet, he had lived his entire life as a revered deity and monarch. “Mockery is when you... say things to tease,” Siri said. “Things that might be hurtful to someone, but you say them in an affectionate or in a playful way. Sometimes you *do* just say them to be mean. Sarcasm is one of the ways we mock—we say the opposite, but in an exaggerated way.”

How do you know if the person is affekshonate, playful, or mean?

“I don’t know,” Siri said. “It’s the way they say it, I guess.”

The God King sat, looking confused but thoughtful. *You are very normal*, he finally wrote.

Siri frowned. “Um. Thank you?”

Was that good sarcasm? he wrote. *Because in reality, you are quite strange.*

She smiled. “I try my best.”

He looked up.

“That was sarcasm again,” she said. “I don’t ‘try’ to be strange. It just happens.”

He looked at her. How had she ever been frightened of this man? How had she misunderstood? The look in his eyes, it wasn't arrogance or emotionlessness. It was the look of a man who was trying very hard to understand the world around him. Earnestness.

However, he was not simple. The speed at which he'd learned to write proved that. True, he'd already understood the spoken portion of the language—and he'd memorized all of the letters in the book years before meeting her. She'd only needed explain the rules of spelling and sound for him to make the final jump.

She still found it amazing how quickly he picked things up. She smiled at him, and he hesitantly smiled back.

"Why do you say that I'm strange?" she asked.

You do not do things like other people, he wrote. Everyone else bows before me all of the time. Nobody talks to me. Even the priests, they only okashonally give me instrukshons—and this they haven't done in years.

"Does it offend you that I don't bow, and that I talk to you like a friend?"

He erased his board. *Offend me? Why would it offend me? Do you do it in sarcasm?*

"No," she said quickly. "I really like talking to you."

Then I do not understand.

"Everyone else is afraid of you," Siri said. "Because of how powerful you are."

But they took away my tongue to make me safe.

"It's not your Breath that scares them," Siri said. "It's your power over armies and people. You're the God King. You could order anyone in the kingdom killed."

But why would I do that? he wrote. I would not kill a good person. They must know that.

Siri sat back, resting on the plush bed, fire crackling in the hearth behind them. "I know that, now," she said. "But nobody else does. They don't know you, but they know how powerful you are. So they fear you. And so they show their respect for you."

He paused. *And so, you do not respect me?*

"Of course I do," she said, sighing. "I've just never been very good at following rules. In fact, if someone tells me what to do, I usually want to do the opposite."

That is very strange, he wrote. I thought all people did what they were told.

"I think you'll find that most do not," she said, smiling.

That will get you into trouble.

"Is that what the priests taught you?"

He shook his head, then he reached over and took out his book. The book of stories for children. He brought it with him always, and she could see from his reverent touch that he valued it greatly.

It's probably his only real possession, she thought. Everything else is taken from him every day, then replaced the next morning.

This book, he wrote. My mother read the stories to me when I was a child. I memorized them all, before she was taken away. It speaks of many children who do not do as they are told. They are often eaten by monsters.

"Oh are they?" Siri said, smiling.

Do not be afraid, he wrote. My mother taught me that the monsters are not real. But I remember the lessons the stories taught. Obedience is good. You should treat people well. Do not go into the jungle by yourself. Do not lie. Do not hurt others.

Siri's smile deepened. All of the learning in his life, he'd either received from moralistic folk tales or from priests who were teaching him to be a figurehead. Once she realized that, the honest, uncomplicated man that he had become was not so difficult to understand.

Yet what had prompted him to break that learning and ask her to teach him? Why was he willing to keep his learning secret from the men he had been taught all of his life to obey and trust? He was not so innocent as he appeared.

"These stories," she said. "Your desire to treat people well. Is that what kept you from... taking me on any of those nights when I first came into the room?"

From taking you? I do not understand.

Siri blushed, hair turning red to match. "I mean... why did you just sit there?"

Because I did not know what else to do, he said. I knew that we need to have a child. So I sat and waited for it to happen. We must be doing something wrong, for no child has come.

Siri paused, then blinked. He couldn't possibly... "You don't know how to have children?"

In the stories, he wrote, a man and a woman spend the night together. Then they have a child. We spent many nights together, and there were no children.

"And nobody—none of your priests—explained the process to you?"

No. What process do you mean?

She sat for a moment. *No*, she thought, feeling her blush deepen. *I am not going to have that conversation with him.* "I think we'll talk about it another time."

It was a very strange experience when you came into the room that first night, he wrote. I must admit, I was very scared of you.

Siri smiled as she remembered her own terror. It hadn't even occurred to her that he would be frightened. Why would it have? He was the God King.

"So," she said, tapping the bedspread with one finger, "you were never taken to other women?"

No, he wrote. I did find it very interesting to see you naked.

She flushed again, though her hair had long decided to just stay red. "That's not what we're talking about right now," she said. "I want to know about other women. No mistresses? No concubines?"

No.

"They really are scared of you having a child."

Why say that? he wrote. They sent you to me.

"Only after fifty years of rule," she said. "And only under very controlled circumstances, with the proper lineage to make a child with the right bloodline. Bluefingers thinks that child might be a danger to us."

I do not understand why, he wrote. This is what everyone wants. There must be an heir.

"Why?" Siri said. "You still look like you're barely two decades old. You don't seem to be aging very quickly because of your BioChroma."

Without an heir, the kingdom is in danger. Should I be killed, there will be nobody to rule.

"And that wasn't a danger for the last fifty years?"

He paused, frowning, then slowly erased his board.

“They must think that you’re in danger now,” she said slowly. “But not from sickness—even I know that Returned don’t suffer from diseases. In fact, do they even age at all?”

I don’t think so, the God King wrote.

“How did the other God Kings die?”

There have only been four, he wrote. *I do not know how they died for certain.*

“Only four kings in several hundred years, dead of mysterious circumstances...”

My father died before I was old enough to remember him, Susebron wrote. *I was told he gave his life for the kingdom—that he released his BioChromatic Breath, like all Returned can, to cure a terrible disease. Regular Returned can only cure one person. A God King, however, can cure many. That is what I was told.*

“There must be a record of that then,” she said. “Somewhere in those books the priests have guarded up so tightly.”

I am sorry that they would not let you read them, he wrote.

She waved an indifferent hand. “It was a long shot. I’ll need to find another way to get at those histories.” *Having a child is the danger*, she thought. *That’s what Bluefingers said. So... whatever threat there is to my life, it will only come after there is an heir.*

Bluefingers mentioned a threat to the God King too. That almost makes it sound like the danger comes from the priests themselves. What reason would they have to want to harm their own God?

She glanced at Susebron, who was flipping intently through his book of stories. She smiled at the look of concentration on his face as he deciphered the text.

Well, she thought, *considering what he knows of sex, I’d say that we don’t have to worry much about having a child in the near future.*

Of course, she was growing more and more worried that the lack of a child would prove just as dangerous as the presence of one.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Vivenna went among the people of T'Telir and couldn't help feeling that every one of them recognized her.

She fought that feeling down. It was a miracle that Thame—who had come from her own home city—had recognized her. Even if the people around her would have no way of connecting Vivenna to the rumors, particularly considering her clothing.

Immodest reds and yellows layered one atop another on her dress. The garment had been the only one that Parlin and Tonk Fah had been able to find that met her stringent requirements for neckline and hem. The tube-like in dress was after a foreign cut, from across the Inner Sea. It came down almost to her ankles, and though it was exposingly tight through the bust, the cloth covered her almost up to the neck, and had full sleeves.

Rebelliously, she did find herself shooting glances at the other women in their loose, short skirts and sleeveless tops. That much skin was scandalous, but with the blazing sun and the cursed lowland humidity, she could see why they did it.

After a month in the city, she also beginning to get the hang of moving with the flow of traffic. She still wasn't sure she wanted to be out. But, Denth had been persuasive.

"You know the worst thing that can happen to a bodyguard?" he had asked. "Letting your charge get killed when you aren't even there. We have a small team, Princess. We can either divide and leave you behind with one guard or you can come with us. Personally, I'd like too keep you where I can keep an eye on you."

And so she'd come. Dressed in one of her new gowns, hair turned an uncomfortable—yet un-Idrian—yellow, and left loose, blowing behind her. She walked around the square, as if out on a stroll, moving so that she wouldn't look nervous. The location was a city garden square. The people of T'Telir liked gardens—they had all kinds of them all over the city. In fact, from what Vivenna had seen, most of the city practically *was* a garden. Palms and ferns grew on every street, and exotic flowers bloomed year round.

Near her four streets crossed, with four plots of cultivated ground forming a checker-board pattern. A circular plot of ground in the center sprouted with a dozen different palms. The buildings surrounding the gardens were more rich than the ones in the market up the way. And while there was a lot of foot traffic, people made certain to stick to the sidewalks, for carriages were common. This was an upscale shopping district. No tents. Fewer performers. Higher quality—and more expensive—shops.

Vivenna strolled along the perimeter of the northwestern garden block. There were ferns and grass to her right. Shops of a quaint, rich, and—of course—colorful variety lay across the street to her left. Tonk Fah and Parlin lounged between two of these. Parlin had the monkey on his shoulder, and had taken to wearing a colorful red vest with his green hat. She couldn't help thinking that the woodsman was even more out of place in T'Telir than she was, but he didn't seem to attract any attention.

Vivenna kept walking. Jewels trailed her somewhere in the crowd. The woman was quite good—Vivenna only rarely caught a glimpse of her, and that was because she'd been told where to look. She never saw Denth. He was there somewhere, far too subtle for her to spot. As she reached the end of the street and turned around to walk back, she did catch sight of Clod. The

Lifeless stood, standing as still as one of the D'Denir statues that lined the gardens, watching the crowds pass. Most of the people ignored him.

Denth was right. Lifeless weren't plentiful, but they also weren't uncommon. Several walked the market carrying bags for their owners. Few of these were as muscular or as tall as Clod—apparently, Lifeless came in as many shapes and sizes as people. They were put to work guarding shops. Acting as packmen. Sweeping the walkway. All around her.

She continued to walk, and she caught a brief glimpse of Jewels in the crowd as she passed. *How does she manage to look so relaxed?* Vivenna thought. Each of the mercenaries looked as relaxed and calm as if they were having a leisurely picnic meal.

Don't think about the danger, Vivenna thought, clenching her fists. She focused on the gardens. The truth was, she was a little jealous of the T'Telir. People lounged, sitting on the grass, lying in the shade of trees, their children playing and laughing. D'Denir statues ran in a solemn line, arms out raised, weapons at the ready, as if in defense of the people. Trees climbed high into the sky, throwing forth branches which grew strange flower-like bundles.

Wide-petaled flowers bloomed in planters; several patches of them were actually Tears of Edgli. Austre had placed the flowers where he wanted them. To bring them back, to use them to adorn a room or house, was to seek ostentation. Yet was it ostentatious to plant them in the middle of the city, where all were free to enjoy them?

She turned away. Her BioChroma continued to sense the beauty. The compact life, so much in one area, was like a buzz inside of her chest.

No wonder they like to live so close together, she thought, noticing how a group of flowers scaled in color, fanning toward the inside of their planter. And if you're going to live this compactly, the only way to see nature would be to bring it in.

"Help! Fire!"

Vivenna spun, as did most of the other people on the street. The building Tonk Fah and Parlin had been standing next to was burning. Vivenna didn't continue to gawk, but turned and looked toward the center of the gardens. Most of the people in the garden itself were stunned, looking toward the smoke billowing into the air.

Distraction one.

People ran to help, crossing the street, causing carriages to pull up shortly. At that moment, Clod stepped forward—surging with the crowd—and swung a club at the leg of a horse. Vivenna couldn't hear the leg break, but she did see the beast scream and fall, upsetting the carriage it had been pulling. A trunk fell from the top of the vehicle, plunging to the street.

The carriage belonged to one Nanrovah, high priest of the God Stillmark. Denth's intelligence said the carriage would be carrying valuables. Even if it wasn't, a high priest in danger would draw a lot of attention. The trunk hit the street. And, in a twist of good fortune, it shattered, spraying out gold coins.

Distraction two.

Vivenna caught a glimpse of Jewels standing on the other side of the carriage. She looked at Vivenna and nodded. Time to go. As people either ran toward gold or fire, Vivenna walked away. Nearby, Denth would be raiding one of the shops with a gang of thieves. The thieves got to keep the goods. Vivenna just wanted to make certain those goods disappeared.

Vivenna was joined by Jewels and Parlin on the way out. She was surprised to feel how quickly her heart was thumping. Almost nothing had happened. No real danger. No threat to herself. Just a couple of accidents.

But, then, that was the idea.

#

Hours later, Denth and Tonk Fah still hadn't returned to the house. Vivenna sat quietly on their new furniture, hands in her lap. The furniture was green. Apparently, brown was not an option in T'Telir.

"What time is it?" Vivenna asked quietly.

"I don't know," Jewels snapped, standing beside the window, looking out at the street.

Patience, Vivenna told herself. It's not her fault she's so abrasive. She had her Breath stolen.

"Should they be back yet?" Vivenna asked calmly.

Jewels shrugged. "Maybe. Depends on if they decided to go to a safe house to let things cool down or not."

"I see. How long do you think we should wait?"

"As long as we have to," Jewels said. "Look, do you think you could just not talk to me? I'd really appreciate it." She turned back to look out the window.

Vivenna stiffened at the insult. Patience! she told herself. Understand her place. That's what the Five Visions teach.

Vivenna stood up, then walked quietly over to Jewels. Tentatively, she laid an arm on the other woman's shoulder. Jewels jumped immediately—obviously, without Breath, it was harder for her to notice when people approached her.

"It's all right," Vivenna said. "I understand."

"Understand?" Jewels asked. "Understand what?"

"They took your Breath," Vivenna said. "They had no right to do something so terrible."

Vivenna smiled, then withdrew, walking to the stairs.

Jewels started laughing. Vivenna stopped, glancing back.

"You think you *understand* me?" Jewels asked. "What? You feel sorry for me because I'm a Drab?"

"Your parents shouldn't have done what they did."

"My parents served our God King," Jewels said. "My Breath was given to him directly. It's a greater honor than you could possibly understand."

Vivenna stood quietly for a moment, absorbing that comment. "You *believe* in the Iridescent Tones?"

"Of course I do," Jewels said. "I'm a Hallandren, aren't I?"

"But the others—"

"Tonk Fah is from Pahn Kahl," Jewels said. "And I don't know where in the Colors *Denth* is from. But I'm from T'Telir itself."

"But surely you can't still worship those... gods," Vivenna said. "Not after what was done to you."

"What was done to me? Well, Princess perfect, I'll have you know that I gave away my breath willingly."

"You were a child!"

"I was eleven and my parents gave me the choice. I made the right one. My father had been in the dye industry, but had slipped and fallen. The damage to his back wouldn't let him work, and my family had six children. By selling my Breath, we got enough money to live for nearly a year!"

"No price is worth a soul," Vivenna said. "You—"

"Stop judging me!" Jewels snapped. "You don't know anything, little Idrian. Do you know what it's like to watch your brothers and sisters starve? My parents had already sold their Breath to get enough money to start the business, years before. But it was more than that. I was *proud* to sell my breath! I still am. A piece of me lives inside of the God King. Because of me, he continues to live. I'm *part* of this kingdom in a way that few others are."

Jewels shook her head, turning away. "That's why we get annoyed by you Idrians. So high. So certain that what you do is *right*. If your God asked you to give up your Breath—or even the Breath of your child—wouldn't you do it? You give up your children to become monks, forcing them into a life of servitude. That's seen as a sign of faith. Yet when we do something to revere *our* gods, you twist your lips at us and call us blasphemers."

Vivenna opened her mouth, but could come up with no response to that. Sending children away to become monks was different.

"We sacrifice for our Gods," Jewels said, still staring out the window. "But that doesn't mean we're being exploited. My family was blessed because of what we did. Not only was there enough money to buy food, but my father recovered, and a few years later, he was able to open up the business again. My brothers still run it."

"You don't have to believe in my miracles. You can call them coincidences, if you must. But don't pity me for my faith. And don't presume that you're better, just because you believe something different."

Vivenna closed her mouth. Obviously, there was no point in arguing. Jewels was in no mood to receive sympathy. Vivenna retreated back up the stairs.

#

A few hours later, it began to grow dark. Vivenna stood on the house's second-story balcony, looking out over the city. Most of the buildings on her street row had such balconies on the front. Ostentatious or not, they did provide a good view of T'Telir.

The city glowed with light. On the larger streets, lamps lined the sidewalks, lit each night by city workers. Many of the buildings glowed as well. Such expenditure of oil and candles still amazed her. Yet with the inner sea so close, oil was far cheaper than it was in the highlands.

She didn't know what to make of Jewels' outburst. How could someone be *proud* that their Breath had been stolen then fed to a greedy Returned? The woman's tone seemed to indicate that she was being honest. She'd obviously thought about these things before. Had she, perhaps, had to rationalize them inside of her?

Vivenna was caught. The Five Visions taught her to understand others. They told her not to place herself above others. And yet, Austrism taught that what Jewels had done was an abomination.

The two seemed contradictory. To believe that Jewels was wrong was to place herself above the woman. Yet to accept what Jewels said was to deny Austrism. Perhaps another might have laughed at the turmoil, but Vivenna had always tried so hard to be devout. She'd known she'd need devotion to survive in heathen Hallandren.

Heathen. Wasn't calling it heathen to place herself above it? But they *were* heathen. She couldn't accept the Returned as true gods. It seemed that to believe in any faith was to become arrogant.

Perhaps she deserved the things Jewels had said about her.

Someone approached. Vivenna turned as Denth pushed open the wooden door and stepped out onto the balcony. "We're back," he noted.

"I know," she said, looking out over the city and its specks of light. "I felt you enter the building a little while ago."

He chuckled, joining her. "I forget that you have so much Breath, princess. You never use it."

Except to feel when people are nearby, she thought. But I can't help that, can I?

"I recognize that look," Denth noted. "Frustration. Still worried that the plan isn't working fast enough?"

She shook her head. "Other things entirely, Denth."

"Probably shouldn't have left you alone so long with Jewels. I hope she didn't take *too* many bites out of you."

Vivenna didn't respond. Finally, she sighed, then turned toward him. "How did the job go?"

"Perfectly," Denth said. "By the time we hit the shop, *nobody* was looking. Considering the guards they put there every night, they must be feeling pretty stupid to have been robbed in the middle of the day."

"I still don't understand what good it will do," she said. "A spice merchant's shop?"

"Not his shop," Denth said. "His storages. We ruined or carted off every barrel of salt in that cellar. He's one of only three men who store salt in any great amount; most of the other spice merchants buy from him."

"Yes, but salt," Vivenna said. "What's the point?"

"How hot was it today?" Denth asked.

Vivenna shrugged. "Too hot."

"What happens to meat when it's hot?"

"It rots," Vivenna said. "But they don't have to use salt to preserve meat. They can use..."

"Cold?" Denth asked, chuckling. "No, not down here, princess. You want to preserve meat, you salt it. And if you want an army to carry fish with them from the inner sea to attack a place as far away as Idris..."

Vivenna smiled.

"The thieves we worked with will ship the salt away," Denth said. "Smuggle it to the distant kingdoms where it can be sold openly. By the time this war comes, the crown will have some real trouble keeping its men supplied with meat. Another small strike, but those should add up."

"Thank you," Vivenna said.

"Don't thank us," Denth said. "Just pay us."

Vivenna nodded. They fell silent for a time, watching out over the city.

"Does Jewels really believe in the Iridescent Tones?" Vivenna finally asked.

"As passionately as Tonk Fah likes to nap," Denth said. He eyed her. "You didn't challenge her, did you?"

"Kind of."

Denth whistled. "And you're still standing? I'll have to thank her for her restraint."

"How can she believe?" Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. “Seems like a good enough religion to me. I mean, you can go and *see* her gods. Talk to them, watch them shine. Isn’t all that tough to understand.”

“But she’s working for an Idrian,” Vivenna said. “Working to undermine her own Gods’ ability to wage war. That was a *priest’s* carriage we knocked over today.”

“And a fairly important one, actually,” Denth said with a chuckle. “Ah, princess. It’s a little difficult to understand. Mindset of a mercenary. We’re paid to do things—but we’re *not* the ones doing them. It’s you who do these things. We’re just your tools.”

“Tools that work against the Hallandren Gods.”

“That isn’t a reason to stop believing,” Denth said. “We get pretty good at separating ourselves from the things we have to do. Maybe that’s what makes people hate us so much. They can’t see that if we kill a friend on a battlefield, it doesn’t mean that we’re callous or untrustworthy. We do what we’re paid to do. Just like anyone else.”

“It’s different,” Vivenna said.

Denth shrugged. “Do you think that the metallurgist fears that the iron he purifies will end up making a sword that kills a friend of his?”

Vivenna stared out over the lights of the city with all of its people moving about. With all of their different beliefs, different ways of thinking, different contradictions. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one who struggled to believe two seemingly opposing things at the same time.

“What about you, Denth?” she asked. “Are you Hallandren?”

“Gods, no,” he said.

“Then what do you believe?”

“Haven’t believed much,” he said. “Not in a long time.”

“What about your family?” Vivenna asked. “What did they believe?”

“Family’s all dead. They believed faiths that most everybody has forgotten by now. I never joined them.”

Vivenna frowned. “You have to believe in something. If not a religion, then somebody. A way of living.”

“I did once.”

“Do you always have to answer everything so vaguely?”

He glanced at her. “Yes,” he said. “Except, perhaps, for that question.”

She rolled her eyes.

He leaned against the banister. “The things I believed,” he said, “I don’t know that they’d make sense, or that you’d even hear me out if I told you about them.”

“You claim to follow money,” she said. “But you don’t. I’ve seen Lemks’ ledgers. He wasn’t paying you that much. Not by far as much as I’d assumed. And, if you’d wanted, you could have hit that priest’s carriage and taken the money. You could have stolen it twice as easily as you did the salt.”

He didn’t respond.

“You don’t follow any kingdom or king I can figure out,” she continued. “You’re a better swordsman than any simple bodyguard—I suspect better than almost anyone, if you can impress a crime boss with your skill so easily. You could have fame, students, and prizes if you decided to become a sport duelist.

“You claim to listen to your employer,” she continued, “but it seems you give the orders more often than take them—and plus, since you don’t care about money, that whole employer thing is probably just a front.”

She paused. “In fact,” she said, “the only thing I’ve ever seen you express even half an emotion about is that man. Vasher. The one with the sword.”

Even as she said the name, Denth grew more tense.

“Who *are* you?” she asked.

He turned toward her, eyes hard, showing her—once again—that the jovial man he kept outside was a mask. A charade. A softness to cover the rock within.

“I’m a mercenary,” he said.

“All right,” she said, “then who *were* you?”

“You don’t want to know the answer to that,” he said. And then he left, stomping away through the door and leaving her alone on the dark wooden balcony.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lightsong awoke and climbed immediately from bed. He stood up, stretched, and smiled. “Beautiful day,” he said.

His servants stood at the edges of the room, watching uncertainly.

“What?” Lightsong asked, holding out his arms. “Come on, let’s get dressed.”

They rushed forward. Llarimar entered a shortly. Lightsong often wondered how early he got up, since he was always there, dressed and ready, each morning when Lightsong rose.

Llarimar watched him with a raised eyebrow. “You’re... chipper this morning, your grace.”

Lightsong shrugged. “It just felt like it was time to get up.”

“A full hour earlier than usual.”

Lightsong cocked his head as the servants tied off his robes. “Really?”

“Yes, your grace.”

“Fancy that,” Lightsong said, nodding to his servants as they stepped back, leaving him dressed.

“Shall we go over your dreams, then?” Llarimar asked.

Lightsong paused, an image flashing in his head. Rain. Tempest. Storms. And a brilliant red panther.

“Nope,” Lightsong said, walking toward the doorway.

“Your grace...”

“We’ll talk about the dreams another time, Scoot,” Lightsong said. “We have more important work.

“More important work?”

Lightsong smiled, reaching the doorway and turning back. “I want to go back to Mercystar’s palace.”

“Whatever for?”

“I don’t know,” Lightsong said happily.

Llarimar sighed. “Very well, your grace. But can we at least look over some art, first? There are people who paid good money to get your opinion, and some are waiting quite eagerly to hear what you think of their pieces.”

“All right,” Lightsong said. “But let’s be quick about it.”

#

Lightsong stared at the painting.

Red upon red, shades so subtle that the painter must have been of the First Heightening at least. Violent, terrible reds, clashing against each other like waves—waves that only vaguely resembled men, yet somehow managed to get across the idea of armies fighting much better than any detailed representation could have.

Chaos. Bloody wounds upon bloody uniforms upon bloody skin. There was so much violence in red. His own color. He almost felt as if he were in the painting—felt its turmoil shaking him, disorienting him, *pulling* on him.

The waves of men pointed toward one figure at the center. A woman, vaguely depicted by a couple of brush strokes with too many curves. And yet it was obvious. She stood high, as if atop a crest formed by crashing soldiers, in a posture of motion, head flung back, hand upraised.

Holding a deep black sword that darkened the red sky around it.

“The battle of Twilight Falls,” Llarimar said quietly, standing beside him in the white hallway. “Last conflict of the Manywar.”

Lightsong nodded. He’d known that, somehow. The faces of many of the soldiers were tinged with grey. Lifeless. The Manywar had marked the first time they had been used in large numbers on the battlefield.

“I know you don’t prefer war scenes,” Llarimar said. “But—”

“I like it,” Lightsong said, cutting off the priest. “I like it a lot.”

Llarimar fell silent.

Lightsong stared into the painting with its flowing reds, painted so subtly that they gave a *feeling* of war, rather than just an image. “It might be the best painting that has ever passed through my hall.”

The priests on the other side of the room began writing furiously. Llarimar just stared at him, troubled.

“What?” Lightsong asked.

“It’s nothing,” Llarimar said.

“Scoot...” Llarimar said, eying him.

The priest sighed. “I can’t speak, your grace. I cannot taint your impression of the paintings.”

“A lot of gods have been giving favorable reviews of war paintings lately, eh?” Lightsong said, looking back at the piece of art.

Llarimar didn’t answer.

“It’s probably nothing,” Lightsong said. “Just us responding to those arguments in the court, I’d guess.”

“Likely,” Llarimar said.

Lightsong fell silent. It wasn’t ‘nothing’ to Llarimar. To him, Lightsong wasn’t just giving his impression of art—he was foretelling the future. What did it foretell to like a depiction of war with such vibrant, brutal colorings?

I shouldn’t have spoken, he thought. And yet, reading the art seemed like the only important thing he did.

He stared at the sharp smears of paint, each person a just a couple triangular strokes. It was beautiful. Could war be beautiful? How could he find beauty in those grey faces meeting flesh, the Lifeless killing men? This battle hadn’t even meant anything. It hadn’t decided the fate of the war, even if the leader of the Pahn Unity—the kingdoms united against Hallandren—had been killed in the battle. Diplomacy had finally ended the Manywar, not bloodshed.

And I’m thinking of starting this up again, Lightsong thought, still transfixed by the beauty.

No, he thought. No, I'm just being careful. Helping Blushweaver secure a political faction. Better that, than let things just pass me by. The Manywar started because the Royal family wasn't careful.

The painting continued to call to him. "What's that sword?" Lightsong asked.

"Sword?"

"The black one," Lightsong said. "In the woman's hand."

"I... I don't see a sword, your grace," Llarimar said. "To tell you the truth, I don't see a woman, either. It's all just wild strokes of paint, to me."

"You called it the Battle of Twilight Falls."

"The title of the piece, your grace," Llarimar said. "I assumed that you were as confused by it as I was, so I told you what the artist had named it."

The two fell silent. Finally, Lightsong turned, walking away from the painting. "I'm done reviewing art for the day." He hesitated. "Don't burn that painting. Keep it for my collection."

Llarimar offered no objection. As Lightsong made his way out of the palace, he tried to regain some of his excitement, and he was mostly successful—though memory of the terrible, beautiful scene stayed with him. Mixing with his memories of the last night's dream, the clashing tempest of winds.

Not even that could dampen his mood completely. The truth was—odd dream notwithstanding—he had awoken more eager this day than he had in years. Something was different. Something excited him.

There had been a murder in the Court of Gods.

He didn't know why he should find that so intriguing. If anything, he should find it tragic. And yet, for so many years—as long as he had lived—everything had been provided for him. Answers to his questions, entertainment to sate his whims. He had become a glutton almost by accident. Only two things had been withheld him: Knowledge of his past and the ability to leave the Court.

Neither of those restrictions were going to change soon. But here, inside the court—the place of too much safety and comfort—something had gone wrong. A little thing. A thing most people would probably ignore. Nobody cared. Nobody wanted to care. Who, therefore, would mind Lightsong's questions?

"You're acting very oddly, your grace," Llarimar said, catching up to him as they crossed the grass, servants following behind in a chaotic cluster as they worked to get a parasol open.

"I know," Lightsong said. "However, can we not agree that I have *always* been rather odd, for a God?"

"I guess that is true."

"Then I'm actually very like myself," Lightsong said. "And all is right in the universe."

"Are we really going back to Mercystar's palace?"

"Indeed we are. Do you suppose she'll be annoyed at us? That might prove interesting."

Llarimar just sighed. "Are you ready to talk about your dreams yet?"

Lightsong fell silent as he walked. The servants finally got the parasol up and held it above him. "I dreamed of a storm," Lightsong finally said. "I was standing in it, without anything to brace myself. It was raining and blowing against me, trying to force me backward. In fact, it was so strong that even the ground beneath me seemed to undulate."

Llarimar looked disturbed.

More signs of war, Lightsong thought. Or, at least, that's how he'll see it.

"Anything else?"

"Yes," Lightsong said. "A red panther. It seemed to shine, reflective, like it was made of glass or something like that. It was in the storm."

Llarimar eyed him. "Are you making things up, your grace?"

"What? No! That's what I really dreamed."

Llarimar sighed, but nodded to a lesser priest, who rushed up to do the transcribing. It wasn't long before they reached Mercystar's palace of yellow and gold. Lightsong paused before the building, realizing that he'd never paid a visit to another god's palace without first sending a messenger.

"Do you want me to send someone in to announce you, your grace?" Llarimar asked.

Lightsong stood for a moment. "No," he finally said, noticing a pair of guards standing at one of the doorways. The two men looked far more muscular than the average servant and they wore swords. Dueling blades, Lightsong assumed—though he'd never actually seen one.

He walked up to the men. "Is your mistress here?"

"I am afraid not, your grace," one of them said. "She went to visit Allmother for the afternoon."

Allmother, Lightsong thought. *Another with Lifeless Commands. Blushweaver's doing?* Perhaps he would drop by later—he missed chatting with Allmother. She, unfortunately, hated him violently. "Ah," Lightsong said to the guard. "Well, regardless, I need to inspect the corridor just inside here, where the attack happened the other night."

The guards glanced at each other. "I... don't know if we can let you do that, your grace."

"Scoot!" Lightsong said. "Can they forbid me?"

"Only if they have direct commands forbidding you, given to them by Mercystar."

Lightsong looked back at the men. Reluctantly, they stepped aside. "It's perfectly all right," he told them. "She asked me to take care of things. Kind of. Coming, Scoot?"

Llarimar followed him into the corridors. Once again, Lightsong felt an odd satisfaction. Instincts he didn't know he had drove him to seek out the place where the servant had died.

The wood had been replaced—his eyes, Heightened to recognize colors—could easily tell the difference between the new wood and the old, used wood. He walked a little further. The patch where the wood had turned grey was gone as well, replaced with new wood.

Interesting, he thought. *But not unexpected. I wonder... are there any other patches?* He walked a little further and was rewarded by another patch of new wood. It formed an exact square.

"Your grace?" a new voice asked.

Lightsong looked up to see the curt young priest he had spoken with the day before. Lightsong smiled. "Ah, good. I was hoping that you would arrive."

"This is most irregular, your grace," the man said.

"I know," Lightsong said. "Look, I need to speak with the guards who saw the intruder the other night."

"But why?" the priest said.

“Because I’m eccentric,” Lightsong said. “Now send for them. I need to speak to *all* of the servants or guards who saw the man who committed the murder.”

“Your grace,” the priest said sufferingly. “The authorities have already taken care of this. They have determined that the intruder was a thief after Mercystar’s art, and they have committed to—”

“Scoot,” Lightsong said, turning. “Can this man ignore my demand?”

“Only at great peril to his soul, your grace,” Llarimar said. “You are, after all, one of his gods.”

The priest eyed them both angrily, then turned and sent a servant to do as Lightsong asked. Lightsong knelt down, causing several servants to whisper in alarm. They obviously thought it improper for a god to stoop.

Lightsong ignored them, looking at the square of new wood. It wasn’t like the other two that had been replaced. Those boards had all been ripped up, creating an uneven patch on the. Here, the distinction was very specific—a square patch of wood that was just *slightly* a different color from the others. Without Breath—and a lot of it—he wouldn’t have even noticed the distinction.

A trap door, he thought with sudden shock. The priest was watching him closely. This patch isn’t as new as the other ones back there. It’s only new in relation to the other boards.

Lightsong crawled along the floor, intentionally ignoring to the door in the wood. Once again, unexpected instincts warned him not to reveal what he’d discovered. So, instead, he looked as if he were searching for threads that might have been caught on the wood. He picked up one that had obviously come from a servant’s robe and held it up.

The priest seemed to relax slightly.

So he knows about the trap door, Lightsong thought. And... perhaps the intruder did as well?

Lightsong crawled about on the ground some more, causing great discomfort in the servants until the men he had requested were assembled. He stood—letting a couple of his servants dust off his robes—then walked over to the newcomers. The hallway was growing quite crowded, so he shooed them back out into the sunlight.

Outside, he regarded the group of six men. “Identify yourselves. You on the left, who are you?”

“My name is Gagaril,” the man said.

“I’m sorry,” Lightsong said. “And how are you involved?”

“I was one of the guards at the door when the intruder broke in.”

“Were you alone?” Lightsong asked.

“No,” said another of the men. “I was with him.”

“Good,” Lightsong said. “You two, go over there somewhere.” He waved his hand at the lawn. The men looked at each other, then walked away as indicated.

“Far enough that you can’t hear us!” Lightsong called at them.

The men nodded and continued.

“All right,” Lightsong said, looking back at the others. “Who are you four?”

“We were attacked by the man in the hallway,” one of the servants said. He pointed at two of the others. “All three of us. And... one other. The man who was killed.”

“Terribly unfortunate, that,” Lightsong said, pointing at another section of the lawn. “Off you go. Walk until you can’t hear me any more, then wait.”

The three men trudged off.

“And now you,” Lightsong said, hands on hips, regarding the last man—a shorter priest.

“I saw the intruder flee, your grace,” the priest said. “I was watching out a window.”

“Very timely of you,” Lightsong said, pointing at a third spot on the lawn, far enough from the others to be sequestered. The man walked away. Lightsong turned back to the priest who was obviously in charge.

“You said that the intruder released a Lifeless animal?” Lightsong asked.

“A squirrel, your grace,” the priest said. “We captured it.”

“Go and fetch it for me.”

“Your grace, it’s quite wild and—” He stopped, recognizing the look in Lightsong’s eyes, then waved for a servant.

“No,” Lightsong said. “Not a servant. You go and get it personally.”

The priest looked incredulous.

“Yes, yes,” Lightsong said, waving him away. “I know. It’s an offense to your dignity. Perhaps you should think about converting to Austrism. For now, get going.”

The priest left, grumbling.

“The rest of you,” Lightsong said, addressing his own servants and priests. “You wait here.”

They looked resigned. Apparently they were growing accustomed to him dismissing them.

“Come on, Scoot,” Lightsong said, walking toward the first group he had sent off onto the lawn—the two guards. Llarimar scuttled forward to keep up as Lightsong took long strides over to the two men. “Now,” Lightsong said to the two, out of earshot of the others, “tell me what you saw.”

“He came to us pretending to be a madman, your grace,” one of the guards said. “He sauntered out of the shadows, mumbling to himself. It was just an act, though, and when he got close enough, he knocked us both out.”

“How?” Lightsong asked.

“He grabbed me around the neck with tassels from his Awakened coat,” one of the men said. He nodded to his companion. “Knocked him in the stomach with the hilt of a sword.”

The second guard raised his shirt to show a large bruise on his stomach, then cocked his head to the side, showing another one on his neck.

“Choked us both,” the first guard said. “Me with those tassels, Fran with a boot on his neck. That’s the last thing we knew. By the time we awoke, he was gone.”

“He choked you,” Lightsong said, “but didn’t kill you. Just enough to knock you out?”

“That’s right, your grace,” the guard said.

“Please describe this man,” Lightsong said.

“He was big,” the guard said. “Had a scraggly beard. Not too long, but not trimmed either.”

“He wasn’t smelly or dirty,” the other said. “He just didn’t seem to take much care for how he looked. His hair was long—came down to his neck—and hadn’t seen a brush in a long while.”

“Wore ragged clothing,” the first said. “Patched in places, nothing bright, but not really dark either. Just kind of... bland.”

“And he was armed?” Lightsong said.

“With the sword that hit me,” the second guard said. “Big thing. Not a dueling blade, more like an easterner sword. Straight, but really long. Had it hidden under his cloak, and we would have seen it, if he hadn’t covered it up by walking so oddly.”

Lightsong nodded. “Thank you. Stay here.”

With that, he turned and walked toward the second group.

“This is very interesting, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But I really don’t see the point.”

“I’m just curious,” Lightsong said.

“Excuse me, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But you’re not really the curious type.”

Lightsong continued walking. The things he was doing, he did mostly without thinking. They just felt natural. He approached the next group. “You were the ones who saw the intruder in the hallway, right?” Lightsong said to them.

The men nodded. One shot a glance back at Mercystar’s palace. The lawn in front of it was now crowded with a colorful assortment of priests and servants, both Mercystar’s and Lightsong’s own.

“Tell me what happened,” Lightsong said.

“We were walking through the servant’s hallway,” one said. “We’d been released for the evening, and were going to go out into the city to a local tavern.”

“Then we saw someone in the hallway,” another said. “He didn’t belong there.”

“Describe him,” Lightsong said.

“Big man,” one said. The others nodded. “Had ragged clothing and a beard. Kind of dirty looking.”

“No,” another said. “The clothing was old, but the man wasn’t dirty. Just slovenly.”

Lightsong nodded. “Continue.”

“Well, there isn’t much to say,” one of the men said. “He attacked us. Threw an Awakened rope at poor Taff, who got tied up immediately. Rariv and I ran for help. Beblin stayed behind.”

Lightsong looked at the third man. “You stayed back? Why?”

“To help Taff, of course,” the man said.

Lying, Lightsong thought. *Looks too nervous*. “Really?” he said, stepping closer.

The man looked down. “Well, mostly. I mean, there was the sword, too...”

“Oh, right,” another said. “He threw a sword at us. Strangest thing.”

“He didn’t draw it?” Lightsong asked. “He *threw* it?”

The men shook their heads. “He threw it at us, sheath and all. Beblin picked it up.”

“I thought I’d fight him,” Beblin said.

“Interesting,” Lightsong said. “So you two left?”

“Yeah,” one of the men said. “When we came back with the others—after getting around that blasted squirrel—we found Dadlet on the ground, unconscious, and poor Taff... well, he was still tied up, though the rope wasn’t Awakened any more. He’d been stabbed straight through.”

“You saw him die?” Lightsong said of Dadlet, the one who had stayed back.

“No,” the man said, waving his arms in denial. He had—Lightsong noticed—a bandage on one hand. “The intruder knocked me out with a fist to the head.”

“But you had the sword,” Lightsong said.

“It was too big to use,” the man said, looking down.

“So, he threw the sword at you, then ran up and *punched* you?” Lightsong said.

The man nodded.

“And your hand?” Lightsong asked.

The man paused, unconsciously retracting his hand. “It got twisted. Nothing important.”

“And you need a bandage for a twisted wrist?” Lightsong said, raising an eyebrow. “Show me.”

The man hesitated.

“Show me, or lose your soul, child,” Lightsong said in what he hoped was a decently divine voice.

The man slowly extended his hand. Llarimar stepped forward and removed the bandage.

The hand was completely grey, drained of color.

Impossible, Lightsong thought with shock. Awakening... it doesn't do that to living flesh. It can't draw color from someone alive, only objects. Boards, clothing.

The man withdrew his hand.

“What is that?” Lightsong asked.

“I don't know,” the man said. “I woke up, and it was like that.”

“Is that so?” Lightsong said flatly. “And I'm to believe that you had nothing else to do with this? That you weren't working with the intruder?”

The man fell to his knees suddenly, beginning to cry. “Please, my lord! Don't take my soul. I'm not the best of men. I go to the brothels. I cheat when we gamble.”

The other two looked startled at this.

“But I didn't know anything about this intruder,” Dadlet continued. “Please, you have to believe me. I just wanted that sword. That beautiful, black sword! I wanted to draw it, swing it, attack the man with it. I reached for it and while I was distracted, he attacked me. But I didn't see him kill Taff! I promise, I hadn't ever seen this intruder before! You have to believe me!”

Lightsong paused. “I do,” he finally said. “Let this be a warning or something. Be better. Stop cheating.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Lightsong nodded to the men, then he and Llarimar left them behind.

“I actually kind of feel like a god,” Lightsong said. “Did you see me make that man repent?”

“Amazing, your grace,” Llarimar said.

“So what do you think about their testimonies?” Lightsong said. “Something strange *is* going on, isn't it?”

“I'm still curious why you think you should be the one to investigate it, your grace.”

“Who better?” Lightsong said. “It's not like I have anything else to do.”

“Besides be a god.”

“Overrated,” Lightsong said, walking up to the final man. “It has nice perks, but the hours are awful.”

Llarimar snorted quietly as Lightsong turned to address the final witness, the short priest who stood in his robes of yellow and gold. He was a fair bit younger than the other priest.

Was he chosen to tell me lies with the hopes that he'd seem innocent? Lightsong wondered idly. Or am I just making assumptions? "What is your story?" Lightsong asked.

The young priest bowed. "I was going about my duties, carrying several inscribed prophecies from the Lady's mouth to the records sanctuary. I heard a distant ruckus in the building. I looked out the window, toward the sound, but I saw nothing."

"Where were you?" Lightsong asked.

The young man pointed toward a window. "There, your grace."

Lightsong frowned. He'd been on the opposite side of the palace from the hallway where the killing had occurred. However, that *was* the side of the building where the intruder had first entered. "You could see the doorway where the intruder disabled the two guards?"

"Yes, your grace," the man said. "Though, I didn't see them at first. I almost left the window behind to go search out the sounds. However, at that point I *did* notice something odd in the lantern light of the entryway. A figure was moving about. It was then that I saw the guards on the ground. I thought they were bodies, and I was frightened by the shadowy figure moving between them. I screamed, and ran for help. By the time anyone paid attention to me, the figure was gone."

"You went down to look for him?" Lightsong asked.

The man nodded.

"And how long did it take you?"

"Several minutes, your grace."

Lightsong nodded slowly. "Very well, then. Thank you."

The young priest moved as if to walk over to the main group.

"Oh, wait," Lightsong said. "Did you, by chance, get a good enough look at the intruder?"

"Not really, your grace," the priest said. "He was in dark clothing, kind of nondescript. It was too far away to see well."

Lightsong waved the man away. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then eyed Llarimar. "Well?"

The priest raised an eyebrow. "Well what, your grace?"

"What do you think?"

Llarimar shook his head. "I... honestly don't know, your grace. This is obviously important, however."

Lightsong paused. "It is?"

Llarimar nodded. "Yes, your grace. Because of what that man said—the one who was wounded in the hand. He mentioned a black sword. You predicted it, remember? In the painting this morning?"

"That wasn't a prediction," Lightsong said. "That was really there, in the painting."

"That's the way foretelling works, your grace," Llarimar said. "Don't you see? You look at a painting and an entire image appears to your eyes. All I see is random strokes of a red brush. The scene you describe—the things you see—are prophetic. You are a god."

"But I saw exactly what the painting was said to depict!" Lightsong said. "Before you even told me what the title was!"

Llarimar nodded knowingly, as if that proved his point.

“Oh, never mind. Priests. Insufferable fanatics, every one of you. Either way, you agree with me that there is something strange here.”

“Definitely, your grace.”

“Good,” Lightsong said. “Then you’ll kindly stop complaining when I investigate it.”

“Actually, your grace,” Llarimar said, “it’s even *more* imperative that you *not* get involved. You predicted this would occur, but you are an oracle. If you get involved, you could unbalance a great many things.”

“I always like being unbalanced,” Lightsong said. “Besides, this is *far* too much fun.”

As usual, Llarimar didn’t react to having his advice ignored. As they began to walk back toward the main group, however, the priest did ask a question. “Your grace. Just to sate my own curiosity, what do *you* think about the murder?”

“It’s obvious,” Lightsong said idly. “There were two intruders. The first is the large man with the sword—he knocked out the guards, attacked those servants, released the Lifeless, then disappeared. The second man—the one the young priest saw—came in after the first intruder. This second man is the murderer.”

Llarimar frowned. “Why do you suppose that?”

“The first man took care not to kill,” Lightsong said. “He left the guards alive at risk to himself, since they could have woken back up at any moment to raise the alarm. He didn’t draw his sword against the servants but simply tried to subdue them. There was no reason for him to kill a tied up captive—particularly since he’d already left witnesses. It wouldn’t make sense.

“If there were a second man, however... well, that would make sense. The servant who was killed, he was the one who was conscious when this second intruder came through. That awake servant was the only one who *saw* the second intruder.”

“So, you think someone else followed the man with the sword, killed the only witness, and then...”

“Both of them vanished,” Lightsong said. “I’m thinking a trapdoor beneath the palace. Seems fairly obvious to me. One thing, however, is *not* obvious.” He glanced at Llarimar, slowing before they reached the main group of priests and servants.

“And... what is that, your grace?” Llarimar asked.

“How in the name of the Colors I figured all of this out?”

“I’m trying to decide that myself, your grace.”

Lightsong shook his head. “This comes from before, Scoot. Everything I’m doing, it feels *natural*. Who was I before I died?”

“I don’t know what you mean, your grace,” Llarimar said, turning away.

“Oh, come now, Scoot. The answer seems obvious to even me, and we both know I’m an idiot. I spend most of my Returned life lounging about, but then the *moment* someone is killed, I leap up and can’t help but start poking around. Doesn’t that sound a little suspicious to you?”

Llarimar didn’t look at him.

“Colors!” Lightsong swore. “You mean to tell me I was someone *useful*? I was just beginning to convince myself that I’d died in a reasonable way—such as falling off a stump when I was drunk.”

“I said nothing,” Llarimar said.

“Well, these instincts came from somewhere,” Lightsong said as they walked over to the main group of watching priests and servants. The head priest from before stood with a wooden box. Wild scratching came from inside. “Thank you,” Lightsong snapped, grabbing the box and passing by without even breaking stride. “I’m telling you, Scoot, I am *not* pleased.”

“You seemed rather happy this morning, your grace,” Llarimar noted as they walked away from Mercystar’s palace. Her priest stood behind, a complaint dying on his lips, Lightsong’s entourage joining their god.

“I was happy,” Lightsong said, “because I didn’t know what was going on. How am I going to be properly indolent if I keep itching to go investigate things? Honestly, this murder is completely destroying my hard-earned reputation.”

“I’m sorry, your grace, that you have to be inconvenienced by a semblance of motivation.”

“You should be,” Lightsong said, sighing. He handed over the box with its furious Lifeless rodent. “Here. You think my Awakeners can break its security phrase?”

“Eventually,” Llarimar said. “Though it’s an animal, your grace. It won’t be able to tell us information.”

“Have them do it anyway,” Lightsong said. “I need to think about this case some more.”

They walked back to his palace. However, the thing that struck Lightsong the most was the fact that he’d used the word ‘case’ in reference to the murder. It was a word he’d never heard used in that particular context. Yet he knew that it fit. Instinctively, automatically.

I didn’t have to learn to speak again when I Returned, he thought. I didn’t have to learn to walk again, or read again, or anything like that. Only my memory was lost.

But not all of it, apparently.

And that left him wondering what else he could do, if he tried.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Something happened to those previous God Kings, Siri thought, walking through the near-endless rooms of the God King's palace, her servants scuttling behind. Something that Bluefingers fears will happen to Susebron. It will be dangerous to both the God King and myself. Or so Bluefingers claims.

She continued to walk, trailing a train made from hundred tassels of translucent green silk behind her. The day's gown was nearly gossamer—she'd chosen it, then had asked her servants to fetch an opaque slip for her. It was funny how quickly she'd stopped worrying about what was 'ostentatious' and what was not.

There were simply much more important problems that she needed to worry about.

The priests do fear that something will happen to Susebron, she thought firmly. They are so eager for me to produce an heir. They claim it's about the succession, but they went fifty years without bothering. They were willing to wait twenty years to get their bride from Idris. Whatever the danger is, it's not urgent.

And yet the priests act like it is.

Perhaps they'd wanted a bride of the Royal line so badly that they'd been willing to risk the danger. Surely they needn't have waited twenty years, though. Vivenna could have born children years ago.

Though... perhaps the treaty specified a time and not an age. Maybe it just said that the king of Idris had twenty years to provide a bride for the God King. That would explain why her father had been able to send Siri instead. Gritting her teeth, Siri cursed herself for ignoring her lessons about the treaty. She didn't really know *what* it said. For all she knew, the danger could be spelled out in the document itself.

She needed more information. Unfortunately, the priests were indifferent, the servants silent, and Bluefingers, well...

She finally caught sight of him walking through one of the rooms, writing on his ledger. Siri hurried up, train rustling. He turned, glimpsing her. His eyes opened wide, and he scuttled away with increased speed, ducking through the open doorway into another room. Siri called after him, moving as quickly as the dress would allow. When she arrived, the room was empty.

"Colors!" she swore, feeling her hair grow a deep red in annoyance. "You still think he isn't avoiding me?" she demanded, turning to the leader of her servants.

The woman lowered her gaze. "It would be improper for a servant of the palace to avoid his queen, Vessel. He must not have seen you."

Right, Siri thought, *just like every other time*. When she sent for him, he always arrived after she'd left. When she had a letter scribed to him, and he responded with such vague language as to frustrate her even further.

She couldn't take books from the palace library, and the priests were disruptively distracting if she tried to read inside the library chamber itself. She'd requested books from the city, but the priests had insisted that they be brought by a priest, then read to her, as to not "strain her eyes." She was pretty sure that if there was anything in the book that the priests didn't want her to know, the reader would simply skip it.

She depended so much upon the priests and scribes for everything, including information.

Except... she thought, still standing in the bright red room. There *was* another source of information. She turned to her servant leader. “What activities are going on today in the courtyard?”

“Many, Vessel,” the woman said. “Some artists have come and are doing paintings and sketches. There are some animal handlers showing exotic pets, several dye merchants displaying their newest color combinations, and—of course—there are minstrels.”

“What about at that building we went to before?”

“The arena, Vessel? I believe there will be games there later in the evening. Contests of physical prowess.”

Siri nodded. “Prepare a box. I want to attend.”

#

Back in her homeland, Siri had occasionally watched running contests. They were usually spontaneous, as the monks did not approve of men showing off. Austre gave all men talents. Flaunting them was seen as arrogance.

Still, boys cannot be so easily contained. She had seen them run, had even encouraged them. Those contests, however, had been *nothing* like what the Hallandren men now displayed.

There were a half dozen different events going on at once. Some men threw large stones, competing for distance. Others raced in a wide circle around the interior of the arena floor, kicking up sand, sweating heavily in the muggy Hallandren heat. Others tossed javelins, shot arrows, or engaged in jumping contests.

Siri watched with a deepening blush—one that ran all the way to the ends of her hair. The men wore only loincloths. During her weeks in the grand city, she had never seen anything quite so... interesting.

A lady shouldn’t stare at young men, her mother had taught. It’s unseemly.

Yet what was the point, if not to stare? Siri couldn’t help herself, and it wasn’t just because of the naked skin. These were men who had trained extensively to compete—who had mastered their physical abilities to wondrous results. As Siri watched, she saw that relatively little regard was given to the winners of each particular event. The contests weren’t about victory, but about the skill required to compete.

In that way, these contests were almost in line with Idris sensibilities—yet, at the same time, they were ironically opposite.

The beauty of the games kept her distracted for much longer than she’d intended, her hair permanently locked into a deep maroon blush, even after she got used to the idea of men competing in such scant clothing. Eventually, she forced herself to stand and turn away from the performance. She had work to do.

Her servants perked up. They had brought all kinds of luxuries. Full couches and cushions, fruits and wines, even a few men with fans to keep her cool. Even after only a few weeks in the palace, such comfort was beginning to seem commonplace to her.

“There was a god who came and spoke to me before,” Siri said, scanning the amphitheater, where many of the stone box sections were decorated with colorful pavilions. “Which one was it?”

“Lightsong the Bold, Vessel,” one of the serving women said. “God of bravery.”

Siri nodded. “And his colors are?”

“Gold and red, Vessel.”

Siri smiled. His pavilion showed that he was there. He wasn't the only god to have introduced himself to her during her weeks in the palace, but he *was* the only one who had spent any amount of time chatting with her. He'd been confusing, but at least he'd been willing to talk. She left her box, beautiful dress trailing on the stone. She'd had to force herself to stop feeling guilty for ruining them, since apparently each dress was burned the day after she wore it.

Her servants burst into anxious motion, gathering up furniture and foods, following behind Siri. As before, there were people on the benches below—merchants rich enough to buy entrance to the Court or peasants who had won a certain lottery drawing. Many turned and looked up as she passed, whispering among themselves.

It's the only way they get to see me, she realized. Their queen.

That was one thing that Idris certainly did better than Hallandren. The Idrians had easy access to their king and their government, while in Hallandren the leaders were held aloof—and therefore made remote, even mysterious.

She approached the red and gold pavilion. The god she had seen before lounged inside, relaxing on a couch, sipping a large glass cup filled with an icy red liquid. He looked much as he had before—chiseled masculine features that she was coming to associate with godhood, styled black hair, golden tan skin, and a rather indifferent attitude.

That's something else Idris was right about, she thought. My people may be too stern, but it also isn't good to become as indulgent as some of these Returned.

The god, Lightsong, eyed her. “My queen.”

“Lightsong the Bold,” she said as one of her servants brought her chair. “I trust your day has been pleasant?”

“So far this day I have discovered several disturbing and redefining elements of my soul which are slowly restructuring the very nature of my existence.” He took a sip from his drink. “Other than that, it was uneventful. You?”

“Fewer revelations,” Siri said, sitting. “More confusion. I'm still inexperienced in the way things work here. I was kind of hoping you could answer some of my questions, give me some information, perhaps...”

“Afraid not,” Lightsong said happily.

Siri paused, then flushed, embarrassed. “I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong. I—”

“No, nothing wrong, child,” Lightsong said, his smile deepening. “The reason I cannot help you is because I, unfortunately, know nothing. I'm useless. Haven't you heard?”

“Um... I'm afraid I haven't.”

“You should pay better attention,” he said, raising his cup toward her. “Shame on you.”

Siri frowned, growing more embarrassed. Lightsong's high priest—distinguished by his oversized headgear—looked on disapprovingly, and that only caused her to be more self-conscious. *Why should I be the self-conscious one?* she thought, growing annoyed. *Lightsong is the one who is making veiled insults against me—and making overt ones against himself! It's like he enjoys being degraded.*

“Actually,” Siri said, looking over at him, lifting her chin. “I *have* heard of your reputation, Lightsong the Bold. Useless wasn't the word I heard, however.”

“Oh?” he said.

“Yes. I was told you were harmless, though I can see that is not true—for in speaking to you, my *ears* have certainly been harmed. Not to mention my head, which is beginning to ache.”

“Both common symptoms of dealing with me, I’m afraid,” he said with an exaggerated sigh.

“That could be solved,” Siri said. “Perhaps it would help if you would put a bag over your head and refrained from speaking when others are present. I think I should find you quite amiable in those circumstances.”

Lightsong laughed. Not a bellowing laugh, like her father or some of the men back in Idris, but a more refined laugh. Still, it seemed genuine.

“I *knew* I liked you, girl,” he said.

“I’m not sure if I should find that an insult or not.”

“Depends upon how seriously one takes oneself,” Lightsong said. “Come, divest yourself of that silly chair and recline on one of these couches. Enjoy the evening.”

“I’m not sure that would be proper,” Siri said.

“I’m a god,” Lightsong said with a wave of his hand. “I make propriety.”

“I think I’ll sit anyway,” Siri said, though she did stand and have her servants bring the chair further under the pavilion so that she didn’t have to speak so loudly. She was careful not to look too long at the contests, lest she be drawn in by them again.

Lightsong smiled. He seemed to enjoy making others uncomfortable. But, then, he also seemed to take little concern for how he was regarded.

“I was honest before, Lightsong,” she said. “I need information.”

“And I, my dear, was quite honest as well. I *am* useless. However, I’ll try my best to answer your questions—assuming, of course, you will provide answers to mine.”

“And... if I don’t know the answers to your questions?”

“Then make something up,” he said. “I’ll never know the difference. Unaware ignorance is far more comfortable than knowledgeable stupidity.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“Do so and you defeat the point. Now, your questions?”

“What happened to the previous God Kings?”

“Died,” Lightsong said. “Happens to people sometimes, even gods. We make, if you haven’t noticed, laughable immortals. We keep forgetting about that ‘live forever’ part and instead find ourselves unexpectedly dead. For the second time. Rather unpleasant, so I hear.”

“Dead?” she said. “How did the God Kings die?”

“Gave away their Breath,” Lightsong said. “Isn’t that right, Scoot?”

Lightsong’s high priest nodded. “It is, your grace. His Divine Majesty Susebron the Fourth died to cure the plague of distrentia that struck T’Telir fifty years ago.”

“Wait,” Lightsong said. “Isn’t distrentia a disease of the bowels?”

“Indeed,” the high priest said.

Lightsong frowned. “You mean to tell me that our God King—the most holy and divine personage in our pantheon—died to cure a few tummy aches?”

“I wouldn’t exactly put it that way, your grace.”

Lightsong leaned over to Siri. “I’m expected to do that someday, you know. Kill myself so that some old lady will be able to stop messing herself in public. Terribly undignified. No wonder I’m such an embarrassing God. Must have to do with subconscious self-worth issues.”

The high priest shot an apologetic look at Siri. For the first time, she realized that the overweight priest’s disapproval wasn’t directed at her, but his god. To her, he smiled.

Maybe they’re not all like Tridees, she thought, smiling back.

“The God King’s sacrifice was not a frivolous waste, Vessel,” the priest said. “True, diarrhea may not seem a danger to many, but to the elderly and the young it can be quite deadly. Plus, the conditions were spreading other diseases, and the city’s commerce—and therefore the kingdom’s commerce—had slowed to a crawl. People in outlying villages went months without necessary supplies.”

“Well, there you go,” Lightsong said. “Question answered. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because I lied to you,” Lightsong said.

“About how the God King died?”

“Colors, no. About being useless. I promise I will be more diligent in the future.”

Siri paused, then found herself smiling even more deeply.

“What?” Lightsong asked, then finished off the last of his drink. It was immediately replaced by another one, this time blue.

“Talking to you is like talking to a river,” she said. “I keep getting pulled along with the current and I’m never sure when I’ll be able to take another breath.”

“Watch out for the rocks, Vessel,” the high priest noted. “They look rather innocent, but there’s a lot of weight to them under the surface.”

“Bah,” Lightsong said. “It’s the *alligators* you have to watch for. They can bite. And... what exactly are we talking about, anyway?”

“The God Kings,” Siri said. “When the last one died, an heir had already been produced?”

“Indeed,” the high priest said. “In fact, he had just been married the year before. The child had been born only weeks before he died.”

Siri sat back in her chair, thoughtful. “And the God King before him?”

“Died to heal the children of a village, attacked by bandits,” Lightsong said. “The commoners love that story. The king was so moved by their suffering that he gave himself up for the simple people.”

“And had he been married the year before?”

“No, Vessel,” the high priest said. “It was several years afterward. Though, he *did* die only a month after his second child was born.”

Siri looked up. “Was the first child a daughter?”

“Yes,” the priest said. “A woman of no divine or Returned powers. How did you know?”

Colors! Siri thought. *Both times, right after the heir was born.* Did having a child somehow make the God Kings wish to give their lives away? Or was it something more sinister? A cured plague or healed village were both things that, with a little creative propaganda, could be invented.

"I'm not much of an expert on these things, I'm afraid, Vessel," the high priest continued. "And, I'm afraid that Lord Lightsong is not either. If you press him, he very well *could* just begin making things up."

"Scoot!" Lightsong said indignantly. "That's slanderous. Oh, and by the way, your zebra is on fire."

"Thank you," Siri said. "Both of you. It has actually been rather helpful."

"If I might suggest..." the high priest said.

"Of course," she replied.

"Try a professional storyteller, Vessel," the priest said. "You can order one in from the city, and they can recite both histories and tales of imagination to you. They will provide much better information than we can."

Siri nodded. *Why can't the priests in the palace be this helpful?* Of course, if they really *were* covering up the reason why their God Kings died, then they had good reason to avoid helping her. In fact, there was a good chance that if she asked for a storyteller, they would just send for one who would tell her what they wanted her to hear.

She frowned. "Could... you do it for me, Lightsong?"

"What?"

"Order in a storyteller," she said. "I should like you to be there, in case I have any questions."

Lightsong shrugged. "I guess I could. Haven't heard a storyteller in some time. Just let me know when."

It wasn't a perfect plan. Her servants were listening and they might be spies for the priests. However, if the storyteller came to Lightsong's palace, perhaps there was a better chance of Siri hearing the truth.

"Thank you," she said, rising.

"Ah, ah, ah?" Lightsong said, raising a finger.

She stopped.

He drank from his cup.

"Well?" she finally asked.

He held up the finger again as he continued to drink, tipping his head back, getting the last bits of slushy ice from the bottom of the cup. He set it aside, mouth blue. "How refreshing. Idris. Wonderful place. Lots of ice. Costs quite a bit, so I've heard. Good thing I don't ever have to pay for anything, eh?"

Siri raised an eyebrow. "And I'm standing here waiting because..."

"You promised to answer some of my questions."

"Oh," she said, sitting back down. "Of course."

"Now, then," he said. "Did you know any policemen back in your home village?"

She cocked her head. "Policemen?"

"You know, fellows who keep the law. City watch. Law enforcement officers. Sheriffs. The men who catch crooks and guard dungeons. That sort."

"I... I knew a couple, I guess," she said. "My home city wasn't large but it was the capital. It did attract some difficult people."

“Ah, good,” Lightsong said. “Kindly describe them for me. Not the difficult fellows. The city watch.”

Siri shrugged. “I don’t know. They tended to be careful. They’d interview newcomers to the village, walk the streets looking for wrongdoing, that sort of thing.”

“Would you call them inquisitive types?”

“Yes,” Siri said. “I guess. I mean, as much as anybody. Maybe more.”

“Were there ever any murders in your village?”

“A couple,” Siri said, glancing down. “There shouldn’t have been—my father always said things like that shouldn’t happen in Idris. Said murder was a thing of... well, Hallandren.”

Lightsong chuckled. “Yes, we do it all the time. Quite the party trick. Now, did these policemen investigate the murders?”

“Of course.”

“Without having to be asked to do so?”

Siri nodded.

“How’d they go about it?”

“I don’t know,” Siri said. “They asked questions, talked to witnesses, looked for clues. I wasn’t involved.”

“No, no,” Lightsong said. “Of course you weren’t. If you’d been a murderer, they would have done something terrible to you. Like... I don’t know, exile you to another country?”

Siri felt herself pale, hair growing lighter.

Lightsong just laughed. “Don’t go taking me seriously, child. Honestly, I gave up wondering if you were an assassin *weeks* ago. Now, if your servants and mine will stay behind for a second, I think I have something important to tell you.”

Siri started as Lightsong stood up. He began to walk from the pavilion, and his servants remained back. Confused but excited, Siri rose from her own seat and hurried after him, waving her servants back. She caught up with him a short distance away on the stone walkway that ran between the various boxes in the arena. Down below, the athletes continued their display.

Lightsong looked down at her, smiling.

They really are tall, she thought, craning a bit. A single foot of extra height made such a difference; when standing next to a man like Lightsong—and not really being that tall in the first place—she felt dwarfed. *Maybe he’ll tell me the thing I’ve been looking for*, Siri thought. *The secret!*

“You are playing a dangerous game, my queen,” Lightsong said, leaning against the stone railing. It was built after Returned proportions, so it was too high for her to rest against comfortably.

“Game?” she asked.

“Politics,” he said, watching the athletes.

“I don’t want to play politics.”

“That’s what I always say,” Lightsong said, sighing. “But I keep getting sucked in. Every time. Complaining doesn’t stop that—though it does annoy people, which is satisfying in its own right.”

Siri frowned. “So you pulled me aside to give me a warning?”

"Colors, no," Lightsong said, chuckling. "If you haven't figured out that this is dangerous, then you're far too dense to worry about warning."

"Oh. Well, that's pleasant. Do you have more insults for me, or should I slap you now?"

He smiled. "I just wanted to give some advice. The first is about your persona."

"My persona?"

"Yes," he said. "It needs work. Using the persona of an innocent newcomer was a good instinct. You fit it well. But you need to refine it. Work on it."

"It's not a persona," she said honestly. "I *am* confused and new to all this."

Lightsong raised a finger. "That's the trick to politics, child. Sometimes, you can't disguise who you are and how you feel, but you can *still* control how people react to you. Take who you are and adapt it. You want to know how people regard you, because that way you know how they'll react to you."

Siri frowned.

"Take me as an example," Lightsong said. "I'm a useless fool. Always have been, as long as I can remember—which, actually, isn't all that long. I call you child, but I've only been alive five years, though I feel as if I've lived forty. Either way, I know how people regard me. I enhance it. Play with it."

"So it's a lie?"

"Of course not. This is who I am. However, I make certain that people *know* it. Controlling how you look—how people think of you—is paramount, my queen. Let them see you, let them become comfortable with you. People distrust that which they can't predict. As long as you feel like a random element in court, you will appear to be a threat. If you can skillfully—and honestly—portray yourself as someone they understand, then you'll begin to fit in.

"You can't control everything. But you can find a place in this mess. And once you have it, you can begin to push on temperaments and influence factions. Should you want to. I rarely do because it's such a hassle."

Siri cocked her head. Then she smiled. "You're a good man, Lightsong," she said. "I knew it, even when you were insulting me. You mean no harm. Is that part of your persona?"

"Trust me," he said, smiling. "I'm not sure *what* it is that convinces people to trust me. I'd get rid of it if I could. It only serves to make people expect too much. Give what I said some practice. The best thing about being locked in this beautiful prison is that you *can* do some good, you *can* change things. I've seen others do it. People I respected. Haven't been many of those around in the Court lately."

"All right," she said.

"You're digging for something—I can sense it. And it has to do with the priests. Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike. Sudden and surprising, that's how you want to be. You don't want to appear *too* nonthreatening—people are always suspicious of the innocent. The trick is to appear *average*. Just as crafty as everyone else. That way, everyone else will assume that they can beat you with just a little advantage."

Siri nodded. "Kind of an Idris philosophy."

"You came from us," Lightsong said. "Or, perhaps, we came from you. Either way, we're more similar than a lot of our outward trappings make us seem. What is that Idris philosophy of extreme plainness except a means of contrasting against Hallandren? All those whites you people use? That makes you stand out on a national scale. You act like us, we act like you, we just do things in opposite ways."

She nodded slowly.

He smiled. “Oh, and one thing. Please, *please* don’t depend on me too much. I mean what I say. I’m not going to be of much help. If your plots come to a head—if things go wrong at the last moment and you’re in danger or distress—don’t think of me. I will fail you. *That* I promise with the absolute sincerity of my heart.”

“You’re a very strange man.”

“Product of my society,” he said. “And, since my society consists pretty much only of myself, I blame god. Good day, my queen.”

With that, he trailed away, walking back to his pavilion and waving for her servants—who had been watching with concern—to finally rejoin her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“The meeting is set, my lady,” Thame said. “The men are eager. Your work in T’Telir is gaining more and more notoriety.”

Vivenna wasn’t sure what she thought of that. She sipped her juice. The lukewarm liquid was addictively flavorful.

Thame looked at her eagerly. The short Idris man was, by Denth’s investigations, trustworthy enough. His story of being ‘forced’ into a life of crime was a bit exaggerated. He filled a niche in Hallandren society—he acted as a liaison between the Idris workers and the various criminal elements.

He was also, apparently, a staunch patriot. Despite the fact that he tended to exploit his own people, particularly newcomers to the city.

“How many will be at the meeting?” Vivenna asked, watching traffic pass on the street out beyond the restaurant patio gate.

“Over a hundred, my lady,” Thame said. “Loyal to our king, I promise. And, they’re influential men, all of them—for Idrians, that is.”

Which, according to Denth, meant that they were men who wielded power in the city because they could provide cheap Idrian workers, and could sway the opinion of the underprivileged Idrian masses. They were men who, like Thame, thrived because of the Idrian subclass. A strange duality. These men gained notoriety among an oppressed minority, but without the oppression, they would be powerless.

Like Lemks, she thought, who served my father—even seemed to respect and love him—all the while stealing every bit of gold he could get his fingers on.

She leaned back, wearing a white dress with a long skirt that rippled and blew in the wind. She tapped the side of her cup, which caused a serving man to refill her juice. Thame smiled, taking more juice as well, though he looked out of place in the fine restaurant.

“How many are there, you suppose?” she asked. “Idrians in the city, I mean.”

“Thousands, my lady. Perhaps as many as five or six.”

“That many?”

“Trouble on the lower farms,” Thame said, shrugging. “It’s hard, sometimes, living up in those mountains. Crops fail, and what do you have? The king owns your land, so you can’t sell. You need to pay your levies...”

“Yes, but men can make petitions in the case of disaster,” Vivenna said.

“Ah, my lady, but most of these men are several weeks travel from the king. Do you leave your family and seek a petition, yet fear that they’ll starve during the weeks it will take to bring food from the king’s storehouse? Or do you travel the much shorter distance down to T’Telir? Take work there, loading on the docks or harvesting flowers in the jungle plantations. Hard work, but steady.”

And, in doing so, they betray their people.

But who was she to judge? The Fifth Vision chastised her haughtiness. She sat beneath a shaded canopy, enjoying a nice breeze and expensive juice while other men slaved to provide for their families. She had no right to sneer at their motivations.

Idrians shouldn't have to seek for work in Hallandren. She didn't like to admit fault in her father, yet his was not a bureaucratically strong kingdom. It consisted of dozens of scattered villages with poor highways that were often hampered by snows or rockslides. In addition, he had to expend a lot of resources keeping his military strong in case of a Hallandren assault.

He had a difficult job. Was that a good enough excuse for the poverty she saw in her people who had been forced to flee their homeland? The more she listened and learned, the more she realized that many Idrians had never known the idyllic life she'd lived in her mountain valley.

"Meeting is three days hence, my lady," Thame said. "Some of these men are hesitant after Vahr and his failure, but they will listen to you."

"I will be there."

"Thank you." Thame rose—bowed, despite the fact that she'd asked him not to draw attention to her—and withdrew.

Vivenna sat and sipped her juice. She felt Denth before he arrived. "You know what interests me?" he said, taking the seat Thame had been using.

"What?"

"People," he said, tapping an empty cup, drawing the serving man back over. "People interest me. Particularly people who don't act like they're supposed to. People who surprise you."

"I hope you aren't talking about Thame," Vivenna asked, raising an eyebrow.

Denth shook his head. "I'm talking about you, Princess. Wasn't too long ago that—no matter what or who you looked at—you had a look of quiet displeasure in your eyes. You've lost it. You're starting to fit in."

"Then that's a problem, Denth," Vivenna said. "I don't want to fit in. I hate Hallandren."

"You seem to like that juice all right."

Vivenna set it aside. "You're right, of course. I shouldn't be drinking it."

"If you say so," Denth said, shrugging. "Now, if you were to ask the mercenary—which, of course, nobody ever does—he might mention that it's *good* for you to start acting like a Hallandren. The less you stand out, then, the less likely people are to connect you to that Idrian princess hiding in the city. Take your friend Parlin."

"He looks like a fool in those bright colors," she said, glancing across the street toward where he and Jewels were chatting as they watched the escape route.

"Does he?" Denth said. "Or does he just look like a Hallandren? Would you hesitate at all if you were in the jungle and saw him put on the fur of a beast, or perhaps shroud himself in a cloak colored like fallen leaves?"

She looked again. Parlin had lost some of his woodsman's grace in recent weeks, and he lounged against the side of a building... much like she'd seen street toughs his age do other places in the city.

"You both fit better here than you once did," Denth said. "You're learning."

Vivenna looked down. Some things in her new life were actually starting to feel natural. The raids, for instance, were becoming surprisingly easy. She was also growing used to moving with the crowds and being part of an underground element. Two months ago, she would have been indignantly opposed to dealing with a man like Denth, simply because of his profession.

She found it very difficult to reconcile some of these changes in her. It was growing harder and harder to understand herself, and to decide what she believed.

“Though,” Denth said, eyeing Vivenna’s dress. “You might want to think about switching to trousers.”

Vivenna frowned, looking up.

“Just a suggestion,” Denth said, then gulped down some juice. “You don’t like the short Hallandren skirts, but the only decent clothing we can buy you that are ‘modest’ are of foreign make—and that makes them expensive. That means we have to use expensive restaurants, lest we stand out. That means you have to deal with all of this terrible lavishness. Trousers, however, are modest *and* cheap.”

“Trousers are *not* modest.”

“Don’t show knees,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Denth shrugged. “Just giving my opinion.”

Vivenna looked away, then sighed quietly. “I appreciate the advice, Denth. Really. I just... I’m confused by a lot of my life lately.”

“World’s a confusing place,” Denth said. “That’s what makes it fun.”

“The men we’re working with,” Vivenna said. “They lead the Idrians in the city but exploit them at the same time. Lemks stole from my father but still worked for the interests of my country. And, here I am, wearing an overpriced dress and sipping expensive juice while my sister is being abused by a terrible dictator and while this wonderful, terrible city prepares to launch a war on my homeland.”

Denth leaned back in his chair, looking out over the short railing toward the street, watching the crowds with their colors both beautiful and terrible. “The motivations of men. They never make sense. And they always make sense.”

“Right now, *you* don’t make sense.”

Denth smiled. “What I’m trying to say is that you don’t understand a man until you understand his motivations. Every man is a hero in his own story, Princess. Murderers don’t believe that they’re to blame for what they do. Thieves, they think they deserve the money they take. Dictators... they believe they have the right—for the safety of their people—to do whatever they wish.”

He stared off, shaking his head. “I think even Vasher sees himself as a hero. The truth is, most people who do what you’d call ‘wrong’ do it for what they call ‘right’ reasons. Only mercenaries make any sense. We do what we’re paid to do. That’s it. Perhaps that’s why people look down on us so. We’re the only ones they understand.”

He paused, then met her eyes. “In a way, we’re the most honest men you’ll ever meet.”

The two of them fell silent, the crowd passing by just a short distance away, a river of flashing colors. Another figure approached the table. “That’s right,” Tonk Fah said, “but, you forgot to mention that in addition to being honest, we’re also clever. And handsome.”

“Those both go without saying,” Denth said.

Vivenna turned. Tonk Fah, like the others, had been watching from a distance. They were letting her start to take the lead in some of the meetings. “Honest, perhaps,” Vivenna said. “But I certainly *hope* that you’re not the most handsome men I’ll ever meet. Are we ready to go?”

“Assuming you’re finished with your juice,” Denth said, smirking at her.

Vivenna glanced at her cup. It was *very* good. Feeling guilty, she took one last gulp. Then she rose and swished her way from the building, leaving Denth—who now handled most of the coins—to settle the bill. Outside on the street, they were joined by Clod, who'd been given orders to come if she screamed for help.

She turned, looking back at Tonk Fah and Denth. “Tonks,” she said. “Where’s your monkey?”

He sighed. “Monkeys are boring anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “You lost *another* one?”

Denth chuckled. “Get used to it, Princess. Of all the justices in the universe, one of the greatest is that Tonks has never fathered a child. He’d probably lose it before the week was out.”

She just shook her head. “Whatever,” she said. “Next appointment. D’Denir garden, right?”

Denth nodded.

“Let’s go,” she said, walking down the street. The others trailed behind, picking up Parlin and Jewels on the way. Vivenna didn’t wait for Clod to force a way through the crowd. The less she depended on that Lifeless to help her, the better. Moving through the crowds really wasn’t that difficult. There was an art to it—one moved with crowd, rather than trying to swim against its flow. It wasn’t long before, Vivenna at the front, the group turned off into the wide grass field that was the D’Denir garden. Like the crossroads, this place was an open space of green life set among the buildings and colors. Yet, here no flowers or trees broke the landscape, nor did people busy about. This was a more reverent place.

And it was filled with statues. Hundreds of them. They looked much like the other D’Denir in the city—with their oversized bodies and heroic poses, many tied with colorful cloths or garments. These were some of the oldest statues she had seen, their stone weathered from years spent enduring the frequent T’Telir rainfalls. This group was the final gift from Peacegiver the Blessed. The statues had been made as a memorial to those who had died in the Manywar. A monument and a warning. So the legends said. Vivenna figured that if the people really did honor those that had fallen, they wouldn’t dress the statues up in such ridiculous outfits.

Still, the place was far more serene than most in T’Telir, and she could appreciate that. She walked down the steps onto the lawn, trailing between the silent stone figures.

Denth moved up beside her. “Remember who we’re meeting?”

She nodded. “Forgers.”

Denth he eyed her. “You all right with this?”

“Denth, during our months together I’ve met with thief lords, murderers, and—most frighteningly—mercenaries. I think I can deal with a couple of spindly scribes.”

Denth shook his head. “These are the men who *sell* the documents, not the scribes who do the work. You won’t meet more dangerous men than forgers. Within the Hallandren bureaucracy, they can make anything seem legal by sticking the right documents in the right places.”

Vivenna nodded slowly.

“You remember what to have them make?” Denth asked.

“Of course I do,” she said. “This particular plan was *my* idea, remember?”

“Just checking,” he said.

“You’re worried that I’ll mess things up, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “You’re the leader in this little dance, Princess. I’m just the guy who mops the floor afterward.” He eyed her. “I hate mopping up blood.”

“Oh, please,” she said, rolling her eyes, walking faster and leaving him behind. As he fell back, she could hear him talking to Tonk Fah. “Bad metaphor?” Denth asked.

“Nah,” Tonk Fah said. “It had blood in it. That makes it a good metaphor.”

“I think it lacked poetic style.”

“Find something that rhymes with ‘blood’ then,” Tonk Fah suggested. He paused. “Mud? Cud? Uh... tastebud?”

They sure are literate, for a bunch of thugs, she thought, shaking her head.

She didn’t have to go far before she spotted the men. They waited beside the meeting place—a large D’Denir with a weathered axe. The group of people were having a picnic and chatting among themselves.

Vivenna slowed.

“That’s them,” Denth whispered. “Let’s go sit beside the D’Denir across from them.”

Jewels, Clod, and Parlin hung back while Tonk Fah strolled away to watch the perimeter. Vivenna and Denth approached the statue near to the forgers. Denth spread out a blanket for her then stood to the side, as if he were a manservant.

One of the men beside the other stature looked across as Vivenna sat down, then he nodded. The others continued to eat. The Hallandren underground’s penchant for working in broad daylight still unnerved Vivenna, but she supposed it had advantages over skulking about at night.

“You want some work commissioned?” the forger closest to her asked, just loudly enough that Vivenna could hear. It almost seemed part of his conversation with his friends.

“Yes,” she said.

“It costs.”

“I can pay.”

“You’re the princess everyone is talking about?”

She paused, noticing that Denth’s hand leisurely going to his sword hilt.

“Yes,” she said.

“Good,” the forger said. “Working with royalty always means good coin. What is it you desire?”

“Letters,” Vivenna said. “I want them to appear as if they were between certain members of the Hallandren priesthood and the king of Idris. They need to have official seals and signatures.”

“Difficult,” the man said.

Vivenna pulled something from her dress pocket. “I have a letter written in King Dedalin’s hand. It has his seal on the wax, his signature at the bottom.”

The man seemed intrigued, though she could only see the side of his face. “That makes it possible. Still hard. What do you want these documents to prove?”

“That these particular priests are corrupt,” Vivenna said. “I have a list on this sheet. I want you to make it seem like they’ve been extorting Idris for years, making the king pay money and make promises to prevent war. I want you to show that Idris doesn’t want war and that the priests are hypocrites.”

The man nodded. “Is that everything?”

“Yes.”

"It can be done. We'll be in touch. Instructions and explanations are on the back of the paper?"

"As requested," Vivenna said.

The group of men stood, a servant moving forward to pack up their lunch. As he did so, he let a napkin blow in the wind, then rushed over and picked it up, grabbing Vivenna's paper too. Soon, all of them were gone.

"Well?" Vivenna asked, looking up.

"Good," Denth said, nodding to himself. "You're becoming an expert."

Vivenna smiled, settling back on her blanket to wait. The next appointment consisted of a group of thieves who had stolen—at Vivenna and Denth's request—various goods from the war offices in the Hallandren bureaucratic building. The documents were of relatively little import, but their absence would cause confusion and frustration.

That appointment wasn't for a few hours, which meant she could enjoy a bit of time relaxing on the lawn, away from the unnatural colors of the city. Denth seemed to sense her inclination, and he sat down, lounging back against the side of the statue. As Vivenna waited, she again saw that Parlin was over talking to Jewels again. Denth was right; though his clothing looked ridiculous to her, that was because she *knew* him as an Idrian. Looking at him another way, she saw that he fit remarkably well with other young men in the city.

That's well and good for him, Vivenna thought with annoyance, looking away. He can dress as he wishes—he doesn't have to worry about his neckline or skirt length. .

Jewels laughed. It was almost more of a snort of derision, but there was *some* mirth in it. Or so it seemed. Vivenna looked back immediately, watching Jewels roll her eyes at Parlin, a self-effacing smirk on his face. He knew he'd said something wrong. He didn't know what. Vivenna knew him well enough to read the expression and to know that he'd just smile and go along with it.

Jewels saw his face, then laughed again.

Vivenna gritted her teeth. "I should send him back to Idris," she said.

Denth turned, looking down at her. "Hum?"

"Parlin," she said. "I sent my other guides back. I should have sent him too. He serves no function."

"He's quick at adapting to situations," Denth said. "And he's trustworthy. That's good enough reason to keep him."

"He's a fool," Vivenna said. "Has trouble understanding half of what goes on around him."

"He's not got the wit of a scholar, true, but he seems to instinctively know how to blend in. Besides, we can't all be geniuses like you."

She glanced at Denth. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Denth said, "that you shouldn't let your hair change colors in public, Princess."

Vivenna started, noticing that her hair had shifted from a still, calm black to the red of frustration. *Lord of Colors!* she thought. *I used to be so good at controlling that. What is happening to me?*

"Don't worry," Denth said, settling back. "Jewels has *no* interest in your friend. I promise you."

Vivenna snorted. "Parlin? Why should I care?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” Denth said. “Maybe because you and he have been practically engaged to him since you were children?”

“That’s completely untrue,” Vivenna said. “I’ve been engaged to the God King since before my birth!”

“And your father always wished you could marry the son of his best friend instead,” Denth said. “At least, that’s what Parlin says.” He eyed her with a smirk.

“That boy talks too much.”

“Actually, he’s usually rather quiet,” Denth said. “You have to pry quite a bit to get him to talk about himself. Either way, Jewels has other ties. So stop your worrying.”

“I’m not worried,” Vivenna said. “And I’m *not* interested in Parlin.”

“Of course not.”

Vivenna opened her mouth to object, but she noticed Tonk Fah wandering over, and didn’t want *him* to start into the discussion as well. She snapped her jaw shut as the large-gutted mercenary joined them.

“Flood,” Tonk Fah said.

“Hum?” Denth asked.

“Rhymes with blood,” Tonk Fah said. “Now you can be poetic. Flood of Blood. It even has as a nice visual image. Far better than tastebud.”

“Ah, I see,” Denth said flatly. “Tonk Fah?”

“Yes?”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Thanks.”

Vivenna stood up and began to walk through the statues, studying them—if only to get herself away from having to watch Parlin and Jewels. Tonk Fah and Denth trailed along behind at a comfortable distance, keeping a watchful eye.

There was a beauty to the statues. They weren’t like the other kinds of art in T’Telir—flashy paintings, colorful buildings, exaggerated clothing. The D’Denir were solid blocks which had aged with dignity. The Hallandrens, of course, did their best to destroy this with the scarves, hats, or other colorful bits they tied on the stone memorials. Fortunately, there were too many in this garden for them to all be decorated.

They stood, somehow more solid than much of the city. Most stared up into the sky or looked straight ahead. Each one was different, each pose distinct, each face constructed differently. *It must have taken decades to create all of these*, she thought. *Perhaps that’s where the Hallandrens got their penchant for art. Their very first king ordered an artistic project that took a lifetime to complete.*

Hallandren was such a place of contradictions. Warriors to represent peace. Idrians who exploited each other and protected each other at the same time. Mercenaries who seemed to be among the best men she had ever known. Bright colors that created a uniformity.

And, above it all, BioChromatic Breath. It was exploitive, yet people like Jewels seemed to see giving up their Breath as a privilege. Contradictions. The question was, could Vivenna afford to become another contradiction? A person who bent her beliefs in order to see that they were preserved?

The Breaths *were* wonderful. It was more than just the beauty or the ability to hear changes in sound and sense intrinsically the distinct hues of color. It was even more than the ability to sense

life around her. More than the sounds of the wind, the tones of people talking, or her ability to feel her way through a group of people and move with the motions of a crowd.

It was a connection. The world around her felt *close*. Even items like her clothing or discarded twigs on the ground felt near to her. They were which were dead, yet seemed to yearn for life again.

She could give it to them. They remembered life and she could Awaken those memories. But what good would it do to save her people if she lost herself?

Denth doesn't seem lost, she thought. He and the other mercenaries can separate what they believe from what they are forced to do.

In her quiet opinion, that was why people regarded mercenaries like they did. If you divorced belief from action, then you were on dangerous ground.

No, she thought. No Awakening for me.

The Breath would remain as it was. If it tempted her too much further, she would give the lot away to somebody who had none.

And become a Drab herself.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tell me about the mountains, Susebron wrote.

Siri smiled. “Mountains?”

Please, he wrote, sitting in his chair beside the bed. Siri lay on one side; her bulky dress had been too hot for this evening, so she sat in her shift with a sheet over her, resting on one elbow so she could see what he wrote. The fire crackled.

“I don’t know what you tell you,” she said. “I mean, the mountains aren’t amazing like the wonders you have in T’Telir. You have so many colors, so much variety.”

I think that rocks sticking from the ground and which rise thousands of feet into the air count as a wonder, he wrote.

“I guess,” she said. “I liked it in Idris—I didn’t really ever want to know anything else. For someone like you, though, it would probably be boring.”

More boring than sitting in the same palace every day, not allowed to leave, not allowed to speak, being dressed and pampered?

“Okay, you win.”

Tell me of them, please. His handwriting was getting very good. Plus, the more he wrote, the more he seemed to understand. She wished so much that she could find him books to read—she suspected that he’d absorb them quickly, becoming as learned as any of the scholars who had tried to tutor her.

And yet, all he had was Siri. He seemed to appreciate what she gave him—but that was probably just because he didn’t know just how ignorant she was. *I suspect,* she thought, *that my tutors would laugh themselves silly if they knew how much I’d come to regret ignoring them.*

“The mountains are... vast,” she said. “You can’t really get a sense of it here, in the lowlands. It’s by watching them that you get a sense of just how insignificant people really are. I mean, no matter how long we worked and built, we could never pile up *anything* as high as one of the mountains.

“They’re rocks, like you said, but they’re not lifeless. They’re green—as green as your jungles. But it’s a different green. I heard some of the traveling merchants complain that the mountains cut off their view, but I think you can see *more*. They let you see the surface of the land as it extends upward, toward Austre’s domain in the sky.”

He paused. *Austre?*

Siri flushed, hair blushing as well. “I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t talk about other gods in front of you.”

Other gods? he wrote. *Like those in the court?*

“No,” Siri said. “Austre is the Idrian God.”

I understand, Susebron wrote. *Is he very handsome?*

Siri laughed. “No, you don’t understand. He’s not a Returned, like you or Lightsong. He’s... well, I don’t know. Didn’t the priests mention other religions to you?”

Other religions? he wrote.

“Sure,” she said. “I mean, not everybody worships the Returned. The Idrians like me worship Austre, and the Pahn Kahl people—like Bluefingers... well, I don’t actually know what they worship, but it’s not you.”

That is very strange to consider, he wrote. If your gods are not Returned, then what are they?

“Not they,” Siri said. “Just one. We call him Austre. The Hallandren used to worship him too before...” She almost said before they became heretics. “Before Peacegiver arrived, and they decided to worship the Returned instead.”

But who is this Austre? he wrote.

“He’s not a person,” Siri said. “He’s more of a force. You know, the thing that watches over all people, who punishes those who don’t do what is right and who blesses those who are worthy.”

Have you met this creature?

Siri laughed. “Of course not. You can’t see Austre.”

Susebron frowned, looking at her.

“I know,” she said. “It seems silly to you, I’ll bet. But... well, we know he’s there. My sister, Vivenna, she knows a lot more about this than I do. But I’ve always believed. When I see something beautiful in nature—when I look at the mountains, with their wildflowers growing in patterns that are somehow more *right* than a man could have planted—I know. Beauty is real. That’s what reminds me of Austre. Plus, we’ve got the Returned—including the First Returned, Vo. He had the Five Visions before he died, and they *must* have come from somewhere.”

But, you don’t believe in worshiping the Returned?

Siri shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. My people teach strongly against it. They’re not fond of the way that Hallandrens see religion.”

He sat quietly for a long moment.

So... you do not like those such as me?

“What? Of course I like you! You’re sweet!”

He frowned, writing. *I do not think God Kings are supposed to be “sweet.”*

“Fine, then,” she said, rolling her eyes. “You’re terrible and mighty. Awesome and deific. And sweet.”

Much better, he wrote, smiling. I should very much like to meet this Austre.

“I’ll introduce you to some monks sometime,” Siri said. “They should be able to help you with that.”

Now you are mocking me.

Siri smiled as he looked up at her. There was no hurt in his eyes. He didn’t appear to mind being mocked; indeed, he seemed to find it very interesting. He particularly liked trying to pick out when she was being serious and when she wasn’t.

He looked down again. *More than meeting with this god, however, I should like to see the mountains. You seem to love them very much.*

“I do,” Siri said. It had been a time since she’d thought of Idris. But, as he mentioned it, she remembered the cool, open feeling of the fields she had run through not so long before. The chill of the crisp air—something that she suspected one could never find in Hallandren.

Plants in the Court of Gods were kept perfectly clipped, cultivated, and arranged. They were beautiful, but the wild fields of her homeland had their own special feel.

Susebron was writing again. *I suspect that the mountains are beautiful, as you have said. However, I believe the most beautiful thing in them has already come down to me.*

Siri started, then flushed. He seemed so open, not even a little embarrassed or shy about the bold compliment. “Susebron!” she said. “You have the heart of a charmer.”

Charmer? He wrote. *I must only speak what I see. There is nothing so wonderful as you, even in my entire Court. The mountains must be special indeed, to produce such beauty.*

“See, now you’ve gone too far,” she said. “I’ve *seen* the goddesses of your court. They’re far more beautiful than I am.”

Beauty is not about how a person looks, Susebron wrote. *My mother taught me this. The travelers in my storybook must not judge the old woman ugly, for she might be a beautiful goddess inside.*

“This isn’t a story, Susebron.”

Yes it is, he wrote. *All of those stories are just tales told by people who lived lives. What they say about humankind is true. I have watched and seen how people act.* He erased, then continued. *It is strange, for me, to interpret these things, for I do not see as normal men do. I am the God King. Everything, to my eyes, has the same beauty.*

Siri frowned. “I don’t understand.”

I have thousands of Breaths, he wrote. *It is hard to see as other people do—only through the stories of my mother can I understand their ways. All colors are beauty in my eyes. When you look at something—a person—they seem sometimes more beautiful than others.*

This is not so for me. I see only the color. The rich, wondrous colors that make up all things and gives them life. I cannot focus only on the face, like so many do. I see the sparkle of the eyes, the blush of the cheeks, the tones of skin—even each blemish is a distinct pattern. All people are wonderful.

He erased. *And so, when I speak of beauty, I must speak of things other than these colors. And you are different. I do not know how to describe it.*

He looked up, and suddenly Siri was aware of just how close they were to each other. She, only in her shift, with the thin sheet covering her. He, tall and broad as a giant, shining with a soul that made the colors of the sheets bend out like light through a prism. He smiled in the firelight.

Oh, dear... she thought. *This is dangerous.*

She cleared her throat, sitting up, flushing yet again. “Well. Um, yes. Very nice. Thank you.”

He looked back down. *I wish I could let you go home, to see your mountains again. Perhaps I could explain this to the priests.*

She paled. “I don’t think it would be good to let them know that you can read.”

I could use the artisan’s script. It is very difficult to write, but they taught it to me so I could communicate with them, if I needed to.

“Still,” she said. “Telling them you want to send me home could hint that you’ve been talking to me.”

He stopped writing for a few moments.

Maybe that would be a good thing, he said.

“Susebron, they’re planning to *kill* you.”

You have no proof of that.

“Well, it’s suspicious, at least,” she said. “The last two God Kings died within months of producing an heir.”

You’re too untrusting, Susebron said. *I keep telling you. My priests are good people.*

She regarded him flatly, catching his eyes.

Except for removing my tongue, he admitted.

“And keeping you locked up, and not telling you anything. Look, even if they aren’t planning to kill you, they know things they’re not telling you. Perhaps it’s something to do with BioChroma—something that makes you die once your heir arrives.”

She frowned, leaning back. *Could that be it?* she wondered suddenly. “Susebron, how do you pass on your Breaths?”

He paused. *I don’t know,* he wrote. *I... don’t know a lot about it.*

“I don’t either,” she said. “Can they take them from you? Give them to your son? What if that kills you?”

They wouldn’t do that, he wrote.

“But maybe it’s possible,” she said. “And maybe that’s what happens. That’s why having a child is so dangerous! They have to make a new God King and it kills you to do so.”

He sat with his board in his lap, then shook his head, writing. *I am a God. I am not given Breaths, I am born with them.*

“No,” Siri said. “Bluefingers told me you’d been collecting them for centuries. That each God King gets two Breaths a week, instead of one, building up his reserves.”

Actually, he admitted, *some weeks I get three or four.*

“But you only need one to survive.”

Yes.

“And they can’t let that wealth die with you! They’re too afraid of it to let you use it, but they also can’t let themselves lose it. So, when a new child is born, they take the Breath from the old king—killing him—and give it to the new one.”

But Returned cannot use their Breath for Awakening, he wrote. *So my treasure of Breaths is useless.*

This gave her pause. She *had* heard that.

Susebron sat for a few moments, and then finally he rose, walking across to the window. He stared out at the darkness beyond. Siri frowned, then picked up his board and crossed the room. She approached hesitantly, wearing only her shift.

“Susebron?” she asked.

He continued to stare out the window. She joined him, careful not to touch him, looking out. Colorful lights sparkled the city beyond the wall of the Court of Gods. Beyond that was darkness. The still sea.

“Please,” she said, pushing the board into his hands. “What is it?”

He paused, then took it. *I am sorry,* he wrote. *I do not wish to appear petulant.*

“Is it because I keep challenging your priests?”

No, he wrote. *You have interesting theories, but I think they are just guesses. You do not know that the priests plan what you claim. That doesn’t bother me.*

“What is it, then?”

He hesitated, then erased with the sleeve of his robe. *You do not believe that the Returned are divine.*

“I... thought we already talked about this.”

We did. However, I now realized that this is the reason why you treat me like you do. You are different because you do not believe in my godhood. I wonder, is that the only reason I find you interesting?

And, if you do not believe, it makes me sad. Because a god is who I am, it is what I am, and if you do not believe in it, it makes me think you do not understand me.

He paused.

Yes. It does sound petulant. I am sorry.

She smiled, then tentatively touched his arm. He froze, looking down, but didn't pull back as he had times before. So she moved up beside him, resting against his arm.

“I don't have to believe in you to understand you,” she said. “I'd say that those people who worship you are the ones who don't understand. They can't get close to you, see who you really are. They're too focused on the aura and the divinity.”

He didn't respond.

“And,” she said, “I'm not different *just* because I don't believe in you. There are a lot of people in the palace who don't believe. Bluefingers, some of the serving girls who wear brown, other scribes. They serve you just as reverently as the priests. I'm just... well, I'm an irreverent type. I didn't really listen to my father or the monks back home, either. Maybe that's what you need. Someone who would be willing to look beyond your godhood and just get to know you.”

He nodded slowly. *That is comforting*, he wrote. *Though, it is very strange to be a god who's wife does not believe in him.*

Wife, she thought. Sometimes that was tough to remember. “Well,” she said, “I should think it would do every man good to have a wife who isn't as in awe of him as everyone else is. Somebody has to keep you humble.”

Humility is, I believe, somewhat opposite of godhood.

“Like sweetness?” she asked.

He chuckled. *Yes, just like that.* He put the board down. Then, hesitantly—a little frightened—he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer as they looked out the window at the lights of a city that remained colorful, even at night.

#

Bodies. Four of them. They all lay dead on the ground, blood an oddly dark color against the grass.

It was the day after Vivenna's visit to the D'Denir garden to meet with the forgers. She was back again. Sunlight streamed down, hot upon her head and neck as she stood with the rest of the gawking crowd. The silent D'Denir waited in rows behind her, soldiers of stone who would never march. Only they had seen the four men get killed.

People chattered with hushed voices, waiting for the city guard to finish their inspection. Denth had brought Vivenna quickly, before the bodies could be cleared. He had done so at her request. Now she wished she'd never asked.

To her enhanced, Awakener eyes, the colors of the blood on grass were powerfully distinct. Red and green. It made almost a violet in combination. She stared at the corpses, feeling an odd sense of disconnect. Color. So strange to see the colors of skin paled. She could tell the difference—the intrinsic difference—between skin that was alive and skin that was dead.

Dead skin was ten shades whiter than live skin. It was caused by blood seeping down and out of the veins. Almost like... like the blood *was* the color, drained out of its husks. The paint of a human life which had been carelessly spilt, leaving the canvas blank.

She looked away.

“You see it?” Denth said, at her side.

She nodded silently.

“You asked about him. Well, here’s what he does. *This* is why we’re so worried. Look at those wounds.”

She turned back. And, in the growing morning light, she could see something she’d missed before. The skin directly around the sword wounds had been completely drained of color. The wounds themselves had a dark black twinge to them. Like they had been infected with some terrible disease.

She turned back to Denth.

“Let’s go,” Denth said, leading her away from the crowd as the city watch finally began to order people back, frustrated by the number of gawkers.

“Who were they?” she asked quietly.

Denth stared straight ahead. “A gang of thieves. Ones we’d worked with.”

“You think he might come for us?”

“I’m not sure,” Denth said. “He could probably find us if he wanted. I don’t know.”

Tonk Fah approached across the green as they passed through the D’Denir statues. “Jewels and Clod are on alert,” Tonk Fah said. “None of us see him anywhere.”

“What happened to the skin of those men?” Vivenna asked.

“It’s that sword of his,” Denth growled. “We *have* to find a way to deal with it, Tonks. We’re going to end up crossing him, eventually. I can feel it.”

“But what is the sword?” Vivenna asked. “And how did it drain the color from their skin?”

“We’ll have to steal the thing, Denth,” Tonk Fah said, rubbing his chin as Jewels and Clod filled in around them, making a protective pattern as they moved out into the human river of the street.

“Steal the sword?” Denth asked. “I’m not touching the thing. No, we have to make him use it. Draw it. He won’t be able to keep it out for long. After that, we’ll be able to take him easily. I’ll kill him myself.”

“He beat Arsteel,” Jewels said quietly.

Denth froze. “He did *not* beat Arsteel! Not in a duel, at least.”

“Vasher didn’t use the sword,” Jewels said. “There was no blackness around Arsteel’s wounds.”

“Then Vasher used a trick!” Denth said. “Ambush. Accomplices. Something. Vasher is no duelist.”

Vivenna let herself get pulled along, thinking of those bodies. Denth and the others had spoken of the deaths this Vasher was causing. She'd wanted to see them. Well, now she had. And it left her feeling disturbed. Unsettled. And...

She frowned, inching slightly.

Someone with a lot of Breath was watching her.

#

Hey! Nightblood said. It's Varatridees! We should go talk to him. He'll be happy to see me.

Vasher stood quietly atop the building. He didn't really care who saw him. He rarely did. A flow of people passed on the colorful street. Varatridees—Denth, as he called himself now—walked among them with his team. The woman, Jewels. Tonk Fah, as always. The clueless princess. And the abomination.

Is Shashara here? Nightblood asked, excitement in his nebulous voice. We need to go see her! She'll be worried about what happened to me.

"We killed Shashara long ago, Nightblood," Vasher said. "Just like we killed Arsteel." *Just like we'll eventually kill Denth.*

As usual, Nightblood refused to acknowledge Shashara's death. She made me, you know, Nightblood said. Made me to destroy things that were evil. I'm rather good at it. I think she'd be proud of me. We should go talk to her. Show her how well I do my job.

"You are good at it," Vasher whispered. "Too good."

Nightblood began to hum quietly, pleased at the perceived praise. Vasher, however, focused on the princess, walking in her obviously exotic dress, standing out like a flake of snow in the tropical heat. He would need to do something about her. Because of her, so many things were falling apart. Plans toppling like stacked boxes, creating a racket with their demise. He didn't know where Denth had found her or how he kept control of her. However, Vasher was sorely tempted to jump down and let Nightblood take her.

The deaths the night before had already drawn too much attention. Nightblood was right. Vasher wasn't good at sneaking about. Rumors regarding him were prevalent in the city. That was both good and bad.

Later, he thought, turning from the silly girl and her mercenary entourage. *Later.*

Chapter Thirty

“Lightsong!” Blushweaver said, hands on hips. “What in the name of the Iridescent Tones are you doing?”

Lightsong ignored her, instead applying his hands to the clump of muddy clay in front of him. His servants and priests stood in a large ring, looking nearly as confused as Blushweaver—who had arrived at his pavilion just a few moments before.

The pottery wheel spun. He held the clay, trying to get it to stay in place. Sunlight shone in through the sides of the pavilion, and the neat, manicured grass beneath his table was flaked with mud. As the wheel sped up, the clay twirled about, flipping out bits and clumps. Lightsong’s hands became soaked with grimy, slick clay, and it didn’t take long for the entire mess to flip off the wheel and squish to the ground.

“Hum,” he said, regarding it.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Blushweaver asked. She wore one of her customary dresses—which meant nothing on the sides, very little at the top, and only slightly more through the front and back. She had her hair up in an intricate twisting pattern of weaves, braids, and ribbon. Likely the work of a master stylist, who had been invited into the Court to perform for one of the gods.

Lightsong hopped to his feet, holding his hands out to the sides as servants rushed to wash them off. Others came and wiped the bits of clay from his fine robes. He stood thoughtfully as other servants removed the pottery wheel.

“Well?” Blushweaver asked. “What *was* that?”

“I just discovered that I am no good at making pottery,” Lightsong said. “Actually, I am worse than ‘no good.’ I am pathetic. Ridiculously bad. Can’t even get the blasted clay to stay on the wheel.”

“Well what did you expect?”

“I’m not sure,” Lightsong said, walking across the pavilion toward a long table. Blushweaver—obviously annoyed at being led along—followed. Lightsong spun, grabbing five lemons off of the table and throwing them into the air. He proceeded juggle them.

Blushweaver watched. And, for just a moment, she looked honestly concerned. “Lightsong?” she asked. “Dear. Is... everything all right?”

“I have never practiced juggling,” he said, watching the lemons. “Here, grab that guava fruit.”

She hesitated, then carefully picked up the guava.

“Throw it,” Lightsong said.

She tossed it at him. He deftly grabbed it from the air, then threw it into the mix with the lemons. “I didn’t know I could do this,” he said. “Not before today. What do you make of it?”

“I...” she cocked her head.

He laughed. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen you at a loss for words, my dear.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen another god throwing fruit into the air.”

"It's more than this," Lightsong said, dipping down as he nearly lost one of the lemons. "Today I have discovered that I know an irregular number of sailing terms, that I am fantastic at mathematics, and that I have a fairly good eye for sketching. On the other hand, I know nothing about the dying industry, horses, or gardening. I have no eye for sculpting, I can't speak any foreign languages, and—as you've seen—I'm terrible at pottery."

Blushweaver watched him for a second.

He looked at her, letting the lemons drop but snatching the guava out of the air. He tossed it to a servant, who began peeling it for him. "My previous life, Blushweaver. These are skills that I—Lightsong—have no right to know. Whomever I was before I died, *he* could juggle. He knew about sailing. And he could sketch."

"We're not supposed to worry about the people we were before," Blushweaver said.

"I'm a god," Lightsong said, taking back a plate containing the peeled and sliced guava, then offering a piece to Blushweaver. "And, by the Colors, I'll worry about whatever I please."

She paused, then smiled and took slice. "Just when I thought I had you figured out..."

"You didn't have me figured out," he said lightly. "And neither did I. That's the point. Shall we go?"

She nodded, joining him as they began to cross the lawn, their servants bringing parasols to shade them. "You can't tell me that you've never wondered," Lightsong said.

"My dear," she replied, sucking on a guava piece, "I was *boring* before."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was a regular person! I would have been... ordinary. Have you *seen* regular women?"

"Their proportions aren't quite up to your standards, I know," he said. "But many are quite attractive."

Blushweaver shivered. "Please. Why would you want to know about your normal life? What if you were a murderer or a rapist? What if you had bad fashion sense?"

He snorted at the twinkle in her eye. "You act so shallow. But I see the curiosity. You should try some of these things, let them tell you a little of who you were."

"Hum," she said, smiling and siding up to him. He stopped as she ran her finger down the front of his chest. "Well, if you're trying new things today, maybe there's something else you ought to think about..."

"Don't try and change the subject, my dear."

"I'm not," she said. "But, how will you know who you were if you don't try? It would be an... experiment."

Lightsong laughed, pushing her hand away. "My dear, I fear you would find me less than satisfactory."

"I think you over-estimate me."

"That's impossible for one to do."

She paused, flushing slightly.

"Uh..." Lightsong said. "Hum. I didn't exactly mean..."

"Oh, bother," she said. "Now you've spoiled the moment. I was about to say something very clever, I just know it."

He smiled. “Both of us, at a loss for words in one afternoon. I do believe we’re losing our touch.”

“You could find *my* touch if you’d just let yourself.”

He rolled his eyes and continued to walk. “You’re hopeless.”

“When all else fails, use sexual innuendo,” she said lightly, joining him. “It always brings the focus back to where it belongs. On me.”

“Hopeless,” he said again. “But, I doubt we have time for me to chastise you again. We’ve arrived.”

Indeed, Hopefinder’s palace was before them. Lavender and silver, it had a pavilion out front set with table settings and food. Blushweaver and Lightsong had, of course, arranged for the meeting ahead of time.

Hopefinder the Just, god of innocence and beauty, stood up as they approached. He looked to be about thirteen years old. By physical age, he was the youngest of the Gods in the court. They weren’t supposed to acknowledge such discrepancies. After all, he’d Returned when his body had been two, which put him—in God years—as Lightsong’s senior by six years. In a place where most gods didn’t last twenty years, and an average age was probably closer to ten, six years difference was very significant.

“Lightsong, Blushweaver,” Hopefinder said, stiff and formal. “Welcome.”

“Thank you, dear,” Blushweaver said, smiling at him.

Hopefinder nodded then gestured toward the tables. The three small tables were separate, but sat closely enough together for the meal to remain intimate while giving each God their own space.

“How have you been, Hopefinder?” Lightsong asked, sitting.

“Very well,” Hopefinder said. His voice always seemed a little too... old for his body. Like a boy trying to imitate his father. “There was a particularly difficult case during Petitions this morning. A mother with her last child, dying of the fevers. She’d already lost the other three, as well as her husband. All in the space of a year. Tragic.”

“My dear,” Blushweaver said with concern. “You’re not actually considering... passing your Breath, are you?”

Hopefinder sat. “I don’t know, Blushweaver. I am old. I feel old. Perhaps it is time for me to go. I’m fifth most aged, you know.”

“Yes, but with the times growing so exciting!”

“Exciting?” he asked. “Why, they’re calming down. The new queen is here, and my sources in the palace say that she’s pursuing her duties to produce an heir with great vigor. Stability will soon arrive.”

“Stability?” Blushweaver asked as the servants brought them each a chilled soup. “Hopefinder, I find it hard to believe that you’re *so* uninformed.”

“You think the Idrians plan to use the new queen to play for the throne,” Hopefinder said. “I know what you’ve been doing, Blushweaver. I disagree.”

“And the rumors out in the city?” Blushweaver said. “The Idrian agents who are causing such a ruckus? This so called second princess out in the city?”

Lightsong paused, spoon halfway to his lips. *What was that?*

“The city’s Idrians are *always* creating one crisis or another,” Hopefinder said, waving his fingers dismissively. “What was that disturbance six months ago, the rebel on the outer dye

plantations? He died in prison, I recall. Foreign workers rarely provide a stable societal underclass, but I don't fear them."

"They've never claimed to have a Royal agent working with them," Blushweaver said. "Things could get out of hand *very* quickly."

"My interests in the city are quite secure," Hopefinder said, lacing his fingers in front of him. The servants took away his soup. He'd taken only three sips. "How about yours?"

"That's what this meeting is for," Blushweaver said.

"Excuse me," Lightsong said, raising a finger. "But what in the *colors* are we talking about?"

"Unrest in the city, Lightsong," Hopefinder said. "Some of the locals are unsettled by the prospect of war."

"They could turn dangerous very easily," Blushweaver said, stirring her soup with a lazy motion. "I think that we should be prepared."

"I am," Hopefinder said, watching Blushweaver with his too-young face. Like all younger Returned—the God King included—Hopefinder would continue to age until his body reached maturity. Then, he would stop aging—just over the brink into adulthood—until he gave up his Breath.

He acted so much like an adult. Lightsong hadn't interacted much with children, but some of his attendants—when training—were youths. Hopefinder was not one of these. Stories said that Hopefinder, like other young returned, had matured very quickly during his first year of life coming to think and speak as an adult while his body was still that of a young child.

Hopefinder and Blushweaver continued to talk about the stability of the city, mentioning various acts of vandalism that had occurred. War plans stolen, city supply stations poisoned. Lightsong let them talk. *He doesn't seem to find Blushweaver's beauty distracting*, he thought as he watched. She began in on the fruit course, acting characteristically luscious as she sucked on pieces of pineapple. Hopefinder either didn't care, or didn't notice, as she leaned forward, showing an alarming amount of cleavage.

Something is different about him, Lightsong thought. He Returned when he was a child and acted like one for a very short time. Now, he's an adult in some ways, but a child in others.

The transformation had made Hopefinder more mature. He was also taller and more physically impressive than regular boys his age, even if he didn't have the chiseled, majestic features of a fully grown god.

And yet, Lightsong thought, eating a piece of pineapple, different Gods have different body styles. Blushweaver is inhumanly well-endowed, particularly for how thin she is. Yet Mercystar is plump and curvaceous all around. Others, like Allmother, look physically old.

Lightsong knew he knew he didn't deserve his powerful physique. Like the knowledge of how to juggle, he somehow understood that a person usually had to work hard in a labor job to obtain a muscular body. Lounging about, eating and drinking, should have made him plump.

But... there have been gods who were fat, he thought, remembering some of the pictures he had seen of Returned who had come before him. *There was a time in our culture when that was seen as the ideal...* Then, did Returned looks have something to do with the way society viewed them? Perhaps their opinion of an ideal body? That would certainly explain Blushweaver.

Some things survived the transformation. Language. Skills. And, as he thought about it, social competence. Considering the fact that the gods spent their lives locked up atop a plateau, they probably should have been far less well-adjusted than they were. At the very least, they should have been ignorant and naive. Yet most of them were consummate schemers with a surprisingly good grasp on what happened in the outside world.

Memory itself didn't survive. Why? Why could Lightsong juggle and understand the meaning of the word bowsprit, yet at the same time be unable to remember who his parents had been? And who was that face he saw in his dreams? Why storms and tempests? What was the red panther that appeared, yet again, in his nightmares the night before?

"Blushweaver," Hopefinder said, holding up a hand. "Enough. Before we go any further, I must point out that your obvious attempts to seduce me will gain you nothing."

Blushweaver glanced away, looking embarrassed.

Lightsong shook himself out of his contemplations. "My dear Hopefinder," he said. "She was *not* trying to seduce you. You must understand; Blushweaver's aura of allure is simply a part of who she is; it's part of what makes her so charming."

"Regardless," he said. "I will not be swayed by her paranoid arguments and worries."

"My contacts do not think that these things are simple 'paranoia,'" Blushweaver said as the fruit dishes were removed. A small chilled fish fillet arrived next.

"Contacts?" Hopefinder asked. "And just who are these 'contacts' you keep mentioning?"

"People within the God King's palace itself."

"We all have people in the God King's palace," Hopefinder said.

"I don't," Lightsong said. "No people. I thought about sending a dog in there once, though."

Blushweaver rolled her eyes. "My contact is *quite* important. He hears things, knows things. War is coming."

"I don't believe you," he said, picking at his food, "but that doesn't really matter now, does it? You're not here to get me to believe you. You just want my army."

"Your codes," Blushweaver said. "Lifeless security phrases. What will it cost us to get them?"

Hopefinder picked at his fish some more. "Do you know, Blushweaver, why I find my existence so boring?"

She shook her head. "Honestly, I *still* think you're bluffing on that count, my dear."

"I'm not," he said. "Eleven years. Eleven years of peace. Eleven years to grow to sincerely loath this system of government we have. We all attend the court of judgment. We listen to the arguments. But most of us don't matter. In any given vote, only those with sway in that area have any real say over anything. During war comes, those of us with Lifeless commands are important. The rest of the time, our opinion rarely matters."

"You want my Lifeless? Be welcome to them! I have had no opportunity to use them in eleven years, and I venture that another eleven will pass without incident. I will give you those Commands, Blushweaver—but only in exchange for *your* vote. You sit on the council of social ills. You have an important vote practically every week. In exchange for my Security Phrases, you must promise to vote in social matters as I say, from now until one of us dies."

The pavilion fell silent.

"Ah, so now you reconsider," Hopefinder said, smiling. "I've heard you complain about your duties in court—that you find your votes trivial. Well, it's not so easy to let go of them, is it? Your vote is all the influence you have. It isn't flashy, but it is potent. It—"

"Done," Blushweaver said sharply.

Hopefinder cut off.

"My vote is yours," Blushweaver said, meeting his eyes. "The terms are acceptable. I swear it in front of your priests and mine, before another god even."

By the Colors, Lightsong thought. *She really is serious.* Part of him had assumed, all along, that her posturing about the war was just another game. Yet the woman who stared Hopefinder in the eyes was not playing. She sincerely believed that Hallandren was in danger, and she wanted to make certain that the armies were unified and prepared. She cared.

And that left him worried. What had he gotten himself into? What if there really was a war? As he watched the interaction of the two gods, he was left chilled by how easily and quickly they dealt in the fate of the Hallandren people. To Hopefinder, his control of a quarter of the Hallandren armies should have been a sacred duty. He was ready to toss that aside simply because he had grown bored.

Who am I to chastise another's lack of piety? Lightsong thought. I, who don't even believe in my own divinity.

And yet... at that moment, as Hopefinder prepared to release his Commands to Blushweaver, Lightsong thought he saw something. Like a remembered fragment of a memory. A dream that he might never have dreamed.

A shining room, glowing, reflecting light. A room of steel.

A prison.

"Servants and priests, withdraw," Hopefinder commanded.

They retreated, leaving the three gods alone beside their half-eaten meals, pavilion canvas flapping slightly in the wind.

"The security phrase," Hopefinder said, looking at Blushweaver, "is 'A candle by which to see.'"

It was the title of a famous poem, even Lightsong knew it. Blushweaver smiled. Speaking those words to any of Hopefinder's ten thousand Lifeless in the barracks would allow her to override their current orders and take complete control of them. Lightsong suspected that by the end of the day, she'd make the trip down to the barracks—which lay at the base of the court, and were considered part of it—and begin imprinting Hopefinder's soldiers with a new Security Phrase, known only to her and perhaps a few of her most trusted priests.

"And now, I withdraw," Hopefinder said, standing. "There is a vote this evening at the court. You will attend, Blushweaver, and you will cast your vote in favor of the reformist arguments."

With that, he left.

"I feel like we just got manipulated," Lightsong said. "It's a very curious feeling. A little like being stepped on, only without so much foot odor."

"We only got manipulated, my dear, if there *isn't* war. If there is, then we may have just set ourselves up to save the entire Court—perhaps the kingdom itself."

"How very altruistic of us," Lightsong said.

"We're like that," Blushweaver said as the servants returned. "So selfless at times it's painful. Either way, that means we control two god's worth of Lifeless."

"Mine and Hopefinder's?"

"Actually," she said, "I was speaking of Hopefinder's and Mercystar's. She confided hers to me yesterday, all the while talking about how comforting she found it that you'd taken a personal interest in the incident at her palace. That was very well done, by the way. She spoke about your thorough investigation."

She seemed to be fishing for something. Lightsong smiled. "No, I didn't know that would encourage her to release her Commands to you. I was just curious."

“Curious about a murdered servant?”

“Actually, yes,” Lightsong said. “The death of a servant of the Returned is quite disconcerting to me, particularly in the proximity of our own palaces.”

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow.

“Would I lie to you?” Lightsong asked.

“Only every time you claim you don’t want to sleep with me. Lies, brazen lies.”

“Innuendo again, my dear?”

“Of course not,” she said. “That one was quite flagrant. Regardless, I know that you are lying about that investigation. What was the *real* purpose of it?”

Lightsong paused, then sighed, shaking his head, waving for servant to bring back the fruit—he liked that better. “I don’t know, Blushweaver. In all honesty, I’m beginning to wonder if I might have been a kind of officer of the law in my previous life.”

She frowned.

“You know, like city watch. I was *extremely* good at interrogating those servants. At least, that’s my own humble opinion.”

“Which we’ve already established is quite altruistic.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “I think this might explain how I ended up dying in “bold” way, giving me my name.”

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. “I just always assumed you were found in bed with a much younger woman and her father killed you. Seems far more bold than dying from stab wounds while trying to catch some petty thief.”

“Your mockery slides right off of my altruistic humility.”

“Ah, indeed. You should probably have been named the God of “putting up with Blushweaver” for your heroics.”

“Either way,” Lightsong said, eating another chunk of pineapple. “I was a sheriff or investigator of some kind. I’ll bet that if I ever got my hands on a sword, I’d prove one of the best duelists this city has ever seen.”

She regarded him for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Dead serious. Dead as a squirrel serious.”

She paused.

“Personal joke,” he said, sighing. “But yes, I believe it. Though, there’s one thing I can’t figure out.”

“And that is?”

“How juggling lemons fits into it all.”

Chapter Thirty-One

"I feel I have to ask one more time," Denth said. "Do we *have* to go through with this?" Denth walked with Vivenna, Tonk Fah, Jewels, and Clod. Parlin had stayed behind at Vivenna's request.

"They're my people, Denth" Vivenna said.

"So?" he asked. "Princess, mercenaries are *my* people, and you don't see me spending that much time with them. They're a smelly, annoying lot."

"Not to mention rude," Tonk Fah added.

Vivenna rolled her eyes. "Denth, I'm their *princess*. Besides, you yourself said that they were influential."

"Their leaders are," Denth said. "And they'd be perfectly happy to meet with you on neutral ground. Going into the slums isn't necessary—the common people, they really aren't all that important."

She eyed him. "That is the difference between Hallandrens and Idrians. We pay attention to our people."

Behind, Jewels snorted in derision.

"I'm not Hallandren," Denth noted. However, he let the statement drop as they approached the slums. Vivenna had to admit that as they grew close, she did feel a little more apprehensive.

This slum felt different than the others. Darker, somehow. Something more than just the run-down shops and unrepaired streets. Small groups of men stood on street corners, watching her with suspicious eyes. Every once in a while, Vivenna would catch a glimpse of a building with women in very revealing clothing—even for Hallandren—hanging about the front. Some even whistled toward Denth and Tonk Fah.

This was a foreign place. Everywhere else in T'Telir, she felt like she didn't fit in. Here, she felt unwelcome. Distrusted. Even hated.

She steeled herself. Somewhere in this place was a group of tired, overworked, frightened Idrians. The threatening atmosphere made her feel even more sorry for her people. She didn't know if they would be much help in trying to sabotage the Hallandren war effort, but she did know one thing: she intended to do help them. If people had slipped through the monarchy's fingers, then it was her duty to try and pick them back up.

"That look on your face," Denth said. "What's it for?"

"I'm worried about my people," she said, shivering as they passed a large group of street toughs dressed in black with red arm-bands, their faces stained and dirtied. "I came by this slum when Parlin and I were searching for a new home. I... I didn't want to get close, even though I'd heard that prices were cheap. I can't believe that my people are so oppressed that they would have to live somewhere in here, surrounded by all of *this*."

Denth frowned. "Surrounded by it?"

Vivenna nodded. "Living among prostitutes and gangs, having to walk past such things every day..."

Denth started laughing, startling her. “Princess,” he said, “your people don’t live *among* prostitutes and gangs. Your people *are* the prostitutes and gangs.”

Vivenna stopped in the middle of the street. “What?”

Denth glanced back at her. “This is the Idrian quarter of the city. These slums are called the Highlands, for Color’s sake.”

“Impossible,” she snapped.

“Very possible,” Denth replied. “I’ve seen it in cities across the world. Immigrants gather, make a little enclave. That enclave gets conveniently ignored by the rest of the city. When roads are repaired, other places come first. When guards are sent to patrol, they avoid the foreign sections.”

“The slum becomes its own little world,” Tonk Fah said, walking up beside her.

“Everyone you pass in here is an Idrian,” Denth said, waving for her to keep walking. “There’s a reason your kind have a bad reputation in the rest of the city.”

Vivenna felt a numb chill. *No*, she thought. *No, it’s not possible.*

Unfortunately, she soon began to see some signs. Symbols of Austre placed—unobtrusive by intention—in the corners of windowsills or on doorsteps. People in grays and whites. Mementoes of the highlands in the form of shepherd’s caps or wool cloaks. And yet, if this people were of Idris, then they’d been completely corrupted. Colors marred their costumes, not to mention the air of danger and unwelcomeness they exuded. And how could any Idrian even *think* of becoming a prostitute?

“I... don’t understand, Denth. We are a peaceful people. A people of mountain villages. We are open. Friendly.”

“That kind doesn’t last long in a slum,” he said, walking beside her. “They change or they get beaten down.”

Vivenna shivered, feeling a stab of anger at Hallandren. They did this to my people, she thought. I could have forgiven the Hallandren for making my people poor. But this? They’ve made thugs and thieves out of caring shepherds. They’ve turned our women into prostitutes and our children to urchins.

She knew she shouldn’t let herself grow angry. And yet, she had to grit her teeth and work very, *very* hard to keep her hair from bleeding to a smoldering red. The images sparked something within her. Something she consistently avoided thinking about.

Hallandren has ruined these people. Just like it ruined me by dominating my childhood, by forcing me to honor the opportunity to be taken and raped in the name of protecting my country.

I hate this city. Hate it so very much.

They were unseemly thoughts. She couldn’t afford to hate Hallandren. She had been told that on many occasions. She had trouble lately remembering why.

She succeeded in keeping her hatred, and hair, contained. A few moments later, Thame joined them and led them the rest of the distance. She had been told they would be meeting in a large park, but Vivenna soon saw that the term ‘park’ had been used loosely. The plot of land was barren, strewn with garbage, and surrounded by buildings on all sides.

Her group stopped at the edge of the dead garden and waited as Thame went ahead. People had gathered in the area as Thame had promised. Most were of the same type that she had seen earlier. Men wearing dark, ominous colors and flippant expressions. Youthful street toughs. Women in the garb of prostitutes. Some older people.

Vivenna forced out a smile, but it felt insincere, even to her. For their benefit, she changed her hair color to yellow. The color of happiness and excitement. The people muttered among themselves.

Thame soon returned and waived her forward.

“Wait,” Vivenna said. “I wanted to talk to the common people before we meet with the leaders.”

Thame shrugged. “If you want...”

Vivenna stepped forward. “People of Idris,” she said. “I’ve come to offer you comfort and hope.”

The people continued to talk among themselves. Very few seemed to pay any attention to her at all. Vivenna swallowed. “I know that you’ve had hard lives. But, I want to promise you that the king *does* care for you and support you. I will find a way to bring you home.”

“Home?” one of the men said. “Back to the highlands?”

Vivenna nodded.

Several people snorted at that comment, and a few trailed away. Vivenna watched them go with concern. “Wait,” she said. “Don’t you want to hear me? I bring news from your king.”

The people ignored her.

“Most of them just wanted confirmation that you were who you said, your highness,” Thame said quietly.

Vivenna turned back toward the groups still talking quietly in the garden. “Your lives can get better,” she promised. “I will see you cared for.”

“Our lives are already better,” one of the men said. “There is nothing for us in the highlands. I earn twice as much here as I did back there.” Others nodded in agreement.

“Then why even come to see me?” she whispered.

“I told you, princess,” Thame said. “They’re patriots—they believe in being Idrian. City Idrians. We stick together, we do. You being here... it means something to them, don’t worry. They may seem indifferent, but they’ll do *anything* to get back at the Hallandrens.”

Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought, growing even more deeply angered. *These people aren’t even Idrians any more.* Thame called them ‘patriots,’ but all she saw was a group held together only because they were forced to.

She turned, giving up on her speech. These people were not interested in hope or comfort. They only wanted revenge. She could use that, perhaps, but it made her feel dirty to even think about it. Thame led her and the others down a pathway beaten into the field of weeds and trash. Near the back of the garden, they found a wide construction that was partially a service shack, partially a wooden pavilion. Inside, visible through the open doorways on the sides, she could see the leaders waiting.

There were three of them, each with his own compliment of bodyguards. The leaders wore rich, vibrant T’Telir colors. Slum lords. Vivenna felt her stomach twist. All three of the men had at least the First Heightening. One of them had obtained the Third.

Jewels and Clod took up places outside the building, guarding Vivenna’s escape route. Vivenna walked in and sat in the chair arranged for her. Denth and Tonk Fah took up protective places behind her.

Vivenna regarded the slum lords. All three of them were variations on the same theme. The one on the left looked the most comfortable in his rich clothing. The one on the right looked more

scraggly. The one in the center seemed the indulgent type. He was sloppy—but in a purposeful way, perhaps because it was a nice accent to his handsome, youthful face.

The room was still.

“I’m not sure what to say to you,” Vivenna finally said. “I came to find something that doesn’t exist. I was hoping that the people still cared about their heritage.”

The sloppy one in the middle leaned forward. This would probably be Rira, Thame’s employer. “You’re our princess,” he said. “Daughter of our king. We care about that.”

“Kind of,” said the one in the neat outfit.

“Really, princess,” Rira said. “We’re honored to meet with you. And curious at your intentions in our city. You’ve been making quite a stir.”

Vivenna regarded them with a flat expression. Finally, she sighed. “You all know that war is coming.”

Rira nodded. The more scraggly man on the right, however, shook his head. “I’m not convinced there will be war. Not yet.”

“It *is* coming,” Vivenna said sharply. “I promise you that. My intentions in this city, therefore, are to make certain that the war goes as well for Idris as possible.”

“And what would that entail?” the scraggly man asked. “A Royal on the throne of Hallandren?”

Was that what she wanted? “I just want our people to survive.”

“A weak middle ground,” said the man on the left. “Wars are fought to be won, your highness. The Hallandrens have Lifeless. Beat them, and they’ll just make more. I think that an Idris military presence in the city would be an absolute *necessity* if you wanted to bring our homeland freedom.”

Vivenna frowned.

“You think to overthrow the city?” asked the man on the right. “If you do, what do we get out of it?”

“Wait,” said the man on the left. “Overthrow the city? Are we sure we want to get involved un *that* sort of thing again? What of Vahr’s failure? We all lost a lot of money in that venture.”

“Vahr was from Pahn Kahl,” the man on the right said. “Not one of us at all. I’m willing to take another risk if there are real Royals involved this time.”

“I didn’t say anything about overthrowing the kingdom,” Vivenna said. “I just want to bring the people some hope,” Vivenna said. *Or, at least, I did...*

“Hope?” asked the man on the left. “Who cares about hope? I want promises. Will titles be handed out? Who gets the trade contracts if Idris wins?”

“You have a sister,” Rira said. “A third one, unmarried. Is her hand bargainable? Royal blood could gain *my* support for your war.”

Vivenna’s stomach twisted. “Gentlemen,” she said in her diplomat’s voice, “this is not about seeking personal gain. This is about patriotism.”

“Of course, of course,” Rira said. “But patriots should earn rewards. Right?”

All three looked at her expectantly.

Vivenna stood up. “I will be going, now.”

Denth, looking surprised, laid a hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure?” he asked. “It took quite a bit of effort to set up this meeting.”

"I have been willing to work with thugs and thieves, Denth," she said quietly. "But seeing them and knowing they're my own people is too hard."

"You judge us quickly, princess," Rira said from behind, chuckling. "Don't tell me that you didn't expect this?"

"Expecting something is different from seeing it first hand, Rira. I expected you three. I didn't expect to see what had happened to our people."

"And the Five Visions?" Rira asked. "You sweep in here, judge us beneath you, then sweep away? That's not very Idrian of you."

She turned back toward the men. The one on the right had already stood and was gathering his bodyguards to go, grumbling about the 'waste of time.'

"What do you know of being Idrian?" she snapped. "Where is your obedience of Austre?"

Rira reached beneath his shirt, pulling out a small white disc, inscribed with his parents names. An Austrin charm of obedience. "My father *carried* me down here from the highlands, princess. He died working the Edgli fields. I've pulled myself up by the pain of my scraped, bleeding hands. I worked very hard to make things better for your people. When Vahr spoke of revolution, I gave him coin to feed his supporters."

"You buy Breath," she said. "And you make prostitutes of housewives."

"I live," he said. "And I make sure that everyone else has enough food. Will *you* do better for them?"

Vivenna frowned. "I..."

She trailed off as she heard the screams.

That confused her. Her life sense jolted her, warning of large groups of people approaching. She spun as the slum lords cursed, standing. Outside, through the garden, she saw something terrible. Purple and yellow uniforms on hulking men with grey faces.

Lifeless soldiers. The city watch.

Peasants scattered, screaming as the Lifeless tromped into the garden, led by a number of uniformed and living city guards. Denth cursed, shoving Vivenna to the side. "Run!" he said, whipping his sword free.

"But—"

Tonk Fah grabbed her arm, towing her out of the building as Denth charged the guards. The slum lords and their people were in chaos as they fled, though the city guard were quickly moving to cut off exits.

Tonk Fah cursed, pulling Vivenna into a small alleyway at the back of the garden.

"What's going on?" she asked, heart thumping.

"Raid," Tonk Fah said. "Shouldn't be too dangerous, unless..."

Blades sounded, metal clashing against metal, and the screams grew more desperate. Vivenna glanced backward. The men from the slum lords' groups, feeling trapped, had engaged the Lifeless. Vivenna felt a sense of horror, watching the terrible, grey faced men wade amongst the swords and daggers, ignoring wounds. The creatures pulled out their weapons and began to attack. Men yelled, falling, bloody.

Denth moved to defend the mouth of Vivenna's alleyway. She didn't know where Jewels had gone.

“Aw, Colors,” Tonk Fah said, shoving her in front of him. “Fools decided to resist. Now we’re in trouble.”

“But how did they find us!”

“Don’t know,” he said. “Don’t care. They might be after you. They might just be after those slum lords. I hope we never find out. *Keep moving!*”

Vivenna obeyed, rushing down the dark alleyway, trying to keep from tripping on her long dress. It proved very impractical to run in, and Tonk Fah kept shooing her forward, looking back anxiously. She heard grunts and echoing yells as Denth fought something at the mouth of the alleyway.

Vivenna and Tonk Fah burst out of the alleyway. There, standing in the street waiting, was a group of five Lifeless. Vivenna lurched to a halt. Tonk Fah cursed.

The Lifeless looked as if they were stone, their expressions eerily grim in the waning light. Tonk Fah glanced backward, obviously decided that Denth wasn’t going to be arriving anytime soon, then resignedly held his hands up and dropped his sword. “I can’t take five on my own, princess,” he whispered. “Not Lifeless. We’ll have to let them arrest us.”

Vivenna slowly held her hands up as well.

The Lifeless pulled out their weapons.

“Uh...” Tonk Fah said. “We surrender?”

The creatures charged.

“Run!” he shouted, expertly kicking his sword back up into his hand.

Vivenna stumbled to the side as several of the lifeless charged Tonk Fah. She scrambled away as quickly as she could. Tonk Fah tried to follow, but had to stop to defend himself. She slowed, glancing back in time to see him ram his dueling blade through the neck of a Lifeless.

The creature gushed something that was not blood. Three others got around Tonk Fah, though he did manage to whip his blade to the side, taking one in the back of the leg. It fell to the cobbles.

Two ran toward her.

Vivenna watched them come, mind numb. Should she stay? Try to help...

Help how? something screamed within her. That something was visceral and primal. *Run!*

And she did. She dashed away, overwhelmed with terror, taking the first corner she saw, ducking into an alleyway. She raced for the other side, but in her haste she tripped on her skirt.

She hit the cobblestones roughly, crying out. She heard footsteps behind her, and she yelled for help, ignoring her bruised elbow as she quickly pulled her skirt off, leaving only her dressing leggings. She scrambled to her feet, screaming again.

Something darkened the other end of the alleyway. A hulking figure with grey skin. Vivenna stopped, then spun. The other two entered the alleyway behind her. She backed against the wall, feeling suddenly cold. Shocked.

Austre, God of Colors, she thought, trembling. Please...

The Lifeless advanced on her, weapons out. She looked down. A bit of rope, frayed but still useful, sat in the refuse beside her discarded green skirt.

Like everything else, the rope called to her. As if it *felt* like it should still live. She couldn’t sense the Lifeless bearing down on her, but ironically she felt as if she could sense the rope. Could imagine it, twisting around legs, tying the creatures up.

Those Breaths you hold, Denth had said. They're a tool. Almost priceless. Certainly powerful...

She glanced back at the Lifeless, with their inhumanly human eyes. She felt her heart thumping so hard it felt like someone was pounding on her chest. She watched them approach.

And saw her death reflected in their unfeeling eyes.

Tears on her face, she fell to her knees, trembling as she grabbed rope and skirt. She knew the mechanics. Her tutors had trained her.

"Come to life," she plead of the rope.

Nothing happened.

She knew the mechanics, but that obviously wasn't enough. She wept, eyes blurry. "Please," she begged. "Please. Save me."

The first Lifeless reached her—the one who had cut her off at the far end of the alleyway. She cringed, cowering to the dirty street.

The creature fell to the ground, jerking. She looked up with shock as someone jumped over her, then slammed his weapon into one of the other creatures as they arrived. Vivenna blinked her eyes clear, and only then did she recognize the newcomer.

Not Denth. Not Tonk Fah. A creature with skin as grey as that of the men attacking her, which is why she hadn't recognized him at first.

Clod.

He expertly took off the head of his first opponent, wielding his thick-bladed sword. Something clear sprayed from the neck of the beheaded creature as it fell backward, tumbling to the ground. Dead—apparently—like any man would have been.

Clod blocked an attack from the remaining Lifeless guard. Behind, in the mouth of the alleyway, two more appeared. They charged as Clod backed up, firmly planting one foot on either side of Vivenna, his sword held before him. It dripped clear liquid.

The remaining lifeless guard waited for the other two to approach. Vivenna trembled, to tired—too numb—to flee. She glanced upward, and saw something almost human in Clod's eyes as he raised his sword against the three. It was the first emotion she'd seen in any Lifeless, though she might have mistaken it.

Determination.

The three attacked. She had assumed—in her ignorance back in Idris—that Lifeless were like decaying skeletons or corpses. She'd imagined them attacking in waves, lacking skill, but having relentless, dark power.

She'd been wrong. These creatures moved with proficiency and coordination, like a human might. Except, there was no speaking. No grunting. Just silence as Clod fended off one attack, then rammed his elbow into the face of a second Lifeless. He moved with a fluidity she had rarely seen, his skill matching the brief moment of dazzling speed that Denth had displayed in the restaurant.

Clod whipped his sword around and took the third Lifeless in the leg. One of the others, however, rammed his blade through Clod's stomach. Something clear squirted out both sides, spraying Vivenna. Clod didn't even grunt as he brought his weapon around and took off a second head.

The Lifeless guard died, falling to the ground and leaving his weapon sticking from Clod's chest. One of the other guards stumbled away, leg bleeding clear blood, and then it fell backward to

the ground too. Clod efficiently turned his attention to the last standing Lifeless, which did not retreat, but took an obviously defensive stance.

The stance didn't work; Clod took this last one down in a matter of seconds. Then he efficiently rammed his blade through the neck of a fallen creature, stopping it from trying to crawl toward Vivenna, a knife in its hand.

The alleyway fell still. Clod turned toward her, eyes lacking emotion. Then he began to twitch. He shook his head, as if trying to clear his vision. An awful lot of clear liquid was pouring from his chest. He placed one hand against the wall, then slumped to his knees.

Vivenna hesitated, then reached out a hand toward him. Her hand fell on his arm. The skin was cold.

A shadow moved on the other side of the alleyway. She looked up, apprehensive, still in shock.

"Aw, Colors," Tonk Fah said, running forward, outfit wet with clear liquid. "Denth! She's here!" He knelt down beside Vivenna. "You okay?"

She nodded dully, only barely aware that she was still holding her skirt in one hand. That meant her legs—all the way up to her thighs and the short dressing leggings she now wore—were exposed. She couldn't find it in herself to care. Nor did she care that her hair was bleached white. She just stared at Clod, who knelt before her, head bowed, as if worshiping at some strange altar. His weapon slipped from his twitching fingers and clanged to the cobbles. His eyes stared forward, glassy.

Tonk Fah followed her gaze, looking at Clod. "Yeah," he said. "Jewels is *not* going to be pleased. Come on, we need to get out of here."

Chapter Thirty-Two

He was always gone when Siri awoke.

She lay in the deep, well-stuffed bed, morning light streaming through the window. Already, the day was growing warm, and even her single sheet was too hot. She threw it off but remained on the bed, looking up at the ceiling.

She could tell from the sunlight that it was nearly noon. She and Susebron tended to stay up late talking. That was probably a good thing. Some might see that she was getting up later and later each morning, and think that it was due to... other activities.

She stretched. At first, it had been strange to communicate with the God King. As the days progressed, however, it was feeling more and more natural to her. She found his writing—uncertain, unpracticed letters that explained such interesting thoughts—to be endearing. If he spoke, she suspected that his voice would be kindly. He was so tender. She'd never have expected that.

She smiled, sinking back into her pillow, idly wishing for him to still be there when she awoke. She was happy. That, also, was something she'd never expected from Hallandren. She did miss the highlands, and her inability to leave the Court of Gods annoyed her, particularly considering the politics.

And yet there were other things. Marvelous things. The brilliant colors, the performers, the sheer *overwhelming* experience of T'Telir. And there was the opportunity to speak with Susebron each night. He treated her differently than anyone ever had before. Her brashness had been such a shame to her family, but Susebron found it fascinating, even alluring.

She smiled again, letting herself dream. However, as she did, real life began to intrude. Susebron was in danger. Real, serious danger. He refused to believe that his priests could bear him any sort of malice or threat. That same innocence which made him so interesting was also a terrible liability.

But what to do? Nobody else knew of his predicament. There was only one person who could help him. That person, unfortunately, wasn't up to the task. She had ignored her lessons, and had come to her fate wholly unprepared.

So what? a part of her mind whispered.

Siri stared at the ceiling. She found it hard to summon her customary shame at having ignored her lessons. She'd made a mistake. How much time was she going to spend moping, annoyed at herself for something done and gone?

All right, she told herself. Enough excuses. I might not have prepared as well as I should, but I'm here, now, and I need to do something.

Because nobody else will.

She climbed out of bed, running fingers through her long hair. Susebron liked it long—he found it fascinating, like her serving women did. With them to help her care for it, the length was worth the trouble. She folded her arms, wearing only her shift, pacing. She needed to play their game. She hated thinking of it that way. "Game" implied small stakes. This was no game. It was the God King's life.

She searched through her memory, dredging up what scraps she could from her lessons. Politics was about exchanges. It was about giving what you had—or what you implied that you had—in order to gain more. It was like being a merchant. You started with a certain stock, and by the end of the year, you hoped to have increased that stock. Or maybe even have changed it into a completely different stock.

Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike, Lightsong had told her. Don't appear too innocent, but don't appear too smart either. Be average.

She stopped beside the bed then gathered up the bed sheets and towed them over to the smoldering fire to burn, as was her daily chore.

Exchanges, she thought, watching the sheets catch fire in the large hearth. *What do I have to trade or exchange? Not much.*

It would have to do.

She walked over and pulled open the door. As usual, a group of serving women waited outside. Siri's standard ladies moved around her, bringing clothing. Another group of servants, however, moved to tidy the room. Several of these wore brown.

As her servants dressed her, she watched one of the girls in brown. At a convenient moment, Siri stepped over, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"You're from Pahn Kahl," Siri said quietly.

The girl nodded, surprised.

"I have a message I want you to give to Bluefingers," Siri whispered. "Tell him I have vital information he needs to know. I'd like to trade. Tell him... it could change his plans drastically."

The girl paled, but nodded, and Siri stepped back to continue dressing. Several of the other serving women had heard the exchange, but the servants were supposed to stay out of politics. It was a sacred tenet of the Hallandren religion that the servants of a god weren't to repeat or betray the things they heard in confidence.

Hopefully that would hold true. If it didn't, then she hadn't really given that much away. Now she just had to decide just what 'vital information' she had, and why exactly Bluefingers should care about it.

#

"My dear queen!" Lightsong said, actually going so far as to embrace Siri as she stepped into his pavilion at the arena.

Siri smiled as Lightsong waved for her to seat herself in one of his couch-like chairs. Siri sat with care—she was growing to favor the intricate Hallandren gowns, but moving about in them took quite a bit of skill. As she settled, Lightsong called for fruit.

"You treat me too kindly," Siri said.

"Nonsense," Lightsong said. "You're my queen! Besides, you remind me of someone of whom I was very fond."

"And who is that?"

"I honestly have no idea," Lightsong said, accepting a plate of sliced grapes, then handing them to Siri. "I can barely remember her. Grapes?"

Siri raised an eyebrow, but she knew by now not to encourage him *too* much. "Tell me," she asked, using a little wooden spear to eat her grape slices. "Why do they call you Lightsong the Bold?"

“There is an easy answer to that one, my dear,” he said, leaning back. “It is because of all the gods, only I am bold enough to act like a complete idiot.”

Siri raised an eyebrow.

“My station requires true courage,” he continued. “You see, I am *normally* quite a solemn and boring person. At nights my fondest desire is to sit and count the rocks in various piles beside my bed. Alas, I cannot. I instead go out courageously each evening, abandoning my rocks in favor of socializing with the other gods.”

“Why does *that* take courage?”

He looked at her. “My dear. Have you seen how dreadfully annoying the rest of them are?”

Siri laughed. “No, really,” she said. “Where *did* the name come from?”

“It’s a complete misnomer,” Lightsong said. “Obviously you’re intelligent enough to see that. Our names and titles are assigned randomly by a small monkey who has been fed an exceedingly large amount of gin.”

“Now you’re just being silly.”

“Now?” Lightsong asked. “*Now?*” he raised a cup of wine toward her. “My dear, I am *always* silly. You retract that statement at once!”

Siri just shook her head. Lightsong, it appeared, was in rare form this afternoon. Great, she thought. My husband is in danger of being murdered by unknown forces and my only allies are a scribe who’s afraid of me and a God who makes no sense.

“It has to do with death,” Lightsong finally said as the priests began to file into the arena floor below for this day’s round of arguments.

Siri looked toward him.

“All men die,” Lightsong said. “Some, however, die in ways that exemplify a particular attribute or emotion. They show a bit of something greater than mankind. That is what is said to bring us back.”

He fell silent.

“You died showing great bravery, then?” Siri asked.

“Apparently,” he said. “I don’t know for certain. Perhaps I insulted a very large panther. That sounds rather brave, don’t you think?”

“You don’t know how you died?”

He shook his head. “We forget,” he said. “We awake without memories. I don’t even know what my job was.”

Siri smiled. “I suspect that you were a negotiator or a salesman of some sort. Something that required you to talk a lot, but to say very little!”

“Yes,” he said quietly, seeming unlike himself as he stared out at the priests. “Yes, I suspect that was it exactly...” He shook his head, then smiled at her. “Regardless, my dear queen, I have provided a surprise for you this day!”

Do I want to be surprised by Lightsong? She glanced about nervously.

He laughed. “No need to fear,” he said. “My surprises rarely cause bodily harm, and never on even numbered days.” He waved his hand, and an elderly man with an exaggeratedly long white beard approached.

Siri frowned.

“This is Hoid,” Lightsong said. “Master storyteller. I believe you had some questions you wished to ask...”

Siri smiled eagerly, remembering only now her request of Lightsong. She glanced at the priests below. “Um, shouldn’t we be paying attention to the speeches?”

Lightsong waved indifferently. “Pay attention? Ridiculous! That would be far too responsible of us. We’re gods, for the Colors’ sake. Or, well, I am. You’re close enough. A god-in-law, one might say. Anyway, do *you* really want to listen to a bunch of stuffy priests talk about sewage disposal?”

Siri grimaced.

“I thought not. Besides, neither of us have votes pertaining to this issue. So let us spend our time wisely. We never know when we will run out!”

“Of time?” Siri asked. “Aren’t you immortal?”

“Not run out of time,” Lightsong said, holding up his plate. “Of grapes. I *hate* listening to storytellers without grapes.”

Siri rolled her eyes, but continued to eat the grape slices. The storyteller waited patiently. As she looked closer, she could tell that he wasn’t quite as old as he appeared at first glance. The beard was something of a uniform, and while it didn’t appear fake, she suspected that it had been bleached. He was much younger than he wanted to seem.

Still, she doubted Lightsong would have settled for anyone other than the absolute best. She settled back in her chair—which, she noticed, had been crafted for someone of her size. *I should be careful with my questions*, she thought. *I can’t ask directly about the deaths of the old God Kings; that would be too obvious.*

“Storyteller,” she said. “What do you know of Hallandren history?”

“Much, my queen,” he said, bowing his head.

“Tell me of the days before the division between Idris and Hallandren.”

“Ah,” the man said, reaching into a pocket. He pulled out a handful of sand and began to rub it between his fingers, letting it drop in a soft stream toward the ground, its grains blown slightly in the wind. “Her majesty wishes one of the *deep* stories, from long before. A story before time began?”

“I wish to know the origins of the Hallandren God Kings.”

“Then we begin in the distant haze,” the storyteller said, bringing up another hand, letting black powdery sand drop from it, mixing with the sand that fell from his other hand. As Siri watched, the black sand turned white, and she cocked her head, smiling at the display.

“The first God King of Hallandren is ancient,” Hoid said. “Ancient, yes. Older than kingdoms and cities, older than monarchs and religions. Not older than the mountains, for *they* were already here. Like the knuckles of the sleeping giants below, they formed this valley, where panthers and flowers both make their home.

“People speak of the valley then, a place before it had a name. The people of Chedesh were dominant upon the world, though their empire has long since been taken by the dust. They sailed the inner sea, coming from the east, and it was they who first discovered this strange land. Their writings are sparse, but memory remains. Perhaps you can imagine their surprise upon arriving here? A place with beaches of sand, with fruits aplenty, and with strange, alien forests?”

Hoid reached into his robes and pulled out a handful of something else. He began to drop it before him—bright green leaves from the fronds of a fern.

“Paradise, they called it,” Hoid whispered. “A paradise hidden between the mountains, a land with pleasant rains that never grew cold, a land where succulent food grew spontaneously.” He threw the handful of leaves into the air, and in the center of them puffed a burst of colorful dust. Deep reds and blues mixed in the air, blowing before him.

“A land of color,” he said. “Because of the Tears of Edgli, the flowers of such brilliant beauty that their dyes would hold fast in any cloth.”

Siri had never really thought about how Hallandren would look to people who came across the Inner Sea. She’d heard stories from the ramblemen who came into Idris, and they spoke of distant places. In other lands, one found parries and steppes, mountains and deserts. But not jungles. Hallandren was unique.

“The First Returned was born during this time,” Hoid said, sprinkling a handful of silver glitter into the air before him. “Aboard a ship that was sailing the coast. Returned can now be found in all parts of the world, but the first one—the man whom we name only by his title—was born here. In the waters of this very bay. He reported the Five Visions. He died a week later.

“The men of his ship founded a kingdom upon these beaches, then called Hanald. Before they arrived, all that had existed in these jungles was the people of Pahn Kahl, more a collection of fishing villages than a true kingdom.”

The glitter ran out, and Hoid began to drop a powdery brown dirt from his other hand as he reached into another pocket. “Now, you may wonder why I must travel back so far. Should I not speak of the Manywar, of the shattering of kingdoms, of the Five Scholars and of Klad the Usurper? Those are the events we focus upon, the ones men know the best. To talk of them only, however, is to ignore the history of three hundred years that led up to them.

“Would there have been a Manywar without knowledge of the Returned? It was a Returned, after all, who predicted the war and prompted Strifelover to attack the kingdoms across the mountains.”

“Strifelover?” Siri interrupted.

“Yes, your majesty,” Hoid said, switching to a black dust. “Strifelover. Another name for Klad the Usurper.”

“That sounds like the name of a Returned.”

Hoid nodded. “Indeed,” he said. “Klad *was* Returned, as was Peacegiver, the man who overthrew him and founded Hallandren. We haven’t arrived at *that* part yet. We are still back in Hanald, the outpost-become-kingdom founded by the men of the First Returned’s crew. They were the ones who placed the First Returned’s wife as their queen, then used the Tears of Edgli to create fantastic dyes which sold for untold riches across the world. This soon became a popular place.”

He removed a handful of flower petals and began to let them fall before him. “The Tears of Edgli. The source of Hallandren wealth. Such small things, so easy to grow here. And yet, this is the only soil where they will live. In other parts of the world, dyes are very difficult to obtain. Expensive. Some scholars say that the Manywar was fought over these little flower petals, that the kingdoms of Kuth and Huth were destroyed by little drips of color.”

The petals fell to the floor.

“But only *some* of the scholars say that, storyteller?” Lightsong said. Siri turned, almost having forgotten that he was watching. “What do the rest say? Why was the Manywar fought in *their* minds?”

The storyteller fell silent for a moment. And then he pulled out two handfuls and began to release dust of a half-dozen different colors. “Breathe, your grace. Most agree that the Manywar was not *only* about plants squeezed dry, but a much greater prize. *People* squeezed dry.

“You know, perhaps, that the royal family was growing increasingly interested in the process by which Breath could be used to bring objects to life. Awakening, it was being called. It was a fresh and newly-understood art, then. It still is, in many ways. The workings of the souls of men—their power to make simple clumps of dirt and flesh become living people—is something discovered barely four centuries ago. A short time, by the accounting of gods.”

“Unlike a court proceeding,” Lightsong mumbled, glancing over at the priests who were still talking about sanitation. “Those seem to last an eternity, according to the accounting of gods.”

The storyteller didn’t break stride at the interruption. “Breath,” he said. “The years leading up to the Manywar, those were the days of the Five Scholars and the discovery of new Commands. To some, this was a time of great enlightenment and learning. Others call them the darkest days of men, for it was the day that we best learned to exploit one another.”

He began to drop two handfuls of dust, one bright yellow, the other black. Siri watched, amused. He seemed to be slanting what he said toward her, careful not to offend her Idris sensibilities. What did she really know of Breath? She’d rarely even seen any Awakeners in the Court. Even when she did, she didn’t really care. The monks had spoken against such things, but, well, she had paid about as much attention to them as she had her tutors.

“One of the Five Scholars made a discovery,” Hoid continued, dropping a handful of white scraps, made of scrunched up pieces of paper with writing on them. “Commands. Methods. The means by which a Lifeless could be created from a *single breath*.”

“This, perhaps, seems a small thing to you. You must look at the past of this kingdom and its founding. Hallandren came from the servants of a Returned and was developed by an aggressive, expansive mercantile effort. It controlled a very lucrative section of land which, through the discovery and maintenance of the northern passes—mixed with increasingly good navigation techniques—was becoming a prized jewel to the outside world.”

He paused and his second hand came up, dropping little bits of metal which fell to the stonework with a sound not unlike falling rain. “And so the war came,” he said. “The Five Scholars split, joining sides. Some kingdoms gained the power of Lifeless when others did not. Some kingdoms had weapons others could only envy.

“To answer the god’s question, my story claims one reason for the Manywar: the ability to create Lifeless so cheaply. Before the discovery of the single breath command, Lifeless took fifty Breaths to make. What good is a extra soldier—even a Lifeless one—if you can only gain one for every fifty people you already have? However, being able to create a Lifeless with a single Breath... one for one... that will double your troops. And half of them don’t need to eat.”

The metal stopped falling.

“Lifeless are not stronger than regular men,” Hoid said. “They are the same. They are not more skilled than regular men. They are the same. However, not having to *eat* like regular men? That advantage was enormous.”

“And the royal family,” Siri said. “They split away because they didn’t agree with what Klad was doing. They saw moral problems with using Lifeless?”

The storyteller hesitated. “Why, yes,” he finally said, smiling through his beard. “Yes, they did, your majesty.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Psst,” Lightsong said, leaning in. “He’s lying to you.”

“Your grace,” the storyteller said, bowing deeply. “There are diverging explanations! Why, I am a teller of stories—all stories.”

“And what do other stories say?” Siri asked.

“None of them agree, your majesty,” Hoid said. “Your people speak of religious indignation and treachery by Klad the Usurper. The Pahn Kahl people tell of the Royal family working too hard to gain powerful Lifeless and Awakeners, then being surprised when their tools turned against them. In Hallandren, they tell of the Royal family aligning themselves with Klad, making him their general and ignoring the will of the people by seeking war with a bloodlust.”

He looked up, and then began to trail two handfuls of black, burned charcoal. “But time burns away behind us, leaving only ash and memory. That memory passes from mind to mind, then finally to my lips. When all is truth, and all are lies, does it matter if some say the Royal family sought to create Lifeless? Your belief is your own.”

“Either way, the Returned took control of Hallandren,” she said.

“Yes,” Hoid said. “And they gave it a new name, transformed from the old one. And yet, some speak still of the Royals who left, bearing the blood of the First Returned to their highlands.”

Siri frowned. “Blood of the First Returned?”

“Yes, of course,” Hoid said. “It was his wife, pregnant with his child, who became the first queen of this land. You are his descendant.”

She sat back.

Lightsong turned, curious. “You didn’t know this?” he asked, voice lacking most of its normal flippancy.

She shook her head. “If this thing is known to my people, we do not speak of it.”

Lightsong seemed to find that interesting. Down below, the priests were moving on to a different topic—something about security in the city and increasing patrols in the slums.

She smiled, sensing a covert method of getting to the questions she *really* wanted to ask. “That means that the God Kings of Hallandren continued on *without* the blood of the First Returned.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Hoid said, crumbling clay out into the air before him.

“And how many God Kings have there been?”

“Five, your majesty,” the man said. “Including his grace, Lord Susebron, but not including Peacegiver.”

“Five kings,” she said. “In three hundred years?”

“Yes, your majesty,” Hoid said, bringing out a handful of golden dust, letting it fall before him. “The kings of Hallandren were founded at the conclusion of the Manywar, the first one gaining his Breath and life from Peacegiver himself. Since that day, each God King has given birth to a stillborn son who then Returned and took his place.”

Siri leaned forward. “Wait. How did Peacegiver create a new God King?”

“Ah,” Hoid said, switching back to sand with his left hand. “Now *there* is a story lost in time. How indeed? Breath can be passed from one man to another, but Breath—no matter how much—does not make one a god. Legends say that Peacegiver died by granting his Breath to his successor. After all, can a god not give his life away to bless another?”

“Not exactly a sign of mental stability, in my opinion,” Lightsong said, waving for some more grapes. “You don’t encourage me to have confidence in our predecessors, storyteller. Besides, if a god gives away his Breath, it doesn’t turn the recipient into a god.”

“I speak only stories, your grace,” Hoid said. “They may be truths, they may be falsehoods. All I know is that the stories themselves exist and that I must tell them.”

With as much flair as possible, Siri thought, watching him reach into yet another pocket and pull free a handful of small bits of grass and earth. He let bits fall slowly between his fingers.

"I speak of foundations, your grace," Hoid said. "Peacegiver was no ordinary Returned, for he managed to stop the Lifeless from rampaging. Indeed, he stole away the armies of the Hallandren—leaving his own people powerless—in an effort to bring peace. By then, of course, it was too late for Kuth and Huth. However, the other kingdoms—Pahn Kahl, Tedradel, Gys, and Hallandren itself—were brought out of the conflict.

"Why can we not assume more from this god of gods who was able to accomplish so much? Perhaps he *did* do something special, as the priests claim. Leave some seed within the God Kings of Hallandren, allowing them to pass their power from father to son."

Which claim would give them a heritage of divinity, Siri thought idly slipping a sliced grape into her mouth. And that would give them a reason to rule. With the god of gods as their progenitor, they could become God Kings. And the only one who could threaten them would be...

The Royal family of Idris, who can apparently trace their line back to the First Returned. Another heritage of divinity, a challenger for right of rule in Hallandren.

That didn't tell her how the God Kings had died. Nor did it tell her why some gods—such as the First Returned—could bear children, while others could not.

"They're immortal, right?" Siri asked.

Hoid nodded, smoothly dropping the rest of his grass and dirt, moving into a different discussion by bringing forward a handful of white powder. "Indeed, your majesty. Like all Returned, the God Kings do not age. Agelessness is a gift for all who reach the Fifth Heightening."

"But why have there been five God Kings?" she asked. "Why did the first one die?"

"Why do any Returned pass on, your majesty?" Hoid asked.

"Because they are loony," Lightsong said.

The storyteller smiled. "Because they tire. Gods are not like regular men. They come back for *us*, not for themselves, and when they can no longer endure life, they pass on. God Kings live only as long as it takes them to produce an heir."

Siri started. "That's commonly known?" she asked, then cringed slightly at the suspicious comment.

"Of course it is, your majesty," the storyteller said. "At least, to storytellers and scholars. Each God King has passed from this world shortly after his son and heir was born. It is natural. Once the heir has arrived, the God King grown restless. Each one has sought out an opportunity to use up his Breath. And then..."

He threw up a hand, snapping his fingers, throwing up a little spray of water which puffed to mist.

"And then they pass on," he said. "Leaving their people blessed and their heir to rule."

The group fell silent, the mist evaporating in front of Hoid.

"Not exactly the most charming thing to inform a newlywed wife, storyteller," Lightsong noted. "That her husband is going to grow bored with life as soon as she bears him a son?"

"I seek not to be charming, your grace," Hoid said, bowing. At his feet, the various dusts, sands, and glitters mixed together in the faint breeze. "I only tell stories. This one is known to most. I should think that her majesty would like to be aware of it as well."

"Thank you," Siri said quietly. "It was good of you to speak of it. Tell me, where did you learn such an... interesting method of storytelling?"

Hoid looked up, smiling. “I learned it many, many years ago from a man who didn’t know who he was, your majesty. It was a distant place where two lands meet and gods have died. But that is unimportant.”

Siri ascribed the vague words to Hoid’s desire to create for himself a mysterious past. Of far more interest to her was what he’d said about the God Kings’ deaths.

So there is an official explanation, she thought, stomach twisting. And it’s actually a pretty good one. Theologically, it makes sense that the God Kings would leave once they had someone else to take over for them.

But, that doesn’t explain how Peacegiver’s Treasure—that wealth of Breath—passes from God King to God King when they have no tongues. And, it doesn’t explain why a man like Susebron would get tired of life when he seems so excited by it.

The official story would work fine for those who didn’t know the God King. It fell flat for Siri. Susebron would not do such a thing. Not now.

Yet... Would things change if she bore him a son? Would Susebron grow tired of her that easily?

“Maybe we should be *hoping* for old Susebron to pass, my queen,” Lightsong said idly, picking at the grapes. “You were forced into this all, I suspect. If Susebron died, you might even be able to go home. No harm done, people healed, new heir on the throne. Everyone is either happy or dead.”

The priests continued to argue below. Hoid continued to bow, waiting for dismissal.

Happy... or dead. Her stomach twisted. “Excuse me,” she said, rising. “I would like to walk about a bit. Thank you for your storytelling, Hoid.”

With that—entourage in tow—she quickly left the pavilion, worried that Lightsong might see her tears.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jewels worked quietly, ignoring Vivenna and pulling another stitch tight. Clod's guts—intestines, stomach, and some other things Vivenna didn't want to identify—lay on the floor beside him, carefully pulled out and arranged so that they could be stitched. Jewels was working on the intestines at the moment, sewing with a thread and needle.

It was gruesome. And yet it didn't really affect Vivenna. Not after the shock she'd had earlier. They were in the safe house. Tonk Fah had gone to scout the regular house to see if Parlin was all right. Denth was downstairs, fetching something.

Vivenna sat on the floor. She'd changed to a long dress—her skirt had muddy from its time in the mud—and sat with legs pulled up against her chest. Jewels continued to ignore Vivenna, working atop a sheet on the floor. She was muttering to herself, still angry.

"Stupid thing," Jewels said under her breath. "Can't believe we let you get hurt like this just to protect *her*."

Hurt. Did that even mean anything to a creature like Clod? He was awake; she could see that his eyes were open. What was the point of sewing up his insides? Would they heal? He didn't need to eat. Why bother with intestines? Vivenna shivered, looking away. She felt, in a way, as if her own insides had been ripped out. Exposed. Shown for the world to see.

Vivenna closed her eyes. Hours later, and she was *still* shaking from the terror of huddling in that alleyway, thinking that she'd soon be killed. What had she proven to be when finally threatened? Modesty had meant nothing—she'd pulled of her skirt rather than let it trip her again. Her hair had meant nothing—she'd ignored it as soon as the danger arrived.

Her religion, apparently, meant nothing. Not that she'd been able to use the Breath—she hadn't even managed to commit blasphemy correctly.

"I'm half tempted to just leave," Jewels muttered. "You and I. Go away."

Clod began to shuffle, and Vivenna opened her eyes to see him trying to stand up, even though his insides were hanging out.

Jewels swore. "Sit back down," she hissed, barely audible. "Colors-cursed thing. Howl of the sun. Go inactive. Howl of the sun."

Vivenna watched as Clod laid down then stopped moving. *They might obey commands*, she thought. *But they aren't very smart. It tried to walk out, obeying Jewels' perceived Command to 'go away.'* And what was that nonsense Jewels had said about the sun?

Vivenna heard footsteps on the stairs leading down to the cellar, and soon the door opened and Denth appeared. He closed the door then walked over and handed Jewels something that looked like a large wineskin. The woman took it and immediately turned back to her work.

Denth sat down beside Vivenna.

"They say a man doesn't know himself until he faces death for the first time," he said in a conversational tone. "I don't know about that. It seems to me that the person you are when you're about to die isn't as important as the person you are during the rest of your life. Why should a few moments matter more than an entire lifetime?"

Vivenna didn't respond.

"Everyone gets scared, Princess. Even brave men sometimes run their first time they see battle. In armies, that's why there's so much training. The ones who hold aren't the courageous ones, they're the well-trained ones. We have instincts like any other animal. They take over sometimes. That's all right."

Vivenna continued to watch as Jewels carefully placed the intestines back into Clod's stomach. She took out a small package and removed something that looked like a strip of meat.

"You did well, actually," Denth said. "Kept your wits about you. Didn't freeze. Found the quickest way out. I've protected some people who will just stand there and die unless you shake them and force them to run."

"I want you to teach me Awakening," Vivenna whispered.

He paused, glancing at her. "Do you... want to think about that a bit first?"

"I have," she whispered, arms around knees, head resting against them. "I thought I was stronger than I am. I thought I'd rather die than use it. That was a lie. In that moment, I would have done *anything* to survive."

Denth smiled. "You'd make a good mercenary."

"It's wrong," she said, still staring forward. "But I can't claim to be pure any more. I might as well understand what I have. Use it. If that damns me, then so be it. At least it will have helped me survive long enough to destroy the Hallandren."

Denth raised an eyebrow. "You want to *destroy* them now, eh? No more simple sabotage and undermining?"

She shook her head. "I want this kingdom overthrown," she whispered. "Just like the slum lords said. It can corrupt those poor people. It can corrupt even me. I hate it."

"I—"

"No, Denth," Vivenna said. Her hair bled a deep red, and for once she didn't care. "I *really* hate it. I've always hated this people. They took my childhood. I had to prepare. Become their queen. Get ready to marry the God King. Everyone said he was unholy and a heretic. Yet *I* was supposed to have sex with him!

"I hate this entire city, with its colors and its Gods! I hate the fact that it ripped away my life, then demanded that I leave behind all that I love! I hate the busy streets, the placating gardens, the commerce, and the suffocating weather.

"I hate their arrogance most of all. Thinking they could push my father around, force him into that treaty twenty years ago. They've controlled my life. Dominated it. *Ruined* it. And now they have my sister."

She puffed, teeth gritted.

"You'll have your vengeance," Denth whispered.

She looked at him. "I want them to hurt, Denth. The attack today wasn't about subduing a rebellious element. The Hallandrens sent those soldiers in to kill. Kill the poor that *they* created. We're going to stop them from doing things like that. I don't care what it takes. I'm tired of being pretty and nice and ignoring ostentation. I want to *do* something."

Denth nodded slowly. "All right. We'll change courses, start making our attacks a little more painful."

"Good," she said. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling frustrated, wishing that she was strong enough to keep all of these emotions away. But, she wasn't.

She'd kept them in too long. That was the problem.

“This was never about your sister, was it?” Denth asked. “Coming here?”

She shook her head, eyes still shut.

“Why, then?”

“I had trained all of my life,” she whispered. “I was the one who would sacrifice herself. When Siri left, I became nothing. I had to come and get it back.”

“But you just said that you’ve always hated Hallandren,” he said, sounding confused.

“I have. And I do. That’s why I had to come.”

He was silent for a few moments. “Too complicated for a mercenary, I guess.”

She opened her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she understood, either. She’d always kept a tight grip on her hatred, only letting it manifest in disdain for Hallandren ways. She confronted it now. Acknowledged it. Somehow, Hallandren could be loathsome yet transfixing at the same time. As if... she knew that until she came and saw the place for herself, she wouldn’t have a real focus—a real understanding, a real image—of what it was that had destroyed her life.

Now she understood. If her Breaths would help, then she would use them. Just like Lemks. Just like those slum lords. She wasn’t so high. She never had been.

She doubted Denth would understand. Instead, Vivenna nodded toward Jewels. “What is she doing?”

Denth turned. “Screwing on a new muscle,” he said. “One of the ones in his side got cut, sheered right through. Muscles won’t work right if you just sew them together. She has to replace the whole thing.”

“With screws?”

Denth nodded. “Right into the bone. It works all right. Not perfectly, but all right. No wound can ever be *perfectly* fixed on a Lifeless, though he will heal some. You just sew them up and pump them full of ichor-alcohol. If you fix them enough times, the body will stop working right and you’ll have to spend another Breath to keep them going. By then, it’s usually best to buy another body.”

Saved by a monster. Perhaps that was what made her so determined to use her Breath. She should be dead, but Clod had saved her. A Lifeless.

She owed her life to something that should not exist. She should be dead. Even worse, if she looked deep within her, she found herself feeling a traitorous pity for the thing. Even and affection. Considering that, she figured that she was already damned to the point that using her Breaths wouldn’t matter.

“He fought well,” she whispered. “Better than the Lifeless that the city guard was using.”

Denth glanced at Clod. “They’re not all equal. Most Lifeless, they’re just made out of whatever body happens to be around. If you pay good money, you can get one who was very skillful in life.”

She felt a chill, remembering just that moment of humanity she’d seen in Clod’s life as he defended her. If an undead monstrosity could be a hero, then a pious princess could blaspheme.

Or was she still just trying to justify her actions?

“Skill,” she whispered. “They keep it?”

Denth nodded. “Some semblance of it, at least. Considering what we paid for this guy, he’d better have been quite the soldier. And that’s why it’s worth the money for us to take the time to learn how to repair him and keep him going, rather than buy a new one.”

They treat him just like a thing, Vivenna thought. Just like she should. And yet, more and more, she thought of Clod as a ‘he.’ He had saved her life. Not Denth, not Tonk Fah. Clod. It seemed to her that they should show more respect for him.

Jewels finished with the muscles, then sewed the skin closed with a thick string.

“Though he’ll kind of heal,” Denth said, “it’s best to use something strong in the sewing, so the wound doesn’t rip apart again.”

Vivenna nodded. “The... juice.”

“Ichor-alcohol,” Denth said. “Discovered by the Five Scholars. Wonderful stuff. Keeps a Lifeless going really well.”

“That’s what let the Manywar occur?” she whispered. “Getting the mixture right?”

“That’s part of it. That and the discovery—again by one of the Five Scholars, I forget which one—of some new Commands. If you really want to be an Awakener, princess, that’s what you have to learn. The Commands.”

She nodded. “Teach me.”

To the side Jewels got out a small pump and stuck a small hose into a little clasp on Clod’s shoulder. She began to pump the Ichor-alcohol, moving the pump very slowly, probably in order to keep from bursting the veins.

“Well,” Denth said, “there are a *lot* of commands. If you want to bring a rope to life—like that one you tried to use back in the alleyway—a good Command is ‘hold things.’ Speak it with a clear voice, willing your Breath to act. If you do it right, the rope will grab whatever is closest. ‘Protect me’ is another good one, though it can be interpreted in fairly strange ways if you don’t imagine exactly what you want.”

“Imagine?” Vivenna asked.

He nodded. “You have to form the Command in your head, not just speak it. The Breath you give up, it’s part of your life. Your soul, you Idrians say. When you Awaken something, it becomes part of you. If you’re good—and practiced—the things you Awaken will do what you want them to. They’re part of you. They understand, just like your hands understand what you want them to do.”

She nodded slowly. Outside, a shadow passed the window and Tonk Fah entered.

“Well?” Denth asked.

“Looks safe,” he said, eyeing Clod. “How’s the stiff?”

“Just finished,” Jewels said. She leaned down, saying something very soft to the Lifeless. Clod started moving again, sitting up, looking about. Vivenna waited as his eyes passed over her, but there didn’t seem to be recognition in them. He wore the same dull expression.

Of course, Vivenna thought, standing. *He’s Lifeless, after all.* Jewels had said something to make him start working again. Was that the security phrase Denth had talked about? She realized it was probably the same one Jewels had used to make him stop moving in the first place. That odd phrase...

Howl of the Sun. Vivenna filed it away, then followed as they left the building.

#

A short time later, they were home. Parlin rushed out, asking after their safety. He went to Jewels first, though she brushed him off. As Vivenna entered the building, he moved up to her. “Vivenna? What happened?”

She just shook her head.

“There was fighting,” he said, following her up the stairs. “I heard about it.”

“There was an attack on the camp we visited,” Vivenna said tiredly, reaching the top of the stairs. “A squad of Lifeless. They started killing people.”

“Lord of Colors!” Parlin said. “Is Jewels all right?”

Vivenna flushed, turning on the landing, looking down the stairs toward him. “Why do you ask about *her*?”

Parlin shrugged. “I think she’s nice.”

“Should you be saying things like that?” Vivenna asked, noticing half-heartedly that her hair was turning red again. “Aren’t you engaged to *me*?”

He frowned. “You were engaged to the God King, Vivenna.”

“But you know what our fathers wanted,” she said, hands on hips.

“I did,” Parlin said. “But, well, when we left Idris, I figured we were both going to get disinherited. There’s really no reason to keep up the charade.”

Charade?

“I mean, let’s be honest, Vivenna,” he said, smiling. “You really haven’t ever been that nice to me. I know you think I’m stupid; I guess you’re probably right. But if you really cared, I figured that you wouldn’t make me *feel* stupid too. Jewels grumbles at me, but she laughs at my jokes some times. You’ve never done that.”

“But...” Vivenna said, finding herself at a slight loss for words. “But, why did you follow me down to Hallandren?”

He blinked. “Well, for Siri, of course. Isn’t that why we came? To rescue her?” He smiled fondly, then shrugged. “Good night, Vivenna.” He trailed down the steps, calling to Jewels to see if she was hurt.

Vivenna watched him go.

He’s twice the person I am, she thought with shame, turning toward her room. *But I’m just finding it hard to care any more.* Everything had been taken from her. Why not Parlin, too? Her hatred for Hallandren grew a little more firm as she stepped into her room.

I just need to sleep, she thought. Maybe after that, I can figure out just what in the name of the Colors I’m doing in this city.

On one thing she remained firm. She was going to learn how to Awaken. The Vivenna from before—the one who had a right to stand up tall and pronounce Breath to be unholy—no longer had a place in T’Telir. The real Vivenna hadn’t come to Hallandren to save her sister. She’d come because she couldn’t stand being unimportant.

She’d learn. That was her punishment.

Inside her room, she pushed the door closed, locking the bolt. Then she walked over to pull the drapes closed.

A figure stood on her balcony, resting against the railing. He wore several days worth of scrub on his face and his dark clothing was worn, almost tattered. He carried a deep black sword.

She jumped, eyes wide.

“You,” he said in an angry voice, “are causing a lot of trouble.”

She opened her mouth to scream, but the drapes snapped forward, wrapping around her neck and mouth. They squeezed tightly, choking her. They around her entire body, pinning her arms to her sides.

No! she thought. I survive the attack and the Lifeless, and then fall in my own room?

She struggled, hoping someone would hear her thrashing and come for her. But nobody did. At least, not before she fell unconscious.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lightsong watched the young queen dart away from his pavilion and felt an odd sense of... guilt. *How very odd for me*, he thought, taking a sip of wine. After the grapes, it tasted a little bitter.

Maybe the bitterness was from something else. He'd made the comment about the God King's death in his usual flippant way. In his opinion, it was usually best for people to hear the truth bluntly—and, if possible, amusingly.

He hadn't expected such a reaction from Siri. What was the God King to her? She'd been sent to be his bride, probably against her will. Yet, she seemed to take the prospect of his death with apparent grief. He eyed her as she fled.

Such a small, young thing she was, all dressed up in gold and blue. *Young?* he thought. *She's been alive longer than I have.*

He retained some things from his former life—such as his perception of his age. He didn't feel like he was five. He felt far older. That age should have taught him to hold his tongue when speaking of making widows out of young girls. Could the girl actually have an affection for the God King?

She'd only been in the city for a couple of months, and he knew—through rumors—what her life must be like. Forced to perform her duty as a wife for a man to whom she could not speak and whom she could not know. A man who represented all the things that her culture taught were profane. The only thing he could determine, then, was that she was worried about what might happen to her if her husband killed himself. A legitimate worry. The queen would lose most of her notoriety if she lost her husband.

Lightsong nodded to himself, turning to look back out at the arguing priests. They were done with sewage and guard patrols and had moved on to other topics.

"We *must* prepare ourselves for war," one of them was saying. "Recent events make it clear that we cannot live with the Idrians with any assurance of peace or security. This conflict will come, whether we wish it or not."

Lightsong sat idly, tapping one finger against the arm rest of his chair.

For five years, I've been irrelevant, he thought. I didn't have a vote on any of the important court councils, I simply held the codes to a segment of Lifeless. I've crafted a divine reputation as the useless one.

The tone below was even more antagonistic than it had been during previous meetings. That wasn't what worried him. The problem was the one spearheading the movement for war. Nanrovah, high priest of Stillmark the Kind. Normally, Lightsong wouldn't have bothered paying attention. Yet Nanrovah had always been the most outspoken *against* the war.

What had made him change his mind?

It wasn't long before Blushweaver made her way to the pavilion. By the time she arrived, Lightsong's taste for wine had returned, and he was sipping thoughtfully. The voices against war from below were soft and infrequent.

Blushweaver sat beside him, a rustle of cloth and a waft of perfume. Lightsong didn't look toward her.

“How did you get to Nanrovah?” he finally asked.

“I didn’t,” Blushweaver said. “I don’t know why he changed his mind. I wish he hadn’t done it so quickly—it seems suspicious and makes people think I manipulated him. Either way, I’ll take the support.”

“You wish for war so badly?”

“I wish for our people to be aware of the threat,” Blushweaver said. “You think I *want* this to happen? You think I want to send our people to die and kill?”

Lightsong looked at her, judging her sincerity. She had such beautiful eyes. One rarely noticed that, considering the way that she proffered the rest of her assets with such over-sensuality. “No,” he said. “I don’t think you want a war.”

She nodded sharply. Her dress was sleek and trim this day, as always, but it was particularly revealing up top, where her breasts were pressed up and forward, like flowers demanding attention. Lightsong looked away.

“You’re boring today,” Blushweaver said.

“I’m distracted.”

“We should be happy,” Blushweaver said. “The priests have almost all come around. Soon there will be a call for war made to the main assembly of Gods.”

Lightsong nodded. The main assembly of Gods was only called to judge in the most important of situations. In that case, they all had a vote. If the vote was for war, the Gods with Lifeless Commands—Gods like Lightsong—would be called upon to lead and administrate the battle.

“You’ve changed the Commands on Hopefinder’s ten thousand?” Lightsong asked.

She nodded. “They’re mine now, as are Mercystar’s.”

Colors, he thought. Between the two of us, we now control three fourths of the kingdom’s armies.

What in the name of the Iridescent Tones am I getting myself into?

Blushweaver settled back in her chair, eying the smaller one that Siri had vacated. “I am annoyed, however, at Allmother.”

“Because she’s prettier than you, or because she’s smarter?”

Blushweaver regarded him with a flat stare.

“Just trying to act less boring, my dear.”

“Allmother holds the last group of Lifeless,” Blushweaver said.

“An odd choice, wouldn’t you think?” Lightsong said. “I mean, I make sense—assuming you don’t know me, of course—since I’m supposedly Bold. Hopefinder represents Justice, a nice mix with soldiers. Even Mercystar, who represents benevolence, makes sense for one who bears soldiers. But Allmother? Goddess of matrons and families? Giving her ten thousand Lifeless is enough to make even me consider my drunk monkey theory.”

“The one who chooses Returned names and titles?”

“Exactly,” Lightsong said. “I’m expanding the theory. I am now tempted to believe that God—or the universe, or time, or whatever you think controls all of this—really is just a drunk monkey.”

She leaned over, squeezing her arms together, seriously threatening to burst her chest out the front of her dress. “And, you think *my* title was chosen by happenstance? Goddess of honesty and interpersonal relations. Seems to fit, wouldn’t you say?”

He hesitated. Then he smiled. “My dear, did you just try to prove the existence of God through the use of your cleavage?”

She smiled. “You’d be surprised what a good wiggle of the chest can accomplish.”

“Hum. I’d never considered the theological power of your breasts, my dear. If there were a church dedicated to them, perhaps you’d make a theist out of me. Regardless, are you going to tell me what specifically Allmother did to annoy you?”

“She won’t give me her Lifeless commands.”

“Not surprising,” Lightsong said. “*I* hardly trust you, and I’m your friend.”

“We need those security phrases, Lightsong.”

“Why?” he asked. “We’ve got three of the four—we dominate the armies already.”

“We can’t afford in biting or divisiveness,” Blushweaver said. “If her ten were to turn against our thirty, we’d win, but we’d be left very weak.”

He frowned. “Surely she wouldn’t do that.”

“Surely we’d rather be certain.”

Lightsong sighed. “Very well, then. I’ll talk to her.”

“That... might not be a good idea.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“She doesn’t like you very much.”

“Yes, I know,” he said. “She one of the few goddesses with good taste.”

She glared at him. “Do I need to wiggle my breasts at you again?”

“No, please. I don’t know if I’d be able to stand the theological debate that would follow. I’ll be good.”

“All right, then,” she said, sitting back, looking down at the priests who were still arguing.

They sure are taking a long time on this one, he thought. He glanced toward the other side of the court arena where Siri had paused, arms resting on the stonework; it was too tall for her to do comfortably.

Perhaps it wasn’t thinking of her husband’s death that bothered her, he thought. Maybe it was because the discussion turned to war.

A war her people couldn’t win. That was another good reason why the conflict was becoming inevitable. As Hoid had implied, when one side had a distinct advantage, war was the result. Hallandren had been building its Lifeless armies for centuries, and the size was becoming daunting. Idris held the passes to the northern kingdoms, through which Hallandren merchants were forced to pay tariffs in order to sell their dyes and fruits. Now that the Hallandren crown again had Royal blood to infuse into the line, war seemed even more likely.

Blushweaver huffed beside him, and he noticed that *she* had noticed his study of Siri. She was watching the queen with undisguised dislike.

Lightsong immediately changed the topic. “Do you know anything about a tunnel complex beneath the Court of Gods?”

Blushweaver turned back toward him, shrugging. “Sure. Some of the palaces have tunnels beneath them, places for storage and the like.”

“Have you ever been down in any of them?”

“Please. Why would I go crawling about in storage tunnels? I only know about them because of my high priestess. When she joined my service, asked me if I wanted mine connected to the main complex of tunnels. I said I didn’t.”

“Because you didn’t want others to have access to your palace?”

“No,” she said, turning back to watching the priests below. “Because I didn’t want to deal with the racket of all that digging. Can I have some more wine, please?”

#

Siri watched the proceedings for quite a long time. She felt a little like Lightsong said he did. Because she didn’t have a say about what the court did, it was frustrating to pay attention. Yet she wanted to know. The arguments of the priests were, in a way, her only connection to the outside world.

She was not encouraged by what she heard. As the time passed, the sun growing close to the horizon and servants lighting massive torches along the walkway, Siri found herself feeling more and more daunted. Her husband was probably either going to be killed or persuaded to kill himself in the upcoming year. Her homeland, in turn, was about to be invaded by the very kingdom her husband ruled—yet he could do nothing to stop it because he had no way to communicate.

Then there was the guilt that came from actually *enjoying* all of the chaos and problems, if only a tad. Back home, she’d had to be contrary and disobedient to find any kind of excitement. Here she only had to stand and watch, and things would begin to topple against each other and cause a clatter. Of course, there was far *too* much clatter at present, but that didn’t stop her from thrilling at her part in it.

Silly fool, she told herself. Everything you love is in danger and you’re thinking about how exciting it is?

She needed to find a way to help Susebron. In doing so, perhaps she could bring him out from beneath the oppressive control of the priests. Then he might be able to do something to help her homeland. As she followed that line of thought, she almost missed a comment from below. It was spoken by one of the priests most strongly in favor of attacking.

“Have you not heard of the Idrian agent who has been causing havoc in the city?” the priest asked. “The Idrians are preparing for the war! *They* know that a conflict is inevitable and so they’ve begun to work against us!”

Siri perked up. Idrian agents in the city?

“Bah,” said another of the priests. “The ‘infiltrator’ you speak of is said to be a princess of the Royal family. That’s obviously a story for the common people. Why would a princess come in secret to T’Telir? These stories are ridiculous and unfounded.”

Siri grimaced. That, at least, was obviously true. Her sisters were not the types to come and work as ‘Idrian agents.’ She smiled, imagining her soft-spoken monk of a sister—or even Vivenna in her prim outfits and stony attitude—coming to T’Telir in secret. Part of her had a little trouble believing that Vivenna had been intended to come be Susebron’s bride. Vivenna? Having to deal with the court and the wild costumes?

Vivenna’s stoic coldness would never have coaxed Susebron out of his imperial mask. Vivenna’s quiet disapproval would have alienated her from gods like Lightsong. Vivenna would have hated wearing the beautiful dresses and would never have appreciated the colors and variety in the city.

Siri might not have been the best one for the position, but she was slowly coming to realize that Vivenna hadn’t been a good choice either.

A group of people was approaching along the walkway. Siri remained where she was; she was too distracted by her thoughts to pay much attention.

“Are they talking about a relative of yours?” a voice asked.

Siri started, spinning. Behind her stood a dark-haired goddess wearing a lavish—and revealing—gown of green and silver. Like most of the gods, she stood a good head taller than a normal person, and she looked down at Siri with a raised eyebrow.

“Your... grace?” Siri asked.

“They’re discussing the famous hidden princess,” the goddess said with a wave of her hand. “She’d be a relative of yours, if she really does have the royal locks.”

Siri shuffled, glancing back at the priests. “They must be mistaken. I’m the only princess here.”

“The stories of her are quite pervasive.”

Siri fell silent.

“My Lightsong has taken a liking to you, princess,” the goddess said, folding her arms.

“He has been very kind to me,” Siri said carefully, trying to give the right image—that of the person she was, only less threatening. A little more confused. “Might I ask which one you are, your grace?”

“I am called Blushweaver,” the Goddess said.

“I am pleased to meet you.”

“No you aren’t,” Blushweaver said. She leaned in, eyes narrowing. “I don’t like what you’re doing here.”

“Excuse me?”

Blushweaver raised a finger. “He’s a better man than any of us, *Princess*. Don’t you go spoiling him and pulling him into your schemes.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t give me your false naiveté,” Blushweaver said. “Lightsong is a good man—one of the last ones we have left in this court. If you taint him, I will destroy you. Do you understand?”

Siri nodded dumbly, then Blushweaver spun and moved away, mumbling, “Find someone else’s bed to climb into, you little slut.”

Siri watched her go, shocked. When she finally shook herself out of the stupor, she flushed, then fled.

#

By the time she got back to the palace, Siri was quite ready for her bath. She entered the bathing chamber, letting her serving women undress her. They retreated with the clothing, then exited to prepare her evening’s gown. That left Siri in the hands of a group of lesser attendants, the ones whose job it was to follow her into the massive tub and scrub her clean.

Siri relaxed back, sighing as the women went to work. Another group—standing fully-clothed in the deep water—pulled her hair straight then cut most of it free, something she’d ordered them to do every night.

For a few moments, Siri floated and let herself forget the threats to her people and her husband. She even let herself forget Blushweaver and her snappish misunderstanding. She just enjoyed the heat and the scents of the perfumed water.

“You wanted to speak with me, princess?” a voice asked.

Siri started, splashing as she dunked her body beneath the water. She spun, angrily. “Bluefingers,” she snapped. “I thought we’d cleared this up on the first day!”

He stood at the rim of the tub, fingers blue, typically anxious as he began to pace. “Oh, please,” he said. “I have daughters twice your age. You wanted to talk to me. Well, this is where I will talk. Away from ears.”

He nodded to several of the serving girls, and they began to splash just a bit more, speaking quietly, creating a low noise. Siri flushed, her short hair a deep red—though a few cut-off strands that hadn’t been scooped up remained a yellow from before.

“Haven’t you gotten over your shyness yet?” Bluefingers asked. “You’ve been in Hallandren for months.”

Siri eyed him, but didn’t relax her concealing posture, even if she did let the serving women continue to work on her hair and scrub her back. “Won’t it seem suspicious to have the serving women making so much noise?” she asked.

Bluefingers waved a hand. “They’re already considered second class servants by most in the palace.” She understood what he meant. These woman, as opposed to her regular servants, wore brown. They were from Pahn Kahl.

“You sent me a message earlier,” Bluefingers said. “What did you mean by my plans?”

Siri bit her lip, sorting through the dozens of ideas she had considered, discarding them all. What did she know? How could she make Bluefingers willing to trade?

He gave me clues, she thought. He tried to scare me into not sleeping with the king. But he had no reason to help me. He barely knew me. He must have other motives for not wanting an heir to be born.

“What happens when a new God King takes the throne?” she asked carefully.

He eyed her. “So, you’ve figured that out, then?”

Figured out what? “Of course I have,” she said out loud.

He wrung his hands nervously. “Of course, of course. Then you can see why I’m so nervous? We worked hard to get me where I am. It isn’t easy for a Pahn Kahl man to rise high in the theocracy of Hallandren. Once I got into place, I worked so hard to provide work for my people. The serving girls who wash you, they have far better lives than the Pahn Kahl who work the dye fields. That will all be lost. We don’t believe in their Gods. Why should we be treated as well as people of their own faith?”

“I still don’t see why it has to happen,” Siri said carefully.

He waved a nervous hand. “Of course it doesn’t *have* to, but tradition is tradition. The Hallandren are very lax in every area but religion. When a new God King is chosen, his servants are replaced. They won’t kill us to send us into the afterlife with our lord—that horrid practice hasn’t been used since the days before the Manywar—but we *will* be dismissed. A new God King represents a fresh start.”

He stopped pacing, looking at her. She was still naked in the water, awkwardly covering herself as best she could. “But,” he said, “I guess my job security is the lesser of our problems.”

Siri snorted. “Don’t tell me you’re worried about *my* safety over your own place in the palace.”

“Of course not,” he said, kneeling down beside the tub, speaking quietly. “But the God King’s life... well, that worries me.”

“So,” Siri said, “I haven’t been able to decide yet. Do the God Kings give up their lives willingly once they have an heir, or are they coerced into it?”

“I’m not sure,” Bluefingers admitted. “There are stories, spoken of by my people regarding the last God King’s death. They say that the plague he cured... well, he wasn’t even in the city when the ‘curing’ happened. My suspicion is that they forced him to give up his Breath to his son and that killed him.”

He doesn’t know, Siri thought. He doesn’t realize that Susebron is a mute. “How closely have you served with the God King?”

He shrugged. “As close as any servant considered unholy. I’m not allowed to touch him or speak to him. But, Princess, I’ve *served* him all my life. He’s not my god, but he’s something better. I think these priests... they look upon their gods as placeholders. It doesn’t really matter to them if one person is holding the station or another. Me, I’ve served his majesty for my entire life. I was hired into the palace as a lad and I remember Susebron’s childhood. I cleaned his quarters. He’s not my god, but he *is* my liege. And now these priests are planning to kill him.”

He turned back to his pacing, wringing his hands. “But there’s nothing to be done.”

“Yes, there is,” she said.

He waved a hand. “I gave you a warning and you ignored it. I know that you’ve been performing your duties as a wife. Perhaps we could find some way of making certain that no pregnancy of yours comes to term.”

Siri flushed. “I would never do such a thing! Austre forbids it.”

“Even to save the life of the God King? But... of course. What is he to you? Your captor and imprisoned. Yes. Perhaps my warnings were useless.”

“I *do* care, Bluefingers,” she said. “And I think we can stop this before it gets to the point of worrying about an heir. I’ve been talking to the God King.”

Bluefingers froze, looking directly at her. “What?”

“I’ve been talking to him,” Siri admitted. “He’s not as harsh as you might think. I don’t think this has to end with him dying or your people losing their places in the palace.”

Bluefingers studied her, watching her to the point that she flushed again, ducking a little more down into the water.

“I see that you’ve found yourself a position of power,” he noted.

Or, at least, one that looks powerful, she thought ruefully. “If things turn out as I want them to, I’ll make certain your people are cared for.”

“And my side of the bargain?” he asked.

“If things don’t turn out as I want them to,” she said, taking a deep breath, heart fluttering. “I want you to get Susebron and me out of the palace.”

Silence.

“Deal,” he said. “But let us make certain it does not come to that. Is the God King aware of the danger from his own priests?”

“He is,” Siri lied. “In fact, he knew about it before I did. He’s the one who told me I needed to contact you.”

“He did?” Bluefingers asked, frowning slightly.

“Yes,” Siri said. “I will be in touch on how to make this turn out well for all of us. And, until then, I would appreciate it if you’d let me get back to my bath.”

Bluefingers nodded slowly, then retreated from the bathing chamber. Siri, however, found it hard to still her nerves. She wasn't certain if she'd handled the exchange well or not. She seemed to have gained something. Now she just had to figure out how to use it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Vivenna awoke sore, tired, and terrified. She tried struggling, but her hands and legs were tied. She only succeeded in rolling herself into a less comfortable position.

She was in a dark room, her face—gagged—pressing awkwardly against a splintering wood floor. She still wore her dress, one of the expensive foreign ones that Denth had complained about. Her hands were tied behind her.

Someone was in the room with her. Someone with a lot of Breath. She could feel it without even concentrating. She twisted, rolling on her back in an awkward motion. She could see a figure silhouetted against a starlit sky, standing on a balcony a short distance away.

It was him.

He turned toward her, face shadowed in the unlit room, and she began to squirm with panic. What was this man planning to do with her? Horrible possibilities appeared in her mind.

The man walked toward her, feet thumping roughly on the floor. He knelt down, pulling her face up next to his. “I’m still deciding whether or not to kill you, princess,” he said. “If I were you, I’d avoid doing anything more to antagonize me.”

His voice was deep, thick, and had an accent she couldn’t quite place. She froze in his grip, trembling, hair bleached white. He appeared to be studying her, eyes reflecting starlight. He dropped her back to the wooden floor.

She groaned through the gag as he lit a lantern then pushed closed the balcony doors. He reached to his belt and removed a large hunting dagger. Vivenna felt a stab of fear, but he simply walked over and cut the bonds on her hands.

He tossed the dagger aside, and it made a thock as it stuck into the wood of the far wall. He reached for something on the bed. His large, black hilted sword.

Vivenna scrambled back, hands free, and pulled at her gag, intending to scream. He whipped the sword toward her, making her freeze.

“You will remain quiet,” he said sharply.

She huddled back into the corner. *How is this happening to me?* she thought. Why hadn’t she fled back to Idris long ago? She’d been deeply unsettled when Denth had killed the ruffians in the restaurant. She’d known, then, that she was dealing with people and situations that were truly dangerous.

She should have run. She’d been arrogant to think that she could do anything in this city. This monstrous, overwhelming, terrible city. She was nothing. Barely a peasant from the countryside to these people. Why had she been so foolish as to get herself involved in their politics and schemes? The worst part was, she hadn’t even really *tried* to save Siri. She’d gotten caught up in the glory of helping against the war, of being a princess to the Idrians in the city.

The man, Vasher, stepped forward. He undid the clasp on that deep, black sword, and Vivenna felt a strange nausea strike her. It seemed that a thin wisp of black smoke began to rise from the blade.

Vasher approached, backlit by the lantern, sheathed tip of the sword dragging against the floor behind him. Then he dropped the sword to the ground in front of Vivenna.

“Pick it up,” he said.

She untensed slightly, looking up, though she still huddled in the corner. She felt tears on her cheeks.

“Pick up the sword, Princess.”

She had no training with weapons, but if she could take it from him... She reached for the sword, but felt her nausea grow far stronger. She groaned, her arm twitching as it approached the strange black blade.

She shied away.

“*Pick it up!*” Vasher bellowed.

She complied with a gagged cry of desperation, grabbing the weapon, feeling a terrible sickness travel like a wave up her arm and into her stomach. She found herself ripping away her gag with desperate fingers.

Hello, a voice said in her head. Would you like to kill someone today?

She dropped the horrid weapon and fell to her knees, retching onto the floor. There wasn’t much in her stomach, but she couldn’t stop herself. When she was done, she crawled away and huddled down against the wall again, mouth dripping with bile, feeling too sick to yell for help or even wipe her face.

She was crying again. That seemed the least of her humiliations.

Through teary eyes, she watched as Vasher stood quietly. Then he grunted—as if in surprise—and picked up the sword. He clicked the clasp on its sheath, locking the weapon back inside, then threw a towel onto the stinking bile.

“We are in one of the slums,” he said. “You may scream if you wish, but nobody will think anything of it. Except me. I’ll be annoyed.” He glanced back at her. “I warn you. I’m not known for my ability to keep my temper.”

Vivenna shivered, still feeling hints of nausea. This man held even more Breath than she did. Yet, when he’d kidnapped her, she hadn’t felt anyone standing in her room. How had he hidden it?

And what had been that voice?

They seemed silly things to distract her, considering her current situation. However, she used them to keep from thinking about what this man might do to her. What—

He was walking toward her again. He picked up the gag, his expression dark. She finally screamed, trying to scramble away, and he cursed, putting a foot on her back and forcing her down against the floor. He tied her hands again before forcing on the gag. She cried, her voice muffled as he jerked her backward. He stood, then slung her over his shoulder and carried her away from the room.

“Colors-cursed slums,” he muttered. “Everyone’s too poor to afford basements.” He pushed her into a much smaller room and tied her hands to the doorknob. He stepped back, looking her over, obviously unsatisfied.

He knelt beside her, unshaven face close to hers, breath vile. “I have work to do,” he said. “Work that *you* have forced me to do. You will not run. If you do, I’ll find you and kill you. Understand?”

She nodded weakly.

She caught sight of him retrieving his sword from the other room, then he quickly rushed down the stairs. The door below slammed and locked, leaving her alone.

An hour or so later, Vivenna had finished crying herself dry. She sat slumped, hands tied awkwardly above her. Part of her kept waiting for the others to find her. Denth, Tonk Fah, Jewels. They were experts. They'd be able to save her.

No rescue came. Dazed, drowsy, and sick though she was, she realized something. This man—this Vasher—was someone that even Denth had feared. Vasher had killed one of their friends some months before. He was at least as skilled as they were.

How did they all end up here, then? she thought, her hands rubbed raw. *It seems an awful coincidence.* Perhaps Vasher had followed Denth to the city and was acting out some kind of twisted rivalry by working against them.

They'll find me and save me.

But she knew that they wouldn't, not if Vasher were as dangerous as they said. He'd know how to hide from Denth. If she were going to escape, she'd have to do it herself. The concept terrified her. Strangely, however, memories from her tutors returned to her.

There are things to do if you are kidnapped, one had taught. Things that every princess should know.

During her time in T'Telir, she'd begin to feel that her lessons were useless. Now, she was surprised to find herself remembering sessions that related directly to her situation.

If a person kidnaps you, the tutor had taught, your best time to escape is near the beginning, when you are still strong. They will starve you and beat you down so that soon you will be too weak to flee. Do not expect to be rescued, though some people will undoubtedly be working to help you. Never expect to be exchanged for a ransom. Most kidnappings end in death.

The best thing you can do for your country is try to flee. You may escape. If you don't, the captor may be forced to kill you. That is preferable to what you will be forced to endure as a captive. Plus, if you die, the kidnappers will no longer have a hostage.

It was a harsh, blunt lesson—but many of her lessons had been that way. Better to die than to be held captive and ransomed against Idris. That was the same lesson that warned her that the Hallandrens might try to use her against Idris once she was there. In such a case, she was told that her father might be forced to order her assassination.

That was a problem she didn't have to worry about anymore. The kidnapping advice, however, seemed useful. It frightened her, made her want to cower back and simply wait, hoping that Vasher would find a reason to let her go. However, the more she thought, the more she knew that she had to be strong.

He'd been extremely harsh with her—exaggeratedly so. He'd wanted to frighten her so that she wouldn't try to escape. He'd cursed not having a cellar, for that would have been a good place to dump her. When he returned, he would probably move her to a more secure location. The tutors were right. The only chance she had to escape was now, when she was still strong.

Her hands were held tightly. She'd tried pulling them free several times already. Vasher knew his knots. She wiggled, rubbing more skin off, and she cringed in pain. Blood began to drip down her wrist, but even that slickness wasn't enough to get her hands free. She began to cry again, not in fear, but in pain and frustration. She couldn't wiggle her way out.

But... could she perhaps make the ropes untie themselves?

I don't know how to use the Breath, she thought. Why didn't I let Denth train me earlier?

Her stubborn self-righteousness seemed even more flagrant to her now. Of course it was better to use the Breath than it was to be killed—or worse—by Vasher. She thought she understood Lemks and his desire to gather enough BioChroma to extend his life. She tried to speak some Commands through her gag.

That was useless. Even she understood that the Commands had to be spoken clearly. She began to wiggle her chin, pushing on the gag with her tongue. It didn't appear to be as tight as her wrist bonds. Plus, it was wet from her tears and saliva. She worked at it, moving her lips and her teeth, wiggling the bond free. She was actually surprised when it finally dropped below her chin, loose.

She licked her lips, working her sore jaw. *Now what?* she thought. Her apprehension was rising. Now she *really* needed to get free. If Vasher returned and saw that she'd managed to work her gag off, he'd never leave her with such an opportunity again. He might punish her for disobeying him.

"Ropes," she said. "Untie yourself."

Nothing happened.

She gritted her teeth, trying to remember the Commands that Denth had told her. *Hold Things* and *Protect Me*. Neither seemed all that useful in her situation. She certainly didn't want the ropes to hold her wrists more tightly. However, he had said something else. Something about imagining what you wanted in your mind. She tried that, picturing the ropes untying themselves.

"Untie yourselves," she said clearly.

Again, nothing happened.

Vivenna leaned her head back in annoyance. Awakening seemed such a vague art, which was odd, considering the amount of rules and restrictions it appeared to have. Or maybe it just seemed vague to her because it was so complicated.

She closed her eyes. I have to get this, she thought. I must figure it out. If I don't, I will be killed.

She opened her eyes, focusing on her bonds. She pictured them untying again, but somehow that felt wrong. She was like a child, sitting and staring at a leaf, trying to make it move just by concentrating on it.

That wasn't the way her newfound senses worked. They were part of her. So, instead of concentrating, she relaxed, letting her unconscious mind do the work. A little like she did when she changed the color of her hair.

"Untie," she Commanded.

The Breath flowed from her. It was like... blowing bubbles beneath the water, exhaling a piece of herself but feeling it flow into something else. Something that became part of her—a limb she could only slightly control. It was more of a *sense* of the rope than an ability to move it.

As the Breath left her, she could feel the world dull, colors becoming slightly less bold, the wind a little more difficult to hear, the life of the city a little more distant. The ropes around her hands jerked, causing her wrists to burn.

Then the ropes unraveled and dropped to the ground. Her arms came loose, and she sat, staring at her wrists, a shocked.

Austre, Lord of Colors, she thought. *I did it*. She wasn't certain whether to be impressed or ashamed.

Either way, she knew she needed to run. She untied her ankles, then scrambled to her feet, noticing that a section of the wooden door had been completely drained of color in a circular pattern around her hands. She paused only briefly, then grabbed the rope and ran down the stairs. She peeked out the doorway onto the street, but it was dark, and she could see little.

Taking a deep breath, she rushed out into the night.

#

She walked aimlessly for a time, trying to put space between herself and Vasher's lair. She knew that she should probably find a place to hide, but she was afraid. She was distinctive in her fine dress and would be remembered by all who passed. Her only real hope was to get out of the slums and into the city proper, where she could find her way back to Denth and the others.

She carried the rope in her pocket. She'd grown so accustomed to having a certain amount of Breath that missing a fraction, even the small bit contained in the rope, felt wrong.

Awakeners could recover Breath they invested into objects; she'd been tutored on that. She just didn't know the Commands to do it. So she brought the rope, hoping that Denth would be able to help her recover its Breath.

She maintained a quick pace, head down, trying to watch for a discarded cloak or piece of cloth she could wrap around herself to hide the dress. Fortunately, it seemed as if the hour were too late, even, for most ruffians. She did occasionally see shadowed figures on the sides of the road, and she had trouble keeping her heart stilled as she passed them.

If only the sun were up! she thought with frustration. It was beginning to grow light with morning's arrival, but it was still dark enough that she had trouble telling which direction she was going. The slums were convoluted enough that she felt she were going in circles. She...

Vivenna stopped, frowning. The street around her looked familiar. Did that mean she'd passed it recently? There were no lamps in the slums, but the light of false dawn was enough. She could have sworn that she recognized the building in front of her.

I do recognize it, she realized. I recognize the way the broken door hangs, the pattern of the windows, the faded colors. I stared out a window at this building, once. That means...

She turned around. Denth's safe house—the one they'd visited after the attack in the restaurant and the attack in the slums—lay huddled between two larger buildings across from her.

Blessed Austre! She thought with relief, quickly crossing the street and pushing her way into the building. The main room was empty, and she hurriedly opened the door down to the cellar, seeking a place to hide.

She searched around with her fingers, and sure enough, she found a lantern with flint and steel beside the stairway. She pulled the door closed and found it more sturdy than she would have assumed. That felt good, though she couldn't lock it from this side. She left it unlatched and bent down to light the lantern.

A set of worn, broken stairs led down into the cellar. Vivenna paused, remembering that Denth had warned her about the steps. She walked down carefully, feeling them creak beneath her, and could see why he'd been worried. Still, she made it down all right. At the bottom, she wrinkled her nose at the musty scent. A couple of small game corpses hung from the wall; someone had been here recently, which was a good sign.

She rounded the stairs. The main space of the cellar was built beneath the floor of the upper room. She would rest there for a few hours, and if Denth didn't arrive, she'd venture out. Then she—

She froze, jerking to a halt, lantern swinging in her hand. Its hesitant light shone on a figure sitting before her, head bowed, face shadowed. His arms were tied behind his back and his legs were tied to the legs of the chair.

"Parlin?" Vivenna asked with shock, rushing to his side. She quickly set down the lantern, then froze. There was blood on the floor.

“Parlin!” she said louder, urgently lifting his head. His eyes stared forward, sightless, his face scratched and bloody. Her life sense couldn’t feel him. His eyes were dead.

Vivenna’s hand began to shake. She stumbled back, horrified. “Oh, colors,” she found herself mumbling. “Colors, colors, colors...”

A hand fell on her shoulder. She screamed, spinning. A large figure stood in the darkness behind her, half hidden beneath the stairs.

“Hello, princess,” Tonk Fah said. He smiled.

Vivenna stumbled back, nearly colliding with Parlin’s body. She began to gasp, hand at her chest. Only then did she notice the bodies on the walls.

Not game animals. What she had mistaken for a pheasant in the dim light of her lantern now reflected back green. A dead parrot. A monkey hung beside, body sliced and cut. The freshest corpse was that of a large lizard. All had been tortured.

“Oh, Austre,” she mumbled.

Tonk Fah stepped forward, grabbing for her, and Vivenna finally shocked herself into motion. She ducked to the side, escaping his reach. She ran around the large man, scrambling toward the stairs. She came up short as she collided with someone’s chest.

She looked up, blinking.

“Do you know what I hate most about being a mercenary, princess?” Denth asked quietly, grabbing her arm. “Fulfilling the stereotypes. Everyone assumes that they can’t trust you. The thing is, they really can’t.”

“We do what we’re paid to,” Tonk Fah said, stepping up behind her.

“It’s not exactly the most enviable work,” Denth said, holding her tightly. “But if the money is good. I was hoping we wouldn’t have to do this. Everything was going so nicely. Why did you run away? What tipped you off?”

He pushed her forward with a careful hand, still holding her arm, as Jewels and Clod moved down the steps behind him. The stairs groaned beneath the weight.

“You’ve been lying to me the entire time,” she whispered, tears almost unnoticed on her cheeks, heart thumping as she tried to make sense of the world. “Why?”

“Kidnapping is hard work,” Denth said.

“Terrible business,” Tonk Fah added.

“It’s better if your subject never even knows they’ve been kidnapped.”

They always kept an eye on me. Staying near. “Lemks...”

“Didn’t do what we needed him to,” Denth said. “Poison was too good a death for that one. You should have known, princess. With as much Breath as he held...”

He couldn’t have died from sickness, she realized. Austre! Her mind was numb. She glanced at Parlin. He’s dead. Parlin is dead. They killed him.

“Don’t look at him,” Denth said, delicately turning her head away from the corpse. “That was an accident. Listen to me, princess. You’ll be all right. We won’t hurt you. Just tell me why you ran away. Parlin claimed not to know where you had gone. Did you really leave without telling him? Why? What made you suspect us?”

She shook her head dumbly.

“This is important, Princess,” Denth said calmly. “I need to know. Whom did you contact? What did you tell the slum lords about me?” He began to squeeze her arm tightly.

“We wouldn’t want to have to break anything,” Tonk Fah said. “You Idrians. You break too easily.”

What had once seemed lighthearted banter to her now seemed terrible and callous. Tonk Fah loomed in the shadowy lanternlight to her right, Denth a thinner form in front of her. She remembered his speed, the way he’d slain those bodyguards at the restaurant.

Remembered the way they’d destroyed Lemks’s house. Remembered their flippancy toward death. They’d hidden it all behind a veil of humor.

“Why?” she asked again. “You seemed like my friends.”

“We are,” Denth said. “I like you, Princess.” He smiled—a genuine smile, not a dangerous leer, like Tonk Fah. “If it means anything, I really do apologize. Parlin wasn’t supposed to die—that was an accident. But, well, a job is a job. We do what we’re paid to do. I explained this all to you several times, I seemed to recall.”

“I never really believed...” she whispered.

“They never do,” Tonk Fah said.

Vivenna blinked. Get away quickly. While you still have strength.

She’d escaped once. Wasn’t that enough? Didn’t she deserve some peace?

Quickly!

She twisted her arm, slapping it against the back of Tonk Fah’s cloak. “Grab—”

Denth, however, was too fast. He yanked her back, snatching her other hand, holding it tightly. Tonk Fah stood surprised as Vivenna’s dress bled free of color, turning grey, and some of her Breath was pulled into his cloak. Yet, without a Command, that Breath couldn’t do anything. It had been wasted, and Vivenna felt the world around her grow more dull.

Denth slapped Tonk Fah on the back of the head.

“Hey,” Tonk Fah said, rubbing his head.

“Pay attention,” Denth said. Then he glanced at Vivenna, holding her arm tightly.

Blood seeped between his fingers from her wounded wrist. Denth froze, obviously seeing her bloodied wrists for the first time; the dark cellar had obscured them. He looked up, meeting her eyes. “Aw, hell,” he cursed. “You didn’t run from us, did you?”

“Huh?” Tonk Fah asked.

Vivenna was numb.

“What happened?” Denth asked. “Was it *him*?”

She didn’t respond.

Denth grimaced, then twisted her arm, causing her to yelp. “All right. It looks like my hand has been forced. Let’s deal with that Breath of yours first, and then we can have a chat—nicely, like friends—about what has happened to you.”

Clod stepped up beside Denth, grey eyes staring forward, empty as always. Except... could she see something in them? Was she making it up? Her emotions were so strained lately that she really couldn’t trust them. Clod seemed to meet her eyes.

“Now,” Denth said, face growing harder. “Repeat after me. My Breath to yours. My Life become yours.”

Vivenna looked up at him, meeting his eyes. “Howl of the sun,” she whispered.

Denth frowned. “What?”

“Attack Denth.”

“I—” Denth began. At that moment, Clod’s fist hit his face.

The blow threw Denth to the side into Tonk Fah, who cursed and stumbled. Vivenna wrenched free, ducking past Clod—nearly tripping on her dress—and threw her shoulder into the surprised Jewels.

Jewels fell. Vivenna scrambled up the stairs.

“You let her hear the security phrase?” Denth bellowed, sounds of struggle coming from where he was wrestling with Clod.

Jewels gained her feet and followed after Vivenna. The woman’s foot broke through a step, however. Vivenna tumbled into the room above then threw the door shut. She reached over, turning the latch.

Won’t hold them for long, she thought, feeling helpless. They’ll keep coming. Chasing me. Just like Vasher. God of Colors. What am I going to do?

She rushed out onto the street, the dawn light now illuminating the city, and ducked down an alleyway. Then she just kept running—this time trying to pick the smallest, and dirtiest, alleyways she could.

Chapter Thirty-Six

I will not leave you, Susebron wrote, sitting on the floor beside the bed, his back propped up by pillows. *I promise.*

“How can you be sure?” Siri asked from her place on the bed. “Maybe once you have an heir, you’ll grow tired of life, then give away your Breath.”

First of all, he wrote, *I’m still not even sure how I would get an heir. You refuse to explain it to me, nor will you answer my questions.*

“They’re embarrassing!” Siri said, feeling her short hair grow red. She turned it back yellow in an instant.

Secondly, he wrote, *I cannot give away my Breath, not if what I understand about BioChroma is true.*

He’s getting much more articulate in his writing, Siri thought as she watched him erase. It’s such a shame that he’s been locked his entire life.

“I really don’t know that much about it,” she said. “BioChroma isn’t exactly something we focus on in Idris. I suspect that half of the things I know are rumors and exaggerations. For instance, back in Idris, they think you sacrifice people on altars in the court here—I heard that a dozen times from different people.”

He paused, then continued writing. *We argue something that is silly. I will not change. I am not going to suddenly decide to kill myself. You do not need to worry.*

She sighed.

Siri, he wrote, *I lived for fifty years with no information, no knowledge, barely able to communicate. Can you really think that I would kill myself now? Now, when I’ve discovered how to write? When I’ve discovered someone to talk to? When I’ve discovered you?*

She smiled. “All right. I believe you. But I still think we have to worry about your priests.”

He didn’t respond, looking away.

Why is he so cursedly loyal to them? she thought.

Finally, he looked back at her. *Would you grow your hair?*

She raised an eyebrow. “And what color am I to make it?”

Red, he wrote.

“You Hallandrens and your bright colors,” she said, shaking her head. “Do you realize that my people considered red the most flagrant of all colors?”

He paused. *I’m sorry*, he wrote. *I did not mean to offend you. I—*

He broke off as she reached down and touched his arm. “No,” she said. “Look, I wasn’t arguing. I was just being flirtatious. I’m sorry.”

Flirtatious? he wrote. *My storybook doesn’t mention this term.*

“I know,” Siri said. “That book is too full of stories about children getting eaten by trees and things.”

The stories are metaphors meant to teach—

“Yes, I know,” she said, interrupting him again.

So, what is flirtatious?

“It’s...” *Colors! How do I get myself into these situations?* “It’s when a girl acts hesitant—or sometimes silly—in order to make a man pay more attention to her.”

Why would that make a man pay attention to her?

“Well, like this.” She looked at him, leaning forward a bit. “Do you want me to grow my hair?”

Yes.

“Do you *really* want me to?”

Of course.

“Well then, if I must,” she said, tossing her head and commanding her hair become a deep auburn red. It flushed mid-toss, flaring from yellow to red like ink bleeding into a pool of clear water. Then she made it grow. The ability was more instinctive than conscious—like flexing a muscle. In this case, it was a “muscle” she’d been using a lot lately, since she tended to cut her hair off in the evenings rather than spending the time combing it.

Even as the hair whipped her face, it grew in length. She tossed her head, one final time—the hair making it feel more heavy, her neck warm from the locks which now tumbled down around her shoulders and down her back, twisting in light curls.

Susebron looked at her with wide eyes. She met them, then tried a seductive glance. The result seemed so ridiculous to her, however, that she just found herself laughing. She fell back on the bed, newly-grown hair flaring around her.

Susebron tapped her leg. She looked over at him, and he stood up, sitting on the side of the bed so that she could see his tablet as he wrote.

You are very strange, he said.

She smiled. “I know. I’m not meant to be a seductress. I can’t maintain a straight face.”

Seductress, he wrote. *I know that word. It is used in a story when the evil queen tries to tempt the young prince with something, though I don’t know what.*

She smiled.

I think she must have been planning to offer him food.

“Yeah,” Siri said. “Good interpretation, there, Seb. Right on.”

He hesitated. She wasn’t offering food, was she?

Siri smiled again.

He flushed. *I feel like such an idiot. There is so much that everyone else understands intrinsically. Yet I have only the stories of a children’s book to guide me. I’ve read them so often that it’s hard to separate myself—and the way I view them—from the child I was when I first read them.*

He began to erase furiously. She sat up then laid a hand on his arm.

I know that there are things I’m missing, he wrote. *Things that embarrass you, and I have guesses. I am not a fool. And yet, I get frustrated. With flirtation and sarcasm—both things where you apparently act opposite of what you want—I fear that I will never understand you.*

He stared with frustration at his board, wiping cloth held in one hand, charcoal in the other. The fire cracked quietly in the fireplace, throwing waves of too-bright yellow against his clean-shaven face.

"I'm sorry," she said, scooting closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his elbow, laying her head against his upper arm. He actually didn't seem that much bigger than her, now that she was used to it. There had been men back in Idris who had stood some six and a half feet tall, and Susebron was only a few inches taller than they. Plus, because his size was proportional to that of a regular person, he didn't seem spindly or unnatural. He was normal, just bigger.

He glanced at her as she rested her head on his arm and closed her eyes. "I think you are doing better than you think. Most people back in my homeland didn't understand me half as well as you do."

He began to write, and she opened her eyes.

I find that hard to believe.

"It's true," she said. "They kept telling me to become someone else."

Who?

"My sister," she said with a sigh. "The woman you were supposed to marry. She was everything the daughter of a king should be. Controlled, soft spoken, obedient, learned."

She sounds boring, he wrote, smiling.

"Vivenna is a wonderful person," Siri said. "She was always very kind to me. It's just that... well, I think even she felt that I should have been more reserved."

I can't understand that, he wrote. *You're wonderful. So full of life and excitement. The priests and servants of the palace, they wear colors, but there's no color inside of them. They just go about their duties, eyes down, solemn. You've got color on the inside, so much of it that it bursts out and colors everything around you.*

She smiled. "That sounds like BioChroma."

You are more honest than BioChroma, he wrote. *My Breath, it makes things more bright, but it isn't mine. It was given to me. Yours is your own.*

She felt her hair shift from the deep red into a golden, and she sighed softly with contentment, pulling herself a little closer to him.

How do you do that? he wrote.

"Do what?"

Change your hair.

"That one was unconscious," she said. "It goes yellow if I feel happy or content.

You're happy, then? he wrote. *With me?*

"Of course."

But, when you speak of the mountains, there is such longing in your voice.

"I miss them," she said. "But if I left here, I'd miss you too. Sometimes, you can't have everything you want, since the wants contradict each other."

Their conversation fell silent for a time, and he set aside his board, hesitantly wrapping his arm around her and resting back against the bed's headboard. She only half-successfully kept the blushful twinge of red out of her hair as she realized that they were still sitting on the bed, and she was snuggling up beside him wearing only her shift.

But, well, she thought, we are married, after all.

The only thing that spoiled the moment was the occasional rumbling of her stomach. After a few minutes, Susebron reached for his board.

You are hungry? he wrote.

“No,” she said. “My stomach is an anarchist; it likes to growl when it’s full.”

He paused. *Sarcasm?*

“A poor attempt,” she said. “It’s all right—I’ll survive.”

Did you not eat before you came to my chambers?

“I did,” she said. “But growing that much hair is draining. It always leaves me hungry.”

It makes you hungry every night? He asked, writing quickly. *And you didn’t say anything?*

She shrugged.

I will get you food.

“No, we can’t afford to expose ourselves.”

Expose what? he wrote. *I am God King—I eat whenever I wish it. I have sent for it at night before. This will not be odd.* He stood, walking toward the doorway.

“Wait!” she said.

He turned, glancing back at him.

“You can’t go to the door like that, Susebron,” she said, keeping her voice quiet, in case someone was listening. “You’re still fully dressed.”

He looked down, then frowned.

“Make your clothing look disheveled at least,” she said, quickly hiding his writing board.

He undid his neck buttons, then threw off his deep black overrobe, revealing an undergown. Like everything white near him, it gave off a halo of rainbow colors. He reached up, mussing his dark hair. He turned back to her, eyes questioning.

“Good enough,” she said, pulling the bed sheets up to her neck, covering herself. She watched curiously as Susebron rapped on the door with his knuckles.

It immediately opened. *He’s too important to open his own door,* Siri thought.

He commanded food by putting a hand to his stomach, then pointing away. The servants—barely visible to Siri through the doorway—scuttled away at his order. He turned as the door closed, walking back to sit beside her on the bed.

Barely a few minutes later, servants arrived at the room with a dining table and a chair. They set the table with large amounts of food—everything from roasted fish to pickled vegetables and simmering shellfish.

Siri watched with amazement. There’s no way they fixed it that quickly. They simply had it waiting in the kitchens, should their God happen to grow hungry.

It was wasteful to the point of extravagance, but it was also wondrous. It bespoke a lifestyle that her people back in Idris couldn’t even imagine, one representative of an uncomfortable balance to the world. Some people starved; others were so wealthy that they never even *saw* most meals fixed for them.

The servants set only one chair at the table. Siri watched as they brought in plate after plate. They couldn't know what the God King wanted, so they apparently brought him some of everything. They filled the table, then retreated as Susebron pointed for them to go.

The scents were almost too much for Siri in her hungered state. She waited, tense, until the door closed. Then she threw off the sheets and rushed over. She had thought the meals prepared for her were extravagant, but they were nothing compared to this feast. Susebron gestured toward the chair.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked.

He shrugged.

She walked over and took one of the blankets from the bed, then she spread it on the stone floor. "What looks good to you?" she said, approaching the table.

He pointed at the plate of simmering mussels and several of the breads. She moved these, along with a dish that didn't appear to have any fish in it—a bowl of exotic fruits tossed in some kind of creamy sauce—to the cloth. She then sat down and began eating.

Susebron carefully situated himself on the floor. He managed to look dignified even when wearing only his undergown. Siri reached over and handed him his board.

This is very odd, he wrote.

"What?" she asked. "Eating on the floor?"

He nodded. *Dining is such a production for me. I eat some of what is on a plate, then servants pull it away, wipe my face, and bring me another one. I never finish an entire dish, even if I like it.*

Siri snorted. "I'm surprised they don't hold the spoon for you."

They did when I was younger, Susebron wrote, flushing. *I eventually got them to let me do it myself. It's hard, when you can't speak with anyone.*

"I can imagine," Siri said between mouthfuls. She eyed Susebron, who ate with small, reserved bites. She felt a slight stab of shame at how fast she was eating, then decided she didn't care. She put aside the fruit dish and fetched several pastries from the table.

Susebron eyed her as she began to eat one after another. *Those are Pahn Kahl tinkfans*, he wrote. *You are to take only small bites, making sure to eat a piece of bread between to wash away the taste. They are a delicacy and—*

He broke off as Siri picked up an entire pastry and shoved it into her mouth. She smiled at him, then continued chewing.

After a moment of looking stunned, he wrote on his board again. *You realize that children in the stories who gorged themselves usually ended up being thrown off of cliffs.*

Siri stuffed another crispbread into her mouth beside the first, dusting her fingers and face with powdered sugar in the process, her cheeks bulging.

Susebron watched her, then reached over and took a whole one himself. He inspected it, then shoved it into his mouth.

Siri laughed, nearly spitting out bits of pastry onto the blanket. "And so my corruption of the God King continues," she said once she could speak.

He smiled. *This is very curious*, he wrote, eating another crispbread. Then another. Then another.

Siri watched him, raising an eyebrow. "One would think that as God King, you would *at least* be able to eat sweets whenever you want."

I have many rules that others need not follow, he wrote as he chewed. The stories explained this. Much is required of a prince or a king. I would rather have been born a peasant.

Siri raised an eyebrow. She had a feeling that he'd be surprised if he actually had to experience things like hunger, poverty, or even discomfort. However, she left him to his ideas. Who was she to chastise?

You are the one who was hungry, he wrote. But I am the one doing all the eating!

"They obviously don't feed you enough," Siri said, trying a slice of bread.

He shrugged, continuing to eat. She watched him, her thoughts turning again to the servants and Susebron's interaction with them.

We can't just keep going on like this, she thought. Playing around at night, pretending like the world isn't going on without us. We're going to get crushed.

"Susebron," she said. "I think we need to find a way to expose what your priests have been doing to you."

He looked up, then wrote, *What do you mean?*

"I mean that we should have you try to talk to the common people," she said. "Or maybe some of the other Gods. The priests gain all of their power by associating with you. If you choose to communicate through someone else, it would overthrow them."

Do we need to do that?

"Pretend with me for a moment that we do," she said.

Very well, he wrote. But how, exactly, would I communicate with someone else? I can't exactly stand up and begin shouting.

"I don't know. Notes, perhaps?"

He smiled. *There is a story about that in my book. A princess trapped in a tower who throws notes out into the ocean waters. The king of the fishes finds them.*

"I doubt the king of fishes cares about our predicament," Siri said flatly.

Such a creature is only slightly less fantastic than the possibility of my notes being found and interpreted correctly. If I threw them out the window, nobody would believe that the God King had written them.

"And if you passed them to servants?"

He frowned. *Assuming that you are right, and that my priests are working against me, then wouldn't it be foolhardy to trust the servants they employ?*

"Perhaps. We could try a Pahn Kahl servant."

None of them attend me, for I am the God King, he wrote. Besides, what if we did get a servant or two on our side? How would that expose the priests? Nobody would believe a Pahn Kahl servant who contradicted the priests.

She shook her head. "I suppose you could try making a scene, running away or causing a distraction."

When outside of the palace, I am constantly attended by a troop of hundreds. Awakeners, soldiers, guards, priests, and Lifeless warriors. Do you honestly think I could make any kind of a scene without being rushed away before I could communicate with anyone?

"No," she admitted. "But we have to do something! There has to be a way out of this."

I do not see one. We need to work with the priests, not against them. Perhaps they know more about why the God Kings die. They could tell us—I can speak to them, using the Artisan’s Script.

“No,” Siri said. “Not yet. Let me think first.”

Very well, he wrote, then tried another pastry.

“Susebron...” she finally said. “Would you consider running away with me? Back to Idris?”

He frowned. *Perhaps*, he finally wrote. *That seems extreme.*

“What if I could prove that the priests are trying to kill you? And if I could provide a way out—someone to smuggle us from the palace and out of the city?”

The concept obviously bothered him. *If it is the only way*, he wrote, *then I will go with you. But I do not believe that we will get to that point.*

“I hope you’re right,” she said. *But if you’re not*, she thought, *then we’re escaping. We’ll take our chances back with my family, war or no war.*

Chapter Thirty-Seven

In the slums it could seem like night, even during the full light of day.

Vivenna wandered, aimless, stepping over soiled bits of colorful trash. She knew that she should find a place to hide and stay there. Yet she wasn't really thinking right any more.

Parlin was dead. He'd been her friend since childhood. She'd convinced him to come with her on what now seemed the most idiotic of quests. It was her fault.

Denth and his team had betrayed her. No. They had *never* worked for her. Now that she looked back, she could see the signs. How conveniently they'd found her in the restaurant. How they'd used her to get at Lemks' Breath. How they'd manipulated her, letting her feel that she was in control. They'd just been playing along.

She'd been a prisoner and never known it.

The betrayal felt so much the worse for how she'd come to trust, even befriend, them. She should have seen the warnings. Tonk Fah's joking brutality. Denth's explanations that mercenaries had no allegiances. He'd pointed out that Jewels would work against her own gods. Compared to that, what was betraying a friend?

She stumbled down yet another alleyway, hand on the wall of a brick building beside her. Dirt and soot stained her fingers. Her hair was a bleached white. It still hadn't recovered.

The attack in the slum had been frightening. Getting captured by Vasher had been terrifying. But seeing Parlin, tied to that chair, blood coming from his nose, his cheeks sliced open to reveal the inside of his mouth...

She would never forget. Something inside of her seemed broken. Her ability to care. She was just. Numb.

She reached the end of the alleyway, then looked up dully. There was a wall front of her. A dead end. She turned to go back.

"You," a voice said.

Vivenna turned, surprised at the speed her own reaction. Her mind remained numb, but a carnal part of her was still awake. Capable of defensive instinct.

She stood in a narrow alley like those she had walked down all day. She'd stayed to the slums, figuring that Denth would expect her to run for the open city. He knew it better than she did. In her addled mind, staying to the clustered, quiet slum seemed a much better idea.

A man sat on a small stack of boxes in behind of her, legs swinging over the sides. He was short, dark haired, and wore typical slum clothing—a mixture of garments going through various stages of wear.

"You've been causing quite a stir," the man said.

She stood quietly.

"Woman wandering the slums in a beautiful white dress, eyes dark, hair white and ragged. If everyone hadn't been so paranoid following the raid the other day, you'd have been seen to hours ago."

The man seemed faintly familiar. "You're Idrian," she whispered.

He shrugged.

“You know who I am,” she said.

“I don’t know anything,” he said. “Particularly not things that could get me into trouble.”

“Please,” she said. “You have to help me.” She took a step forward.

He hopped off his boxes, a knife flashing in his hand. “Help you?” he asked. “I saw that look in your eyes when you came to the meeting. You look down on us. Just like the Hallandren.”

She shied back.

“A lot of people have seen you wandering about like a wraith,” he said. “But nobody seems to know exactly where to find you. There’s quite a search going in some parts.”

Denth, she thought. It’s a miracle I’ve stayed free so long. I need to do something. Stop wandering. Find a place to hide.

“I figure that someone will find you eventually,” the man said. “So I’m going move first.”

“Please,” she whispered.

He raised the knife. “I won’t turn you in. You deserve at least that much. Besides, I don’t want to draw attention to myself. That dress, though. That will sell for a lot, even scraped up like it is. I could feed my family for weeks on that cloth.”

She hesitated.

“Scream and I’ll cut you,” he said quietly. “It’s not a threat. It’s just an inevitability. The dress, Princess. You’ll be better without it. It’s what is making everyone pay attention to you.”

She considered using her Breath. But... she hadn’t been able to make that work very well yet. So, numb, she reached up, undoing the buttons.

“Don’t drop it to the ground,” the man said. “It’s dirty enough already.”

She pulled it off, then shivered, standing only in her under-leggings and her shift. He took the dress then opened her pocket pouch. He frowned as he tossed aside the rope inside of it. “No money?”

She shook her head dully.

“The leggings. They’re silk, right?”

Her shift came down to her mid thighs. She stooped down, pulling off the leggings, then handed them over. He took them, and she saw a glint of greed—or perhaps something else—in his eyes.

“The shift,” he said, waving his knife.

“No,” she said quietly.

He took a step forward.

Something snapped inside of her.

“No!” she yelled. “No, no, NO! You take your city, your colors and clothing, and go! Leave me!” She fell to her knees, crying, and grabbed handfuls of refuse and mud, rubbing it on the shift. “There!” she screamed. “You want it! Take it from me! Sell it like this!”

Contrary to his threat, the man wavered. He looked around, then clutched the valuable cloth to his chest and dashed away.

Vivenna knelt. Where had she found more tears? She curled up, heedless of the trash and mud, and wept.

#

It started raining sometime while she was curled in the mud. It was one of the soft, hazy Hallandren rainfalls. The wet drops kissed her cheek; little streams ran down the sides of the alleyway walls.

She was hungry and exhausted. But with the falling rain came a bit of lucidity.

She needed to move. The thief had been right—the dress had been a hindrance. She felt naked in the shift, particularly now that it was wet, but she had seen women in the slums wearing just as little. She needed to go, become just another waif in the dirt and grime.

She crawled over to a refuse pile, noticing a bit of a cloth sticking from it. She pulled free a muddy, stinking shawl. Or maybe it had been a rug. Either way, she wrapped it around her shoulders, pulling it tight across her chest to offer some measure of modesty. She tried to make her hair black, but it refused.

She sat down, too uncaring to be frustrated. Instead, she simply rubbed mud and dirt into her hair, changing the pale white into a sickly brown.

It's still too long, she thought. I'll need to do something about that. It stands out. No beggar would keep hair that long—it would be difficult to care for.

She began to make her way out of the alleyway, then paused. The shawl was too bright, now that she was wearing it. *Breath. I'll be immediately visible to anyone with the First Heightening. I can't hide in the slums!*

She still felt the loss of the Breath she'd sent into the rope and then the larger amount she'd wasted on Tonks' cloak. Yet she had the greater portion left. She huddled down by the side of the wall, nearly losing control again as she considered the situation.

And then she realized something.

Tonk Fah snuck up on me down in that cellar. I couldn't feel his Breath. Just like I couldn't feel Vasher's when he took me in my rooms.

The answer felt so easy it was ridiculous. She couldn't feel the Breath in the rope she'd made. She picked it up, tying it around her ankle. Then she took the shawl, holding it in front of her. It was such a pathetic thing, frayed at the edges, only a bit of its original red color peeking through the grime.

"My Breath to yours," she said, speaking the words Denth had tried to get her to say. They were the same words Lemks had spoken when he'd given her his Breath.

It worked on the shawl too. Her Breath drained from her body, all of it, invested into the shawl. It was no Command—the shawl wouldn't be able to do anything—but her Breath, hopefully, would be safe. She wouldn't give off an aura.

None at all. She almost fell to the ground with the shock of losing it all. Where she had once been able to sense the city around her, now everything became still. It was as if it had been silenced. The entire city becoming dead.

Or maybe it was Vivenna who had become dead. A Drab. She stood slowly, shivering in the drizzling rain, and wiped the water from her eyes. Then she pulled the shawl—Breaths and all—close and shuffled away.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lightsong sat, sweating, staring down at the floor in front of him. He was breathing heavily.

Llarimar eyed a lesser scribe, who lowered his pen. Servants clustered around the edges of the bed chamber. They had, at his request, woken him up unusually early in the morning. He hadn't anticipated the dreams.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked.

It's nothing, Lightsong thought. I dream of war because I'm thinking about it. Not because of prophesy. Not because I'm a god.

It felt so real. In the dream he had been a man, on the battlefield, with no weapon. Soldiers had died around him. Friend after friend. He had known them, each one close to him.

A war against Idris wouldn't be like that, he thought. It would be fought by our Lifeless.

He didn't want to acknowledge that his friends during the dream hadn't been wearing bright colors. He hadn't been seeing through the eyes of a Hallandren soldier. Perhaps that was why it had been such a slaughter.

It wouldn't be, he thought. The Idrians are the ones threatening us. They're the rebels who broke off, maintaining a second throne inside of Hallandren borders. They need to be quelled.

They deserve it.

"What did you see, your grace?" Llarimar asked again.

Lightsong closed his eyes. There were other images. The recurring ones. The glowing red panther. The tempest. A young woman's face, being absorbed by darkness. Eaten alive.

"I saw Blushweaver," he said, speaking only of the very last part of the dreams. "Her face red and flushed. I saw you, and you were sleeping. And I saw the God King."

"The God King?" Llarimar asked, sounding excited.

Lightsong nodded. "He was crying."

The scribe wrote the images down. Llarimar, for once, didn't prompt further. Lightsong stood, forcing the images out of his mind. Yet he couldn't ignore that his body felt weak. It was Feast Day, and he would have to take in a Breath or he would die.

"I'm going to need some urns," Lightsong said. "Two dozen of them, one for each of the Gods, painted after their colors."

Llarimar gave the order without even asking why.

"I'll also need some pebbles," Lightsong said as the servants dressed him. "Lots of them."

Llarimar nodded. Once Lightsong was dressed, he turned to leave the room. Off once again to feed on the soul of a child.

#

Lightsong threw a pebble into one of the urns in front of him. It made a slight ringing sound.

"Well done, your grace," Llarimar praised, standing beside Lightsong's chair.

“Nothing to it,” Lightsong said, tossing another pebble. It fell short of the intended urn, and a servant rushed forward, plucking it off the ground and depositing it in the proper container.

“I appear to be a natural,” Lightsong noted. He felt much better, having been given his Breath.

“Indeed, your grace,” Llarimar said. “I believe that her grace, the Goddess Blushweaver is approaching.”

“Good,” Lightsong said, throwing another pebble. He hit this time. Of course, the urns were only a few feet from his seat. “I can show off my pebble-throwing skills.”

He sat on the green of the courtyard, a cool breeze blowing, his pavilion set up just inside the Court’s gates. He could see the blocking wall, the one that kept him from looking out at the city proper. With the wall in the way, it was a rather depressing sight.

If they’re going to lock us in here, he thought, they could at least give us the courtesy of a decent view out.

“What in the name of the Iridescent tones, are you doing?”

Lightsong didn’t need to look to know that Blushweaver was standing with hands on hips beside him. He threw another pebble.

“You know,” he said, “it’s always struck me as strange. When we say oaths like that, we use the colors. Why not use our own names? We are, presumably, gods.”

“Most Gods don’t like their names being used as an oath,” Blushweaver said, sitting beside him.

“Then they are far too pompous for my taste,” Lightsong said, tossing a pebble. It missed, and a servant deposited it. “I, personally, should find it very flattering to have my name used as an oath. Lightsong the Brave! Or, by Lightsong the Brave! I suppose that’s a bit of a mouthful. Perhaps we could shorten it to simple Lightsong!”

“I swear,” she said. “You are getting stranger by the day.”

“No, actually,” he said. “You *didn’t* swear in that particular statement. Unless you think we should simply swear using the familiar pronoun. *You!* So, your line at this point is ‘What in the name of You are you doing?’”

She leaned back, huffing quietly.

He eyed her. “I certainly don’t deserve that yet. I’ve barely gotten started. Something else must be bothering you.”

“Allmother,” she said.

“Still won’t give you the Commands?”

“Refuses to even speak with me now.”

Lightsong threw a pebble into one of the urns. “Ah, if only she knew the utter frustration she was missing by refusing your acquaintance.”

“I’m not that frustrating!” Blushweaver said. “I’ve actually been rather charming with her.”

“Then that is your problem, I surmise,” Lightsong said. “We’re gods, my dear, and we quickly grow tired of our immortal existences. Surely we seek for extreme ranges in emotion—good or bad, it doesn’t matter. In a way, it’s the *absolute value* of emotion that is important, rather than the positive or negative nature of that emotion.”

Blushweaver paused. So did Lightsong.

“Lightsong, dear,” she said. “What in the name of You did that mean?”

"I'm not exactly sure," he said. "It just kind of came out. I can visualize what it means in my head, though. With numbers."

"Are... you all right?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Images of warfare flashed in his mind. His best friend, a man he didn't know, dying with a sword through the chest. "I'm not sure," he said. "Things have been rather different for me lately."

She sat quietly for a moment. "You want to go back to my palace and frolic? That always makes me feel better."

He tossed a pebble, smiling. "You, my dear, are incorrigible."

"I'm the Goddess of Lust, for the Your sake," she said. "I've got to fill the role."

"Last I checked," he said. "You were goddess of Honesty."

"Honesty and honest emotions, my dear," she said sweetly. "And let me tell you, lust is one of the most honest of all emotions. Now, what *are* you doing with those silly pebbles?"

"Counting," he said.

"Counting your insanities?"

"That," Lightsong said, tossing another pebble, "and counting the number of priests who come through the gates wearing the colors of each God or Goddess."

Blushweaver frowned. It was mid-day, and the gates were fairly busy with the comings and goings of servants and performers. There were only occasionally priests or priestesses, however, since they would have been required to come in early to attend their gods.

"Each time a priest of a particularly god enters," Lightsong said, "I toss a pebble into the urn representing that god."

Blushweaver watched him toss—and miss—with another pebble. As he'd instructed, the servants picked the pebble up and put it in the proper urn. Violet and silver. To the side, one of Hopefinder's priestesses rushed across the green toward her god's palace.

"I'm confused," Blushweaver finally said.

"It's easy," Lightsong said. "You see someone wearing purple, you throw a pebble in the urn of the same color."

"Yes, dear," she said. "But *why*?"

"To keep track of how many priests of each god enter the Court, of course," Lightsong said. "They've slowed to nearly a trickle. Scoot, would you mind counting?"

Llarimar bowed then gathered several servants and scribes, ordering them to empty the urns and count the contents of each one.

"My dear Lightsong," Blushweaver said. "I *do* apologize if I've been ignoring you lately. Allmother has been rudely unresponsive to my suggestions. If my lack of attention has caused your fragile mind to snap..."

"My mind is quite unsnapped, thank you," Lightsong said, sitting up, watching the servants count.

"Then, you must be so very bored," Blushweaver continued. "Perhaps we can come up with something to entertain you."

"I'm well entertained." He smiled even before the counting results were in. Mercystar had one of the smallest piles.

"Lightsong?" Blushweaver asked. Nearly all of her playful attitude was gone.

"I ordered my priests in early today," Lightsong said, glancing at her. "And to set up position here, in front of the gates, before the sun even rose. We've been counting priests for some six hours now."

Llarimar walked over, handing Lightsong a list of the gods and the number of priests who had entered wearing their colors. Lightsong scanned it, nodding to himself.

"Some of the Gods have had over a hundred priests report for service, yet a couple of them have had barely a dozen. Mercystar is one of those."

"So?" Blushweaver asked.

"So," Lightsong said. "I'm going to send my servants to watch and count at Mercystar's palace, keeping track of the number of priests who are there. I already suspect that I know what they'll find. Mercystar doesn't have fewer priests than the rest of us. They're just getting into the Court by a different route."

Blushweaver paused. "The tunnels," she finally said.

Lightsong nodded.

Blushweaver leaned back, sighing. "Well at least you're not insane or bored. You're just obsessed."

"Something's going on with those tunnels, Blushweaver. And it relates to the servant who was murdered."

"Lightsong, we have *much* bigger problems to worry about!" Blushweaver shook her head, holding her forehead. "I can't believe that you're still bothering with this. Honestly! The kingdom is about to go to war—for the first time, your position in the Court is important—and you're worrying about how priests are getting into the Court?"

Lightsong didn't respond immediately. "Here," he finally said, "let me prove my point to you."

He reached over to the side of his couch and picked a small box up off the ground. He held it up, showing it to Blushweaver.

"A box," she said flatly. "What a convincing argument you make."

He pulled the top off of the box, leaving a small grey squirrel sitting in his hand. It stood perfectly still, staring forward, fur blowing in the breeze.

"A Lifeless rodent," Blushweaver said. "That's *much* better. I feel myself being swayed already."

"The person who broke into Mercystar's palace used this as a distraction," Lightsong said. "Do you know anything about Breaking Lifeless, my dear?"

She shrugged.

"I didn't either," Lightsong said. "Not until I required my priests to break this one. Apparently, it requires *weeks* to take control of a Lifeless for which you do not have the right security phrases. I'm not even sure how the process goes—has something to with Breath and torture, apparently."

"Torture?" she said. "Lifeless can't feel."

Lightsong shrugged. "Anyway, my servants broke this one for me. The stronger and skilled the Awakener who created the Lifeless, the more difficult it is to break his Lifeless."

"That's why we need to get the Commands from Allmother," Blushweaver said. "If something were to happen to her, her ten thousand would become useless to us. It would take years to break that many Lifeless!"

“The God King and some of her priestess have the codes as well,” Lightsong said.

“Oh,” Blushweaver said, “and you think *he* is going to just give them over to us? Assuming we’re even allowed to talk to him?”

“Just pointing out that a single assassination couldn’t ruin our entire army,” Lightsong said, holding up the squirrel. “That’s not the point. The point is that whomever made this squirrel held quite a bit of Breath and knew what he was doing. The creature’s blood has been replaced with ichor-alcohol. The sutures are perfect. The Commands controlling the thing were extremely strong. It’s a marvelous piece of art.”

“And?” she asked.

“And he released it in Mercystar’s palace,” Lightsong said. “Creating a distraction so that he could sneak into those tunnels. Someone else followed the intruder, and this second person killed a man to keep him from revealing what he’d seen. Whatever is in those tunnels—wherever they lead—it’s important enough to waste Breath on. Important enough to kill for.”

Blushweaver shook her head. “I still can’t believe you are even worrying about this.”

“You said you knew about the tunnels,” Lightsong said. “I had Llarimar ask around, and others know of them too. They’re used for storage beneath the palaces, like you said. Different gods have ordered them constructed at various times during the history of the Court.”

“But,” he continued, excited. “They would also be the perfect place to set up a clandestine operation! The Court is outside the jurisdiction of the regular city guards. Each palace is like a little, autonomous country! Expand a few of those cellars so that their tunnels connect with others, dig them out of the Court so that you can come and go secretly...”

“Lightsong,” Blushweaver said. “If something *that* secret were going on, then why would the priests use those tunnels to come into the Court? Wouldn’t that be a little suspicious? I mean, if you noticed it, how hard could it be to discover?”

Lightsong paused, then flushed slightly. “Of course,” he said. “I got so wrapped up in pretending to be meaningful that I forgot myself! Thank you so much for reminding me that I am an idiot.”

“Lightsong, I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s quite all right,” he said, standing. “Why bother? I need to remember who I am. Lightsong, self-hating god. The most useless person ever granted immortality. Just answer one question for me.”

Blushweaver paused. “What question?”

“Why?” he asked, looking at her. “*Why* do I hate being a god? Why do I act so frivolous? Why do I undermine my own authority. Why?”

“I... always assumed it was because you liked being pithy,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Blushweaver, I was *like this from the first day*. The very day I awoke, I refused to believe I was a god. Refused to accept my place in this pantheon and this Court. I’ve acted accordingly ever since. And, if I might say, I’ve gotten quite a bit more clever as the years have passed. That is beside the point. The thing I must focus on—the important point here—is *why*.”

“I don’t know,” she confessed.

“I don’t either,” he said. “But whomever I was before, he’s trying to get out. That man I was before I died, he keeps whispering for me to dig at this mystery. Keeps warning me that I’m no god. Keeps prompting me to deal with this all in a frivolous way.” He shook his head. “I don’t know who I was—nobody will tell me. But I’m beginning to have suspicions. I was a person who

couldn't simply sit and let something unexplained slide away into the fog of memory. I was a man who hated secrets. And I'm only just beginning to understand how many secrets there are in this Court."

Blushweaver looked taken aback.

"Now," he said, walking away from the pavilion, his servants hurrying to catch up, "if you will excuse me, I have some business to be about."

"What business?" Blushweaver demanded, rising.

He glanced back. "To see Allmother. There are some Lifeless Commands that need to be dealt with."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

A week living in the gutters served to drastically change Vivenna's perspective on life.

She sold her hair on the second day, getting a depressingly small amount. The food that she'd bought with it hadn't even filled her stomach. She didn't have the strength to regrow the locks. The haircut didn't even have the dignity of being shaved—it was a ragged job of hackwork, and would have still been a pale white, save for the fact that it was matted and blackened with dirt and soot.

She sat on the side of the street, holding out her hand to the passing crowds, keeping her eyes down. No offerings came. She wasn't certain how the other beggars did it; their meager earnings seemed an amazing treasure. They knew so much she didn't—where to sit, how to plead. Passers learned to avoid beggars, even with their eyes. The successful beggars, then, were those who managed to draw attention.

Vivenna wasn't certain if she wanted the attention or not. Though the gnawing pain of hunger had eventually driven her out onto busy streets, she was still frightened that Denth or Vasher might find her.

The more hungry she grew, the less other worries seemed to bother her. Eating was a problem for *now*. Being killed by Denth or Vasher was a problem for *later*.

The flood of people in their colors continued to pass. Vivenna watched them without focusing on faces or bodies. Just colors. Like a spinning wheel, each spoke a different hue. *Denth won't find me here*, she thought. *He won't see the me in the beggar on the side of the street*.

Her stomach growled. She was learning to ignore it. Just like the people ignored her. She didn't feel like she was a true beggar or child of the street, not after just one week. But she *was* learning to imitate them, and her mind felt so fuzzy lately. Ever since she'd gotten rid of her Breath.

She pulled the shawl close. She kept it with her always.

She still hardly believed what Denth and the others had done. She had such fond memories of their joking. She couldn't connect that to what she'd seen in the cellar. In fact, sometimes, she found herself rising to seek them out. Surely the things she'd seen had been hallucinations. Surely they couldn't be such terrible men.

She sat back down.

That's foolish, she thought. I need to focus. Why isn't my mind working right anymore?

Focus on what? There wasn't much to think about. She couldn't go to Denth. Parlin was dead. The city authorities would be no help—she had now heard the rumors of the Idris princess who had been causing such troubles. She'd be arrested in a heartbeat.

There were soup kitchens in the city, but the first one she'd gone to, she'd spotted Tonk Fah lounging in a doorway across the street. She'd turned and scurried away, hoping he hadn't seen her. For the same reason, she didn't dare leave the city. Denth was sure to have agents watching the gates. Besides, where would she go? She didn't have the supplies for a trip to back to Idris.

Perhaps she could leave if she managed to save up enough money. That was hard, almost impossible. Every time she got a coin, she spent it on food. She couldn't help herself. Nothing else seemed to matter.

She'd already lost weight. Her stomach growled.

So, she sat, sweaty and dirty in the meager shade. She still wore only her shift and the shawl, though she was dirty enough that it was difficult to tell where clothing ended and skin began. Her arrogance of days past, refusing to wear anything but the rich dresses, now seemed ridiculous.

She shook her head. One week on the street felt like an eternity—yet she knew that she'd only just begun to experience the life of the poor. How did they survive? Sleeping in alleyways? Getting rained on every day? Jumping at every sound? Feeling so hungry they were tempted to pick at and eat the rotting garbage they found in gutters? She'd tried that. She'd even managed to keep some down.

It was the only thing she'd had to eat in two days.

Someone paused beside her. She looked up, eager, hand stretching further until she saw which colors were represented. Yellow and Blue. City guard. She grabbed at her shawl, pulling it closer. It was foolish, she knew—nobody knew about the Breaths it contained. The move was reflexive. The shawl was the only thing she owned, and—meager though it was—several urchins had already tried stealing it from her while she slept.

The guard didn't reach for her shawl. He just nudged her with his truncheon. "Hey," he said. "Move. No begging on this corner."

He didn't offer an explanation. They never did. There were apparently rules about where beggars could sit and where they couldn't, but nobody took thought to explain such things to the beggars. Laws were things of lords and gods, not the lowly.

I'm already starting to think about lords as if they were some other group.

Vivenna rose, head bowed, and felt a moment of nausea and dizziness. She rested against the side of the building, and the guard nudged her again, prompting her to shuffle away.

She bowed her head and moved along with the crowd, though most of them kept their distance from her. Ironical that they would leave her space now that she didn't care. She didn't want to think about how she smelled—though more than the scent, it was the fear of being robbed that probably kept the others away. They needn't have worried. She wasn't skilled enough to cut purses or pick pockets, and she couldn't afford to get caught trying.

She'd stopped worrying about the morality of stealing days ago. Even before going to the streets, she hadn't been so naive to assume that she wouldn't steal if she were denied food—but she'd assumed that it would take her far longer to reach that state.

She didn't head to another corner, but instead shuffled out of the crowds, making her way back into the Idrian slums. Here she'd gained some small measure of acceptance. At least she was considered one of them. None knew that she was the princess—after that first man, nobody had recognized her. However, her accent had earned her a place.

She began to search out a location to spend the night. That was one of the reasons she'd decided not to continue begging for the evening. It was a profitable time, true, but she was just so tired. She wanted a good place to sleep. She wouldn't have thought that it would make much difference which alleyway one huddled in, but some were warmer than others and some had better cover from the rain. Some were safer. She was beginning to learn these things, as well as who to avoid making mad.

In her case, that last group included pretty much everyone—including the urchins. They were all above her in the pecking order. She'd learned that second first day. She'd tried to bring back a coin from selling her hair, intending to save it for a chance at leaving the city. She wasn't certain how the urchins had known that she had coin, but she'd gotten her first beating that day.

Her favorite alleyway turned out to be occupied by a group of men with dark expressions, doing something that was obviously illegal. She left quickly, going to her second favorite. It was crowded with a gang of urchins. The ones who had beaten her before. She left that one quickly as well.

The third alley it was, this one beside a building that cooked bread. It was often warmer there, perhaps from the ovens. She found it empty, but cold. The ovens hadn't been on today.

She laid down anyway, curling up with her back against the bricks, clutching her shawl close. She was out in moments, despite the lack of pillow or blanket.

Chapter Forty

Siri was sitting and having a meal on the Court green when Tridees found her. She ignored him for a time, content to pick at the dishes in front of her.

The sea, she had decided, was quite strange. What else could be said of a place that could spawn creatures with such wiggly tentacles, other creatures with such boneless bodies, and yet others with such needly skins? She poked at something the locals called a cucumber, but which—in actuality—tasted nothing like one.

She tried them all, testing each one with her eyes closed, focusing on the flavor. Some hadn't been as bad as the others. She hadn't really liked any of them.

I would have trouble becoming a true Hallandren, she decided, sipping her fruit juice.

Fortunately, the juice was delicious. The variety, and flavor, of the numerous Hallandren fruits was almost as astounding as the oddness of its sea life.

Tridees cleared his throat. The God King's high priest was not a man who was accustomed to waiting.

Siri nodded to her serving women, motioning for them to prepare another series of plates. Susebron had given Siri some coaching on how to eat with etiquette, and she wanted to practice. Coincidentally, his way of eating—taking small bites, never really finishing anything—was a rather good one for testing out new dishes.

She wanted to become familiar with Hallandren, its ways, its people, its tastes. She'd forced her servants to begin talking to her more, and she planned to meet with more of the gods. In the distance, she saw Lightsong wandering by, and she waved to him fondly. He seemed uncharacteristically preoccupied; he only gave a wave of his own, and didn't come to visit her.

Pity, she thought. I would have liked a good excuse to keep Tridees waiting even longer.

The high priest cleared his throat again, this time more demandingly. Finally, Siri stood, waving for her servants to stay behind.

"Would you mind walking with me for a bit, your grace?" she asked lightly. She passed him, moving in a gorgeous violet dress with a gossamer train that trailed behind her in the grass.

He hurried to catch up. "I need to speak to you about something."

"Yes," she said. "I deduced that by the way that you summoned me several times today."

"You didn't come," he said.

"It seems to me that the wife of the God King should not make a habit of responding to demands and hopping whenever she is requested."

Tridees frowned.

"However," she continued, "I will of course make time for the high priest himself, should he come to speak to me."

He eyed her, standing tall and straight-backed, wearing the God King's colors of the day—blue and copper. "You should not antagonize me, your highness."

Siri felt just a flush off anxiety, but caught her hair before it bleached white. “I am not antagonizing you,” she said. “I am simply establishing some things that should have been mine from the beginning.”

Tridees got a hint of a smile on his face.

What? Siri thought with surprise. *Why that reaction?*

As they walked, he drew himself up more straightly. “Is that so,” he said, his voice turning condescending. “You know very little of what you presume, your highness.”

Blast! she thought. How did this conversation get away from me so quickly?

“I might say the same to you, your grace.” The massive black temple of a palace loomed above them, sheer ebony blocks stacked like the playthings of gigantic child.

“Oh?” he said, glancing at her. “Somehow I doubt that.”

She had to force back another spear of anxiety. Tridees smiled again.

Wait, she thought. It’s like he can read my emotions. Like he can see...

Her hair hadn’t changed colors, at least not discernibly. She glanced at Tridees, trying to figure out what was wrong. She noticed something interesting. In a pool around Tridees, the grass seemed just a shade more colorful.

Breath, she thought. Of course he’d have it! He’s one of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

People with lots of Breath were supposed to be able to see very minute changes in color. Could he really be reading her from such faint reactions in her hair? Was that why he had always been able to be so dismissive?

He could see her fear.

She gritted her teeth. In her youth, Siri had ignored the exercises that Vivenna had done to make sure she had complete control over her hair. People who knew her would be able to read her emotions despite her hair, so what was the point in learning to keep it the same color?

She hadn’t factored in a Court of the Gods and men with the power of BioChroma. Those tutors had been a *whole* lot more intelligent than Siri had given them credit. As were the priests. Now that she thought about it, it seemed obvious that Tridees and the others would have studied the meanings of all the shades of the royal locks.

She needed to get the conversation back on course. “Do not forget, Tridees,” she said. “You are the one who came to see me. Obviously, I have some power here, if I could force even the high priest to come.”

He glanced at her, eyes harsh. Focusing, she kept her hair the deepest black. Black, for confidence. She met his eyes, and let not even a slight twinge color her locks.

He finally turned away. “I have heard disturbing rumors.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It appears that you are no longer fulfilling your wifely duties. Are you pregnant?”

“No,” she said. “I had my women’s issue just a couple of days ago. You can ask my servants.”

“Then why have you stopped trying?”

“What?” she asked lightly. “Are your spies are annoyed to be missing their nightly show?”

Tridees flushed just slightly. He glanced at her, and she again managed to keep her hair completely black. Not even a glimmer of white or red. He seemed more uncertain.

“You Idrians,” the priest spat. “Living up in your lofty mountains, dirty and uncultured, but still assuming that you’re better than us. Don’t judge me. Don’t judge us. You know nothing.”

“I know that you’ve been listening in on the God King’s chamber.”

“Not just listening,” Tridees said. “The first few nights, there was a spy in the chambers itself.”

Siri couldn’t mask this blush. Her hair remained mostly black, but if Tridees really did have enough BioChroma to distinguish subtle changes, he would have noticed a bit of red in it.

“You are a foreign element,” Tridees said, turning away. “I am well aware of the poisonous things your monks teach, the hatred into which you’re indoctrinated. Do you really think that we’d let a woman from Idris confront the God King himself, alone, unwatched? We had to make certain you weren’t intending to kill him. We’re still not convinced.”

“You speak with remarkable frankness,” she noted.

“Just saying some things that *I* should have established from the beginning,” he said. They stopped in the shadow of the massive palace. “You are not important here. Not compared to our God King. He is everything, and you are *nothing*. Just like the rest of us.”

If he’s so important, Siri thought, meeting Tridees’ eyes, *then why are you planning to kill him?* She held his eyes. She wouldn’t have been able to do such a thing several months ago. Even a few weeks ago, she would have looked away. But when she felt weak, she remembered Susebron. Tridees was orchestrating the plot to subdue, control, and eventually kill his own God King.

And Siri wanted to know why.

“I stopped having sex with the God King on purpose,” she said, keeping her hair dark with some effort. “I knew it would get your attention.”

In truth, she had simply stopped her little performances each night. Tridees’ reaction, however, proved what Bluefingers had told her—the priests only listened, but did not watch. They believed her acts. For that she could bless her luck.

They might still be unaware that she could communicate with Susebron. She was extra careful to whisper at night, and had even taken to writing things herself, to keep up the charade. Then again, they might know. On that, she couldn’t be sure.

“You must produce an heir,” Tridees said.

“Or what? Why are you so eager, Tridees?”

“It is none of your concern,” he said. “Suffice it to say that I have obligations that you cannot comprehend. I am subject to gods, and I do their will, *not* yours.”

“Well you’re going to have to bend that last part a bit if you want your heir,” Siri said.

Tridees obviously did not like how the conversation was going. He glanced at her hair. And, somehow, she kept it from showing even a slight bit of uncertainty. He glanced back at her eyes.

“You can’t kill me Tridees,” she said. “Not if you want a Royal heir. You can’t bully me or force me. Only the God King could do that. And, we know how *he* is.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Tridees said flatly.

“Oh, come now,” Siri said. “You didn’t honestly expect me to sleep with the man and not find out he has no tongue? That he’s virtually a child? I doubt he can even go to the privy without help from some servants.”

Tridees flushed with anger.

He really does care, Siri thought with an abstract interest. Or, at least, insulting his God King insults him. He's more devoted than I would have given him credit.

So it probably wasn't about money. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected that this was not the type of man to sell out his religion. Whatever the reasoning for what was happening inside the palace, it probably had to do with true conviction.

Revealing what she knew about Susebron was a gamble. She figured that Tridees would guess anyway, and so it would be better to indicate that she thought Susebron a fool with the mind of a child. Give away one bit of information, but add deception to it to turn her opponents the wrong direction. If they assumed that she thought Susebron a fool, they wouldn't suspect an alliance between her and her husband.

Siri wasn't sure if she was doing the right thing. But needed to learn, or Susebron would die. And the only way to learn was to do. She didn't have much, but she *did* have something that the priests wanted: her womb.

It seemed that she could hold it for ransom effectively, for Tridees pushed down his anger and maintained a semblance of calmness. He glanced up at the palace, turning from her. "Do you know much about the history of this kingdom?" he asked. "After your family departed, of course."

Siri frowned, surprised at the question. *More than you probably think*, she thought to herself. "Not really," she said out loud.

"Lord Peacegiver left us with a challenge," Tridees said. "He gave us the treasure our God King now holds, a wealth of BioChromatic Breath like nobody had ever seen. Over fifty thousand Breaths. He told us to keep them safe." Tridees turned back to her. "And he warned us not to use it."

Siri felt a slight shiver.

"I do not expect you to understand what we have done," Tridees said. "But it was necessary."

"Necessary to keep a man in bondage?" Siri said. "To remove his ability to speak, to make a continual child out of a grown man? He didn't even understand what he was supposed to do with a woman!"

"It was necessary," Tridees said, jaw set. "You Idrians. Just because it's *different*, you look down on it. You don't even try to understand. I've had dealings with your father for years, and I sense the same ignorant prejudice in him."

He's baiting me, Siri thought, keeping her emotions in check. It was harder than she'd have thought. "Believing in Austre instead of your living gods is not ignorance. After all, you're the ones who abandoned your faith and looked toward an easier path."

Tridees shrugged. "We follow the god who came to protect us when your Austre—an unseen, unknown thing—abandoned us to the destroyer Klad. Peacegiver came back to life with a specific purpose—to stop the conflict between men, to bring peace again to Hallandren."

He glanced at her. "His name is holy. *He* is the one who gave us life, Princess. And he only asked one thing of us: to care for his power. He died to give it to us, but demanded that it be held in case he should Return again and need it. We couldn't let it be used. We couldn't let it be profaned. Not even by our God King."

He fell silent.

So how do you get that treasure away from him? she thought. She was tempted to ask. Would that be giving away too much?

Finally, Tridees spoke. “I see now why your father sent you instead of the other one. We should have focused more on all of the daughters, not just the first. You are far more capable than we had been led to believe.” The statement surprised her, but she kept her hair in check. Tridees sighed, looking away. “What are your demands? What will it take to make you return to your... work each night?”

“My servants,” she said. “I want to replace my main serving women with the women from Pahn Kahl.”

“You are displeased with your serving women?”

“Not in particular,” Siri said. “I simply feel that I have more in common with the women of Pahn Kahl. They, like me, are living in exile from their own people. Plus, I like the browns they wear.”

“Of course,” Tridees said, obviously thinking her Idrian prejudices to be behind the request.

“The Hallandren girls can continue to serve in the place that the Pahn Kahl women did,” Siri said. “They don’t have to leave me completely—in fact, I still want to talk to some of them. However, the main women who are with me always, they are to be from Pahn Kahl.”

“As I said,” Tridees said. “It shall be done. You’ll return to your efforts, then?”

“For now,” Siri said. “That will earn you a few more weeks.”

Tridees flushed in anger, but what could he really do? Siri smiled at him, then turned and trailed away. However, she found herself a little dissatisfied with the way the conversation had gone. She’d achieved a victory—but at the cost of antagonizing Tridees even further.

I doubt he would have taking a liking to me, no matter how hard I tried, she decided, sitting down in her pavilion. This is probably the better way.

She still didn’t know what was going to happen to Susebron, but she knew she could manipulate the priests at least a small measure. That meant something, though she knew she was walking on dangerous ground. She turned back to her meal, ready to try another round of sea food. She did her best to learn about Hallandren, but if it came down to Susebron’s life, she was going to get him out. Hopefully, giving Bluefingers’ Pahn Kahl a more prominent position around her would facilitate that escape. Hopefully.

With a sigh, she raised the first bit of food to her lips and continued with her tasting.

Chapter Forty-One

Vivenna presented her coin.

“One bit?” Cads asked. “That’s all? One *single* bit?” He was among the dirtiest of men she’d met, even in the streets. He liked fancy clothing, though. It was his style—worn and dirty clothing of the most trendy designs. He seemed to think it was funny. A mockery of the highborn.

He turned her coin over in his fingers. “One bit,” he repeated.

“Please,” Vivenna whispered. They stood at the mouth of an alley at the back two restaurants. Just inside the alley, she could see urchins rooting in the garbage. Fresh garbage from *two* restaurants. She salivated.

“I find it hard to believe, lady girly,” he said, “that *this* is all you made today.”

“Please, Cads,” she said again. “You know... you know I don’t beg well.” It was starting to rain. Again.

“You should do better,” he said. “Even the children can bring me at least two.”

Behind him, the fortunates who had pleased him continued to feast. It smelled so good. Or maybe that was the restaurants.

“I haven’t eaten in days,” she whispered, blinking away the rain.

“Then do better tomorrow,” he said, shooing her away.

“My coin—”

Cads immediately waved for his toughs as she reached toward him. Vivenna shied away reflexively, stumbling.

“Two tomorrow,” Cads said, walking into his alleyway. “I have to pay the restaurant owners, you know. Can’t let you eat for free.”

Vivenna stood, staring. Not because she thought she could get him to change his mind. But because she just had trouble making her mind understand. It was her last chance for food this day. One bit wouldn’t buy anything more than a mouthful elsewhere, but here—last time—it had let her eat until she was full.

That had been a week ago. How long had she been on the streets now? She didn’t know. She turned, dully, and pulled her shawl tight. It was dusk. She should go beg some more.

She couldn’t. Not after losing that bit. She felt shaken, as if her most valuable possession had been stolen.

No. *No*. She still had that. She pulled the shawl close.

Why was it important again?

She shuffled back toward the Highlands. Her home. A part of her realized that she shouldn’t feel so distant from the person she had been. She was a princess, wasn’t she? But she felt so sick lately, sick enough that she didn’t even think she could feel the hunger anymore. It was all so wrong. So very, very wrong.

She entered the slums and crept along, careful to keep her head bowed, her back cowed, lest someone take offense at her. She hesitated as she walked, however, passing a street to her right. It was where the whores waited, protected from the drizzle by an awning.

Vivenna stared at them, standing in their revealing clothing. It was only two streets into the slum, a place that wasn’t too threatening for outsiders. Everyone knew not to rob a man on his way

to visit the whores. The slum lords didn't like it when their customers got scared away. Bad for business, as Denth might say.

Vivenna stood for a long moment. The whores looked fed. They weren't dirty. Several of them laughed. She could join them. An urchin had spoken of it the other day, mentioned that she was still young. He'd wanted her to come to the slum lord with him, hoping to get some coin for recruiting a willing girl.

It was so tempting. Food. Warmth. A dry bed.

Blessed Austre, she thought, shaking herself. *What am I thinking? What is wrong with my mind?* It was so hard to focus. As if she were in a trance all the time.

She forced herself to keep moving, stumbling away from the women. She wouldn't do that. Not yet.

Not yet.

Oh, Lord of Colors, she thought with horror. I need to get out of this city. Better for me to die, starving on the road back to Idris—better to get taken by Denth and tortured—than to end up in the brothel.

However, much like the morality of stealing, the morality of using her body seemed much more vague to her now, when her hunger was such an omnipresent need. She made her way to her latest alleyway. She'd been kicked out of the others. But this one was good. It was secluded, yet often filled with younger urchins. Their company made her feel better, though she knew they searched her at night for coins.

I can't believe how tired I am... she thought, feeling dizzy, putting her hand against the wall. She took a few deep breaths. The spells often struck these days.

She started forward again. The alleyway was empty, everyone else staying out in the evening to try getting a few extra coins. She took the best of the spots—an earthen mound which had managed to grow a small tuft of grass. There weren't even that many rocks in the dirt, though it would be wet with mud from the light rain. She didn't care about that.

Shadows darkened the alleyway behind her.

Her reaction was immediate. She started to run. Living on the streets taught quick lessons. Weak as she was, she managed a burst of speed. However, another shadow stepped across the other end of the alley in front of her. She froze, then turned, looking to see a group of street thugs moving down the alleyway behind her.

At their back was the man who had robbed her a few weeks ago, taking her dress. He looked chagrined. "Sorry, Princess," he said. "Bounty just got too high. Took me blasted long enough to find you, though. You did a great job of hiding."

Vivenna blinked. And then she simply let herself slide down to the ground.

I just can't take any more, she thought, wrapping her arms around herself. She was exhausted. Mentally, emotionally, completely. In a way, she was glad it was over. She didn't know what the men would do to her, but she did know it was over. Whomever they sold her to wouldn't be foolish enough to let her escape again.

The thugs clustered around her. She heard one mention Denth. Rough hands grabbed her arm, towing her to her feet. She followed with head bowed. They led her out onto the main street. It was growing dim, but no urchins or beggars made their way toward the alley.

I should have realized, she thought. It was too deserted.

Everything, finally, overwhelmed her. She couldn't summon the energy to care about escaping, not again. A part of her, deep inside, realized that her tutors had been right. When you were weak and hungry, it was hard to summon the energy to care about anything, even escape.

She had trouble remembering her tutors now. She had trouble even remembering what it was like to not be hungry.

The thugs stopped walking. Vivenna looking up, blinking away her dizziness. There was something in the dark, wet street in front of them.

A black sword in a silver sheath stuck from the ground. The weapon, sheath and all, had somehow been rammed down into the earth.

The street grew still. One of the thugs stepped forward, pulling the sword from the ground. He undid the sheath clasp. Vivenna felt a sudden nausea, more of a memory than a real emotion. She stumbled back, horrified.

The other thugs, transfixed, stepped up around their friend. One of them reached for the hilt.

The man carrying the sword struck. He swung the weapon, sheath and all, into the face of his friend. A black smoke began to twist out of the sheath, rising from the tiny bit of the blade that was visible.

Men cried out, each one scrambling for the sword. The man holding it continued to swing, the weapon hitting with far more force and damage than it should have. Bones broke, blood began to run on the cobblestones. The man continued to attack, moving with a terrible speed. Vivenna, still stumbling backward, could see his eyes.

They were terrified.

He killed his last friend—the one who had robbed her on that day that seemed so long ago—by slamming the sheathed sword down against the man's back. Bones cracked. By now, the clothing on the first man's arm had disintegrated, and a blackness—like vines growing on a wall—had twisted up around his shoulder. Black, pulsing veins that bulged out of the skin. The man screamed a piercing, desperate cry.

Then he twisted the sword around and rammed it, sheath and all, through his chest. It cut skin and flesh, though the sheath itself didn't seem sharpened. The man stumbled to his knees, then slumped backward, twitching, staring up into the air as the black veins on his arm began to evaporate. He died like that, kneeling, sword sticking down through his chest and propping him up from behind.

Vivenna stood alone on a street littered with corpses. A figure dropped from a rooftop, lowered by two twisting lengths of animated rope. He landed softly, ropes falling dead. He passed Vivenna, ignoring her, and grabbed the sword. He paused for a moment, then did the clasp up and pulled the weapon—sheath and all—free from the corpse.

The dead man finally fell to the ground.

Vivenna stared dully ahead. Then, numb, she sat down in the street. She didn't even twitch as Vasher picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

Chapter Forty-Two

“Her Excellency is not interested in seeing you,” the priestess said, maintaining a reverent posture.

“Well I’m not interested in her disinterest,” Lightsong said. “Perhaps you should ask her again, just to be sure.”

The priestess bowed her head. “My pardons, your Excellency, but I have already asked fourteen times. Goddess Allmother is growing impatient with your requests, and she asked me not to respond to them any more.”

“Did she give the same command to any of the other priestesses?”

The priestess paused. “Well, no, your Excellency.”

“Wonderful,” Lightsong said. “Send for one of them. Then send *her* to ask Allmother if she will see me.”

The priestess sighed visibly; Lightsong considered that something of a victory. Allmother’s priests were among the most pious—and most humble—in the Court. If he could annoy them, he could annoy anyone.

He waited, hands on hips as the priestess went to do his bidding. Allmother could give them orders and commands, but she couldn’t tell them to completely ignore Lightsong. After all, he was a god too. As long as he asked them to do things other than what Allmother had explicitly told them not to do, they had to obey.

Even if it annoyed their goddess.

“I’m developing a new skill,” Lightsong said. “Irritation by proxy!”

Llarimar sighed. “What about your speech to Goddess Blushweaver a few days ago, your Excellency? It seemed to imply that you were *not* going to annoy people as much.”

“I said nothing of the sort,” Lightsong said. “I simply said that I was coming to recognize within myself a little more of the person I used to be. That doesn’t mean I’m going to discard all the progress I’ve made over the last few years.”

“Your sense of self-awareness is remarkable, your grace.”

“I know! Now, hush. The priestess is coming back.”

Indeed, the woman approached and bowed herself before Lightsong on the grass. “My apologies, your Excellency. Our Goddess, however, has now requested that *no* priestess be allowed to ask her if you can come in to meet her.”

“Did she tell them that they couldn’t ask if she would come out here?”

“Yes, your Excellency,” the priestess said. “And every other phrasing that would imply asking her to come within your grace’s proximity, or communicate with him by letter, or relay messages from him in any form.”

“Hum,” he said, tapping his chin. “She’s getting better. Well, I guess there’s nothing to be done.”

The priestess relaxed visibly.

“Scoot, set up my pavilion here in front of her palace,” Lightsong said. “I’m going to be sleeping here tonight.”

The priestess looked up.

“You’re going to do *what*?” Llarimar asked.

Lightsong shrugged. “I’m not moving until I meet with her. That means staying until she acknowledges me. It’s been a week! If she wants to be stubborn, then I’ll prove that I can be *equally* stubborn.” He eyed the priestess. “I’m quite practiced at it, you know. Being an insufferable buffoon, and all. I don’t suppose she forbid you from letting squirrels into the building?”

“Squirrels, your grace?” the woman asked.

“Excellent,” Lightsong said, sitting down as his servants erected the pavilion. He pulled the Lifeless squirrel from its box and held it forward.

“Almond grass,” he said quietly, giving the new Command he’d had his people imprint on the Lifeless. Then he spoke louder, so that the priestess could hear. “Go into the building, search out the Returned who lives in it, and run around in circles squeaking as loudly as you can. Don’t let anyone catch you. Oh, and destroy as much furniture as you can. Almond grass.”

The squirrel immediately jumped off his hand and shot toward the palace. The priestess spun, horrified. She squirrel began to screech with a sound that seemed rather un-squirrel like. It disappeared into the building, slipping between the legs of a startled guard.

“What a delightful afternoon it’s becoming,” Lightsong said, reaching for a handful of grapes as the priestess rushed after the squirrel.

“It won’t be able to follow all of those orders, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It has the mind of a squirrel, despite the power that Breath gives it to obey Commands.”

Lightsong shrugged. “We shall see.”

He began to hear screams of annoyance from inside the palace. He smiled.

It took longer than he had expected. Allmother was a stubborn one, as proved by Blushweaver’s complete inability to manipulate her. As he sat—idly listening to a group of musicians—a priestess occasionally checked on him. Several hours passed. He didn’t eat or drink very much so he didn’t need to visit the privy.

He ordered his musicians to play louder. He had picked a group with a lot of percussion.

Finally, a frazzled-looking priestess left the palace. “Her Excellency will see you,” the woman said, bowing before Lightsong.

“Hum?” Lightsong said. “Oh, that. Do I have to go now? Can I finish listening to this song?”

The priestess glanced up. “I—”

“Oh, very well then,” Lightsong said, rising.

#

Allmother was still in her audience chamber. Lightsong hesitated in the doorway—which, like those in every palace, was cut to the size of a god. He frowned to himself.

People still waited in a line and Allmother sat in a throne at the front of the room. She was stocky for a goddess; he had always thought that her white hair and wrinkled face stood out among the pantheon. By age of body, she was the oldest of the gods.

It had been a while since he’d come to visit her. In fact...

The last time I was here was before Calmseer gave up her Breath, he realized. That evening, years ago, when we shared what would be her last meal.

He'd never come back. What would have been the point? They'd only gotten together in the first place because of Calmseer. During most of the meetings, Allmother had been quite vocal about what she thought of Lightsong. At least she was honest.

That was more than he could say for himself.

She didn't acknowledge him as he entered. She continued to sit, a little stooped over, listening to the man petitioning her. He was middle aged and stood awkwardly, leaning on a walking staff.

"... my children are starving now," he said. "I cannot afford the food. I figured if my leg worked, I could go back to the docks." He looked down.

"Your faith is commendable," Allmother said. "Tell me, how did you lose the use of your leg?"

"A fishing accident, your grace," the man said. "I came down from the highlands a few years back, when late frosts took my crops. I took a job on one of the stormrunners—the ships who go out during the spring tempests, catching fish when others remain in the harbor. The accident crushed a barrel against me leg. Nobody will take me on to work the boats, not with a lame leg."

Allmother nodded.

"I wouldn't have come to you," he said. "But with my wife sick and my daughter crying with such hunger..."

Allmother reached a hand out, laying it on the man's shoulder. "I understand your difficulties, but your problems are not as severe as you may think. Go and speak with my high priest. I have a man on the docks who owes me allegiance. You have two good hands; you will be put to work sewing nets."

The man looked up, hope glimmering in his eyes.

"We will send you with enough food to care for your family until you learn your new trade," Allmother said. "Go with my blessing."

The man rose, then fell back to his knees and began to cry. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Priests walked forward and led the man away. The room fell still, and Allmother looked over, meeting Lightsong's eyes. She nodded to the side, where a priest stepped up, holding a bundle of fur tied tightly with ropes.

"This is yours, I am told?" Allmother asked.

"Ah, yes," Lightsong said, flushing slightly. "Terribly sorry about that. It kind of got away from me."

"With an accidental Command to find me?" Allmother asked. "Then run around in circles screaming?"

"That actually worked?" Lightsong said. "Interesting. My high priest didn't think the squirrel brain would be capable of following such complicated Commands."

Allmother regarded him with a flat look.

"Oh," Lightsong said. "I mean, 'Whoops. It completely misunderstood me. Stupid squirrel.' My deepest apologize, honored sister."

Allmother sighed, then waved toward a doorway on the side of the room. Lightsong walked over to it and she followed, a few servants trailing. Allmother moved with a stiff agedness. *Is it*

me, or does she look older than she did before? That was, of course, impossible. Returned did not age. At least, not the ones who had reached maturity.

Once they were out of earshot and eyeshot of the petitioners, Allmother grabbed his arm. “What in the name of the Colors do you think you are doing?” she snapped.

Lightsong turned, raising an eyebrow. “Well, you wouldn’t see me, and—”

“Do you intend to destroy what little authority we have left, you idiot?” Allmother asked. “Already, people in the city are saying that the Returned are growing weak, that the best of us died years ago.”

“Maybe they’re right.”

Allmother scowled. “If too many of them believe that, then we lose our access to Breaths. Have you considered that? Have you considered what your lack of decorum, your flippancy, could cost all of us?”

“Is that the reason for the show then?” he asked, glancing back through the doorway.

“Once, the Returned didn’t just listen to petitions and say yes or no,” Allmother said. “They would take the time to hear each person who came to them, then seek to help them as best they could.”

“Seems like an awful lot of trouble.”

“We’re their *gods*. Should a bit of trouble deter us?” She eyed him. “Oh, of course. We wouldn’t want to let something as simple as the pains of our people interfere with our leisure time. Why am I even talking to you?” She turned to wander from of the room.

“I came to give you my Lifeless Commands,” Lightsong said.

Allmother froze.

“Blushweaver has control of two sets of Commands,” Lightsong said, “which gives her control of half of our armies. That worries me for a reason I can’t explain. I mean, I trust her as much as I trust any other Returned. But if war does come, then she’ll quickly become the second most powerful person in the kingdom. Only the God King would have more authority.”

Allmother regarded him with an unreadable expression.

“I figure that the best way to counter her is to have someone else who has two sets of Commands,” Lightsong said. “Perhaps it will give her pause. Keep her from doing anything too rash.”

There was silence in the room.

“Calmseer trusted you,” Allmother finally said.

“Her one flaw, I must profess,” Lightsong said. “Even goddesses have them, or so I’m told. I’ve found it gentlemanly to never point such things out.”

“She was the best of us,” Allmother said, glancing out in the direction of her supplicants. “She would meet with people all day. They loved her.”

“Bottom line blue,” Lightsong said. “That’s my core security phrase. Please, take it. I’ll tell Blushweaver that you bullied me into giving it to you. She’ll be angry at me, of course, but it won’t be the first time.”

“No,” Allmother finally said. “No, I’m not letting you out of this so easily, Lightsong.”

“What?” he asked, startled.

“Can’t you feel it?” she asked. “Something is happening in the city. This mess with the Idrians and their slums, the increasingly violent arguments among our priests.” She shook her head.

"I'm not letting you wiggle out of your part. You were chosen for that place of yours. You're a god, like the rest of us, even if you try your best to pretend otherwise."

"You already have my Command, Allmother," he said with a shrug, walking toward a doorway to leave. "Do what you will with it."

"Verdant bells," Allmother said. "That's mine."

Lightsong closed his eyes.

"Now two of us know both of them," Allmother said. "If what you said earlier was true, then it's better that our Commands be distributed."

He spun. "You were just calling me a fool! Now you entrust me with command of your soldiers? I must ask, Allmother, and please think me not rude. But what in the name of the *Colors* is wrong with you?"

"I dreamed that you would come today," she said, meeting his gaze. "I saw it in the pictures. I remembered noise when I awoke and I saw Lifeless eyes watching me. I saw patterns of circles in the paintings, all red and gold. Your colors."

"Coincidence," he said.

She snorted quietly. "Someday, you'll have to get over your foolish selfishness, Lightsong. This isn't just about us. I've decided to start doing a better job of things. Perhaps you should take a look at who you are and what you are doing."

"Ah, my dear Allmother," Lightsong said. "You see, the problem in that challenge is the presumption that I haven't *tried* to be something other than what I am. Every time I do, disaster is the result."

"Well, you now have my Commands. For better, or for worse." The aged Goddess turned away, walking back toward her room of supplicants. "I, for one, am curious to see how you handle them."

Chapter Forty-Three

Vivenna awoke, sick, tired, thirsty, starving.

But alive.

She opened her eyes, feeling a strange sensation. Comfort. She was in a comfortable plush bed. She sat up immediately; her head spun.

"I'd be careful," a voice said. "Your body is weak."

She blinked fuzzy eyes, focusing on a figure sitting at a table a short distance away, his back to her. He appeared to be eating.

A black sword in a silver sheath rested against the table.

"You," she whispered.

"Me," he said between bites.

She looked down at herself. She wasn't wearing her shift any more, but instead had on a set of soft cotton sleeping garments. Her body was clean. She raised a hand to her hair, feeling that the tangles and mats were gone. It was still white.

She felt so strange to be clean.

"Did you rape me?" she said quietly.

He snorted. "A woman who's been to Denth's bed holds no temptation for me."

"I never slept with him," she said, though she didn't know why she cared to tell him.

Vasher turned, face still wearing the patchy, unkempt beard. His clothing was far less fine than her own. He studied her eyes. "He had you fooled, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Idiot."

She nodded again.

He turned back to his meal. "The woman who runs this building," he said. "I paid her to bathe you, dress you, and change your bedpan. I never touched you."

She frowned. "What... happened?"

"Do you remember the fight on the street?"

"With your sword?"

He nodded.

"Vaguely. You saved me."

"I kept a tool out of Denth's hands," he said. "That's all that really matters."

"Thank you anyway."

He was silent for a few moments. "You're welcome," he finally said.

"Why do I feel so...?"

“Tramaria,” the man said. “It’s a sickness, one you don’t have in the highlands. Insect bites spread it. You probably got it a few weeks before I found you. It stays with you, if you’re weak.”

She put a hand to her head.

“You probably had a pretty bad time lately,” Vasher noted. “What with the dizziness, the dementia, and the hunger.”

“Yes,” she said.

“You deserved it.” He continued to eat.

She didn’t move for a long moment. His food smelled so good, but she’d apparently been fed on broth while she slept, for she wasn’t as famished as she might have thought. Just mildly hungry. “How long was I unconscious?” she asked.

“A week,” he said. “You should sleep some more.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

He didn’t reply. “The BioChromatic Breaths you had,” he said. “You gave them to Denth?”

She paused, thinking. “Yes.”

He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” she admitted, looking away. “I put them in the shawl I was wearing.”

He stood, leaving the room. She considered running. Instead, she moved over and began to eat at his food—a fish, whole and fried. Seafood didn’t bother her anymore.

He returned, then stopped in the doorway, watching her ravage the fish bones. He didn’t force her out of the seat; he simply took the other chair at the table. Finally, he held up the shawl, washed and clean.

“This?” he asked.

She froze, a bit of fish on her cheek.

He set the shawl on the table beside her.

“You’re giving it back to me?” she asked.

He shrugged. “If there really is Breath stored in it, I can’t get to it. Only you can.”

She picked it up. “I don’t know the Command.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You escaped those ropes of mine without Awakening them?”

She shook her head. “I guessed that Command.”

“I should have gagged you better. What do you mean you ‘guessed’ it?”

“It was the first time I’d ever used Breath.”

“That’s right, you’re of the Royal line.”

“What does that mean?”

He just shook his head, pointing toward the shawl. “Your Breath to mine,” he said. “That’s the Command you want.”

She laid her hand on the shawl and said the words. Immediately, everything changed.

Her dizziness went away. Her deadness to the world vanished. She gasped, shaking with the pleasure of Breath restored. It was so strong that she actually fell from the chair, quivering in wonder like a person having a fit. It was amazing. She could sense life. Could sense Vasher, making a pocket of color around him that was bright and beautiful. She was *alive* again.

She basked in that for a long moment.

“It’s shocking, when you first get it,” Vasher said. “It’s usually not too bad if you take the Breath back after only an hour or so. Wait weeks, though, and it’s like taking it in for the first time.”

Smiling, feeling amazing, she climbed back into the seat and wiped the fish from her face. “My sickness is gone!”

“Of course,” he said. “You’ve got enough Breath for at least the Third Heightening, if I’m reading you right. You’ll never know sickness. You’ll barely even age. Assuming you manage to hang onto the Breath, of course.”

She looked up at him in a panic.

“No,” he said. “I’m not going to force you to give it to me. Though I probably should. You’re far more trouble than you’re worth, Princess.”

She turned back to the food, feeling more confident. It seemed as if the last few weeks had been a nightmare. A bubble, surreal, disconnected. Had it really been her who had sat on the street, begging? Had she really slept in the rain, lived in the mud? Had she really considered turning to prostitution?

She had. She couldn’t forget just because she now had Breath again. And, truthfully, she couldn’t help blaming her experience upon her becoming a Drab. Perhaps the sickness had a part in it too. However, the greatest part had been simple desperation.

“All right,” he said, standing, picking up the black sword. “Time to go.”

“Go where?” she asked, suspicious. The last time she had met this man, he’d bound her, forced her to touch that sword of hers, and left her gagged.

He ignored her concern, tossing a pile of clothing onto the table. “Put this on.”

She picked through it. Thick trousers, a tunic that tucked into them, a vest to go over the tunic. All of various shades of blue. There were undergarments of a less bright color.

“That’s a man’s clothing,” she said.

“It’s utilitarian,” Vasher said, walking toward the doorway. “I’m not going to waste money buying you rich dresses, princess. You’ll just have to get used to those.”

She opened her mouth, but then shut it, discarding her complaint. She’d just spent... she didn’t know how long running around in a thin, nearly-translucent shift that had only covered her to mid thigh. She took the trousers and shirts thankfully.

“Please,” she said, turning toward him. “I appreciate this clothing. But can I at least know where you intend to do with me?”

Vasher hesitated in the doorway. “I have work for you to do.”

She shivered, thinking of the bodies Denth had shown her, and of the men Vasher had killed. “You’re going to kill again, aren’t you?”

He turned back toward her, frowning. “Denth is working toward something. I’m going to block him.”

“Denth was working for me,” she said. “Or, at least, he was pretending to. All of those things he did, they were at my command. He was just playing along to keep me complacent.”

Vasher laughed a barking laugh, and Vivenna flushed. Her hair—responding to her mood for the first time since her shock at seeing Parlin dead—turned red.

It felt so surreal. Two weeks on the street and now, suddenly, fed she felt like her old self again? It was the Breath. The beautiful, wonderful Breath. She never wanted to be parted from it again.

Not her old self at all. Who was she, then? Did it matter?

“You laugh at me,” she said, turning to Vasher. “But I was just doing the best I could. I wanted to help my people in the upcoming war. Fight against Hallandren.”

“Hallandren isn’t your enemy.”

“It is,” she said sharply. “And it is planning to march on my people.”

“The priests have good reasons for acting like they do.”

Vivenna snorted. “Denth said that every man thinks he’d doing the right thing, in his head.”

“Denth is too smart for his own good. He was playing with you, princess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t it ever occur to you?” Vasher asked. “Attacking supply caravans? Rousing the Idris poor to rebel? Reminding them of Vahr and his promises of freedom, which were so fresh in their minds. Showing yourself to thug lords, making them think that Idris was working to undermine the Hallandren government? Princess, you say every man thinks he’s on the right side, that every man who opposed you was deluding himself.”

He met her eyes. “Didn’t you ever once stop to think that maybe *you* were the one on the wrong side?”

Vivenna froze.

“Denth wasn’t working for you,” Vasher said. “He wasn’t even pretending to. Someone in this city hired him to start a war between Idris and Hallandren, and he’s spent these last few months using you to make it happen. I’m trying to figure out why. Who’s behind it, and why would a war serve them?”

Vivenna sat back, eyes wide. It couldn’t be. He had to be wrong.

“You were the perfect pawn,” Vasher said. “You reminded the people in the slums of their true heritage, giving Denth someone to rally behind. The Court of Gods is a hair’s breadth away from marching on your homeland. Not because they hate Idrians, but because they feel like Idris insurgents have *already* been attacking them.”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t believe that you didn’t realize what you were doing. I assumed you had to be working with him intentionally to start the war.” He eyed her. “I underestimated your stupidity. Get dressed. I don’t know if we have enough time to undo what you’ve done, but I intend to try.”

#

The clothing felt strange. The trousers pulled at her thighs, making her feel like she was exposed. It was odd not to have the swishing of skirts by her ankles.

She walked beside Vasher without comment, head bowed, hair too short to even put into a braid. They passed through the Idris slum, and Vivenna had to fight to keep herself from jumping at every sound, looking over her shoulder to see if someone were following her.

Was that an urchin wanting to steal the money she’d begged? Was that a group of thugs, wishing to sell her to Denth? Were those shadows grey-eyed Lifeless, come to attack and slaughter? They passed a waif beside the road, a young woman of indeterminable age but with a

soot-covered face and bright eyes that watched them. Vivenna could read the hunger in those eyes. The woman was trying to decide whether or not to try stealing from them.

The sword in Vasher's hand was obviously enough to ward the girl away. Vivenna watched her scurry down an alleyway, feeling an odd sense of connection.

Colors, she thought. Was that really me?

No. She hadn't even been as capable as that girl. Vivenna had been so naive that she'd been kidnapped without knowing it, then worked to start a war without realizing what she was doing.

Didn't you ever stop to think that maybe you were on the wrong side?

She wasn't sure what to believe. She'd been taken in so quickly by Denth that she was very hesitant to accept anything this Vasher said. However, she *could* see signs that some of what he had told her were true.

Denth had always taken her to meet with the less reputable elements in the city. Not only were they the ones a mercenary like him would know, but they would be more likely to prefer the chaos of war. Attacking the Hallandren supplies wouldn't only make it more difficult to administer the war, it would make the priests more likely to attack. While they were still strong. The losses would also serve to make them more angry.

It made chilling sense—sense it was hard for her to ignore. “Denth made me think that the war was inevitable,” Vivenna whispered as they walked through the slums. “My father thinks it's inevitable. Everyone says it's going to happen.”

“They're wrong,” Vasher said. “War between Hallandren and Idris has been close for decades, but never inevitable. Getting this kingdom to attack requires convincing the Returned—and they're generally too focused on themselves to worry about something as disruptive as a war. Only an extended effort—first convincing the priests, then getting them to argue until the Gods believed them—would be successful.”

They fell silent. Vivenna stared ahead down the dirty streets with their colorful refuse. “I really am useless, aren't I?” she whispered.

Vasher glanced over at her.

“First, my father sent my sister to marry the God King instead of me. I followed, but I didn't even know what I was doing—Denth took me in on the very first day I was here. When I finally escaped him, I couldn't make it a month on the street without getting robbed, beaten, and then captured. Now you claim that I've single-handedly thrown my people into war.”

Vasher snorted. “Don't give yourself *too* much credit. Denth has been working on this war for a long time. From what I hear, he corrupted the Idris ambassador himself. Plus there are elements in the Hallandren government—the ones who hired Denth—who want this conflict to happen.”

It seemed so muddy. What he said made sense, but Denth had made sense too. She needed to know more. “Do you have any guesses who they might be? The ones who hired Denth?”

Vasher shrugged. “One of the Gods, I think—or perhaps a cabal of them. Maybe a group of priests, working on their own.”

They fell silent again.

“Why?” Vivenna finally asked.

“How should I know?” Vasher asked. “I can't even figure out *who*'s behind it.”

“No,” Vivenna said. “Not that. I mean, why are you involved? Why do you care?”

“Because,” Vasher said.

“Because why?”

Vasher sighed. “Look, Princess. I’m not like Denth; I don’t have his ability with words, and I don’t really like people in the first place. Don’t expect me to chat with you. All right?”

Vivenna closed her mouth sharply. If he’s trying to manipulate me, she thought, he has a very strange way of doing it.

Their destination turned out to be a run-down building on the corner of a run-down intersection. As they approached, Vivenna paused to wonder exactly how slums like this one came to exist. Did people build them cramped and shoddy on purpose, or had these streets once been a richer section of town that had fallen into disrepair?

Vasher grabbed her arm as she stood there, then pulled her up to the door, upon which he pounded on with the hilt of his sword. The door creaked open a second later, and a pair of nervous eyes glanced out.

“Get out of the way,” Vasher said, testily shoving the door open the rest of the way and pulling Vivenna inside. A young man stumbled back, pressing up against the wall of the hallway and letting Vasher and Vivenna pass. He closed the door behind them.

Vivenna felt as if she should be frightened, or at least angry, at the treatment. However, after what she had been through, it just didn’t seem like much. Vasher let go of her and thumped his way down a set of stairs. Vivenna followed more carefully, the dark stairwell reminding her of the cellar in Denth’s hideout. She shivered, and might have paused, save for the fact that the young man was following behind.

At the bottom, fortunately, the similarities between cellars ended. This one had a wooden floor and walls. A rug sat in the middle of the room and a group of men sat on the ground. A couple of them rose as Vasher rounded the stairs.

“Vasher!” one said. “Welcome. Do you want something to drink?”

“No.”

The men glanced uncomfortably at each other as Vasher tossed his sword toward the side of the room. It hit with a clank, skidding on the wood. Then he reached back and pulled Vivenna forward.

“Hair,” he said.

She hesitated. He was using her just like Denth had. Yet, rather than make him angry, she obliged, changing the color of her hair. The men watched with awe, then several of them bowed their heads. “Princess,” one whispered.

“Tell them you don’t want them to go to war,” Vasher said.

“I don’t,” she said honestly. “I have never wanted my people to fight Hallandren. They would lose, almost certainly.”

The men turned to Vasher. “But she was working with the slum lords. Why did she change her mind?”

Vasher looked at her. “Well?”

Why did she change her mind? *Had* she changed her mind? It was all too quick.

“I... ” she said. “I’m sorry. I... didn’t realize. I’ve *never* wanted war. I thought it was inevitable, and so I tried to plan for it. I might have been manipulated, though.”

Vasher nodded, then pushed her aside. He left her and joined the men as they sat back on the rug. Vivenna remained where she was. She wrapped her hands around herself, feeling the unfamiliar cloth of the tunic and coat.

These men are Idrians, she realized, listening to their accents. And now they've seen me, their princess, wearing a man's clothing. How is it that I can still care about such things, considering everything else that is happening?

"All right," Vasher said, squatting. "What are you doing to stop this?"

"Wait," one of the men said. "You expect that to change our minds? A few words from the princess, and we're supposed to believe everything you've been telling us?"

"If Hallandren goes to war, you're dead," Vasher snapped. "Can't you see that? What do you think will happen to the Idrians in these slums? You think things are bad now, wait until you're seen as sympathizers with the enemy."

"We know that, Vasher," another said. "But what do you expect us to do? Submit to Hallandren treatment of us? Cave in and worship their indolent gods?"

"I don't really care what you do," Vasher said, "as long as it doesn't involve threatening the security of the Hallandren government."

"Maybe we should just admit that war is coming and fight," another said. "Maybe the slum lords are right. Maybe the best thing to do is hope that Idris wins."

"They hate us," another of them said, a man in his twenties with anger in his eyes. "They treat us worse than they do the statues in their streets! We're less than Lifeless, to them."

I know that anger, Vivenna realized. I felt it. Feel it still. Anger at Hallandren.

The man's words rang hollow to her now. The truth was, she hadn't really felt any ire from the Hallandren people. If anything, she'd felt indifference. She was just another body on the street to them.

Perhaps that's why she hated them. She'd worked all of her life to become something important for them—she'd been dominated by the beast that was Hallandren and its God King. And then, in the end, the city and its people had simply ignored her. She didn't matter to them. And that was infuriating.

"Too much has happened already," one of the older men was saying. "The people are angry. We can't stop the riots, Vasher. Not after that slaughter a few weeks back."

Vasher pounded the floor with a fist. "That's what they want! Can't you fool see that you're giving your enemies perfect scapegoats? Those Lifeless that attacked the slum weren't given their orders by the government. Someone slipped a few broken Lifeless into the group with orders to kill so that the things would turn bad!"

What? Vivenna thought.

"The Hallandren theocracy is a bulky thing laden with bureaucratic foolishness," Vasher said. "It never moves unless someone prompts it! If we have riots in the street, that will be just what the war faction needs."

I could help him, Vivenna thought, watching the reactions of the Idrians. She knew them while Vasher obviously didn't. He made good arguments, but he needed more. He needed credibility, more than simply tossing her out had gained him.

She could help. But should she?

Vivenna didn't know what to think anymore. If Vasher was right, she'd been manipulated and played the entire time she'd been with Denth. She knew, at least, that Denth had been lying to her. That she'd discovered on her own. But what was to say that Vasher wasn't doing the same thing?

Did she want war? No, of course she didn't. Particularly not a war Idris would have a very hard time surviving, let alone winning. Vivenna had worked so hard to undermine Hallandren's ability to wage war. Why hadn't she ever considered trying to head it off.

I did, she realized. That was my original plan when I was back in Idris. I'd intended to talk the God King out of war when I became his bride.

She'd given up on that plan. No, she'd been manipulated into giving up on it. Either by her father's sense of inevitability or by Denth's subtlety, it didn't really matter.

Her initial instinct had been to prevent the conflict. That was the best way to protect Idris; that was—she realized—also the best way to protect Siri. She'd practically given up on saving her sister, focusing on her own hates and arrogance instead.

Stopping the war wouldn't protect Siri from being abused by the God King. But it would probably keep her from being used as a pawn or a hostage. It would save her life.

That was enough for Vivenna. It's what she should have been focused on all along: save Idris, save Siri.

"It's too late," one of the men said.

"No," Vivenna said. "Please."

The men in the circle paused, looking over at her. She walked back to the circle then knelt before them. "Please do not say such things."

"But princess," one of the men said, "what can we do? The slum lords rile the people to anger. We have no power compared to them."

"You must have some influence," she said. "You seem like men of wisdom."

"We're fathers and workers," another said. "We have no riches."

"But people listen to you?" she asked.

"Some do."

"Then tell them that there are more options," Vivenna said, bowing her head. "Tell them to be stronger than I was. The Idrians here in the slums—I've seen their strength. If you tell them that they're being used, maybe they can avoid being used."

The men fell silent.

"I don't know if everything this man says is true," she said, nodding to Vasher. "But I do know that Idris will not win this war. We should be doing everything we can to slow a conflict, not to encourage one." She felt a tear on her cheek, and her hair had grown a pale white. "You can see. I... no longer have the control a princess and follower of Austre should show. I am a shame to you, but please don't let my failure doom you. The Hallandrens don't hate us. They barely even notice us. I know this is frustrating, but if you *make* them notice you by rioting and destroying, they will only be shaken into anger against our homeland."

"So we should just roll over?" the younger man asked. "Let them step on us? What does it matter if they do it unintentionally? We still get smashed."

"No," Vivenna said. "There must be a better way. An Idrian is their queen, now. Perhaps, if we give them time, they will get over their prejudice. We *must* focus our energies now on keeping them from attacking!"

"Your words make sense, Princess," said one of the elder men in the room. "But—and forgive me for my ostentation—we here find it difficult to care about Idris much anymore. It has abandoned us and we can't really go back."

"We *are* Idrians," one of the others said. "But... well, our families here are more important."

A month ago, Vivenna would have been offended by this talk. A short time on the streets, however, had shown a little of what desperation could do to a person. What was Idris to them if their families starved? She could not blame them for their attitudes.

"You think things will fare better for you here if Idris is conquered?" Vasher asked. "If there's war, you'll be treated even *worse* than you are now."

"There *are* other options," Vivenna said. "I know of your plight here now. If I return to my father and explain it, perhaps we can work out a way to return you to Idris."

"Return us to Idris?" one of the men said. "My family has been here in Hallandren now for fifty years!"

"Yes, but as long as the King of Idris lives," Vivenna said, "you have an ally. We can work with diplomacy to make things better for you here."

"The king doesn't care about us," another said softly.

"I care," Vivenna said.

And she did. She found it strange, but a piece of her felt more of a kinship with the Idrians in the city than she did with those she had left. She understood."

"We must find a way to bring attention to your hardships without bringing hatred as well," she said. "We will find a way. As I said, my sister is married to the God King himself. If we can get her attention, perhaps he can be persuaded to improve the slums. Not because he's afraid of the violence our people might cause, but because of the pity he feels for their situation."

She continued to kneel, feeling ashamed before these men. Ashamed to be crying, to be seen in the immodest clothing and with ragged, short hair. Ashamed to have failed them so soundly.

How could I fail so easily? she thought. I, who was supposed to be in control. How could I be so angry that I ignored my people's needs just because I wanted to see Hallandren pay?

"She is sincere," one of the men finally said. "I will give her that."

"I don't know," said another. "I still feel it's too late."

"If that's the case," Vivenna said, still looking at the floor, "what do you have to lose? Think of the lives you could save. I promise. Idris will not forget you any longer. If you make peace with Hallandren, I will make certain that you are seen as heroes back in our homeland."

"Heroes, eh?" one of them said. "It would be nice to be known as a hero, rather than the one who left the highlands to live in brazen Hallandren."

"Please," Vivenna whispered.

"I'll see what I can do," one of the men said, standing.

Several of the others voiced agreement. They stood as well, shaking hands with Vasher. Vivenna remained kneeling as they left.

Eventually, the room was empty save for her and Vasher. He sat down across from her.

"Thanks," he said.

"I didn't do it for you," she whispered.

"Get up," he said. "Let's go. I want to meet with someone else."

"I..." she sat down on the rug, trying to make sense of her feelings. "Why should I do as you tell me? How do I know that you're not just using me? Lying to me. Like Denth did."

"You don't know," Vasher said, recovering his sword from the corner. "You'll just have to do what I say."

“Am I a prisoner then?”

He glanced at her. Then he walked over, squatting. “Look,” he said. “But we both agree that war is bad for Idris. I’m not going to take you on raids or make you meet with slum lords. All you have to do is tell people you don’t want a war.”

“And if I’m not willing to do that?” she said. “Will you force me?”

He watched her for a moment, then swore under his breath, standing. He pulled out a bag of something and tossed it at her. It clinked as it hit her chest then fell to the floor.

“Go,” he said. “Get back to Idris. I’ll do it without you.”

She just continued to sit, staring. He began to walk away.

“Denth used me,” he found herself whispering. “And the worse part is, I still feel like this should all be just a misunderstanding. I feel that he’s really my friend, and that I should go to him and find out why he did what he did. Maybe we are all just confused.”

She closed her eyes, resting her head on her knees. “But then I remember the things I saw him do. My friend Parlin is dead. Killed by one of Denth’s men. I feel so confused.”

The room fell silent. “You’re not the first one he’s taken in, princess,” Vasher finally said. “Denth... he’s a careful one. A man like him can be evil to the core, but if he is charismatic and amusing, people will listen to him. They’ll even like him.”

She looked up, blinking teary eyes.

Vasher turned away. “Me,” he said. “I’m not like that. I have trouble talking. I get frustrated. I snap at people. Doesn’t make me very popular. But I promise you that I won’t lie to you.” He met her eyes. “I want to stop this war. That’s all that really matters to me, right now. I promise you.”

She wasn’t sure if she believed him. Yet, she found herself wanting to. *Idiot*, she thought. *You’re just going to get taken in again.*

She hadn’t proven herself a very good judge of character. Still, she didn’t pick up the bag of coins. “I am willing to help. Assuming it doesn’t involve anything more than telling others that I wish to keep Idris from harm.”

“Good enough.

She hesitated. “Do you really think we can stop it. The war?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Assuming I can keep myself from beating the Colors out of all these Idrians for acting like idiots.”

A pacifist with temper-control issues, she thought ruefully. What a combination. A little like a devout Idrian princess who holds enough BioChromatic Breath to populate a small village.

“There are more places like this,” Vasher said. “I would show you to the people there.”

“All right,” she said, trying not to look at the blade as she stood. It had a strange ability to make her feel sick, even still, just by looking at it.

Vasher nodded. “There won’t be many people at each meeting. I don’t have Denth’s connections, and I’m not friendly with important people. The ones I know are workers. We’ll have to go visit the dye vats, perhaps even some of the fields.”

“I understand,” she said.

Without further comment, Vasher picked up his bag of coins, then led her out onto the street. *And so, she thought, I begin again.*

I can only hope that this time, I’m on the right side.

Chapter Forty-Four

Siri watched Susebron with fondness as he ate a third dessert. Their night's meal lay spread out on the table and floor, some dishes completely devoured, others barely tasted. That first night when Susebron had ordered a meal had created a tradition. Now they ordered food every night—though only after Siri did her act for the listening priests. Susebron claimed to find it very amusing, though she noticed the curiosity in his eyes as he watched her.

Susebron had proven to have quite a sweet tooth now that disapproving priests and their sense etiquette were gone. “You should probably watch out,” she noted as he finished another pastry. “If you eat too many of those, you will gain weight.”

He reached for his writing board. *No I won't.*

“Yes you will,” she said, smiling. “That’s the way it works.”

Not for Gods, he wrote. My mother explained it. Some men become more bulky if they exercise a lot and become fat if they eat a lot. That doesn't happen to Returned. We always look the same.

Siri couldn't offer argument. What did she know of Returned?

Is food in Idris like this? Susebron wrote.

Siri smiled. He was always so curious about her homeland. She could sense a longing in him, the wish to be free of his palace and see the outside. And yet, he didn't want to be disobedient, even when the ones who made the rules were obviously harsh.

“I really need to work on corrupting you some more,” she noted.

He paused. *What does that have to do with food?*

“Nothing,” she said. “But it’s true nonetheless. You’re far too good a person, Susebron.”

Sarcasm? he wrote. *I certainly hope that it is.*

“Only half,” she said, laying down on her stomach and watching him across their impromptu picnic settings.

Half sarcasm? He wrote. *Is this something new?*

“No,” she said, sighing. “There is truth sometimes even in sarcasm. I don't *really* want to corrupt you, but I do think that you're just too obedient. You need to be a little more reckless. Impulsive.”

It's hard to be impulsive when you are locked in a palace surrounded by hundreds of servants, he wrote.

“Good point.”

However, I have been thinking about the things which you have said. Please don't be mad at me.

Siri perked up, noting the embarrassment in his expression. “All right. What did you do?”

I talked to my priests, he said. *With the Artisan's Script.*

Siri felt a moment of panic. “You told them about us?”

No, no, he wrote quickly. I did tell them I was worried about having a child. I asked why my father died right after he had a child.

Siri frowned. Part of her wished that he'd let her handle such negotiations. However, she said nothing. She didn't want to keep him pinned down like his priests did. His life that was being threatened—he deserved the chance to work on the problem too.

“Good,” she said.

You're not mad?

She shrugged. “I was just telling you to be more impulsive! I can't really complain. What did they say?”

He erased, then continued. *They told me not to worry. They said everything would be all right. So I asked them again, and again they gave me a vague answer.*

Siri nodded slowly.

It hurts me to write this, but I'm beginning to think that you are right. I've noticed that my guards and Awakeners are staying particularly close lately. We even skipped going to the court of judgment yesterday.

“That's a bad sign,” she agreed. “I haven't had much luck finding out what is going to happen. I've ordered in three other storytellers but none of them had information any better than what Hoid gave me.”

You still think it has to do with the Breath I hold?

She nodded. “Remember what I said about my conversation with Tridees? He talked about that Breath of yours with reverence. To him, it's something to be passed from generation to generation, like a family tapestry.”

In one of the children's stories in my book, he wrote, there is a magic sword. A young boy is given it by his grandfather, and it turns out the sword was a heirloom—the symbol of kingship in the land.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

Perhaps the entire monarchy of Hallandren is nothing more than a way to guard the Breath. The only way to store Breath is inside of a person. So they created a monarchy with line of God Kings who could take the treasure and pass it from father to son.

Siri nodded slowly. “That would mean that the God King is more of a placeholder than anything else. A sheath for a magic weapon.”

Exactly, Susebron wrote, hand moving quickly. They had to make my family kings because of how much Breath was in that treasure. And they had to give it to a Returned—otherwise their king and their Gods might have been in conflict for power.

“Perhaps. It seems convenient that the God King always bears a stillborn son who becomes Returned...”

She trailed off. Susebron saw it too.

Unless the next God King isn't really the son of the current one, he wrote, hand shaking slightly.

“Austre!” Siri said. “God of Colors! That's it. Somewhere in the kingdom, a baby died and Returned. That's why it's so urgent that I get pregnant! They already have the next God King, now they just need to keep up the farce. They marry me to you, hope for a child as quickly as possible, then switch the baby for the Returned one.”

Then they kill me and somehow take my Breaths away, he wrote. And give it to this child, who can become the next God King.

Siri sat back, frowning. “But if any of that is true, then that asks another question. Why even bother changing God Kings? Why not just leave one man holding the Breath?”

I don’t know, Susebron wrote. It doesn’t seem to make sense, does it? Maybe they are worried about keeping a single God King captive that long. Children are easier to control, perhaps?

“If that’s the case, they would want to change *more* often,” Siri said. “Some of those God Kings lasted centuries. Of course, it could just have to do with how rebellious they think their king is.”

I do everything I’m supposed to! You just complained that I am too obedient.

“Compared to me, you are,” she said, sitting up and leaning back. “Maybe from their viewpoint, you’re a wildman. After all, you did hide that book your mother gave you, and then you learned to write. Perhaps they know you well enough to realize that you weren’t going to stay docile. So now that they have an opportunity to replace you, they’re intending to take it.”

Maybe, he wrote.

Siri thought through their conclusions again. Looked at critically, she could see that they were just speculations. Yet, everyone said that the other Returned couldn’t have children, and so why would the God King be different? That might just be a means of obfuscating the fact that they were bringing in a new person to be God King when they found one.

That still didn’t answer the most important question. What were they going to do to Susebron to get his Breaths away from him?

Susebron leaned back, staring up at the dark ceiling. Siri watched him, noting the look of sadness in his eyes. “What?” she asked.

He just shook his head.

“Please? What is it?”

He sat for a moment, then looked down, writing. *If what you say is true, then the woman who raised me was not my mother. I would have been born to someone random out in the countryside. The priests would have taken me once I returned, then raised me in the palace as the ‘son’ of the God King they’d just killed.*

Seeing him in pain made her insides twist. She moved around the blanket, sitting beside him, putting her arms around him.

She’s the only person to have shown me real kindness in my life, he wrote. The priests, they revere me and care for me—or, at least, I assumed that they did. However, they never really loved me. Only my mother did that. And now I’m not sure I even know who she is.

“If she raised you, she’s your mother,” Siri said. “It doesn’t matter who gave birth to you.”

He didn’t respond to that.

“Maybe she was your real mother,” Siri said. “If they were going to bring you to the palace and raise you in secret, they might as well bring your mother too. Who better to care for you?”

He nodded, then scribbled on the board with one hand—the other around Siri’s waist. *Perhaps you are right. Though it now seems suspicious to me that she would die as she did. She was one of the few who could have told me the truth.*

This seemed to make him even more sad, and Siri pulled him close, laying her head on his chest.

Please, he wrote. Tell me of your family.

“My parents were often frustrated with me,” Siri said. “But they did love me. *Do* love me. They just wanted me to do what they thought was right. And... well, the more time I spend in Hallandren, the more I wish I would have listened to them, at least a little bit.

“Ridger was right above me. I was always getting him into trouble. He was the heir, and I had him *thoroughly* corrupted, at least until he got old enough to realize his duties. He’s a little like you. Very kind hearted, always trying to do what is right. He didn’t eat as many sweets, though.”

Susebron smiled faintly, squeezing her shoulder.

“Then there was Fafen. I didn’t really know her that well. She joined a monastery when I was still quite young—and I was glad. It’s seen as a duty in Idris to provide at least one child for the monasteries. They’re the ones who grow the food for the poor and take care of things that need to be done around the city. Pruning, washing, painting. Anything to be of service.”

He reached over. *A little like a king*, he wrote. *Living a life to serve others.*

“Sure,” Siri said. “Only they don’t get locked up and they can stop doing it, if they want. Either way, I’m glad it was Fafen and not me. I would have gone *crazy* living as a monk. They have to be pious all the time, and are supposed to be the least ostentatious in the city.”

Not a good match for your hair, he wrote.

“Definitely,” she said.

Though, he wrote, frowning slightly. *It’s stopped changing colors as often lately.*

“I’ve had to learn to control it better,” Siri said with a grimace. “People can read me too easily by it. Here.” She changed it from black to yellow, and he smiled, running his fingers through its lengthy locks.

“After Fafen,” Siri said, “there’s just the eldest, Vivenna. She’s the one you were supposed to marry. she spent her entire life preparing to move to Hallandren.”

She must hate me, Susebron wrote. *Growing up knowing she would have to leave her family and live with a man she didn’t know.*

“Nonsense,” Siri said. “Vivenna looked forward to it. I don’t think she *can* feel hatred. She was always just calm and careful and perfect.”

Susebron frowned.

“I sound bitter, don’t it?” Siri said, sighing. “I don’t mean to. I really do love Vivenna. She was always there, watching out for me. But, it seemed to me that she made too many efforts to cover up for me. My big sister, pulling me out of trouble, scolding me calmly, then seeing that I wasn’t punished as much as I should have been.” She hesitated. “They’re all probably back home right now, worried sick about me.”

You sound like you’re worried about them, he wrote.

“I am,” she said. “I’ve been listening to the priests argue in the Court. It... doesn’t sound good, Seb. There are a lot of Idrians in the city and they’re being very reckless. The city guard was forced to send troops into one of the slums a few weeks back. That isn’t helping tensions between our countries.”

Susebron didn’t write a response, but instead wrapped his arm around her again, pulling her close. It felt good to be held against him. Very good.

After a few minutes, he put his arm away and wrote again, awkwardly erasing first. *I was wrong, you know.*

“About what?”

About one of the things I said earlier. I wrote that my mother was the only person to ever show me love and kindness. That's not true. There's been another.

He trailed off with his writing, looking down at her. Then he glanced at the board again. *You didn't have to show me kindness, he wrote. You could have hated me for taking you from your family and your homeland. Instead, you taught me to read, befriended me. Loved me.*

He stared at her. She stared at him. Then, hesitant, he leaned down and kissed her.

Oh, dear... Siri thought, a dozen objections popping into her head. She found it difficult to move, to resist, or to do anything.

Anything other than kiss him back.

She felt hot. She knew that they needed to stop, lest the priesthood get exactly what they were waiting for. She *understood* all of these things. Yet those objections began to seem less and less rational as she kissed him, as her breathing grew more hurried.

He paused, obviously uncertain what to do next. Siri looked up at him, breathing heavier, then pulled him down to kiss him again, feeling her hair bleed to a deep, passionate red.

At that point, she stopped caring about anything else. Susebron didn't know what to do. But she did. *I really am too impulsive*, she thought as she pulled off her shift. *I need to get better at that.*

Some other time.

Chapter Forty-Five

That night, Lightsong dreamed of T'Telir burning. Of the God King dead and of soldiers in the streets. Of Lifeless killing people in colorful clothing.

And of a black sword.

Chapter Forty-Six

Vivenna choked down her meal. The dried meat tasted strongly of fish, but she had learned that by plugging her nose, she could ignore much of the flavor. She ate every bite, then washed the taste down with a few mouthfuls of warm boiled water.

She was alone in the room. It was a small chamber built onto the side of a building in the slums. Vasher had paid a few coins for a day in it, though he wasn't there at the moment. He'd rushed off to see to something.

She leaned back, food consumed, closing her eyes. She'd reached the point where she was so exhausted that she actually found it difficult to sleep. The fact that the room was so small didn't help. She couldn't even stretch out all the way.

Vasher hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that their work would be rigorous. Stop after stop—each meeting only attended by a few people—she spoke with the Idrians, consoling them, begging them not to prompt Hallandren to war. So far as she could tell, Vasher seemed to be being honest with her. Of course, she had thought that about Denth, too.

She did what she could. She worried that she was being manipulated, that she would make mistakes again. She didn't want to help or trust a man who might just be another murderer. However, she felt different about these visits. There were no restaurants like there had been with Denth. No dinners with men in fine clothing and guards. Just group after group of tired, working-class men and women. Many of them weren't rebellious and a large number of them didn't even live in the slums. But they were part of the Idrian community in T'Telir, and they had an effect on how their friends and family felt.

She liked them. Empathized with them. She felt far better about her work now than she had about her work with Denth. She had decided to trust those instincts. That was her decision, and that decision meant helping Vasher, for now.

Vasher didn't ask her if she wanted to continue. He simply led her from location to location, expecting her to keep up. And so she did. Meeting with the people was emotionally draining, but she did it anyway, pleading with them, admitting her fault. As the days had progressed, she'd grown more and more certain that she *had* been duped into helping fuel the war. She could see it in the way the Idrians—even the good natured ones—had been riled against Hallandren in the recent months.

She wasn't certain if she could fix what she had done. But she was willing to try. This determination seemed to gain her a bit of respect from Vasher. It was much more reluctantly given than Denth's respect had been.

Denth was fooling me the entire time. It was still hard to remember that fact. Part of her didn't want to. She leaned forward, staring at the bland wall in front of her in the box-like room. She shivered. It was a good thing that she'd been working herself so hard lately. It kept her from thinking about things.

Discomforting things.

Who was she? How did she define herself now that everything she'd been, and everything she'd tried, had collapsed around her? She couldn't be Vivenna the confident princess anymore. That person was dead, left behind in that cellar with Parlin's bloody corpse. Her confidence had

come from naiveté. She hadn't known how helpless she was, and so she'd been able to act secure and in control.

Now she knew. She knew how easily she had been played. She knew the cost of ignorance, and she understood what it was like to glimpse poverty.

Yet, she also couldn't be *that* woman—the waif of the streets, the thief, the beaten down wretch. That wasn't her. She felt as if those weeks had been a dream, brought on by the stress and trauma of her betrayal, fueled by becoming a Drab and being suffocated by disease. That wasn't her. To pretend that it would be to parody, somehow, those who truly lived on the streets. The people she'd hidden amongst and tried to imitate.

Where did that leave her? Was she the penitent, quiet princess who knelt with bowed head, pleading with the peasants to avoid war? This, too, was something of an act. She really did feel sorry. However, she was using her stripped pride as a tool to manipulate. That wasn't her.

Who was she?

She stood up, feeling cramped in the tiny room, and pushed open the door. The neighborhood outside wasn't quite a slum, but it wasn't rich either. It was simply a place where people lived. There were enough colors along to street to be welcoming, but the buildings were small and held a number of families each.

She walked along the street, careful not to stray too far from the room Vasher had rented. She passed trees, admiring their blooms.

Who was she really? What was left, when one stripped away the princess and the hatred of Hallandren? She was determined. That part of her, she liked. She'd forced herself to become the woman she needed to be in order to marry the God King. She'd worked hard, sacrificing, to obtain her goal.

She was also a hypocrite. Now she knew what it was to be truly humble, without ostentation at all. Compared to that, her former life seemed more loud and arrogant than any colorful skirt or shirt.

She did believe in Austre. She loved the teachings of the Five Visions. Humility. Sacrifice. Seeing another's problems before your own. Yet, she was beginning to think that she—along with many others—had taken this view too far, letting her desire to seem humble become a form of arrogance itself. It seemed to her that when her faith had become about clothing instead of people, it had taken a wrong turn.

She wanted to learn to Awaken. Why? What did that say about her? That she was willing to accept a tool her religion rejected, just because it would make her powerful?

No, that wasn't it. At least, she hoped that wasn't it. Looking back on her recent life, she felt frustrated at how helpless she had been so much of the time.

And *that* felt like part of who she really was. The woman who would do anything to make certain she wasn't helpless. That was why she'd trained so hard with the tutors in Idris. That was also why she wanted to learn how to Awaken. She wanted to hold as much information as she could. She wanted to be prepared as for the problems that might come at her.

She wanted to be capable. That might be arrogant, but it was the truth. She wanted to learn everything she could about how to survive in the world. The most humiliating aspect of her time in T'Telir was her ignorance. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

She nodded to herself.

Time to practice, then, she thought, returning to the room. Inside, she pulled out a piece of rope—the one that Vasher had used to tie her up, the first thing that she had Awakened. She'd since retrieved the Breath from it.

She went back outside, holding the rope between her fingers, twisting it, thinking. *The Commands that Denth taught me were simple phrases. Hold things. Protect me.* He'd implied that the intent was important. When she'd Awakened her bonds, she'd made them move as if part of her body. It was more than just the Command. The Command brought the life, but the intent—the instructions from her mind—brought focus.

She stopped beside a large tree with thin, blossom-laden branches that drooped toward the ground. She stood beside a branch, touched the bark of the tree's trunk itself to use its color. She held out the rope to the branch. "Hold things," she Commanded, reflexively letting out some of her Breath. She felt a moment of panic as her sense of the world dimmed.

The rope twitched. However, instead of drawing color from the tree, the Awakening pulled color from her tunic. The garment bled grey, and the rope moved, wrapping like a snake around the branch. Wood cracked slightly as the rope pulled tight. However, the other end of the rope twisted in an odd pattern, writhing.

Vivenna watched, frowning, until she figured out what was happening. The rope was twisting around her hand, trying to hold it as well.

"Stop," Vivenna said.

Nothing happened. It continued to pull tight.

"Your Breath to mine," she Commanded.

The rope stopped twisting and her Breath returned. She shook the rope free. All right, she thought. 'Hold things' works, but it's not very specific. It will wrap around my fingers as well as the thing I want it to tie up. What if I tried something else?

"Hold that branch," she Commanded. Again, Breath left her. More of it this time. Her trousers drained of color, and the rope end twisted, wrapping around the branch. The rest of it remained still.

She smiled in satisfaction. So, the more complicated the command, the more Breath it requires.

She took back her Breath. As Vasher had indicated, doing so didn't cause her senses to be shocked, for it was a restoration back to a normal state for her. If she'd gone several days without that Breath, she'd have been overwhelmed by recovering its power. A little like taking a first bite of something very flavorful.

She eyed her clothing, which was now completely grey. Out of curiosity, she tried Awakening the rope again. Nothing happened. She picked up a stick, then awakened the rope again. It worked this time, the stick bleeding of color, though it took a LOT more breath. Perhaps this was because the stick wasn't very colorful.

She discarded it and fetched a few of Vasher's colored handkerchiefs from the room. She walked back to the tree. *Now what?* she thought. Could she put the Breath into the rope now, then command it to hold something later? How would she even phrase that?

"Hold things that I tell you to hold," she Commanded.

Nothing happened.

"Hold that branch when I tell you."

Again, nothing.

"Hold whatever I say."

Nothing.

A voice came from behind. "Tell it to 'Hold when thrown.'"

Vivenna jumped, spinning. Vasher stood behind her, Nightblood held before him, point down. He had his pack over his shoulder.

Vivenna flushed, glancing back at the rope. "Hold when thrown," she said, using a handkerchief for color. The rope remained limp. So she tossed it to the side, hitting one of the hanging tree branches.

The rope immediately twisted about, locking the branches together and holding them tightly.

"That's useful," Vivenna said.

Vasher raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps. Dangerous though."

"Why?"

"Get the rope back."

Vivenna paused, realizing that the rope had twisted around branches that were too high for her to reach. She hopped up, trying to grab it.

"I prefer to use a longer rope," Vasher said, raising Nightblood by the blade and using its hooked crossguard to pull the branches down. "If you always keep ahold of one end, then you don't have to worry about it getting taken from you. Plus, you can Awaken when you need to, rather than leaving a bunch of Breath locked into a rope that you may or may not need."

Vivenna nodded, recovering her Breath from the rope.

"Come on," he said, walking back toward the room. "You've obviously made enough of a spectacle for one day."

Vivenna followed, noticing that several people on the street had stopped to watch her. "How did they notice?" she asked. "I wasn't *that* obvious about what I was doing."

Vasher snorted. "And how many people in T'Telir walk around in grey clothing?"

Vivenna blushed as she followed Vasher into the cramped room. He set down his pack then leaned Nightblood against one wall. Vivenna eyed the sword. She still wasn't certain what to make of the weapon. She felt a little nauseous every time she looked at it, and the memory of how violently she'd felt sick when touching it was still fresh inside of her.

Plus there had been that voice in her head. Had she really heard it? Vasher had been characteristically tight-lipped when she'd asked about it, rebuffing her questions.

"Aren't you an Idrian?" Vasher asked, drawing her attention as he settled down.

"Last I checked," she replied.

"You seem uncomfortably fascinated with Awakening for a follower of Austre." He spoke with eyes closed as he rested his head back against the door.

"I'm not a very good Idrian," she said, sitting down. "Not anymore. I might as well learn to use what I have."

Vasher nodded. "Good enough. I've never really understood why Austrism suddenly turned is back on Awakening."

"Suddenly?"

He nodded, eyes still closed. "Wasn't like that before the Manywar."

"Really?"

"Of course," he said.

He often spoke that way, mentioning things that seemed farfetched to her, yet saying them as if he knew exactly what he was talking about. No conjecture. No wavering. As if he knew everything. She could see why sometimes it was hard for him to get along with people.

"Anyway," Vasher said, opening his eyes. "Did you eat all of that squid?"

She nodded. "Is that what that was?"

"Yes," he said, opening his pack, getting out another dried chunk of meat. He held it up. "Want more?"

She felt sick. "No, thank you."

He paused, noticing the look in her eyes. "What? Did I give you a bad piece?"

She shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"It's nothing."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I said it's nothing." She glanced away. "I just don't care for fish very much."

"You don't?" he asked. "I've been feeding it to you for five days now."

She nodded silently.

"You ate it every time."

"I'm dependent upon you for food," she said. "I don't intend to complain about what you give me."

He frowned, then took a bite of squid and began chewing. He still wore his torn, almost-ragged clothing, but Vivenna had now been around him enough to tell that he kept it clean. He obviously had the resources to get new clothing, yet he chose to wear the worn and tattered things instead.

"You aren't what I expected," he finally said.

"I would have been," she said. "A few weeks ago."

"I doubt it," he said, gnawing on his chunk of squid. "That tenacious spirit you've got doesn't come from a few weeks on the streets. Neither does that sense of martyrdom."

She met his eyes. "I want you to teach me more about Awakening."

He shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"I don't even know how to answer that," she said. "Denth taught me a few Commands, but that was the same day that you took me captive."

Vasher nodded. They sat silent for a few minutes.

"Well?" she finally asked. "Are you going to say anything?"

"I'm thinking," he said.

She raised an eyebrow.

He scowled. "Awakening is something I've done for a very, very long time. I always have trouble trying to explain it. Don't rush me."

"It's okay," she said. "Take your time."

He shot her a glance. "Don't patronize me either."

"I'm not patronizing; I'm being polite."

“Well next time, be polite with less condescension in your voice,” he said.

Condescension? she thought. *I wasn't condescending!* She eyed him as he sat, chewing on his dried squid. The more time she spent with him, the less frightening she found him, but the more frustrating. *He is a dangerous man*, she reminded herself. *He has left corpses strewn all over the city, using that sword of his to make people slaughter each other.*

She had trusted Denth too quickly. She wouldn't make the same mistake with Vasher. Still, there was a better feeling about him, now that she was coming to know him.

Or does he just want me to think that?

She'd considered running from him on several occasions, but had eventually decided that she'd be a fool to do so. She could find no fault in his efforts to stop the war, and his solemn promise in the basement that first day still stuck with her. She believed him. Hesitantly.

She just intended to keep her eyes open a little wider from now on.

“All right,” he said. “I guess this is for the best. I'm getting tired of you walking around with that bright aura of yours that you can't even use.”

“Well?”

“Well, I think we should start with theory,” he said. “There are four kinds of BioChromatic entities. The first, and most spectacular, are the Returned. They're called gods here in Hallandren, but I'd rather call them Spontaneous Sentient BioChromatic Manifestations in a Deceased Host. What is odd about them is that they're the only naturally occurring BioChromatic entity, which is theoretically the explanation for why they can't use or bestow their BioChromatic Investiture. Of course, the fact is that *every* living being is born with a certain BioChromatic Investiture. This could also explain why Type Ones retain sentience.”

Vivenna blinked. That wasn't what she had been expecting.

“You're more interested in Type Two and Type Three entities,” Vasher continued. “Type Two being Mindless Manifestations in a Deceased Host. They are cheap to make, even with awkward Commands. This is per the Law of BioChromatic Parallelism: the closer a host is to a living shape and form, the easier it is to Awaken. BioChroma is the power of life, and so it seeks patterns of life. That, however, leads us to another law—the Law of Comparability. It states that the amount of Breath required to Awaken something isn't necessarily indicative of its power once Awakened. A piece of cloth cut into a square and a piece of cloth cut into the shape of a person will take very different amounts of Breath to Awaken, but will be essentially the same once they have been Invested.

“The explanation for this is simple. Some people think of Awakening like pouring water into a cup. You pour until the cup is filled, and then the object comes to life. This is a false parallelism. Instead, think of Awakening like beating down a door. You pound and pound, and some doors are easier to open than others, but once they're open, they do about the same thing.”

He glanced at her. “Understand?”

“Uh...” she said slowly. She'd spent her youth training with the tutors, but this was beyond even their methods of teaching. “It's a little dense.”

“Well, do you want to learn or not?”

You asked me if I understood, she thought. *And I answered.* However, she didn't voice her objections. Better for him to keep talking.

“Type Two BioChromatic Entities,” he said, “are what people in Hallandren call Lifeless. They are, in a way, like Type One entities—only with some very large differences. They only require a few Breaths to Awaken—anywhere between one and fifty, depending on the Commands

used—and they feed off of their own color when being Invested. They don't present an aura when Awakened, but the Breath sustains them, keeping them from needing to eat. They can die, and need a special alcohol solution to remain functional past a few years of Awakened status. Because of their organic host, their Breath clings to the body, and cannot be withdrawn once Invested."

"I know a little about them," Vivenna said, "Denth and his team have a Lifeless."

Vasher fell silent. "Yes," he finally said. "I know."

Vivenna frowned, noticing a strange look in his eyes. They sat for a few moments. "You were talking about Lifeless and their Commands?" she prompted.

Vasher nodded. "They need a Command to Awaken them, just like anything else. Even your religion teaches about Commands—it says that Austre is the one who Commands the Returned to come back."

She nodded.

"Understanding the theory of Commands is tough. Look at Lifeless, for instance. It's taken us centuries to discover the most efficient ways to bring a body to a Lifeless state. Even still, we're not sure if we understand how it works. I guess *this* is the first thing I'd like to get across to you—that BioChroma is complicated, and we really don't understand most of it."

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Just what I said," Vasher replied, shrugging. "We don't really know what we're doing."

"But you sound so technical in your descriptions."

"We've figured out some things," he said. "But Awakeners really haven't been around that long. The more you learn about BioChroma, the more you realize that there are more things that we *don't* know than there are things we do. Why are the specific Commands so important, and why do they have to be spoken in your native language? What brings Type One entities—Returned—back to life in the first place? Why are Lifeless so dull-minded, while Returned completely sentient?"

Vivenna nodded.

"Creating Type Three BioChromatic Entities is what we traditionally call 'Awakening,'" Vasher continued. "That's when you create a BioChromatic manifestation in an organic host that is far removed from having been alive. Cloth works the best, though sticks, reeds, and other plant matter can be used."

"What about bones?" Vivenna asked.

"They're strange," Vasher said. "Take far more Breath to awaken than a body held together with flesh and aren't as flexible as something like cloth. Still, Breath will stick to them fairly easily, since they were once alive and maintain the form of a living thing."

"So Idrian stories that talk about skeletal armies *aren't* just fabrications."

He chuckled. "Oh, they are. If you wanted to Awaken a skeleton, you'd have to arrange all the bones together in their correct places. That's a lot of work for something that will take upwards of fifty or a hundred Breaths to Awaken. Intact corpses make far more sense economically, even if the Breath sticks to them so well that it becomes impossible to recover.

"Type Three Entities—regular Awakened objects—are different. BioChroma doesn't stick to them very well at all. The result is that they require quite a bit of Investiture—often well over a hundred Breaths—to Awaken them. The benefit of this, of course, is that the Breath can be drawn back out again. This has allowed for quite a bit more experimentation, and that has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of Awakening techniques."

“You mean the Commands?” Vivenna asked.

“Right,” Vasher said. “As you’ve seen, most basic Commands work easily. If the Command something the object could accomplish, and you state it in a simple way, the Command will usually work.”

“I tried some simple Commands,” she said. “On the rope. They didn’t work.”

“Those may have sounded simple, but they weren’t. Simple Commands are only two words long. Grab Something. Hold Something. Move Up. Move down. Twist around. Even some two word commands can be more complicated, and it takes practice visualizing—or, well, imagining. Well, using your mind to—”

“I understand that part,” she said. “Like flexing a muscle.”

He nodded. “The Command ‘Protect me,’ though only two words, is extremely complicated. So are others, like Fetch Something. You have to give the right impulse to the object. This area is where you really begin to understand how little we know. There are probably thousands of Commands we don’t know. The more words you add, the more complicated the mental component becomes, which is why discovering a new Command can take years of study.”

“Like the discovery of a new Command to make Lifeless,” she said thoughtfully. “Three hundred years ago, those who had the one-Breath Command could make their Lifeless much cheaper than those who didn’t. That disparity started the Manywar.”

“Yes,” Vasher said. “Or, at least, that was part of what caused the war. It’s not really important. The thing to understand is that we’re still children when it comes to Awakening. It doesn’t help that a lot of people who learn new, valuable Commands never share them, and probably die with the knowledge.”

Vivenna nodded, noticing how his discussion grew more relaxed and conversational as he got into the topic. Still, his knowledge surprised her.

He sits on the floor, she thought, eating a dry piece of squid, not having shaven in weeks and wearing clothing that looks like it’s about to fall off. Yet he talks like a scholar giving a speech. He carries a sword that leaks black smoke and causes people to kill each other, yet he works so hard to stop a war. Who is this man?

She glanced to the side, to where Nightblood sat leaning against the wall. Perhaps it was the discussion of the technical aspects of BioChroma, or perhaps it was simply her growing suspicion. She was beginning to understand what wasn’t right about the sword.

“Is there a Type Four BioChromatic entity?” Vivenna asked, glancing back at Vasher.

He fell silent.

“Type One is a human body with sentience,” Vivenna said. “Type Two is a human body without sentience. Type three is an Awakened object like a rope—an object with no sentience. Is there a way to create an Awakened object *with* sentience? Like a Returned, but inside of something other than a human body?”

Vasher stood. “We’ve covered enough for one day.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“And I’m not going to,” he said. “And I advise you never to ask it again. Understand?” He glanced at her, and she felt a chill at the harshness in his voice.

“All right,” she said, though she didn’t glance away.

He snorted to himself, then reached into his large pack, pulling something out. “Here,” he said. “I brought you something.”

He tossed a long, cloth-wrapped object to the floor. Vivenna stood, walking over to pull the cloth off. Inside was a thin, well-polished dueling blade.

“I don’t know how to use one of these,” she said.

“Then learn,” he replied. “If you know how to fight, you’ll be far less annoying to have around. I won’t have to keep pulling you out of trouble all the time.”

She flushed. “One time.”

“It’ll happen again,” he said.

She hesitantly picked up the sheathed sword, surprised at how light it was.

“Let’s go,” Vasher said. “I’ve got another group for us to visit.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Lightsong tried not to think about his dreams. He tried not to think about T'Telir in flames. Of people dying. Of the world, essentially, ending.

He stood on the second story of his palace, looking over the Court of the Gods. The second story was essentially a covered roof, open on all sides. Wind blew his hair. The sun was close to setting. Already, torches were arrayed on the lawn. It was so perfect. The palaces set in a circle, lit by torches and lanterns matching the colors of the nearest palace.

Some of the places were dark; the buildings currently held no Gods.

What would happen if too many others Returned before we killed ourselves? he thought idly. Would they build more palaces? As far as he knew, there had always been enough space.

At the head of the Court sat the God King's palace, tall, black. It had obviously been built so that it would dominate even the extravagant mansions of the others, and it threw a wide, warped shadow across the back wall.

Perfect. So perfect. The torches were arranged in patterns he could only see by standing up atop a building. The grass was kept perfectly manicured, and the massive wall tapestries were replaced often so that they showed no wear, stains, or fading.

The people put forth such effort for their gods. Why? Sometimes it befuddled him. Then he thought of other religions and the beings they revered. What of those faiths? Faiths with no visible gods, only incorporeal imaginings or wishes. Surely those 'gods' did even less for their people than the Hallandren court, yet the still were worshipped.

Lightsong shook his head. Meeting with Allmother had reminded him of days he hadn't thought of in a long time. Calmseer. She had been his mentor when he'd first Returned. Blushweaver was jealous of his memories of her, but she didn't understand truth. Nor could he, really, explain it.

Calmseer had come closer to being a divinity than any Lightsong had seen. She'd done for her followers things such as Allmother now tried, but there had been genuine concern in Calmseer's regard for them. Not a worry that they would stop worshiping. Not an arrogance of presumed superiority, mixed with benevolence for those who were so far beneath them.

Real kindness. Real love. Real mercy.

Yet even Calmseer had felt inadequate. She had often said she felt guilty because she couldn't live up to what people expected. How could she? How could anyone? In the end, he suspected this was what drove her answer a Petition. There had only been one way, in her estimation, to be the goddess everyone demanded she be. And that was to give up her life for her people.

They push us into it, Lightsong thought. They craft all of this splendor and wonder, they give us whatever we desire, then they subtly poke at us. Be a god. Prophecy. Maintain our illusion for us.

Die. Die so that we can keep believing.

He usually stayed off of his roof. He preferred to be down below, where the perspective made it so much easier to ignore the larger view. So much easier to focus on simple things, like his life in the moment.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked quietly, approaching.

Lightsong didn't reply.

"Are you all right, your grace?"

"No man should be this important," Lightsong said.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked, walking up beside him.

"It does strange things to you. We weren't built for it."

"You're a god, your grace. You *were* built for it."

"No," he said. "I'm no god."

"Excuse me, but you don't really get to choose. We worship you, and that makes you our God." Llarimar spoke the words in his usual calm way. Didn't the man *ever* get upset?

"You're not helping."

"I apologize, your grace. But, perhaps you should stop arguing about the same old things."

Lightsong shook his head. "This is something different, today. I'm not sure what to do."

"You mean about Allmother's Commands?"

Lightsong nodded. "I thought I had it figured out, Scoot. I can't keep up with all of the things Blushweaver is plotting—I've never been good at details. I've gotten myself in too deeply."

Llarimar didn't respond.

"I was going to give it up," Lightsong said. "Allmother was doing a fantastic job of standing up for herself. I figured that if I gave her my Commands, then *she'd* know what to do. She'd understand if it's better to support Blushweaver or oppose her."

"You could still just let her," Llarimar said. "You gave her your Commands too."

"I know," Lightsong said.

They fell silent.

So, it comes down to this, he thought. The first of us who changes those Commands takes control of all twenty thousand. The other will be locked out.

What did he choose? Did he sit back and let history happen, or did he jump in and make a mess of it?

Whoever you are, he thought, whatever is out there that sent me back, why couldn't you just leave me be? I'd already lived one life. I'd already made my decisions. Why did you have to send me back? Couldn't I just be done?

He'd tried everything, and yet people still looked to him. He knew for a fact that he was one of the most popular Returned, visited by more petitioners and given more art than almost anyone else. *Honestly*, he thought. *What is wrong with these people?* Were they so in need of something to worship that they chose him rather than worry that their religion might be false?

Allmother claimed that some *did* think that. She worried about the perceived lack of faith among the common people. Lightsong wasn't certain he agreed with her. He knew of the theories—that the gods who lived the longest were the weak ones because the system encouraged the best to kill themselves quickly. However, the same number of petitioners came to him now as when he first started. Plus, too few gods were chosen on a whole to support a theory that depended upon statistical dilution over time.

Or was he just distracting himself with irrelevant details? He leaned on the banister, looking out over the green as glowing pavilions.

This could be the crowning moment for him. He could finally prove himself to be an indolent, a man who avoided anything that resembled work. It was perfect. If he did nothing, then Allmother would be forced to take up the armies and resist Blushweaver.

But was that what he wanted? Allmother kept herself secluded from the other gods. She didn't attend many Court meetings and didn't listen to the debates. Blushweaver was intricately involved. She knew every god and goddess. She understood the issues, and she was very clever. Of all of the Gods, only she had begun taking steps to secure their armies.

Siri is no threat, he thought. But if someone else were manipulating her? Would Allmother have the political savvy to understand the danger? Would she be capable of directing the surgings of popular opinion? And, without guidance, would Blushweaver see that Siri wasn't crushed?

If he did walk away, there would be a cost. He would be to blame, for he'd given up.

"Who was she, Llarimar?" Lightsong asked quietly. "The young woman in my dreams. Was she my wife?"

The high priest didn't answer.

"I need to know," Lightsong said, turning. "This time, I *really* need to know."

"I..." Llarimar frowned, then looked away. "No," he said quietly. "She was not your wife."

"My lover?"

He shook his head.

"But she was important to me?"

"Very," Llarimar said.

"And is she still alive?"

Llarimar wavered, then finally nodded his head.

Still alive, Lightsong thought.

If this city fell, then she would be in danger. Everyone who worshiped Lightsong—everyone who counted on him despite his best efforts—would be in danger. But, T'Telir couldn't fall. Even if there was war, the fighting wouldn't come here. Hallandren was not in danger. It was the most powerful kingdom in the world.

And what of his dreams?

I know I'm no god, he thought. Why should I let dreams bother me? There's nothing more to them than my own worried subconscious.

He had only been given one real duty in the Court. That of taking command of ten thousand Lifeless. Of deciding when they should be used. And when they should not be.

Still alive...

He turned and walked toward the steps.

#

The Lifeless Enclave was technically part of the Court of Gods. The massive building was built at the base of the Court plateau, and a long, covered walkway ran down to it.

Lightsong moved down the steps with his entourage. They passed several guard posts, though he wasn't sure why they needed guards in a hallway leading from the Court. He had only visited the enclave a couple of times—primarily during his first few weeks as a Returned, when he had been required to give the security phrase to his ten thousand soldiers.

Perhaps I should have come more often, he thought. What would have been the point? Servants cared for the Lifeless, making certain their ichor-alcohol was fresh, that they exercised, and... did whatever else it was that Lifeless did.

Llarimar and several of the other priests were puffing from the long, brisk walk by the time they reached the bottom of the steps up. Lightsong, of course, had no trouble. He was in perfect physical condition. There were some things about godhood that never made him complain. A couple of guards opened the doors into the compound. It was massive, of course—it contained space for forty thousand Lifeless. There were four large warehouse-like storage areas for the different groups of Lifeless, a track for them to run about, a room filled with various stones and blocks of metal for them to lift to keep their muscles strong, and a medical area where their ichor-alcohol was tested and administered.

They passed through several twisting passages, then approached a guard post set beside a large open doorway. Lightsong passed the guard post, which was populated with human guards, and looked in at the Lifeless.

He'd forgotten that they kept them in the dark.

"There they are, your grace," Llarimar said, waving for a couple of priests to hold up lanterns. The door opened onto a viewing platform. The floor of the warehouse extended below, filled with line upon line of silent, waiting soldiers. They wore their armor and carried their weapons in sheaths.

"There are holes in the ranks," Lightsong said.

"Some of them will be exercising," Llarimar replied. "I have sent a servant to fetch them."

Lightsong nodded. The Lifeless stood with eyes open. They didn't shuffle or cough. Staring out over them, Lightsong suddenly remembered why he never felt any desire to return and inspect his troops. They were simply too unnerving.

"Everyone out," Lightsong said.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked. "Don't you want a few priests to stay?"

Lightsong shook his head. "No. I will bear this phrase myself."

Llarimar hesitated, but then nodded, doing as ordered.

In Lightsong's opinion, there was no good way of keeping Command Phrases. Leaving them in the hands of a single god was to risk losing the Phrase through assassination. However, the more people who knew the Command Phrases, the more likely it was that the secret would be bribed or torture, out of someone.

The only mitigating factor was the God King. Apparently, with his powerful BioChroma, he could Break Lifeless more quickly. Still, taking control of ten thousand would weeks, even for the God King.

The choice was left to the individual Returned. They could let some of their priests hear the Command Phrase so that if something happened to the god, the priests could pass the Phrase on to the next Returned. If the god chose not to give the Phrase to his priests, then he placed an even larger burden on himself. Lightsong had found that option silly, years before, and had included Llarimar and several others in the secret.

This time he saw wisdom in keeping the phrase to himself. Should he get the chance, he would whisper it to the God King. But only him. "Bottom line blue," he said. "I give you a new Command Phrase." He paused. "Red Panther. Red Panther. Step to the right side of the room."

A group of the Lifeless near the front of the crowd moved over to the side.

Lightsong sighed, closing his eyes. A part of him had hoped that Allmother had come here first, that she had already changed the Command Phrase.

But she hadn't. He opened his eyes then took the steps down to the warehouse floor. He spoke again, changing the phrase for another group. He could do about twenty or thirty at a time—he remembered the process taking hours the last time.

He continued. He would leave the Lifeless with their basic instructions to obey the servants when asked creatures to exercise or go to the infirmary. He'd give them a lesser command that could be used to move them about and make them march to specific locations, like when they had been placed in ranks outside the city to greet Siri. Another to make them go with members of the City Watch to provide extra muscle.

Yet there would only be one person with ultimate command of them. One person who could make them go to war. When he was done in this room, he would move on, taking utter command of Allmother's ten thousand as well.

He would draw both armies to him. And in doing so, he would take his place at the very heart of the fate of two kingdoms.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Susebron didn't leave in the mornings anymore.

Siri lay in the bed beside him, curled slightly, her skin against his. He slept peacefully, chest going up and down, white bed sheets throwing out prismatic colors around him as they inevitably reacted to his presence. A few months back, who could have understood where she'd find herself? Not only married to the God King of Hallandren, but in love with him as well.

Part of her still thought it amazing. He was the most important religious and secular figure in the whole of the inner sea area. He was the basis for worship of the Hallandren Iridescent Tones. He was a creature feared and hated by most people in Idris.

And he was dozing quietly at her side. A God of color and beauty, his body as perfectly sculpted a statue. And what was Siri? Not perfect, of that she was sure. And yet, somehow, she'd brought to him something that he needed. A hint of spontaneity. A breath from the outside, untamed by his priests or his reputation.

She sighed, head resting on his chest. There would be a price to be paid for their enjoyment of these last few nights. *We really are fools*, she thought idly. *We only have to avoid one thing: giving the priests a child. We're pointing ourselves straight toward danger.*

She found it hard to berate herself too soundly. She suspected that her act wouldn't have fooled the priests for much longer. They would grow suspicious, or at least frustrated, if she continued to go without producing an heir. She could see them interfering more if faced with more stalling.

Whatever she and Susebron did to change events, they would have to do it quickly.

He stirred beside her, and she twisted, looking at his face as he opened his eyes. He regarded her for a few minutes, stroking with her hair. It was amazing how quickly they had become comfortable in their intimacy.

He reached for his writing board. *I love you.*

She smiled. It was always the first thing he wrote in the mornings. "And I love you," she said.

However, he continued, *we are probably in trouble, aren't we?*

"Yes."

How long? he asked. *Until it's obvious that you will bear a child, I mean?*

"I'm not sure," she said, frowning. "I don't have much experience with this, obviously. I know that some of the women back in Idris complained of not being able to have children as quickly as they wanted, so maybe it doesn't always happen immediately. I know other women who bore children almost exactly nine months after their wedding night."

Susebron looked thoughtful.

A year from now, I could be a mother, Siri thought. She found the concept daunting. Up until a short time ago, she hadn't really thought of herself as an adult. *Of course*, she thought, feeling a bit sick, *according to what we've been told, any children I bear the God King would be stillborn anyway*. Even if that was a lie, then her child would be in danger. She still suspected that the priests would spirit it away, then replace it with a Returned. Chances were that in such a case, Siri would be made to disappear as well.

Bluefingers tried to warn me, she thought. He spoke of danger, not only to Susebron, but to myself.

Susebron was writing. *I've made a decision*, he wrote.

Siri raised an eyebrow.

I want to try making myself known to the people, he wrote, *and the other gods. I want to take control of my kingdom for myself.*

"I thought we decided that would be too dangerous."

It will be, he wrote. *But I'm beginning to think that it is a risk we must take.*

"And your objections from before?" she asked. "You can't shout out the truth, and your guards are likely to rush you away if you try something like escaping."

Yes, Susebron wrote, *but you have far fewer guards, and you can yell.*

Siri paused. "Yes," she said. "But would anyone believe me? What would they think if I just started screaming about how the God King is being held prisoner by his own priests?"

Susebron cocked his head.

"Trust me," she said. "They'd think that I was crazy."

What if you gained the confidence of the Returned you often speak about? he wrote. *Lightsong the Bold.*

Siri gave that some thought.

You could go to him, Susebron wrote. *Tell him the truth. Perhaps he will lead you to other Returned he thinks might listen. The priests will not be able to silence us all.*

Siri lay beside him for a moment, head still resting on his chest. "It sounds possible, Seb, but foolhardy. Why not just run? My serving women are from Pahn Kahl now. Bluefingers has said that he will try to get us out, if I ask. We can flee to Idris."

If we flee, Hallandren troops will follow, Siri. We would not be safe in Idris.

"We could go somewhere else, then."

He shook his head. *Siri, I have been listening to the arguments in the court of judgment. There will soon be war between our kingdoms. If we run, we will be abandoning Idris to invasion.*

"The invasion will happen if we stay, too."

Not if I take control of my throne, Susebron wrote. *The people of Hallandren, even the Gods, are obligated to obey my will. There will be no war if they know I disapprove.* He erased, then continued, writing faster. *I have told the priests that I do not wish to go to war, and they appeared sympathetic. However, they have done nothing.*

"They are probably worried," Siri said. "If they let you start making policy, then you may begin to think that you don't need them."

They are right, he wrote, smiling. *I need to become the leader of my people, Siri. That is the only way to protect your beautiful hills and the family you love so much.*

Siri fell silent, offering no further objections. To do as he was saying would be to play their hand. Make a gamble for everything. If they failed, the priests would undoubtedly figure out that Siri and Susebron were in communication. That would spell the end of their time alone together.

Susebron obviously noticed her concern. *It is dangerous, but it is the best option. Fleeing would be just as risky, and it would leave us in far worse circumstances. In Idris, we would be seen*

as the reason the Hallandren armies had come, and do you really think that we could survive in another country?

Siri slowly shook her head. They'd have no money and would make perfect subjects for ransom. They'd escape the priests only to find themselves being held captive to be used against Hallandren. The Kingdom of Iridescence was still widely disliked because of the Manywar.

"We'd be taken captive, as you say," she acknowledged. "Plus, if we were in another country, I doubt we'd be able to get you a Breath every week. Without them, you'd die."

He looked hesitant.

"What?" she asked.

I would not die without Breath, he said. But that is not an argument for us to flee.

"You mean the stories of Returned needing Breath to live are lies?" Siri asked incredulously.

Not at all, he wrote quickly. We do need Breath—but you forget that I hold the wealth off Breath passed down for generations in my family. I heard my priests speak of this once. If it were necessary to move me, I could survive based on the extra Breaths I hold. Those over and above the Breath that makes me Returned. My body would simply feed off of those, absorbing one a week.

Siri sat back thoughtfully. That seemed to imply something about Breath that she couldn't quite figure out. Unfortunately, she just didn't have the experience to sort through it.

"All right," she said. "So we *could* go into hiding if we needed to."

I said this was not an argument for fleeing, Susebron wrote. My treasure of Breaths might keep me alive, but it would also make me a very precious target. Everyone will want those Breaths—even if I weren't the God King, I would be in danger.

That was very true. Siri nodded. "All right," she said. "No fleeing; that means exposing your captivity to the other gods. If we're really going to try this, I think we should do it soon. If I display any signs of being pregnant, I bet it will take the priests all of two heartbeats to sequester me away."

Susebron nodded. *There will be a general meeting of the court in a couple of days. I have heard my priests say that this will be an important meeting—it is rare that the gods are all called together to vote. That meeting will decide whether or not we march on Idris.*

Siri nodded nervously. "I'll sit with Lightsong," she said, "and plead for his help. If we go to several of the other Gods, perhaps they—in front of the crowds—can demand to know whether or not I am lying."

And I will open my mouth and reveal that I have no tongue, he wrote. Then let us see what the priests do. They will be forced to bow before the will of their own pantheon.

Siri nodded. "All right," she said. "Let's try it."

Chapter Forty-Nine

Vasher found her practicing again.

He hovered outside the window, lowered down from the roof via an Awakened rope which gripped him about the waist. Vivenna repeatedly Awakened a strip of cloth, unaware of Vasher. She Commanded the cloth to wiggle across the room, wrap around a cup, then bring that cup back without spilling.

She's learning so quickly, he thought. The Commands themselves were simple to say, but giving the right mental impulse was difficult. It was like learning to control a second body.

Even as she watched, she got it wrong. The cloth wiggled across the room, but climbed into cup instead of wrapping around it. It shook, making the cup fall over, then finally returned, leaving a soggy trail. Vivenna cursed and walked over to refill the cup. She never noticed Vasher hanging just outside. He wasn't surprised—he was currently a Drab, his excess Breath stored in his shirt.

She replaced the cup, and he pulled himself up as she walked back. Of course, the mechanics of how he moved about on the ropes were far more complicated than they seemed. His Command incorporated making the rope respond to taps of his finger along its length. Awakening was different from creating a Lifeless—Lifeless had brains and could interpret Commands and requests. The rope had none of that; it could only act on its original instructions.

With a few taps, he lowered himself back down, Vivenna's back to him again as she picked up another colored swatch to use as fuel when she Awakened her cup-fetching ribbon.

I like her, Nightblood said. I'm glad we didn't kill her.

Vasher didn't respond.

She's very pretty, don't you think? Nightblood asked.

You can't tell, Vasher replied.

I can tell, Nightblood said. I've decided that I can.

Vasher shook his head. Pretty or not, the woman should never have come to Hallandren. She'd given Denth a perfect tool. *Of course*, he admitted wryly, *Denth probably didn't need that tool*. Hallandren and Idris were close to snapping. Vasher had stayed away too long. He knew that. He also knew that there was no way he would have come back earlier.

Inside the room, Vivenna successfully managed to get the cloth to bring her cup, and she drank from it with a satisfied look that Vasher could just barely see from the side. He had the rope lower him to the ground. He ordered it to let go up above, then—once it had twisted down around his arm—he recovered his breath climbed the external steps to the room.

#

Vivenna turned as Vasher entered. She set down the cup, hurriedly stuffing the cloth in her pocket. *What does it matter if he sees me practicing?* she thought, flushing. *It's not like I have anything to hide.*

Practicing before him made her feel embarrassed. He was so stern, so unforgiving of faults. She didn't like him seeing her fail. "Well?" she asked.

He shook his head. “Both the house you were using and the safehouse in the slums are empty,” he said. “Denth is too clever to get caught like that. He must have figured that you would compromise his location.”

Vivenna ground her teeth in frustration, resting back against the wall. Like the other rooms they had stayed in, this one was simple. Their only possessions were a pair of bedrolls and their changes of clothing, all of which Vasher carried about in his duffle.

Denth lived far more luxuriously. He could afford to—he now held all of Lemks’ money. Clever bit, that, she thought. Giving me the money, making me feel like I was in charge. He knew all along that the gold was never out of his hands, just like I never was.

“I was hoping we’d be able to watch him,” she said. “Maybe get a jump on what he’s planning next.”

Vasher shrugged. “Didn’t work. No use crying about it. Come on. I think I can get us in to meet with some of the Idrian workers at one of the orchards, assuming we arrive during the lunch break.”

Vivenna frowned as he turned to go. “Vasher,” she said. “We can’t keep doing this.”

“This?”

“When I was with Denth, we met with crime lords and politicians. You and I are meeting with peasants on corners and in fields.”

“They’re good people!”

“I know they are,” Vivenna said quickly. “But, do you really think we’re making a difference? Compared to what Denth is probably doing, I mean?”

He frowned, but instead of arguing with her, he just pounded his fist against the side of the wall. “I know,” he said. “I’ve tried other leads, but the truth is that most everything I do seems a step behind Denth. I can kill his gangs of thieves, but he has more of them than I can find. I’ve tried to figure out who is behind the war—even followed leads in the Court of Gods itself—but everyone is growing more and more closed-lipped. They take the war as inevitable, now, and don’t want to be seen on the losing side of the argument.”

“What about priests?” Vivenna said. “They’re the ones who bring things to the attention of the gods? If we can get more of them to argue against the war, then maybe we can stop it.”

“Priests are fickle,” Vasher said with a shake of his head. “Most of those who argued against the war have caved in. Even Nanrovah switched sides on me.”

“Nanrovah?”

“High priest of Stillmark,” Vasher said. “I thought he was solid—he even met with me a few times to talk about his opposition of the war. Now he refuses to see me anymore and has switched sides. Colorless liar.”

Vivenna frowned. *Nanrovah*... “Vasher,” she said. “We did something to him.”

“What?”

“Denth and his team,” Vivenna said. “We helped a gang of thieves rob from a salt peddler. We used a couple of distractions to cover the burglary. We set a fire in a nearby building and overturned a carriage that was passing through the garden. It belonged to a high priest. I think his name was Nanrovah.”

Vasher cursed quietly.

“You think it might be connected?” she asked.

“Maybe. You know which thieves were actually doing the robbery?”

She shook her head.

"I'll be back," he said. "Wait here."

#

So, she did. She waited for hours. She tried practicing her Awakening, but she'd already spent most of the day working on that. She was mentally exhausted and found it difficult to concentrate. Eventually, she found herself staring out the window in annoyance. Denth had always let her go along on his information gathering forays.

That was just because he wanted to keep me close, she thought. Now that she looked back, there were obviously lots of things Denth had been hiding from her. Vasher just didn't care to placate her.

He wasn't stingy with information, though, when she asked. His answers were grumpy, but he did usually answer. She still mulled over their conversation about Awakening. Less because of what he'd said. More because of the way he'd said it.

She'd been wrong about him. She was almost certain of that now. She had to stop judging people. But... was that possible? Wasn't interaction based, in part, on judgments? A person's background and attitudes influenced how she responded to them.

The balance, then, must not be to stop judging. It was to be careful to not hold those judgments as immutable. She'd judged Denth to be a friend, but she shouldn't have ignored the way he talked about mercenaries having no friends.

The door slammed open. Vivenna jumped, putting a hand to her chest.

Vasher walked in. "Start reaching for that sword when you're startled," he said. "There's little reason to grab your shirt, unless you're planning to rip it off."

Vivenna flushed, hair twinging red. The sword he had bought her lay on the side of the room; they hadn't had much opportunity to practice, and she still barely even knew how to hold the thing. "Well?" she asked as he closed the door. It was already dark outside, and the city was beginning to sparkle with lights.

"The robbery was a cover," Vasher said. "The real hit was that carriage. Denth promised the thieves something valuable if they committed a robbery and started a fire, both as distractions to get at the carriage."

"Why?" Vivenna asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Coins?" Vivenna asked. "When Tonk Fah hit the horse, it knocked a chest off the top. It was filled with gold."

"What happened then?" Vasher asked.

"I left with some others. I thought the carriage itself was the distraction, and once it went down, I was supposed to pull out."

"Denth?"

"He wasn't there, come to think of it," Vivenna said. "The others told me he was working with the thieves."

Vasher nodded, walking over to his pack. He threw aside the bedrolls then took out several articles of clothing. He pulled off his shirt, exposing a well-muscled—and rather hairy—torso. Vivenna blinked in surprise, then flushed. She probably should have turned aside, but the curious part of her was too strong. What was he doing?

He didn't remove his trousers, thankfully, but instead threw on a different shirt. The sleeves of this one were cut into long ribbons near the wrists.

"Upon call," he said, "become my fingers and grip that which I must."

The cuff tassels wiggled.

"Wait," Vivenna said. "What was that? A Command?"

"Too complicated for you," he said, kneeling and undoing the cuff of his trousers. She could see that here, too, there were extra lengths of cloth. "Become as my legs and give them strength," he Commanded.

The leg-tassels crossed under his feet, growing tight. Vivenna didn't argue with his insistence that the Commands were 'too complicated'. She just memorized them anyway.

Finally, Vasher threw on his tattered cloak, which was ripped in places. "Protect me," he commanded, and she could see almost all of his remaining breath drain into the cloak. He wrapped his rope belt around his waist—it was thin, for a rope, and strong, and she knew its purpose was not to keep his trousers up.

Finally, he picked up Nightblood. "You coming?"

"Where?"

"We're going to go capture a few of those thieves. Ask them exactly what Denth wanted with that carriage."

Vivenna felt a stab of fear. "Why invite me? Won't I just make it harder for you?"

"Depends," he said. "If we get into a fight, and you get in the way, then it will be more difficult. If we get into a fight and half of them attack you instead of me, it will make things more easy."

"Assuming you don't defend me."

"That's a good assumption," he said, looking into her eyes. "If you want to come, come. But don't expect me to protect you, and—whatever you do—don't try and follow on your own."

"I wouldn't do such a thing," she said.

He shrugged. "I thought I'd make the offer. You're no prisoner here, Princess. You can do whatever you want. Just don't get in my way when you do it, understand?"

"I understand," she said, feeling a chill as she made her decision. "And I'm coming."

He didn't try to dissuade her. He simply pointed at her sword. "Keep that on."

She nodded, tying it on.

"Draw it," he said.

She did so, and he corrected her grip.

"What good will holding it properly do?" she asked. "I still don't know how to use it."

"Look threatening and it might make someone attacking you pause. Make them hesitate for a couple seconds in a fight, and that could mean a lot."

She nodded nervously, sliding the weapon back in its sheath. Then she grabbed several lengths of rope. "Hold when thrown," she said to the smaller one, then stuffed it into her pocket.

Denth eyed her.

"Better to lose the Breath than get killed," she said.

“Few Awakeners agree with you,” he noted. “To most of them, the thought of losing Breath is far more frightening than the prospect of death.”

“Well, I’m not like most Awakeners,” she said. “Half of me still finds the process blasphemous.”

He nodded. “Put the rest of your Breath somewhere else,” he said, opening the door. “We can’t afford to draw attention.”

She grimaced, then did as told, putting her Breath into her shirt with a basic, and non-active, Command. It was actually the same as giving a half-spoken Command, or one that was mumbled, actually. Those would draw out the Breath, but leave the item unable to act.

As soon as she placed the Breath, the dullness returned. Everything seemed... dead around her.

“Let’s go,” Denth said, moving out into the darkness.

Night in T’Telir was very different from her homeland. There, it had been possible to see so many stars overhead that it looked like a bucket of white sand had been sprayed into the air. Here, there were street lamps, were taverns, restaurants, and houses of entertainment. The result was a city full of lights—a little like the stars themselves had come down to inspect grand T’Telir. Even still, Vivenna was saddened by how few stars she could see from inside the city.

None of that meant that the places they were going were—by any means—bright. Vasher led her through the streets, and he quickly became little more than a hulking shadow. They left behind places with street lights, and even lit windows, moving into an unfamiliar slum. This was one of those she’d been afraid to enter, even when living on the streets. The night seemed to grow even darker as they entered and walked down one of the twisting, dark alleys that passed for streets in such places. They remained silent. Vivenna knew not to speak and draw attention.

Eventually, Vasher pulled to a stop. He pointed toward a building: single story, flat-topped, and wide. It sat alone, in a depression, shanties built from refuse covering the ground running up the slight hill behind it. Vasher waved for her to stay back, then quietly put the rest of his Breath into a rope and crept forward up the hill.

Vivenna waited, nervous, kneeling beside a decaying shanty that looked to have been built from half-crumbling bricks. *Why did I come?* she thought. *He didn’t tell me to—he simply said that I could. I could just as easily have stayed behind.*

But she was tired of having things happen *to* her. She had been the one to point out that maybe there was a connection between the priest and Denth’s plan. She wanted to see this to the end. Do something.

That had been easy to think back in the lit room. It didn’t help her nerves that, looming to the left side of the shanty, stood one of the D’Denir statues. There had been some of them in the Highland slums as well, though most of them had been defaced or broken.

She couldn’t feel anything with her life sense. Without her Breath, she felt almost as if she’d been made blind. Losing it brought her memories of nights sleeping in the mud of a cold alleyway. Beatings administered by urchins half her size but with twice her competency. Hunger. Terrible, omnipresent, depressing and draining hunger.

A footstep cracked and a shadow loomed. She nearly gasped in shock, but managed to keep it in as she recognized Nightblood in the figure’s hand.

“Two guards,” Vasher said. “Both silenced.”

“Will they work for answering our questions?”

Vasher shook a silhouetted head. “Practically kids. We need someone more important. We’ll have to go in. Either that, or sit and watch for a few days to determine who is in charge, then grab him when he’s alone.”

“That would take too long,” Vivenna whispered.

“I agree,” he said. “I can’t use the sword, though. When Nightblood is done with a group, there’s never anyone to question.”

Vivenna shivered.

“Come on,” he whispered. She followed as quietly as she could, moving for the front door. Vasher grabbed her arm and shook his head. She followed him around to the side, barely noticing the two lumps of unconscious bodies stuffed into a ditch. At the back of the building, Vasher began to feel around on the ground. After a few moments without success, he cursed quietly and pulled something from his pocket. A handful of straw.

In just a few seconds, he had constructed three little men from of the straw, using Breath reclaimed from his cloak to give them life. He gave each one the same command “Find Tunnels.”

Vivenna watched with fascination. *That’s far more abstract a Command than he led me to believe was possible*, she thought as the little men scuttled around on the ground. Vasher himself returned to his searching. *But... it seems that experience—and ability to use mental images—is the most important aspect of Awakening.*

He’s been doing this a long time, and the way he spoke before—like a scholar—indicates he’s studied Awakening very seriously.

One of the straw men began to jump up and down. The other two rushed over to it and then they began to bounce as well. Vasher joined them, as did Vivenna, and she watched as he uncovered a trap door hidden with a thick layer of dirt on it. He raised it a tad, then reached underneath. His hand came back out with several small bells, which had apparently been rigged there to ring if the door were opened all the way.

“No group like this has a hideout without bolt holes,” Vasher said. “Usually a couple of them. Always trapped.”

Vivenna watched as he recovered the Breath from the straw men, quietly apologizing to each one. She frowned at the curious words. They were just piles of straw. Why apologize?

He put the Breath back into his cloak with a protection Command then led the way down through the trap door. Vivenna followed, stepping softly, skipping a particular step when Vasher indicated. The bottom was a cellar-like tunnel—or, so she got from feeling along the sides of the lightless earthen chamber.

Vasher moved forward; she could only tell because of his rustling clothing. She followed and was curious to see light ahead. She could also hear voices. Men talking, and laughing.

Soon she could see Vasher’s silhouette; she moved up next to him, peeking into an earthen room. There was a fire burning at the center, the smoke twisting up through a hole in the ceiling. The upper chamber—the building itself—was probably just a front, for the chamber down here looked very lived-in. There were piles of cloth, bed rolls, pots and pans. All of it as dirty as the men who sat around the fire, laughing.

Vasher gestured to the side. There was another tunnel. Vivenna’s heart jumped in shock as Vasher crept into the room and toward the tunnel. She glanced at the fire. The men were very focused on their drinking, and were blinded by the light. They didn’t seem to notice Vasher.

She took a deep breath, then followed, feeling exposed with the firelight to her back. Vasher didn’t go very far, however, before stopping. Vivenna nearly collided with him. He stood there for

a few moments; finally, Vivenna poked him in the back, trying to get him to move aside so that she could see what he was doing. He shuffled letting her see what was before him.

This tunnel ended abruptly—apparently, it was less of a tunnel, and more of a nook. Nestled against the back of the nook was a cage, about as tall as Vivenna's waist. Inside the cage was a child.

Vivenna gasped softly, pushing past Vasher and kneeling down beside the cage. The valuable thing in the carriage, she thought, making the connection. It wasn't the coins. It was the priest's daughter. The perfect bargaining chip if you wanted to blackmail someone into changing their position at court.

As Vivenna knelt, the girl pulled back in the cage, sniffing quietly and quivering. The cage stank of human waste, and the child was covered in grime. All except for her cheeks, which had been washed clean by tears.

Vivenna looked up at Vasher. His eyes were shadowed, his back to the fire, but she could see him gritting his teeth. She could see tension in his muscles. He turned his head to the side, half-lighting his face by the illumination of the red fire.

In that single lit eye, Vivenna saw fury.

"Hey!" one of the thieves called.

"Get the child out," Vasher said in a harsh whisper.

"How did you get here!" another man yelled.

Vasher met her eyes with his single illuminated one, and she felt herself shrink before him. She nodded, and Vasher turned away from her, one hand clenching into a fist, the other grabbing Nightblood in a hard-knuckled grip. He stepped slowly, deliberately, as he approached the men, his cloak rustling. Vivenna intended to do as asked, but she found it hard to look away from him.

Men drew blades. Vasher moved suddenly.

Nightblood, still sheathed, took one man in the chest, and Vivenna heard bones snap. Another man attacked, and Vasher spun, whipping out a hand. The tassels on his sleeve moved on their own, wrapping around the blade of the thief's sword, catching it. Vasher's momentum ripped the blade free, and he tossed it aside, the tassels releasing it.

The sword hit the dirt of the cellar floor; Vasher's hand snapped up, grabbing the thief by the face. The tassels wrapped like too-limber fingers around the man's head, latching on like a squid's tentacles. Vasher slammed then man down into the ground—kneeling to give momentum—even as he rammed the sheathed Nightblood into another man's legs, dropping him. A third tried to cut Vasher from behind, and Vivenna cried a warning. Vasher's cloak, however, suddenly whipped out—moving on its own—and grabbed the surprised man by the arms.

Vasher turned, anger in his face, and swung Nightblood toward the captured man. Vivenna cringed at the sound of the cracking bones, and she turned away from the fight as the screaming continued. With shaking fingers, she tried to open the cage.

It was locked, of course. She drew out some Breath from a rope, then tried to Awaken the lock, but nothing happened.

Metal, she thought. Of course. It hasn't been alive, so it can't be Awakened.

Instead she pulled a thread free from her shirt, trying to ignore the cries of pain from behind. Vasher began to bellow as he fought, losing any semblance of being a cold, professional killer. This was a man enraged.

She raised the thread.

“Unlock things,” she Commanded.

The thread wiggled a bit, but when she stuck it into the lock, nothing happened.

She withdrew the Breath, took a few calming breaths of her own, then closed her eyes.

Have to get the intention right. Need it to go inside, twist the tumbler free.

“Twist things,” she said, feeling the Breath leave her. She stuck the thread into the lock. It spun about, and she heard a click. The door opened. The sounds of fighting from behind stopped, though men continued to moan.

Vivenna recovered her Breath then reached into the cage. The girl cringed, crying out and hiding her face.

“I’m a friend,” Vivenna said soothingly. “Please, I’m here to help you.” But the girl wiggled, screaming when touched. Frustrated, Vivenna turned back toward Vasher.

He stood beside the fire, head bowed, bodies strewn around him. He held Nightblood in one hand, sheathed tip resting back against the dirty floor.

Vasher’s other hand was on Nightblood’s hilt. The sheath clasp was undone, and black smoke crept out, off of the blade, some pouring toward the ground, some floating up toward the ceiling. As if it couldn’t decide.

Vasher’s arm was quivering.

Draw... me... a distant voice seemed to say in Vivenna’s head. *Kill them...*

Many of the men still twitched on the ground. Vasher began to slide the blade free. It was dark black, and it seemed to suck in the firelight.

This isn’t good, she thought. “Vasher!” she yelled. “Vasher, the girl won’t come to me!”

He froze, then glanced at her, eyes glazed over.

“You defeated them, Vasher. No need to draw the sword.”

Yes... yes there is...

He blinked, then saw her. He snapped Nightblood back into place, shaking his head and rushing toward her. He kicked a body as he passed, earning a grunt.

“Colorless monsters,” he whispered, looking into the cage. He reached out his hands. And, oddly, the child immediately went to him, grabbing his chest and weeping. Vivenna watched with shock. Vasher picked the child up, tears in his own eyes.

“You know her?” Vivenna asked.

He shook his head. “I’ve met Nanrovah, and knew he had young children, but I never met any of them.”

“Then how? Why did she come to *you*?”

He didn’t answer. “Come on,” he said. “I attacked the ones who came running down when they heard screams. But more might return.”

He looked like he almost wished that would happen. He turned toward the exit tunnel, and Vivenna followed.

#

They immediately moved toward one of the rich neighborhoods of T’Telir. Vasher didn’t say much as they walked, and the girl was even more unresponsive. Vivenna worried for the child’s mind. She had obviously had a rough couple of months.

They passed from shanties, to tenements, to fine homes on tree-lined streets. As they reached the mansions, Vasher paused on the street, setting the girl down. “Child,” he said. “I’m going to say some words to you. I want you to repeat them. Repeat them, and *mean* them.”

The girl regarded him absently, nodding slightly.

He glanced at Vivenna. “Back away.”

She opened her mouth to object, but thought better of it. She stepped back out of earshot. Fortunately, Vasher was near a lit street lamp, so she could see him well. He spoke to the little girl, and she spoke back to him.

After opening the cage, Vivenna had taken the Breath back from the thread. She hadn’t stowed it somewhere else. And, with the awareness she had, she thought she saw something. The girl’s BioChromatic aura—the normal one that all people had—flickered just slightly.

It was faint. Yet with the First Heightening, Vivenna could have sworn she saw it.

But, Denth told me it was all or nothing, she thought. You have to give away all the Breath you hold. And you certainly can’t give away part of a breath.

Vasher stood, the girl climbing back into his arms. Vivenna walked up and was surprised to hear the girl talking. “Where’s daddy?” she asked.

Vasher didn’t reply.

“I’m dirty,” the girl said, looking down. “Mommy doesn’t like it when I get dirty. The dress is dirty too.”

Vasher began walking. Vivenna hurriedly caught up.

“Are we going home?” the girl asked. “Where have we been? It’s late, and I shouldn’t be out. Who’s that woman?”

She doesn’t remember, Vivenna realized. Doesn’t remember where she’s been... probably doesn’t remember anything of the entire experience.

Vivenna looked again at Vasher, walking with his ragged beard, eyes forward, child in one arm, Nightblood in the other. He walked right up to a mansion’s gates then kicked them open. He moved onto the mansion grounds, and Vivenna following more nervously.

A pair of guard dogs began barking. They howled and growled, getting closer. Vivenna cringed. Yet, as soon as they saw Vasher, they grew quiet, then trailed along happily, one hopping up and trying to lick his hands.

What in the name of the Colors is going on?

Some people were gathering at the front of the mansion, holding lanterns, trying to see what had caused the barking. One saw Vasher, said something to the others, then disappeared back inside. By the time Vivenna and Vasher had reached the front patio, a man had appeared at the front doors. He wore a white nightgown and was guarded by a couple of soldiers. They stepped forward to block Vasher, but the man in the nightgown rushed between them, crying out. He wept as he took the child from Vasher’s arms.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

Vivenna stood quietly, staying back. The dogs continued to lick Vasher’s hands, though they noticeably stayed away from Nightblood.

The man clutched his child before finally surrendering her to a woman who had just arrived—the child’s mother, Vivenna assumed. The woman cried in joy, taking the girl.

“Why have you returned her,” the man said, looking at Vasher.

“Those who took her have been punished,” Vasher said in his quiet, gruff voice. “That’s all that needs matter to you right now.”

The man squinted. “Do I know you, stranger?”

“We’ve met,” Vasher said. “I asked you to argue against the war.”

“That’s right!” the man said. “You didn’t need to encourage me. But when they took Misel away from me... I had to stay quiet about what had happened, had to change my arguments, or they said they’d kill her.”

Vasher turned away, moving to walk back down the path. “Take your child, keep her safe.” He paused, turning back. “And make certain this kingdom doesn’t send its Lifeless to a slaughter.”

The man nodded, still weeping. “Yes, yes. Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Vasher continued walking. Vivenna rushed after him, eyeing the dogs. “How did you make them stop barking?”

He didn’t respond.

She glanced back at the mansion.

“You have redeemed yourself,” he said quietly, passing the dark gates.

“What?”

“Kidnapping that girl is something Denth would have done, even if you hadn’t come to T’Telir,” Vasher said. “I would ever have found her. Denth worked with too many different groups of thieves, and I thought that burglary was simply intended to disrupt supplies. Like everyone else, I ignored the carriage.”

He stopped then looked at Vivenna in the darkness. “You saved that girl’s life.”

“By happenstance,” she said. She couldn’t see her hair in the dark, but she could feel it going red.

“Regardless.”

Vivenna smiled, the compliment affecting her—for some reason—far more than it should have. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I lost my temper,” he said. “Back in that lair. A warrior is supposed to be calm. When you duel or fight, you can’t let anger control you. That’s why I’ve never been that good of a duelist.”

“You did the job,” she said, “and Denth has lost another pawn.” They moved out onto the street. “Though,” she added, “I wish I hadn’t seen that lavish mansion. Doesn’t help my opinion of the Hallandren priests.”

Vasher snorted. “Nanrovah’s father was one of the most wealthy merchants in the city. The son dedicated himself to serving the gods out of thankfulness for their blessings. He takes no pay for his service.”

Vivenna paused. “Oh.”

Vasher shrugged in the darkness. “Priests are always easy to blame. They make convenient scapegoats—after all, anyone with a strong faith different from your own must either be a crazy zealot or a lying manipulator.”

Vivenna flushed yet again.

Vasher stopped in the street, then turned to her. “I’m... sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to say it that way.” He cursed, turning and walking again. “I told you I’m no good at this.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m getting used to it.”

He nodded in the darkness, seeming distracted.

He is a good man, she thought. *Or, at least, an earnest man trying to be a good.* A part of her felt foolish for making yet another judgment.

Yet, she knew she couldn’t live—couldn’t interact—without making some judgments. So she judged Vasher. Not as she’d judged Denth, who had said amusing things and given her what she’d wanted to see. She judged Vasher by what she had seen him do. Cry when he saw a child being held captive. Return that child to her father, his only reward an opportunity to make a rough plea for peace. Living with barely any money, dedicating himself to preventing a war.

He was rough. He was brutal. He had a terrible temper. But he was a good man. And, walking beside him, she felt safe for the first time in weeks.

Chapter Fifty

“And so we each have twenty-thousand,” Blushweaver said, walking beside Lightsong on the stone pathway that led in a circle around the arena.

“Yes,” Lightsong said.

Their priests, attendants, and servants followed in a herd, though the two Gods had refused pavilion or shade. They walked solitarily, side by side. Lightsong in gold and red. Blushweaver, for once, wearing a gown that actually covered her up.

Amazing, how good she looks in one of those, he found himself thinking, *when she takes the time to respect herself.* He wasn’t certain what made him dislike revealing outfits. Perhaps he’d been a prude in his former life.

Or perhaps he simply was one now. He smiled ruefully to himself. How much can I really blame on my ‘old’ self? That man is dead. He wasn’t the one who got himself involved in the politics of the kingdom.

The arena was filling, and—in a rare show—it appeared that all of the Gods would be in attendance. Only Weatherlove was late, but he was often a little bit behind.

Important events come, Lightsong thought. *They have been building for years now. Why should I be at the center of them?* So many of the gods nodded in respect as he passed their pavilions—though, admittedly, a few scowled at him, and a few just ignored him.

What a strange method of rule. Immortals who only last a decade or two—and who have never seen the outside world. And the people trust us.

The people trust us.

“I think we should share the Command phrases with each other, Lightsong,” Blushweaver said. “So that we each have all four, just in case.”

He didn’t say anything.

She turned away from him, looking at the people in their colorful clothing, clogging the benches and seats. “My, my,” Blushweaver said, “quite the crowd. And so few of them paying attention to me. Quite rude of them, wouldn’t you say?”

Lightsong shrugged.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said. “You think that ignoring me is high praise.”

Lightsong paused, then smiled faintly, remembering their conversation a few months back. The day this had all started. He had claimed—in his usual flippant way—that by ignoring her, he gave her the respect she deserved.

Blushweaver looked at him, a longing in her eyes.

“Indeed,” Lightsong said. “Or, at least, that was once my opinion. I have come to revise it.”

Blushweaver smiled. “You have, have you?”

“Yes, I have,” Lightsong said. “You see, to ignore you is to invite your attention. That, in turn, allows you to act indignant, which we all know is when you are in best form. And yet, the act

is spoiled by intention. Only truly, *sincerely* ignoring you would provide compliment. I am, unfortunately, unable to ignore you in such a benevolent manner. I do apologize.”

“Oh?” Blushweaver said. “You seem very good at ignoring *some* things. Your own divinity. General good manners. My feminine wiles.”

“You’re hardly wily, my dear,” Lightsong said. “A wily man is one who fights with a small, carefully hidden dagger. You are more like a man who fights with a boulder the size of three palace stones. Regardless, I do have another method of dealing with you, one that you shall likely find quite flattering.”

“Somehow I find myself doubting.”

“You should show more faith in me,” he said with a flippant wave of the hand. “I am, after all, a god. In my divine wisdom, I have realized that the only way to truly compliment one such as you—Blushweaver—is to be far more attractive, intelligent, and interesting than you.”

She snorted. “Well, then, I feel rather insulted by *your* presence.”

“Touché,” Lightsong said.

“Are you going to explain *why* you consider showing me up to be the most sincere form of compliment?”

“Of course I am,” Lightsong said. “My dear, have you ever known me to make an inflammatorily ridiculous statement without providing an equally ridiculous explanation to back it up?”

“Of course not,” she agreed. “You are nothing if not exhaustive in your self-congratulatory made-up logic.”

“I’m rather humble that way.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Anyway,” Lightsong said, holding up a finger, “by being far more stunning than you are, I invite people to ignore you and pay attention to me. That, in turn, invites *you* to act your usual charming self—throwing fits and being seductive—to draw the attention back to you. And that, as I explained, is when you are most majestic. Therefore, the only way to make certain you receive the attention you deserve is to draw it all away from you. It really is *quite* a difficult task. I hope you appreciate the work I do to be so wonderful.”

Let me assure you,” she said, “I do. In fact, I appreciate it so very much that I would like to give you a break. You can back down. I will take the awful burden of being the most wonderful of the gods.”

“I couldn’t possibly let you.”

“But if you are *too* wonderful, my dear, you will completely destroy your image.”

“It’s getting a little tiresome anyway,” Lightsong said. “I’ve long sought to be the laziest of the gods, but I’m realizing more and more that such a task is beyond me. The others are all so much more delightfully useless than I am. They just pretend to not be aware of it.”

Blushweaver glanced at him, obviously sensing the hint of bitterness in his voice. They stopped on the walkway, Blushweaver facing him, her back to the arena floor. Lightsong feigned a smile, but the moment was dying. They couldn’t continue as they had. Not amidst the weights that moved around them.

“They aren’t as bad as you imply,” she said quietly.

“Only a group of idiots beyond imagining would give *me* control of their armies.”

“They trust you.”

“They’re lazy,” Lightsong said. “They want others to make the difficult decisions. That’s what this system encourages, Blushweaver. We’re all locked in here, told to spend our time in idleness and pleasure. And then we’re expected to know what is best for our country?” He shook his head. “We’re more afraid of the outside than we’re willing to admit. All we have are paintings and dreams. That’s why you and I ended up with these armies. Nobody wanted to be the one who actually sent our troops out to kill. They all want to be involved, but nobody wants to be responsible.”

He fell silent. She looked up at him, a goddess of perfect form. So much stronger than the others, but she hid it behind her own veil of ridiculousness. “I know one thing that you said is true,” she said quietly.

“And that is?”

“You are wonderful, Lightsong.”

He stood there, looking into her eyes for a time. Wide, beautiful eyes.

“You’re not going to give me your Command Phrases, are you?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I brought you into this,” she said. “You always talk about being useless, but we all know that you’re one of the few who always goes through every picture in his gallery. The one who listens most attentively to his Petitioners.”

“They are fools,” he said. “There is nothing in me to respect.”

“No,” She said. “You’re the one who makes us laugh, even while you insult us. Can’t you see what *that* does? Can’t you see how you’ve inadvertently set yourself above everyone else? You didn’t do it intentionally, Lightsong, and that’s what makes it work so well. In a city of frivolity, you’re the only one who’s shown any measure of wisdom. In my opinion, that’s why you hold the armies.”

He didn’t reply.

“I knew the others respected you,” she said. “But I thought that I’d be able to influence you.”

“You can,” he said. “As you’ve said, it’s your fault that I’m involved in all of this.”

She shook her head, still staring into his eyes. “I can’t decide which feeling for you is stronger, Lightsong. My love or my frustration.”

He took her hand, then kissed it. “I accept them both, Blushweaver. With honor.” And with that, he turned from her, drawing his servants away as he approached his box. Weatherlove had arrived; that only left the God King and his bride. Lightsong sat down, wondering where Siri was. She usually got to the arena long before it was time to begin.

He found it difficult to focus his attention on the young queen. Blushweaver still stood on the walkway where he had left her. She was watching him.

Finally, she turned, trailed by her servants as she made her way to her own pavilion.

#

Siri walked through the palace corridors, surrounded by her serving women in brown, a dozen worries going through her head.

First, go to Lightsong, she told herself, going over the plan. It won’t look odd for me to sit with him—we often spend time together at these things.

I wait for Susebron to arrive. Then I ask Lightsong we can talk in private, without our servants or his priests. I explain what I have discovered about the God King. I tell him about the way Susebron is being kept captive. Then we see what he does.

Her biggest fear was that Lightsong would already know, somehow. Could he be part of the entire conspiracy? She trusted him as much as she trusted anyone except Susebron, but her nerves had a way of making her question everything and everyone.

She passed through room after room, each one draped in a theme of colors. She almost didn't notice how bright those were anymore.

Assuming Lightsong agrees to help, she thought, I wait for intermission. Once the priests step off the sand, Lightsong goes and speaks with several other gods. They each go to their priests and instruct them to begin a discussion in the arena about whether the God King is capable of speaking. They force the God King's priests to let him make his defense.

She didn't like trusting the priests, but this did seem like the best way to voice the problem to the people. Plus, if the priests didn't do as instructed, Lightsong and the others would realize that they were being undermined by their own servants. Either way, Siri realized she was getting into very dangerous territory.

I started in dangerous territory, she thought, leaving the rooms of the palace and entering the dark outer hallway. *The man I love is threatened with death, and any children I bear will be taken from me.* She either had to act or let the priests continue to push her about. Susebron and she were in agreement. The best plan was—

Siri slowed. At the end of the hallway, a small group of priests stood with several Lifeless soldiers. They were silhouetted by the evening light outside. The priests turned toward her, and one pointed.

Colors! Siri thought, spinning. Another group of priests was approaching up the back hallway. *No! Not now!*

The two groups of priests closed. Siri considered running, but where? Dashing in her long dress—pushing through servants and Lifeless—seemed ridiculous to her. She raised her chin—eying the priests with a flat stare—and kept her hair completely under control. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded.

“We're terribly sorry, Vessel,” the lead priest said. “But it has been decided that you shouldn't be exerting yourself while in your condition.”

“My condition?” Siri asked icily. “What foolishness is this?”

“The child, Vessel,” the priest said. “We can't risk danger to it. There are many who would try to harm you, should they know that you are carrying.”

Siri froze. Child? she thought with shock. How could they know that Susebron and I have actually started...

But no. She would know if she were with child, she was sure. However, she'd supposedly been sleeping with the God King for months now. That was just enough time for a pregnancy to be discovered. It would sound plausible to the people of the city.

Fool! She thought to herself in a sudden panic. Assuming they've already found their replacement God King, I don't actually need me to bear them a child. They just have to make everyone think I was pregnant!

“There is no child,” she said. “You were just waiting—you just had to stall until you had an excuse to lock me away.”

“Please, Vessel,” one of the priests said, gesturing for a Lifeless to take her arm. She didn’t struggle; she forced herself to remain calm, staring the priest in the eyes.

He looked away. “This will be for the best,” he said. “It’s for your own good.”

“I’m sure it is,” she snapped, but allowed herself to be led back to her rooms.

#

Vivenna sat among the crowds, watching and waiting. Part of her felt foolish at coming out into the open so flagrantly. However, that part of her—the cautious princess raised in Idris—was growing more and more quiet.

Denth’s people had found her when she’d been hiding in the slums. She’d probably be safer in the crowds with Vasher than she ever was in alleyways. Particularly considering how well she blended in. She hadn’t realized how natural it could feel to sit in trousers and a tunic, colored brightly, completely ignored.

Vasher appeared at the railing above the benches. She carefully slipped out of her seat—someone else took it immediately—and walked toward him. The priests had already begun their arguments down below. Nanrovah, his daughter restored to him, had started by announcing his changed mind. He currently was leading the discussion against war.

He had very little support.

Vivenna joined Vasher beside the railing, and he quite unapologetically elbowed some room out for her. He didn’t carry Nightblood—at her insistence, he had left the sword behind with her own dueling blade.

“Well?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head. “If Denth is here, I couldn’t find him.”

“No surprise, considering the size of that crowd,” Vivenna said quietly. There were bodies all around them—many lining the railing. “Where did they all come from?” Vivenna asked. “This is far more busy than the other court sessions.”

He shrugged. “People who are given a one time visit to the court can hold their token of entry until they want to use it. A lot of them use those at a general court session, rather than one of the smaller meetings.”

Vivenna turned back to look over the crowd. She suspected it also had to do with the rumors she’d heard. People thought that this session would be the one where the Pantheon of Returned finally declared war on Idris.

“Nanrovah argues well,” she said. She was having trouble hearing him because of the crowds—the Returned apparently had messengers relaying transcripts. She wondered why someone just didn’t order all the people to be quiet. That didn’t seem to be the Hallandren way. They liked chaos. Or, at least, they liked the opportunity to sit and chat about things while important events were occurring.

“Nanrovah is being ignored,” Vasher said. “He’s changed his mind twice now on the same issue. He lacks credibility.”

“He should explain why he changed his mind, then.”

“That could hurt his position. If the people knew his child had been kidnapped, it would make them more afraid. Plus there’s that stubborn Hallandren pride. Priests are particularly bad. Mentioning that his daughter had been taken, and that he had been pressured into changing his politics...”

“I thought you liked the priests,” she said.

“Some of them,” he said. “Not others.” When he said that, he eyed the God King’s pedestal. Susebron had yet to arrive and they had apparently started without him.

Siri wasn’t there either. That annoyed Vivenna, since she’d been anticipating checking in on the girl, if only from a distance.

I’ll help you, Siri. For real this time. The first step has to be stopping this war.

Vasher looked back at the floor of the arena, leaning on the railing, looking anxious.

“What?” she asked.

He shrugged.

She rolled her eyes. “Tell me.”

“I just don’t like leaving Nightblood alone for too long,” he said.

“What’s it going to do?” Vivenna asked. “We locked it in the closet.”

He shrugged again.

“Honestly,” she said. “You would think that you’d realize that bringing a five foot long black sword into public would be a little conspicuous. It doesn’t help, mind you, that said sword bleeds smoke and can talk in people’s minds.”

“I don’t mind being conspicuous.”

“I do,” she replied.

Vasher grimaced, and she thought he’d argue some more, but he finally just nodded. “You’re right, of course,” he said. “I’ve just never been all that good at being unobtrusive. Denth used to make fun of me for that too.”

Vivenna frowned. “You were friends, then?”

Vasher turned away and fell silent.

Great, she thought. One of these days, someone in this Colors-cursed city is going to tell me the whole truth. I’ll probably die of shock.

“I’m going to go see why the God King is taking so long,” Vasher said, leaving the railing. “I’ll be back.”

She nodded, and he was gone. She leaned down, partially wishing she hadn’t relinquished her seat. Once, she would have felt stifled by the large group of people, with their shifting bodies and chattering voices. She’d grown used to the busy market streets, and so being surrounded by people wasn’t as intimidating to her as it once had been. In addition, there was her Breath. She’d put some of it into her shirt, but she’d left a portion—she needed to be of at least the First Heightening to pass the gates into the Court without being questioned.

Her Breath let her feel life like a regular person felt the air. It was always there, cool against her skin. Having so many people in close proximity left her feeling just a little intoxicated. So much life, so many hopes and desires. So much Breath. She closed her eyes, enjoying it, listening to the arguments of the priests down below rise over the crowd.

She felt Vasher approach before he arrived. Not only did he have a lot of Breath, but he was watching her. And she felt a slight familiarity to those eyes. She turned, picking him out of the crowd. He stood out far more than she did, in his darker, ragged clothing.

“Congratulations,” he said as he approached, taking her arm.

“Why?”

“You’ll soon be an aunt.”

“What are you...” she trailed off. “*Siri?*”

“Your sister is pregnant,” he said. “The priests are going to make an announcement later this evening. The God King is apparently remaining back in his palace to celebrate.”

Vivenna stood, stunned. *Siri. Pregnant.* Siri, who was still a little girl in Vivenna’s mind, bearing the child of that *thing* in the palace. And yet wasn’t Vivenna now fighting to keep that thing on his throne?

No, she thought. I haven’t forgiven Hallandren, even if I am learning not to hate them. I can’t let Idris go to war and be destroyed.

She felt a panic. Suddenly, all of her plans seemed meaningless. What would the Hallandren do to her once they had their heir? “We have to get her out,” Vivenna found herself saying. “Vasher, we have to rescue her.”

He remained quiet.

“*Please*, Vasher,” she whispered. “She’s my *sister*. I thought to protect her by ending this war... but if your hunch is right, then the God King himself is one of the ones who wishes to invade Idris. Siri won’t be safe with him.”

“All right,” Vasher said. “I will do what I can.”

Vivenna nodded, turning back to the arena. The priests were withdrawing. “Where are they going?”

“To their gods,” Lightsong said. “To seek the will of the Pantheon in formal vote.”

“About the war?” Vivenna asked, feeling a chill.

Vasher nodded. “It is time.”

#

Lightsong waited beneath his canopy, a couple of serving men fanning him, a cup of chilled juice in his hand, lavish snacks spread out to his side.

Blushweaver brought me into this, he thought. Because she was worried that Hallandren would be taken by surprise.

The priests were consulting with their gods. He could see several of them kneeling before Returned, heads bowed. It was the way that government happened in Hallandren. The priests argued their opinions then they sought the will of the Gods. That would become the will of the Pantheon. That would become the will of Hallandren itself. Only the God King could veto an action of the Pantheon.

And he had chosen not to attend this meeting.

So self-congratulatory on spawning a child that he couldn’t even bother to see to the future of his people? Lightsong thought with annoyance.

Llarimar approached. Though he had been down below with the other high priests, he had offered no arguments to the court. Llarimar tended to keep his thoughts to himself.

The high priest knelt before him. “Please, give me your will, Lightsong my God.”

Lightsong didn’t respond. He looked up, across the open arena to where Blushweaver’s canopy stood, verdant in the dimming evening light.

“Oh, God,” Llarimar said. “Please. Give me the knowledge I seek. Should we go to war with our kinsmen, the Idris? Are they rebels who need to be quelled?”

Priests were already returning from their prayers. Each held aloft a flag indicating the will of their God or Goddess. Green for a favorable response. Red for dissatisfaction with the petition. In this case green meant war. So far, five of the returning seven flew green.

“Your Excellency?” Llarimar asked, looking up.

Lightsong stood up. They vote, but what good are their votes? he thought, walking out of his canopy. They hold no authority. Only two votes really matter.

More green. Flags flapped as priests ran down the walkways. The arena was abuzz with people. They could see the inevitable. To the side, Lightsong could see Llarimar following him. The man must be frustrated. Why didn’t he ever show it?

Lightsong approached Blushweaver’s pavilion. Almost all of the priests had gotten their answers, and the vast majority of them carried flags of green. Blushweaver’s high priestess still knelt before her. Blushweaver, of course, wanted to wait upon the drama of the moment.

Lightsong stopped outside of her canopy. Blushweaver reclined inside, watching him with calm eyes, though he could sense her anxiety. He knew her too well.

“Are you going to make your will known?” she asked.

He looked down at the center of the arena. “If I resist,” he said, “this declaration will be for naught. The gods can yell war until they are blue, but *I* control the armies. If I don’t allow them my Lifeless, then Hallandren will not win any wars.”

“You would defy the will of the Pantheon?”

“It is my right to do so,” he said. “Just as it any of them have the same right.”

“But you have the Lifeless.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to do what I’m told.”

There was a moment of silence before Blushweaver waved to her priestess. The woman stood then raised a flag of green and ran down to join the others. This caused a roar of voices. The people must know that Blushweaver’s political wranglings had left her in a position of power. Not bad, for a person who had started without command of a single soldier.

With her control of that many troops, she’ll be an integral part of the planning, diplomacy, and execution of the war. Blushweaver could come out of this as one of the most important Returned in the history of the kingdom.

And so could I.

“I need to think about this some more,” Lightsong said, turning to go.

“What?” Blushweaver demanded. “What about the vote?”

Lightsong shook his head.

“Lightsong!” she said as he left. “Lightsong, you can’t leave us hanging like this!”

He shrugged, glancing back. “Actually, I can.” He smiled. “I’m frustrating like that.”

And, with that, he left the arena, heading back to his palace without giving his vote.

Chapter Fifty-One

I'm glad you came back for me, Nightblood said. It was very lonely in that closet.

Vasher didn't reply as he walked across the top of the wall surrounding the Court of Gods. It was late, dark, and quiet, though a few of the palaces still shone with light. One of those belonged to Lightsong the Bold.

I don't like the darkness, Nightblood said.

"You mean darkness like it is now?" Vasher asked.

No. In the closet.

"You can't even see."

A person knows when they're in darkness, Nightblood said. Even when they can't see.

Vasher wasn't certain how to respond to that. He paused atop the wall, overlooking Lightsong's palace. Red and gold. Courageous colors.

You shouldn't ignore me, Nightblood said. I don't like it.

Vasher knelt down, studying the palace. He'd never met the one called Lightsong, but he had heard rumors. The most flagrant of the Gods, the most condescending and mocking. And this was the person who held the fate of two kingdoms in his hands.

There was an easy way to influence that fate.

We're going to kill him, aren't we? Nightblood said, eagerness sounding in his voice.

Vasher just stared at the palace.

We should kill him, Nightblood continued. Come on. We should do it. We really should do it.

"Why do you care?" Vasher whispered. "You don't know him."

He's evil, Nightblood said.

Vasher snorted. "You don't even know what that is."

For once, Nightblood was silent.

That was the great crux of the problem, the issue that had dominated most of Vasher's life. A thousand Breaths. That was what it took to Awaken an object of steel and give it sentience. Even Shashara hadn't fully understood the process, though she had first devised it.

It took a person who had reached the Ninth Heightening to Awaken stone or steel. Even still, this process shouldn't have worked. It should have created an Awakened object with no more of a mind than the tassels on his cloak.

Nightblood should not be alive. And yet he was. Shashara had always been the most talented of them. She'd been spurred on by the knowledge that she'd been shown up by Yesteel. She studied, learned, practiced. And she'd done it. She'd learned to forge the Breath of a thousand people into a piece of steel, Awaken it to sentience, and give it a Command. That single Command took on immense power, providing foundation for the personality of the object Awakened.

With Nightblood, she and Vasher had chosen a simple, yet elegant, Command. “Destroy Evil.” It had seemed like such a logical choice. There was only one problem, something neither of them had foreseen.

How was an object of steel—an object that was so removed from life that it would find the experience strange and foreign—supposed to understand what ‘evil’ was?

I’m figuring it out, Nightblood said. I’ve had a lot of practice.

The sword wasn’t really to blame. It was a terrible, destructive thing—but it had been created to destroy. It still didn’t understand life or what that life meant. It only knew its Command, and it tried so hard to fulfill it.

That man down there, Nightblood said. The one in the palace. He holds the power to start this war. You don’t want this war to start. That’s why he’s evil.

“Why does that make him evil?”

Because he will do what you don’t want him to.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Vasher said. “Plus, who is to say that my will is best?”

It is, Nightblood said. Let’s go. Let’s kill him. You told me war is bad. He will start a war. He’s evil. Let’s kill him. Let’s kill him.

The sword was getting excited; Vasher could feel it—feel the danger in its blade, the twisted power of Breaths that had been pulled from a living host and shoved into something unnatural. He could almost feel them breathing out, black and corrupted, twisting in the wind. Drawing him toward Lightsong. Pushing him to kill.

“No,” Vasher said.

Nightblood sighed. You locked me in a closet, he reminded. You should apologize.

“I’m not going to apologize by killing someone.”

Just throw me in there, Nightblood said. If he’s evil, he’ll kill himself.

This gave Vasher pause. *Colors*, he thought. The sword seemed to be getting more subtle each year, though Vasher knew he was just seeing things. Awakened objects didn’t change or grow, they simply were what they were.

It was still a good argument.

“Maybe later,” Vasher said, turning away from the building.

You are afraid, Nightblood said.

“You don’t know what fear is,” Vasher replied.

I do. You don’t like killing Returned. You’re afraid of them.

The sword was wrong, of course. But, on the outside, Vasher supposed that his hesitance did look a little like fear. It had been a long time since he’d dealt with the Returned. Too many memories. Too many pains.

He made his way to the God King’s palace. The structure was old, far older than the palaces that surrounded it. Once, this place had been a seaside watchplace, overlooking the bay. No city. No colors. Just the stark, black tower. It amused Vasher that it had become the home of the God King of the Iridescent Tones.

Vasher slid Nightblood into a strap on his back then jumped from the wall toward the palace. Awakened straps around his legs gave him strength, letting him leap some twenty feet. He slammed against the side of the building, smooth onyx blocks rubbing his skin. He twitched his fingers, and the straps on his sleeves grabbed hold of the ledge above him, holding him tight.

He breathed. The belt at his waist—touching his skin, like always—Awakened. Color drained from the kerchief tied beneath his trousers to his leg.

“Climb things, then grab things, then pull me up,” he Commanded. Three commands in one Awakening, a difficult task for some. For him, however, it had become as simple as blinking.

The belt untied itself, showing it to be far longer than it looked when wrapped. The twenty-five feet of rope snaked up the side of the building, curling inside of a window. Seconds later, the rope hauled Vasher up and into the air. He released his tassel grips, then pulled Nightblood free as the rope deposited him inside the building.

He knelt silently, eyes searching the darkness. The room was unoccupied. Carefully, he drew back his Breath then wrapped the rope around his arm and held it in a loose coil. He stalked forward.

Who are we going to kill? Nightblood asked.

It's not always about killing, Vasher said.

Vivenna. Is she in here?

The sword was trying to interpret his thoughts again. It had trouble with things that weren't fully formed in Vasher's head. Most thoughts passed through his mind like they did those of other people. Fleeting, momentary. Flashes of image, sound, or scent. Connections made, then lost, then recovered again.

Vivenna. The source of a lot of his troubles. His work in the city had been easier when he'd been able to assume that she was working willingly with Denth. Then, at least, he'd been able to blame her.

Where is she? Is she here? She doesn't like me, but I like her.

Vasher hesitated in the dark hallway. *You do?*

Yes. She's nice. And she's pretty.

Nice and pretty—words that Nightblood didn't really understand. He had simply learned when to use them. Still, the sword did have opinions, and it rarely lied. It must like Vivenna, even if it couldn't explain why.

She reminds me of a Returned, the sword said.

Ah, Vasher thought. *Of course. That makes sense.* He continued on.

What? Nightblood said.

She's descended from one, he thought. You can tell by the hair. There's a bit of Returned in her.

Nightblood didn't respond to that, but a part of Vasher could feel it thinking.

He paused at an intersection. He was pretty sure he knew where the God King's chambers would be. However, a lot of the interior seemed different now. The fortress had been stark, built with odd twists and turns to confuse an invading foe. Those remained—all the stonework was the same—but many of the open dining halls or garrison rooms had been split into many, smaller rooms, colored with decorations after the way of the Hallandren rich.

Where would the God King's wife be? If she were pregnant, she'd be under the care of servants. One of the larger quarters, he assumed, on a higher level. He made his way to a stairwell. Fortunately, it seemed late enough that there were very few people awake.

The sister, Nightblood said. That's who you're after. You're rescuing Vivenna's sister!

Vasher nodded quietly in the darkness, feeling his way up the stairs, counting on his BioChroma to let him know if he approached any people. Though most of his Breath was stored inside of his clothing, but he had just enough to awaken the rope and to keep him aware.

You like Vivenna too! Nightblood said.

Nonsense, Vasher thought.

Then why?

Her sister, he thought. She's a key to all of this, somehow. I realized it today. Vivenna mentioned that as soon as her sister arrived, the real move to begin the war surged. She's right. There's something going on.

Nightblood fell silent. That kind of logical leap was a bit too complex for him. *I see*, he said, though Vasher smiled at the confusion he sensed in the voice.

At the very least, Vasher thought, she's a very convenient hostage for the Hallandren. The God King's priests—or whoever's behind this—can threaten the girl's life, should the war go poorly for them. She makes an excellent tool.

One you intend to remove, Nightblood said.

Vasher nodded, reaching the top of the stairwell and slinking through one of the corridors. He walked until he sensed someone nearby—a maid servant approaching through one of the corridors.

Vasher Awakened his rope, stood in the shadows of an alcove, and waited. As she passed, the rope shot from the shadows, wrapped around her waist, and yanked her into the darkness. Vasher had one of his tassel hands wrapped around her mouth before she could scream.

She squirmed, but the rope tied her tightly. He felt a little stab of guilt as he loomed over her, her terrified eyes tearing up. He reached for Nightblood and pulled the sword slightly out of its sheath. The girl immediately looked sick. A good sign.

"I need to know where the queen is," Vasher said, forcing Nightblood up so that his hilt touched her cheek. "You're going to tell me."

He held her like that for a time, watching her squirm, feeling dissatisfied with himself. Finally, he relaxed the tassels, keeping the sword against her cheek. She began to vomit, and he turned her to the side.

"Tell me," he whispered.

"Southern corner," the girl whispered, trembling, spittle on her cheek. "This floor."

Vasher nodded, then tied her up with the rope, gagged her, and took his Breath back. He pushed Nightblood back into the sheath then rushed down the hallway.

You won't kill a god who plans to march his armies to war? Nightblood asked. But you'll choke a young woman near to death?

It was a complicated statement for the sword. However, it lacked the accusation that a human would have put into the words. To Nightblood, it wasn't an attack, but a question. He was trying to understand.

I don't understand my morality either, Vasher thought. I'd suggest you avoid confusing yourself.

He found the place easily. It was guarded by a large group of brutish men who seemed rather out of place in the fine palace hallways.

Vasher paused. Something strange is going on here.

What do you mean? Nightblood asked.

He hadn't meant to address the sword, but that was the trouble with an object that could read minds. Any thoughts Vasher formed in his head, Nightblood thought were directed at it. After all, in the sword's opinion, *everything* really should have been directed toward it.

Guards at the door. Soldiers, not servants. So they had already taken her captive. Was she really even pregnant? Were the priests just securing their power?

That many men would be impossible to kill without making noise. The best he could hope for was to take them fast. Maybe they were far enough from anyone else that a little bit of fighting wouldn't be heard.

He sat for a few minutes, grinding his teeth. Then, finally, he stepped up and tossed Nightblood into the middle of the men. He'd let them fight each other and then be ready to stop any who weren't taken into the Sword's influence.

Nightblood clanged to the stones. All of the men's eyes turned toward it. And, at that moment, something grabbed Vasher around the shoulder and yanked him backward.

He cursed, spinning, throwing his hands up to wrestle with whatever had him. An Awakened rope. Men started to fight behind him. Vasher grunted, pulling out the knife in his boot, then slicing the Awakened rope. A body tackled him as he got free, however, and he was thrown back against the wall.

He grabbed his attacker by the face with one of his arm tassels, then twisted the man back and threw him into the wall. Another figure charged him from behind, but Vasher's Awakened cloak caught that one, tripping him.

"Grab things other than me," Vasher said quickly, snatching the cloak of one of the fallen men. That cloak whipped about, taking down another man, whom Vasher then killed with a swipe of his dagger. He kicked another man, throwing him backward, opening a pathway.

Vasher lunged, making for Nightblood, but three more figures burst out the rooms around him, cutting him off. They were the same kind of brutish men that were now fighting over the sword. Figures were all around. Dozens of them. Vasher kicked out, breaking a leg, but one man pulled Vasher's cloak off with a lucky twist. Others piled on top of him. And then, another Awakened rope snapped out, tying his legs together.

Vasher reached for his vest. "Your Breath to—" he began, trying to draw in some Breath to use for an attack, but three men grabbed his hand and pulled it away. Within seconds, he was wrapped up in the Awakened rope. His cloak still fought against three men who were struggling to cut it up, but Vasher himself was pinned.

A figure left the room to his left.

"Denth," Vasher spat, struggling.

"My good friend," Denth said, nodding for one of his lackeys—the one known as Tonk Fah—to move down the hallway toward the queen's room. Denth knelt beside Vasher. "Very good to see you."

Vasher spat again.

"Still as eloquent as ever, I see," Denth said with a sigh. "You know the best thing about you, Vasher? You're solid. Predictable. I guess I am too, in away. Hard to live as long as we have without falling into patterns, eh?"

Vasher didn't reply, though he did try to yell as some men gagged him. A piece of him noticed with satisfaction that he'd taken down a good dozen opponents before they'd managed to force him down.

Denth eyed the fallen soldiers. “Mercenaries,” he said. “No risk is too great, assuming the pay is right.” He said it with a twinkle in his eye. Then he leaned down, his jovialness gone as he met Vasher’s eyes. “And you were always to be *my* payment, Vasher. I owe you. For Shashara, even still. We’ve been waiting, hiding in the palace here for a good two weeks, knowing that eventually the good Princes Vivenna would send you to save her sister.”

Tonk Fah returned with a bundle held in a blanket. Nightblood.

Denth eyed it. “Throw that out somewhere in the city,” he said, grimacing.

“I don’t know, Denth,” Tonk Fah said. “I kind of think we should keep it. It could be very useful...” The beginnings of the lust began to show in his eyes, the desire to draw Nightblood, to use the sword. To destroy evil. Or, really, just to destroy.

Denth stood and snatched the bundle away. Then he smacked Tonk Fah on the back of the head.

“Ow!” Tonk Fah said.

Denth rolled his eyes. “Stop whining; I just saved your life. Go check on the queen then clean up that mess. I’ll take care of the sword myself.”

“You always get so nasty when Vasher’s around,” Tonk Fah grumbled, waddling away. Denth wrapped Nightblood up securely; Vasher watched, hoping to see the lust appear in Denth’s eyes. Unfortunately, Denth was far too strong-willed to be taken by the sword. He had nearly as much history with it as Vasher did.

“Take away all his Awakened clothing,” Denth said to his men, walking away. “Then hang him up in that room over there. He and I are going to have a long talk about what he did to my sister.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Lightsong sat in one of the rooms of his palace, surrounded by finery, cup of wine in his hand. Despite the very late hour, servants moved in and out, piling up furniture, paintings, vases, and small sculptures. Anything that could be moved.

The riches sat in heaps. Lightsong lounged back on his couch, ignoring empty plates of food and broken cups, which he refused to let his servants take away.

A pair of servants entered, carrying a red and gold couch. They propped it up by the far wall, nearly toppling a pile of rugs. Lightsong watched them leave then downed the rest of his wine. He dropped the empty cup to the floor beside the others, and held out his hand for another full one. A servant provided, as always.

He wasn't drunk. He couldn't get drunk.

"Do you ever feel," Lightsong said, "like something is going on? Something far greater than you are? Like... a painting you can only see the corner of, no matter how you squint and search?"

"Every day, your grace," Llarimar said. He sat on a stool beside Lightsong's couch. As always, he watched events calmly, though Lightsong could sense the man's disapproval as another group of servants piled several marble figurines in the corner.

"How do you deal with it?" Lightsong asked.

"I have faith, your grace, that someone understands."

"Not me, I hope," Lightsong noted.

"You are part of it. But it is much larger than you."

Lightsong frowned to himself, watching more servants enter. Soon, the room would be so piled with his wealth that people wouldn't be able to move in and out. "It's odd, isn't it," Lightsong said, gesturing toward a pile of paintings. "Arranged like this, none of it looks beautiful anymore. When you put it together in piles, it just seems like junk."

Llarimar raised an eyebrow. "The value in something relates to how it is treated, your grace. If you see these items as junk, then they are, regardless of what someone else would pay for them."

"There's a lesson in there somewhere, isn't there?"

Llarimar shrugged. "I *am* a priest, after all."

Lightsong snorted, then waved toward the servants. "That's enough," he said. "You can go now."

The servants, growing more resigned to being banished, left the room. Soon, Lightsong and Llarimar were alone with piles and piles of riches, all stolen from other parts of the palace and brought into this one room.

Llarimar surveyed the mounds. "So what *is* the point of all this, your grace?"

"This is what I mean to them," Lightsong said, gulping down some more wine. "The people. They'll give up their riches for me. They sacrifice the Breath of their souls to keep me alive. I suspect that, even, they would die for me."

Llarimar nodded quietly.

“And,” Lightsong said, “all I’m expected to do is choose their fates for them. Do we go to war or do we remain at peace? What do you think?”

“I could argue for either side, your grace,” Llarimar said. “It would be easy to sit here and condemn the war on mere principle. War is a terrible, terrible thing. And yet, it seems that few great accomplishments in history ever occur without the unfortunate truth of military action. Even the Manywar, which caused so much destruction, can be pointed to as the foundation of modern Hallandren power in the inner sea area.”

Lightsong nodded.

“But,” Llarimar continued. “To invade our brethren? Despite provocation, I cannot help but think that attacking is too extreme. How much death, how much suffering, are we willing to cause simply to prove that we won’t be pushed around?”

“And what would you decide?”

“Fortunately, I don’t have to.”

“And if you were forced to?” Lightsong asked.

Llarimar sat for a moment. Then, carefully, he removed the large miter from his head, revealing a head of thinning black hair plastered to the skull with sweat. He set aside the ceremonial headgear.

“I speak to you as a friend, Lightsong, not your priest,” Llarimar said quietly. “The priest cannot influence his god for fear of disrupting the future.”

Lightsong nodded.

“And as a friend,” Llarimar said, “I honestly have trouble deciding what I would do. I didn’t argue on the floor of the court.”

“You rarely do,” Lightsong said.

“I’m worried,” Llarimar said, wiping his brow with a kerchief, shaking his head. “I don’t think we can ignore the threat to our kingdom. The fact of the matter is, Idris *is* a rebel faction living within our borders. We’ve ignored them for years, suffering under their almost tyrannical control of the northern passes.”

“So you’re for attacking?”

Llarimar paused, then shook his head. “No. No, I don’t think that even Iris’s rebellion would justify the slaughter it would take to get those passes back.”

“Great,” Lightsong said flatly. “So, you think we should go to war, but not attack.”

“Actually, yes,” Llarimar said. “We declare war, we make a show of force, and we frighten them into realizing just how precarious their position is. If we then hold peace talks, I’ll bet we could forge more favorable treaties for use of the passes. They formally renounce claim on our throne; we give them official sovereignty. Wouldn’t we both get what we want?”

Lightsong sat thoughtfully. “I don’t know,” he said. “That’s a very reasonable solution, but I don’t think those who are calling for war would accept it. It seems that we’re missing something, Scoot. Why now? Why are tensions so high after the wedding, which *should* have unified us?”

“I don’t know, your grace,” Llarimar said.

Lightsong smiled, standing. “Well then,” he said, eyeing his high priest. “Let’s find out.”

#

Siri would have been annoyed if she hadn’t been so terrified. She sat alone in the black bedchamber. It felt wrong for Susebron to not be there with her.

She'd hoped that maybe he would still be allowed come to her when night fell. But, of course, he didn't arrive. Whatever the priests were planning, it didn't require her to actually be pregnant. Not now that they'd played their hand and locked her up.

The door creaked, and she sat up on the bed, hope sparking. But it was only the guard checking on her again. One of the crass, soldier-like men who had been guarding her in recent hours. *Why did they change to these men?* she wondered as the guard closed the door. *What happened to the Lifeless and the priests who were watching me before?*

It didn't really matter. She lay back down on the bed, staring up at the canopy, still dressed in her fine gown. Her mind kept flashing to her first week in the palace, when she'd been locked inside for her 'Wedding Jubilation.' It had been difficult enough then, and she'd known when it would be over. Now she didn't even have an assurance that she'd live through the next few days.

No, she thought. They'll keep me around for a few more months. Long enough for my 'baby' to be born. I'm insurance. If something goes wrong, they'll still need me to provide an heir.

That was little comfort. The thought of six months cooped up inside the palace—not allowed to see anyone lest they see that she wasn't really pregnant—was frightening enough to make her want to scream.

But what could she do?

Hope in Susebron, she thought. I taught him to read, and I gave him the determination that he needed to break free from his priests.

That will have to be enough.

#

"Your grace," Llarimar said, his voice hesitant, "are you certain you want to do this?"

Lightsong crouched down, peeking through the bushes toward Mercystar's palace. Most of the windows were dark. That was good. However, she still had a number of guards patrolling the palace. She was afraid of another break in.

And rightly so.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked, sounding more nervous. The portly high priest knelt on the grass beside Lightsong, the darkness having masked their approach.

"I should have brought a sword," Lightsong said thoughtfully.

"You don't know how to use one, your grace."

"We don't know that," Lightsong said.

"Your grace, this is foolishness. Let's go back to your palace. If we *must* see what is in those tunnels, we can hire someone from the city to sneak in."

"That would take too long," Lightsong said. A guard patrol passed their side of the palace. "You ready?" he asked once the patrol had passed.

"No."

"Then wait here," Lightsong said, taking off in a dash toward the palace.

Llarimar let out an uncharacteristic curse from behind, and Lightsong heard the bushes rustle. He didn't look back; he just kept running toward the open window. Like in most Returned palaces, the doorways and windows were open. The tropical climate invited such designs. Lightsong reached the side of the building, feeling exhilarated. He climbed up through the window, then reached a hand out to help Llarimar when he arrived. The hefty priest puffed and sweated, but Lightsong managed to pull him up and into the room.

They took a few moments, Llarimar resting with his back to the outer wall, gasping for breath.

“You really need to exercise some more, Scoot,” Lightsong said, creeping toward the doorway and peeking out into the hall beyond.

Llarimar didn’t answer. He just sat, puffing, shaking his head as if he couldn’t believe what was happening.

“I wonder why the man who attacked the building didn’t come in through the window,” Lightsong said. Then he noticed that the guards standing at the inner doorway had an easy view of this particular room. *Ah, he thought. Well, then. Time for the backup plan.* Lightsong stood up, walking out into the hallway. Llarimar followed, then jumped when he saw the guards. They had similar expressions of amazement on their faces.

“Hello,” Lightsong said to the guards, then turned from them and walked down the hallway.

“Wait!” one said. “Stop!”

Lightsong turned toward them, frowning. “You dare command a god?”

They froze. Then they glanced at each other. One took off running in the opposite direction.

“They’re going to alert others!” Llarimar said, rushing up. “We’ll be caught.”

“Then we should move quickly!” Lightsong said, taking off in another run. He smiled, hearing Llarimar grudgingly break into a jog behind him. They quickly reached the trap door.

Lightsong knelt, feeling around for a few moments before finding the hidden clasp. He triumphantly pulled the trap door open, then pointed down. Llarimar shook his head in resignation, then climbed down the ladder into darkness. Lightsong grabbed a lamp off the wall and followed. The remaining guard—unable to interfere with a god—simply watched with concern.

The bottom wasn’t very far down. Lightsong found a tired Llarimar sitting on some boxes in what was obviously a small storage cellar.

“Congratulations, your grace,” Llarimar said. “We’ve found the secret hiding place of their flour.”

Lightsong snorted, moving through the chamber, poking at the walls. “Something living,” he said, pointing at one wall. “That direction. I can feel it with my life sense.”

Llarimar raised an eyebrow, standing. They pulled back a few boxes, and behind them was a tunnel cut into the wall. Lightsong smiled, then crawled down through it, pushing the lamp ahead of him.

“I’m not sure I’ll fit,” Llarimar said.

“If I fit, you will,” Lightsong said, voice muffled by the close confines. He heard another sigh from Llarimar, followed by shuffling as the portly man entered the hole. Eventually, Lightsong passed out another hole into a much larger tunnel. He stood up, feeling self satisfied as Llarimar squeezed through. “There,” Lightsong said, throwing a lever and letting a grate drop down over the opening. “They’ll have trouble following now!”

“And we’ll have trouble escaping,” Llarimar said.

“Escape?” Lightsong said, raising his lamp, inspecting the tunnel. “Why would we want to do that?”

“Pardon me, your grace,” Llarimar said. “But it seems to me that you are getting far too much enjoyment from this experience.”

“Well, I’m called Lightsong the *Bold*,” Lightsong said. “It feels good to finally be living up to the title. Now, hush. I can still feel life nearby.”

The tunnel was obviously man-made, and looked like Lightsong expected a mine shaft might. There were several branches. The life was straight ahead. Lightsong didn't turn that direction, but instead turned left, toward a tunnel that sloped downward. He followed it for a few minutes, judging the trajectory.

"Figured it out yet?" Lightsong asked, turning to Llarimar.

"The Lifeless barracks," Llarimar said. "If this tunnel continues like this, it will lead directly to them."

Lightsong nodded. "Why would they need a secret tunnel to the barracks? Any god can go there whenever he wants."

Llarimar shook his head, and they continued down the tunnel. Sure enough, after a short time, they arrived at a trap door which—when pushed up—led into one of the dark, Lifeless warehouses. Lightsong shivered, looking out at the endless rows of legs, barely illuminated by his lamp. He pulled his head back down, closed the trap door, then followed the tunnel around a bit more.

"It goes in a square," he said quietly.

"With doors up into each of the Lifeless barracks I'll bet," Llarimar said. He reached out, taking a piece of dirt and crumbling it between his fingers. "This tunnel seems newer than the one we were in up above."

Lightsong nodded. "We should keep moving," he said. "Those guards in Mercystar's palace know we're down here. I don't know who they'll tell, but I'd rather finish exploring before we get chased out."

Llarimar shivered visibly at that. They walked back up the steep tunnel to the main one they'd left behind. Lightsong still felt life down a side tunnel, but he chose the other branch, exploring. It soon became apparent that this one diverged and twisted numerous times.

"Tunnels to some of the other Returned palaces," he guessed, poking at a wooden beam used to support the shaft. "Old—much older than the tunnel by the barracks."

Llarimar nodded.

"All right, then," Lightsong said. "Time to find out where the main tunnel goes."

Llarimar followed as Lightsong approached the main tunnel. Lightsong closed his eyes, trying to determine how close the life was. It felt... distant. Almost beyond his ability to sense. If everything else down in the tunnels hadn't been rock and dirt, he probably wouldn't have even noticed the life in the first place. He nodded to Llarimar, then continued down the tunnel, stepping quietly.

Did it seem like he was capable of moving more silently than he should? Did he have skill in sneaking about? He was certainly better at it than Llarimar. Of course, a tumbling boulder was probably better at moving quietly than Llarimar, considering his bulky clothing and his puffing exhalations.

The tunnel went on for a time without branches. Lightsong looked up, trying to judge what was above them. *The God King's palace?* he guessed. He couldn't be certain; it was difficult to judge direction beneath the ground.

He felt... excited. Thrilled. This was something no god was supposed to do. Sneaking at night, moving through secret tunnels, looking for secrets and clues. *Odd*, he thought. *They give us everything they think that we might want; they glut us with sensation and experience. And yet the real feelings—fear, anxiety, excitement—are completely lost to us.*

He smiled. In the distance, he could hear voices. He turned down the lamp and crept forward extra quietly, waving for Llarimar to stay behind.

“... have him up above,” a masculine voice was saying. “He came for the princess’s sister, as I said he would.”

“You have what you want, then,” said another voice. “Honestly, you pay far too much attention to that one.”

“Do not underestimate Vasher,” first voice said. “He has accomplished more in his life than a hundred men, and has done more for the good of all people than you will ever be able to understand.”

Silence.

“Aren’t you planning to kill him?” said second voice.

“Yes.”

Silence.

“You’re a strange one, Denth,” second voice said. “However, our goal is accomplished.”

“You people don’t have your war yet.”

“We will.”

Lightsong crouched beside a small pile of rubble. He could see light up ahead, but couldn’t distinguish much beyond some moving shadows. His fortune seemed remarkably good, though it was very late at night—anyone up was likely to be about clandestine activities. Beyond that, today *had* been the day that the vote had happened.

“I have a job for you,” second voice said. “We’ve got someone I need you to interrogate.”

“Too bad,” first voice said, growing distant. “I’ve got an old friend to torture. I just had to pause to dispose of his monstrosity of a sword.”

“Denth! Come back here!”

“You didn’t hire me, little man,” first voice said, growing fainter. “If you want to make me do something, go get your boss. Until then, you know where to find me.”

Silence. And then, something moved behind Lightsong. He spun, and could just barely make out Llarimar creeping forward. Lightsong waved him back, joined him.

“What?” Llarimar whispered.

“Voices, ahead,” Lightsong whispered back, the tunnel dark around them. “Talking about the war.”

“Who were they?” Llarimar asked.

“I don’t know,” Lightsong whispered. “But I’m going to find out. Wait here while I—”

A voice screamed. Lightsong jumped immediately. The sound came from the place where he had heard the voices, and it seemed like...

“Let go of me!” Blushweaver yelled. “What do you think you’re doing! I’m a goddess!”

Lightsong stood up sharply. A voice said something back to Blushweaver, but Lightsong was now too far down the tunnel to hear.

“You will let me go!” Blushweaver yelled. “I—” she cut off sharply, crying out in pain.

Lightsong’s heart was pounding. He took a step.

“Your grace!” Llarimar said, standing. “We should go for help!”

“We *are* help,” Lightsong said. He took a deep breath. Then—surprising himself—he charged down the tunnel. He quickly approached the light, turning around a corner and coming into a

section of tunnel that had been worked. In seconds, he was running on a smooth stone floor and burst into what appeared to be a dungeon or a cellar.

Blushweaver sat tied to a chair. A group of men wearing the God King's priestly robes stood around her. There were several uninformed soldiers in the room. Blushweaver's lip was bleeding, and she was crying through a gag that had been placed on her mouth. She wore a beautiful sleeping robe, but it was dirty and disheveled.

The men in the room looked up in surprise, obviously shocked to see someone come up behind them. Lightsong took advantage of this shock and threw his weight against the soldier nearest to him. He sent the man flying back into the wall, Lightsong's superior size and weight knocking him aside with ease. Lightsong knelt down and quickly pulled the fallen soldier's sword from its sheath.

"Aha!" Lightsong said, lowering the weapon at the men in front of him. "Who's first?"

The soldiers regarded him dumbly.

"I say, you!" Lightsong said, lunging at the next-closest guard.

He missed the man by a good three inches, fumbling and off-balance from the lunge. The guard finally realized what was going on and pulled out his own sword. The priests backed against the wall. Blushweaver blinked her tears, looking shocked.

The soldier nearest Lightsong attacked, and Lightsong raised his blade awkwardly, trying to block, doing a horrible job of it. The guard at his feet suddenly threw himself at Lightsong's legs, toppling him to the ground. Then one of the standing guards thrust his sword into Lightsong's shoulder.

The shoulder bled blood as red as that of any mortal. Suddenly, Lightsong knew pain. Pain greater than, literally, he'd ever known in his short life.

He screamed.

He saw, through tears, Llarimar heroically trying to tackle a guard from behind, but the attack was almost as poorly-executed as Lightsong's own. The soldiers stepped away, several guarding the tunnel, another holding his bloodied blade toward Lightsong's throat.

Funny, Lightsong thought, gritting his teeth against the pain. That was not at all how I imagined this going.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Vivenna waited up for Vasher. He did not return.

She paced in the small, one-room hideout—the sixth in a series of quick moves, never more than a few days in each location. It was unadorned and held only their bedrolls, Vasher’s pack, and a single flickering candle.

Vasher would have chastised her for wasting the candle. For a man who held a king’s fortune in Breaths, he was surprisingly frugal.

She paced some more. She knew that she should probably just go to sleep. Vasher could take care of himself. It seemed that the only one in the city who couldn’t do *that* was Vivenna.

And yet he’d told her he was only going to go on a quick scouting mission. Though he seemed like such a solitary person, he apparently understood her desire to be a part of things, so he usually let her know where he was going and when to expect him back. She’d never waited up for Denth to come back from a night mission. She’d been working with Vasher for a fraction of the time she’d spent with the others. Why did she care so much now?

Though she had felt like she was Denth’s friend, she hadn’t really cared about him. He’d been amusing and charming, but distant. Vasher was... well, who he was. There was no guile with him. He wore no false mask or face. She’d only met one other person like that. Her sister, the one who would bear the God King’s child.

Lord of Colors! Vivenna thought, still pacing. How did things turn out to be such a mess?

#

Siri awoke with a start. There was shouting coming from outside her room. She roused herself quickly, moving over to the door and putting her ear to it. She could hear fighting. If she were going to run, perhaps now would be the time. She rattled the door, hoping for some reason that it was unlocked. It wasn’t.

She cursed. Something was obviously happening in the palace. She’d heard fighting before—screaming, and men dying. And now again. *Someone trying to rescue me, perhaps?* she thought hopefully. *But who?*

The door shook suddenly, and she jumped back as it opened. Tridees, high priest of the God King, stood in the doorway. “Quickly, child,” he said, waving to her. “You must come with me.”

Siri looked desperately for a way to run. She backed away from the priest, and he cursed quietly, waving for a couple of soldiers in city guard uniforms to rush in and grab her. She screamed for help.

“Quiet, child!” Tridees said. “You fool! We’re trying to help you.”

His lies rang flat in her ears, and she struggled as the soldiers pulled her from the room. Outside, bodies were lying on the ground, some in guard uniforms, others in nondescript armor, still others having grey skin.

She heard fighting down the hallway, and she screamed toward it as the soldiers roughly pulled her away.

#

Old Chaps, they called him. Those who called him anything, that was.

He sat in his little boat, almost more of a canoe, moving across the dark water of the bay. Night fishing. During the day, one had to pay a tariff to fish in T'Telir waters. Well, technically, during the night you were supposed to pay too.

But the thing about night was, nobody could see you. Old Chaps chuckled to himself, lowering his net over the side of the boat. The waters made their characteristic lap, lap, lap against the side of the boat. Dark. He liked it dark. Lap, lap, lap.

Occasionally, he was given better work. Taking bodies for one of the city's slum lords, weighting them down with bits of rock tied in a sack to the foot, then tossing them into the bay. There were probably hundreds of them down there, floating in the current. Like a party of skeletons, having a dance. Dance, dance, dance.

No bodies tonight, though. Too bad. That meant fish. Free fish, he didn't have to pay tariffs on. And free fish were good fish.

No... a voice said to him. A little bit more to your right.

The sea talked to him sometimes. Coaxed him this way or that. He happily made his way in the direction indicated. He was out on the waters almost every night. They should know him pretty well by now.

Good. Drop the net.

He did so. It wasn't too deep in this part of the bay. He could drag the net behind his boat, pull the weighted bits along the bottom, catching the smaller fish that came up into the shallows to feed. Not the best fish, but the night was looking too dangerous to be out far from the shore.

His net struck something. He grumbled, yanking it. Sometimes, it got caught on debris or coral. It was heavy. Too heavy. He pulled the net over the side, then undid the shield on his lantern, risking a bit of light.

A sword lay in the bottom of his boat. Silvery, with a black handle.

Lap, lap, lap.

Ah, very nice, the voice said, much louder now. I hate the water. So wet and icky down there.

Transfixed, Old Chaps reached out, picking up the weapon. It felt heavy in his hand.

I don't suppose you'd want to go destroy some evil, would you? the voice said. I'm not really sure what that means, to be honest. I'll just trust you to decide.

Old Chaps smiled.

Oh, all right, the sword said. You can admire me a little bit longer, if you must. After that, though, we really need to get back to shore.

#

Vasher awoke groggily.

He was tied by his wrists to a hook in the ceiling of a stone room. The rope that had been used to tie him, he noticed, was the same one he'd used to tie up the maid. It had been drained completely of color.

In fact, everything around him was a uniform grey. He had been stripped save for a grey pair of undershorts. He groaned, his arms feeling numb from the awkward angle of being hung by his wrists.

He wasn't gagged, but he had no Breath remaining—he'd used the last of it in the fight, to Awaken the cloak of the fallen man. He groaned.

A lantern burned in corner. A figure stood next to it. "And so we both return," Denth said quietly.

Vasher didn't reply.

"I still owe you for Arsteel's death too," Denth said quietly. "I want to know how you killed him."

"In a duel," Vasher said with a croaking voice.

"You didn't beat him in a duel, Vasher," Denth said, stepping forward. "I know it."

"Then maybe I snuck up and stabbed him from behind," Vasher said. "It's what he deserved."

Denth backhanded him across the face, causing him to swing in bonds. "Arsteel was a good man!"

"Once," Vasher said, tasting blood. "Once, we were all good men, Denth. Once."

Denth was quiet. "You think your little quest here will undo what you've done?"

"Better than becoming a mercenary," Vasher said. "Working for whomever will pay."

"I am what you made of me," Denth said quietly.

"That girl trusted you. Vivenna."

Denth turned, eyes darkened, the lanternlight not quite reaching his face. "She was supposed to."

"She liked you. Then you killed her friend."

"Things got a little out of hand."

"They always do, with you," Vasher said.

Denth raised an eyebrow, face growing amused in the wan light. "*I* get out of hand, Vasher? Me? When's the last time *I* started a war? Slaughtered tens of thousands? Killed my best friend's sister?"

Vasher didn't reply. What argument could he make? That Shashara had needed to die? When she'd revealed the cheaper Commands to make Lifeless, that had been bad enough. What if the way of making Awakened steel, like Nightblood, had entered the Manywar? Undead monsters slaughtering people with Awakened swords crying for blood.

None of that mattered to a brother who had seen his sister murdered by Vasher's hand.

"I was going to let Tonk Fah have you," Denth said, turning away again. "He likes hurting things. It's a weakness he has. We all have weaknesses. With my direction, he's been able to keep it only to animals."

Denth turned to him, holding up a knife. "I've always wondered what he finds so enjoyable about causing pain."

#

Dawn was approaching. Vivenna threw off her blanket, unable to sleep. She dressed, frustrated, but not sure why. Vasher was probably just fine. He was likely out carousing somewhere.

Of course, she thought wryly, carousing. That sounds just like him.

He'd never stayed out an entire night before. Something had happened. And the only person in the city who knew enough of his movements to realize the danger was Vivenna. She slowed as she pulled on her belt, glancing over at Vasher's pack and the change of clothing he had inside of it.

Every single thing I've tried since I left Idris has failed miserably, she thought, continuing to dress. I failed as a revolutionary, I failed as a beggar, and I failed as a sister. What am I supposed to do? Go find him? I don't even know where to start.

She looked away from the pack. Failure. It wasn't something she'd been accustomed to, back in Idris. Everything she'd tried there had turned out well.

Maybe that is what this is all about, she thought, sitting. My hatred of Hallandren. My insistence on saving Siri, on taking her place. When her father had chosen Siri over her, it had been the first time in her life that she could remember feeling that she wasn't good enough. So she'd come to T'Telir, determined to prove that the problem hadn't been with her. It'd had been with someone else. Anyone else. As long as Vivenna wasn't flawed.

Hallandren had repeatedly proved that she was. And now that she'd tried so many things and failed, she found it hard to act. There was a chance that by acting she might fail—and that was so daunting that doing nothing seemed preferable.

It seemed the crowning arrogance in Vivenna's life. She bowed her head. One last bit of feathered hypocrisy to adorn her hair.

You want to be competent? she thought. You want to learn to be in control of what goes on around you, rather than just be pushed around? Then you'll have learn to deal with failure.

It was frightening, but she knew it was true. She stood up, walking to Vasher's duffle-like pack. She pulled out a wrinkled overshirt and a pair of leggings. Both had ties hanging from the cuffs.

Vivenna put them on. Vasher's spare cloak followed. It smelled like him, and was cut—like his other one—into the vague shape of a man. She understood, now, one of the reasons his clothing looked so tattered.

She pulled out a couple of colorful handkerchiefs. "Protect me," she Commanded the cloak, imagining it grabbing people who tried to attack her. She placed a hand on the sleeve of the shirt.
**

"Upon call," she Commanded, "become my fingers and grip that which I must." She'd only heard Vasher give the Command a couple of times, and she still wasn't quite sure how to visualize what she wanted the shirt to do. She imagined the tassels closing around her hands like she had seen them do for Vasher.

She Awakened the leggings, commanding them to strengthen her legs. The leg tassels began to twist, and she raised each foot in turn, letting the tassels wrap around the bottoms. Her stance felt more firm, the leggings pulled tight against her skin. She smiled, nodding.

Finally, she tied on the sword Vasher had given her. She still didn't know how to use it, though she could hold it properly. It felt right to bring it.

Then she left.

#

Lightsong had rarely seen a Goddess cry.

"It wasn't supposed to go this way," Blushweaver said, heedless of the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I had things under control."

The dungeons beneath the God King's palace were in a small, cramped room. Cages—like one might use for animals—lined both walls. They were large enough to hold a god. Lightsong couldn't decide if that were coincidence or not.

Blushweaver sniffled. “I thought I had the God King’s priesthood on my side. We were working together.”

Something’s wrong about this, Lightsong thought, glancing at the group of priests chatting anxiously at the side of the room. Llarimar sat in his own cage—the one directly next to Lightsong—head bowed.

Lightsong glanced back at Blushweaver. “How long?” he asked. “How long were you working with them?”

“From the beginning,” Blushweaver said. “I was supposed to get the Command Phrases. We came up with the plan together!”

“Why did they turn on you?”

She shook her head, glancing down. “They claimed I didn’t do my part. That I was withholding things from them.”

“Were you?”

She looked away, eyes tear-stained. She looked very odd, sitting in her cell. A woman of deific proportions, wearing a fine silken robe, sitting on the ground, surrounded by bars.

We have to get out of here, Lightsong thought. He crawled over to the bars separating his cage from Llarimar’s. “Scoot,” he hissed. “Scoot!”

Llarimar glanced up. He looked haggard.

“What does one use to pick a lock?” Lightsong asked.

Llarimar blinked. “What?”

“Pick a lock,” Lightsong said, pointing. “Maybe I’ll discover that I know how to do it, if I get my hands into the right position. I still haven’t figured out why my swordsmanship skills were so poor. But surely I can do this. If I can only remember what to use.”

Llarimar started at him.

“Maybe I—” Lightsong began.

“What is wrong with you?” Llarimar whispered.

Lightsong paused.

“What is wrong with you!” Llarimar bellowed, standing. “You were a *scribe*, Lightsong. A Colors-cursed *scribe*. Not a soldier. Not a detective. Not a thief. You were an accountant for a local moneylender!”

What? Lightsong thought.

“You were as much an idiot then as you are now!” Llarimar yelled. “Don’t you ever *think* about what you’re going to do before you just saunter off and do it! Why can’t you just stop, occasionally, and ask yourself if you’re being a complete fool or not? I’ll give you a hint! The answer is *usually* yes!”

Lightsong stumbled back from the bars, startled. Llarimar. *Llarimar* was screaming.

“And every time,” Llarimar said, turning away, “*I* get in trouble with you. Nothing has changed. You become a god, and I *still* end up in prison!”

The heavy priest slumped down, breathing in deep gasps, shaking his head in obvious frustration. Blushweaver was staring at them. And so were the priests.

What is it I find odd about them? Lightsong thought, trying to sort out his thoughts and emotions as the group of priests approached.

“Lightsong,” one of them said, stooping down beside his cage. “We need your Command Phrases.”

He snorted. “I’m sorry to say that I’ve forgotten them. You probably know my reputation for being weak of mind. I mean, what kind of fool would come charging in here and get himself captured so easily?”

He smiled at them.

The priest by his cage sighed, then waved a hand toward the others. They unlocked Blushweaver’s cage and pulled her out. She yelled and fought, and Lightsong smiled at the trouble she gave them. Yet, there were six priests, and they finally managed to get her out.

Then one got out a knife and slit her throat.

The shock of the moment hit Lightsong like a physical force. He froze, eyes wide, watching in horror as the red blood spilled out the front of Blushweaver’s throat, staining her beautiful nightgown.

Far more disturbing was the look of panicked terror in her eyes. Such beautiful eyes.

“No!” Lightsong screamed, slamming against the bars, reaching helplessly toward her. He strained his godly muscles, pressing himself against the steel as he felt his body begin to shake. It was useless. Even a perfect body couldn’t push its way through steel.

“You bastards!” he yelled. “You colors-cursed bastards!” He struggled, pounding the bars with one hand as Blushweaver’s eyes began to dim.

And then, her BioChroma faded. Like a blazing bonfire dimming down to a single candle. It puffed out.

“No...” Lightsong said, sliding down to his knees, numb.

The priest regarded him. “So you *did* care for her,” he said. “I’m sorry that we had to do that.” He knelt down, solemn. “However, Lightsong, I need you to know that we’re serious. I do know your reputation. I know that you usually take things light-heartedly. That is a fine attribute to have in many situations. Right now, you must realize how dangerous things are.”

“Bastard...” Lightsong whispered.

“I need your Command Phrases,” the priest said. “This is important. More important than you can understand.”

“You can beat them out of me,” Lightsong growled, feeling rage slowly overwhelm his shock.

“No,” the priest said, shaking his head. “We’re actually new to all of this. We don’t know how to torture, Lightsong, and those who *do* know how to torture aren’t being very cooperative right now. Never pay a mercenary before the job is done.”

The priest waved, and the others left Blushweaver’s corpse on the ground. Then they moved to Llarimar’s cage.

“No!” Lightsong screamed.

“We are serious, Lightsong,” the man said. “Very, very, serious. We know how much you care for your high priest. You now know that we will kill him if you don’t do as we say.”

“Why?” Lightsong said. “What is this even about? The God King could order us to move the armies if he wanted to! We’d listen to him. Why do you care so much about those Command Phrases?”

The priests forced Llarimar from his cage, then pushed him to his knees. One took out a knife.

“Red panther!” Lightsong yelled, weeping. “That’s the Command Phrase. Please. Leave him be.”

The priest nodded to the others, and they put Llarimar back in his cell. They left Blushweaver’s corpse on the ground, face down in the blood.

“I hope that you haven’t lied to us, Lightsong,” the main priest said. “We are not playing games. It would be unfortunate if we discovered that you still are.” He shook his head. “We are not harsh men. But we are working for something very important. Do not test us.”

With that, he left. Lightsong barely noticed. He was still staring at Blushweaver, trying to convince himself that he was dreaming, or that she was faking, or that *something* would change to make him realize that it was all just an elaborate scam.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please, no...”

Chapter Fifty-Four

“What’s the word on the street, Tuft?” Vivenna asked, siding up to a beggar.

He snorted, holding out his cup to those few who passed in the early light. Tuft was always one of the first to arrive in the mornings. “Why do I care?” he said.

“Come on,” Vivenna said. “You kicked me out of this spot on three different occasions. I figure you owe me something.”

“I don’t owe nobody nothing,” he said, squinting at the street passers with his one eye. The other eye was simply an empty hole. He didn’t wear a patch. “Particularly don’t owe you nothing,” he said. “You were a plant all the time. Not a real beggar.”

“I...” Vivenna paused. “I wasn’t a plant, Tuft. I just thought I should know what it was like.”

“Huh?”

“Living among you,” she said. “I figured your life couldn’t be easy. But I couldn’t know—not really *know*—until I tried it for myself. So I came to the streets. Determined to live here for a time.”

“Foolish thing to do.”

“No,” she said. “The fools are those who pass, without even thinking about what it must be like to live like you. Maybe if they knew, they’d give you something.”

She reached into her pocket, pulling out one of the bright handkerchiefs. She placed one in the cup. “I don’t have any coins, but I know you can sell that.”

He grunted, eying it. “What do you mean by word on the street?”

“Disturbances,” Vivenna said. “Ones that are out of the ordinary. Perhaps involving Awakeners.”

“Go to the Third Dock Slums,” Tuft said. “Maybe you’ll find what you’re looking for there.”

#

Light peeked through the window.

Morning already? Vasher thought, head down, still hanging by his wrists.

He knew what to expect from torture. He was not new to it. He knew how to scream, how to give the torturer what he wanted. He knew how to not expend his strength in resisting too much.

He also knew that none of that was likely to do any good. How would he be after a week of torture? Blood dripped down his chest, staining his undershorts. A dozen small pains itched at his skin, slices that had been smothered in lemon juice.

Denth stood with his back facing Vasher, bloodied knives on the ground around him.

Vasher looked up, forcing a smile. “Not as fun as you thought it would be, was it, Denth?”

Denth didn’t turn.

There’s still a good man in there, Vasher thought. Even after all these years.

He’s just been beaten down. Bloodied. Cut up worse than I have been.

“Torturing me won’t bring her back,” Vasher said.

Denth turned, eyes dark. “No. It won’t.” He picked up another knife.

#

The priests pushed Siri through the passageways of the palace. They occasionally passed bodies in the dark black hallways, and she could still hear fighting in places.

What is going on? Someone was attacking the palace. But who? For a moment, she hoped it was her people—Idris, coming to save her. She discarded that quickly. The men opposing the priests had Lifeless soldiers; that ruled out Idris.

It was someone else. A third force. And they wanted to free her from the grip of the priests. Hopefully, her calls for help would not go unheeded. Tridees and his men led her forward, taking her out of the hallways, entering the colorful rooms of the inner palace. They rushed her quickly through a few doors.

The white cuffs of Siri’s dress suddenly began to bend with color. She looked up with hope as they entered a final room. The God King stood inside the room, surrounded by a group of priests and soldiers.

“Susebron!” she said, straining against her captives.

He took a step toward her, but a guard held his arm, pulling him back. *They’re touching him*, Siri thought. *All semblance of respect is gone. No need to pretend now.*

The God King looked down at his arm, frowning. He tried to tug it free, but another soldier stepped up to help hold him. Susebron glanced at this man, then at Siri, confused.

“I don’t understand either,” she said.

Tridees entered the room. “Bless the Colors,” he said. “You’ve arrived. Quickly, we must go. This place is not safe.”

“Tridees,” Siri said, turning to glare at him. “What is going on?”

He ignored her.

“I am your *queen*,” Siri said. “You will answer my question!”

He actually stopped, surprising her. He turned with an annoyed look. “A group of Lifeless has attacked the palace, Vessel. They are trying to get to the God King.”

“I figured that much out, priest,” Siri snapped. “Who are they?”

“We don’t know,” Tridees said, turning from her. As he did, a scream came from outside the room, distant. It was followed by the sound of fighting.

Tridees glanced toward the sounds. “We have to move,” he said to one of the other priests. There were, perhaps, a dozen of them in the room, as well as a half-dozen soldiers. “The palace has too many doorways and passages. It would be too easy to surround us.”

“The back exit?” the other priest said.

“If we can get to it,” Tridees responded. “Where is that squadron of reinforcements I demanded?”

“They’re not coming, your grace,” a new voice said. Siri turned to see Bluefingers, looking haggard, enter through the far door with a couple of wounded soldiers. “The insurgents have taken the east wing and are pushing this way.”

Tridees cursed.

“We have to get his majesty to safety!” Bluefingers said.

"I'm well aware of that," Tridees snapped.

"If the east wing has fallen," the other priest said. "We won't be able to get out that way."

Siri watched, helpless, trying to get Bluefinger's attention. He met her eyes, then nodded covertly, smiling. "Your grace," Bluefingers said. "We can escape through the tunnels."

The sounds of fighting were growing closer. It seemed to Siri that their room was virtually surrounded by battle.

"Perhaps," Tridees said one of his priests rushed to the door to peek out. The soldiers who had come with Bluefingers were resting by the wall, bleeding. One of them seemed to have stopped breathing.

"We should go," Bluefingers said urgently.

Tridees was quiet. Then he walked over to one of the fallen soldiers and picked up the man's sword. "Very well," he said. "Gendren, take half of the soldiers and go with the scribe. Take his majesty to safety." He glanced at Bluefingers. "Seek the docks, if you can."

"Yes, your grace," Bluefingers said, looking relieved. The priests released the God King, and he rushed to Siri, taking her in his arms. She held him, tense, trying to sort through her emotions.

Bluefingers. Going with him made sense—the look in his eyes indicated that he had a plan to save her and the God King, get them away from the priests. And yet... something felt wrong to her.

One of the priests gathered three of the soldiers then moved to the far side of the room, peeking out. They waved to Siri and the God King. The other priests joined Tridees, taking weapons off of the dead guards, their expressions grim.

Bluefingers pulled on Siri's arm. "Come, my queen," he whispered. "I believe I made a promise before. Let's get you out of this mess."

"What about the priests?" she asked.

Tridees glanced at her. "Foolish girl. Go! The insurgents are moving this direction. We will let them see us, then we will lead them another direction. They will assume we know where the God King is." The priests with him did not look hopeful. If—when—they were caught, they would be slaughtered.

"Come on!" Bluefingers hissed.

Susebron looked at her, frightened. She slowly let Bluefingers tug her and the God King to the side, to where the solitary priest and three soldiers had been joined by a group of servants in brown. Something whispered in her mind. Something... Lightsong had told her.

Don't make too many waves until you're ready to strike, he had said. Sudden and surprising, that's how you want to do things. You don't want to appear too nonthreatening—people are always suspicious of the innocent. The trick is to appear average.

Average.

It was good advice. Advice that, likely, others knew. And understood. She glanced at Bluefingers, walking beside her, urging her forward. Nervous, as always.

The fighting, she thought. Several groups have been fighting back and forth, seizing control of my room. One force belongs to the priests. The second force—the one with the Lifeless—belongs to someone else. This mysterious third party.

Someone in T'Telir had been pushing the kingdom toward war. But who would have anything at all to gain from such a disaster? Hallandren, who would expend huge resources to quell rebels, fighting a battle that they would win—but likely at great cost? It didn't make sense.

Who would gain the most if Hallandren and Idris went to war?

“Wait!” Siri Said, stopping. Things were suddenly falling into place.

“Vessel?” Bluefingers asked. Susebron laid a hand on her shoulder, looking at her with confusion. Why would the priests sacrifice themselves if they were planning to kill Susebron? Why would they simply let us go, allow us to flee, if the God King’s safety were not their prime concern?

She looked into Bluefinger’s eyes, and saw him grow more nervous. His face paled, and she knew. “How does it feel, Bluefingers?” she asked. “You’re from Pahn Kahl, yet everyone always just assumes that your people are Hallandren. The Pahn Kahl people were here first, in this land, but it was taken from you. Now you’re just another province, part of the kingdom of your conquerors.

“You want to be free, but your people have no military of your own. And so, here you are. Unable to fight. Unable to free yourselves. Considered second-class. And yet, if your oppressors were to get into a war with their enemies, it might give you an opening. A chance to break away...”

He met her eyes, then took off in a dash, fleeing from the room.

“What in the name of the colors?” Tridees said.

Siri ignored him, looking up into the God King’s face. “You were right all along,” she said. “We *should* have trusted your priests.”

“Vessel?” Tridees said, stalking over.

“We can’t go that way,” Siri said. “Bluefingers was leading us into a trap.”

The high priest opened his mouth to respond, but she met his eyes and turned her hair a deep red with anger. Bluefingers had betrayed her. The *one* person she’d thought that she could trust to help them.

“We go for the front gates, then,” Tridees said, looking over their motley collection of priests and wounded soldiers. “And try to fight our way out.”

#

It was easy for Vivenna to find the location her beggar friend had referenced. The building—a slum tenement—was surrounded by gawkers, despite the morning hour. People whispered, talking about spirits and death and ghosts from the sea. Vivenna stopped at the perimeter, trying to see what had drawn their attention.

The docks were to her left, the sea brine pungent. The dock slums, where many of the dockhands lived and drank, were a small section of buildings clustered between warehouses and shipyards. Why would Vasher have come here? He had been planning to visit the Court of Gods. From what she could hear, there had been a murder in the building near her. People whispered of ghosts, but Vivenna simply shook her head. This wasn’t what she was looking for. She’d have to—

Vivenna? The voice was faint, but she could just barely make it out. And recognize it.

“Nightblood?” she whispered.

Vivenna. Come get me.

She shivered. She wanted to turn and run—even thinking about the sword made her feel nauseous. Yet Vasher had taken Nightblood with him. She was in the right place after all.

The gawkers spoke of a murder. Was Vasher the person who had been killed?

Suddenly concerned, she shoved her way through the crowd, ignoring yells that she should stay back. She climbed up the stairs, passing door after door. In her rush, she almost missed the one with black smoke creeping out underneath it.

She froze. Then, taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room was poorly kept, the floor littered with trash, the furniture splintered and worn. Four bodies lay dead on the floor. Nightblood was sticking from the chest of the fourth, an old man with a leathery face,

Vivenna! Nightblood said happily. You found me. I'm so excited. I tried to get them to take me to the Court of Gods, but it didn't turn out well. He did draw me a little bit. That's good, right?

She fell to her knees, feeling sick.

Vivenna? Nightblood asked. I did well, right? Varatridees threw me into the ocean, but I came back out. I'm quite satisfied. You should tell me that I did well.

She didn't respond.

Oh, Nightblood said. And, Vasher is hurt, I think. We should go find him.

She looked up. "Where?" she asked, uncertain if the sword would even be able to hear her.

The God King's palace, Nightblood said. He went to get your sister out. I think he likes you, even though he says he doesn't. He says you're annoying.

Vivenna blinked. "Siri? You went after Siri?"

Yes, but Varatridees stopped us.

"Who is that?" She asked, frowning.

You call him Denth. He's Shashara's brother. I wonder if she's here too. I'm not sure why he threw me in the water. I thought he liked me.

"Vasher..." she said, climbing back to her feet, feeling woozy from the sword's influence. Vasher had been taken by Denth.

She shivered, remembering the anger in Denth's voice when he'd spoken of Vasher. She gritted her teeth and grabbed a dirty blanket off the bedroll and wrapped it around Nightblood so that she wouldn't have to touch him.

Ah, Nightblood said. You don't really need to do that. I had the old man clean me off after he got me out of the water.

She ignored the sword, managing to lift the bundle with only a small amount of nausea. Then she left, heading for the Court of Gods.

#

Lightsong sat, staring at the stones in front of him. A little trickle of Blushweaver's blood was making its way down a crack in the rock.

"Your grace?" Llarimar asked quietly. He stood up against the bars between their cages.

Lightsong didn't respond.

"Your grace, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"What good is godhood?" Lightsong whispered.

Silence. Lanterns flickered on either side of the small chamber. Nobody had cleaned up Blushweaver's body, though they had left a couple of priests and Lifeless behind to watch Lightsong. They still needed him, should it turn out that he'd lied about the Command Phrases.

He hadn't.

"What?" Llarimar finally asked.

"What good is it?" Lightsong said. "We aren't gods. Gods don't die like that. A little cut. Not even as wide as my palm."

"I'm sorry," Llarimar said. "She was a good woman, even among gods."

"She wasn't a god," Lightsong said. "None of us are. I've always known it. Nobody pays attention to me. Shouldn't they listen to the one they worship? Particularly if he's telling you *not* to worship him?"

"I..." Llarimar seemed at a loss for words.

"They should have seen," Lightsong hissed. "They should have seen the truth about me! An idiot. Not a god, but a scribe. A foolish little scribe who was allowed to play god for a few years! A coward."

"You're no coward," Llarimar said.

"I couldn't save her," Lightsong said. "I couldn't do anything. I just sat there and screamed. Maybe if I'd been more brave, I'd have joined with her and taken control of the armies. But I hesitated. And now she's dead."

Silence.

"You were a scribe," Llarimar said quietly to the damp air. "And you were one of the best men I'd ever known. You were my brother."

Lightsong looked up.

Llarimar stared out through the bars, looking toward one of the flickering lanterns set in the stark stone wall. "I was a priest, even then. I worked in the palace of Kindwinds the Honest. I saw how he lied to play the games of politics. The longer I spent in that palace, the more my faith waned."

He fell silent for a moment, then he looked up. "And then you died. Died rescuing my daughter. That's the girl you see in your visions, Lightsong. The description is perfect. She was your favorite niece. Still would be, I assume. If you hadn't..." He shook his head. "When we found you dead, I lost hope. I was going to resign my position. I knelt above your body, weeping. And then, the Colors started to glow. You lifted your head, body changing, getting larger, muscles growing strong.

"I knew it at that moment. I knew that if a man like *you* were chosen to Return—a man who had died to save another—then the Iridescent Tones were real. The visions were real. And the gods were real. You gave me my faith back, Stennimar."

He met Lightsong's eyes. "You *are* a god. To me, at least. It doesn't have to do with how easily you can be killed, how much Breath you have, or how you look. It has to do with who you are and what you mean."

Chapter Fifty-Five

“There is fighting at the front gates, your grace,” the bloodied soldier said. “The insurgents are fighting each other there. We... we might be able to get out.”

Siri felt a stab of relief. Finally, something going right.

Tridees turned toward her. “If we can get into the city, the people will rally around their God King. We should be safe there.”

“Where did they get so many Lifeless?” Siri asked.

Tridees shook his head. They had paused in a room near the front of the palace, desperate, yet uncertain. Breaking through the Pahn Kahl fortification of the Court of Gods was bound to be difficult.

She looked up at Susebron. His priests treated him like a child—they gave him respect, but they obviously didn’t care to ask his opinion. For his part, he stood, hand on his shoulder. She saw thoughts and ideas working behind those eyes of his, but there was nothing for him to write upon.

“Vessel,” Tridees said, drawing her attention. “You need to know something.”

She looked at him.

“I hesitate to mention this,” Tridees said, “as you are not a priest. But... if you survive but we do not...”

“Speak it,” she commanded.

“You cannot bear the God King a child,” he said. “Like all Returned, he is unable to bear children. We have not yet figured out how the First Returned managed to have a child all those years ago. In fact...”

“You don’t even think he did,” she said. “You think the Royal line is a fabrication.” *Of course he’d dispute that*, she thought. *He wouldn’t want to give credibility to Idris’s claim.*

He flushed. “It’s what people believe that is important in this matter. Regardless, we... have a child...”

“Yes,” Siri said. “A Returned child you are going to make the next God King.”

He looked at her, shocked. “You *know*?”

“You’re planning to kill him, aren’t you?” she hissed. “Take Susebron’s Breath and leave him dead!”

“Colors, no!” Tridees said, shocked. “How... how could you think... No, we’d never do such a thing! Vessel, the God King needs only give away the treasure of Breaths he holds, investing them into the next God King, and then he can live the rest of his life—so long as he should desire—in peace.”

Siri raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That’s foolish, Tridees. If the God King gives away his Breath, he will die.”

“There is a way,” the priest said.

“That is supposed to be impossible.”

“No, not at all. Think about it. The God King has *two* sources of Breath. One is his innate, divine Breath—that which makes him Returned. The other is the Breath given to him as the Treasure of Peacegiver, fifty-thousand Breath strong. *That* he could use as any Awakener could, as long as he is careful about the Commands he uses. He could also survive quite easily as a Returned without it. Any of the other gods could do the same, should they gain Breath beyond the one a week which sustains them.”

“You keep them from realizing that, though,” Siri said.

“Not *keep* specifically,” the priest said, looking away. “It does not come up. Why would the Returned care about Awakening? They have everything they need.”

“Except knowledge,” Siri said. “You keep them in ignorance. I’m surprised you didn’t cut out all of their tongues to hide your precious secrets.”

Tridees looked back at her, face growing harsh. “You judge us still. We do what we do because it is what we *must*, Vessel. The power he holds in that Treasure—fifty thousand Breaths—could destroy kingdoms. It is too great a weapon; we were charged as our single, divine mission to keep it safe and *not* let it be used. We—”

A sound came from a nearby room. Tridees looked, concerned, and Susebron’s grip on Siri’s shoulder tightened.

She looked up, concerned. “Tridees,” she said. “I need to know. How? How can Susebron give away his Breath? He can speak no Command!”

“I—”

At that moment, Lifeless burst through the doorway to their left. Tridees cut off, glancing at them. He yelled for her to flee, but another group of the creatures came through the other way. Siri cursed, grabbing Susebron’s hand, pulling him toward another doorway. She pulled it open.

Bluefingers stood on the other side. He looked into her eyes, face grim. Lifeless stood behind him.

Siri felt a stab of terror, backing away. Sounds of fighting came from behind her, but she was too focused on the Lifeless charging around Bluefingers toward her and Susebron. The God King cried out, a tongueless, wordless groan of anger.

And then the priests were there. They threw themselves in front of the Lifeless, trying to beat them back, trying desperately to protect their God King. Siri clung to her husband in the ruddy room, watching as the priests were slaughtered by emotionless warriors with gray faces. Priest after priest jumped in the way, some with weapons, others simply holding up their arms, bearing no weapons.

She saw Tridees grit his teeth, terror showing in his eyes as he ran forward, trying to attack a Lifeless. He died like the others. His secrets died with him.

The Lifeless walked over the corpses. Susebron pushed Siri behind her, arms shaking as he backed them toward a wall, facing down the bloodied monsters. The Lifeless finally stopped, and Bluefingers walked around them, looking past Susebron toward her.

“And now, Vessel, I believe we were going somewhere.”

#

“I’m sorry, miss,” the guard said, holding up a hand. “All access to the Court of Gods is forbidden.”

Vivenna ground her teeth. “This is unacceptable,” she said. “I’m to report to the Goddess Allmother at once! Can’t you see how many Breaths I hold? I’m not someone you can just turn away!”

The guards remained firm. There were a good two dozen of them at the gates, forbidding anyone who tried to enter. Vivenna turned away. Whatever Vasher had done inside the night before, he’d apparently caused quite a stir. People clustered around the gateway to the Court, demanding answers, asking if something was wrong. Vivenna made her through them, leaving the gates behind.

Go to the side, Nightblood said. Vasher never asks if he can enter. He just goes in.

Vivenna glanced at the side of the plateau. There was a short ledge of ground running around the outside of the wall. With the guards so distracted by the people wanting in...

She slipped to the side. There were guards on the wall above—she could feel them with her life sense. They were moving about, and it was early in the morning yet, the sun not having crested the eastern mountains. She might be able to sneak by them.

She waited until one patrol had passed, then Awakened one of the tapestries. “Lift me,” she said, dropping a drained handkerchief. The tapestry wrapped around her, drawing her into the air and setting her on the walltop. She glanced about, recovering her breath. To the side, a ways away, a group of guards was pointing at her.

You’re not any better at this than Vasher is, Nightblood noted. You people can’t sneak at all!

She cursed, Awakening the tapestry again, having it lower her down into the Court. She recovered her breath, then took off running across the grassy lawn. Few people were about, but that only made her stand out even more.

The palace, Nightblood said. *Go there.*

That was where she *was* going. However, the longer she held the sword, the more she was coming to realize that it said whatever it wanted, no matter whether or not its comments had any relevance. Like a child, speaking or asking questions as they occurred to it.

The front of the palace was very well guarded by a group of men who weren’t wearing uniforms. *He’s in there*, Nightblood said. *I can feel him. Third floor. Where he and I were before.*

Vivenna got an image of the room shoved into her head. She frowned. *Remarkably useful*, she thought, *for an evil weapon of destruction.*

I’m not evil, Nightblood said, voice not defensive, simply informative. As if reminding her of something she’d forgotten. I destroy evil. I think maybe we should destroy those men up ahead. They look evil. You should pull me out.

For some reason, she doubted that would be a good idea.

Come on, Nightblood said.

The soldiers were pointing at her. She glanced behind, and saw others rushing across the lawn. *Austre, forgive me*, she thought. Then, gritting her teeth, she threw Nightblood—blanket and all—toward the guards in front of the building.

They halted. To a man, they looked down at the sword as it rolled free of the blanket, silver sheath glistening on the lawn. *Well, I guess this works too*, Nightblood noted, voice feeling distant now.

One of the soldiers picked up the sword. Vivenna dashed to the side, ignored by the soldiers. They started to fight.

Can't go that way, she thought, eying the front entrance, not wanting to risk pushing her way through fighting men. So instead she ran to the side of the massive palace. The lower levels were made of the step-like black blocks which gave the palace its pyramid-like feel. Above these, it grew into a more traditional fortress, with steep walls. There were windows, if she could get to them.

She twitched her fingers, making the tassels on her sleeves clench and unclench. Then she jumped, her Awakened leggings tossing her up a few extra feet. She reached up and made the tassels grab the edge of the large, black block. The tassels held, just barely, gripping the stone like foot-long fingers. With difficulty, Vivenna pulled herself up onto the block.

Men yelled and screamed below, and she spared a glance. The guard who had grabbed Nightblood was fighting off the others, a small trail of black smoke swirling around him. As she watched, he backed into the palace itself, the other men following him.

So much evil, Nightblood said, like a woman tisk'ing as she cleaned cobwebs from her ceiling.

Vivenna turned away, feeling guilty for giving the sword to the men. She jumped up and pulled herself onto the next block, continuing as the soldiers who had seen her from the walls arrived. They wore the colors of the city watch, and while a couple of them got caught up in the Nightblood fight, most of them ignored it.

Vivenna continued her way up.

To the right, Nightblood said distantly. That window on the third floor. Two over. He's in there...

And his voice faded. Vivenna looked up, glancing at the window indicated. She still had to climb up a number of blocks then somehow reach a window that was an entire story up a sheer, steep wall. There did appear to be some stonework that could make for handholds, but she grew dizzy at even thinking about climbing them.

An arrow snapped against the stone beside her, making her jump. Several guards below had bows.

Colors! she thought, and pulling herself upon the next block. She heard a whoosh behind her, and cringed, feeling as if she should have been struck. Nothing happened. She pulled herself up onto the block, then twisted around.

She barely caught sight of her cloak holding an arrow. She started, remembering that she had Awakened it. It dropped the arrow, then returned to normal.

Handy, that, she thought, climbing up the last block. By the time she got up on top of it, her arms were sore and tired, and her legs were doing little better. Fortunately, her Awakened fingers were still gripping as well as ever. She took a deep breath, then began to climb up the outside of the black fortress, using the handholds.

And decided, for her own sanity, that she'd probably better avoid looking down.

#

Lightsong stared ahead. Too much information. Too much was happening. Blushweaver's death and Llarimar's revelation, all in such quick succession.

He sat in his cell, arms wrapped around himself, gold and red robes dirtied from crawling through the tunnel, then sitting in his cage.

The priests talked quietly on the far side of the room. Oddly, as he glanced at them, something took his mind away from everything else. A diversion, of sorts.

He finally realized what was bothering him about them. He should have seen it earlier. It had to do with color—not the color of their clothing, but the color of their faces. It was just slightly off. The deviation in one man would have been easy to ignore. But all of them together... it was a pattern.

No regular person could have noticed it. To a man with his Heightenings, it seemed obvious, once he knew what to look for.

These men were not from Hallandren.

Anyone can wear a set of robes, he realized. *That doesn't mean that they're priests*. In fact, judging by the faces, he realized the men must be from Pahn Kahl.

And it all made sense to him, that quickly. They'd all been played for fools.

#

"Bluefingers," Siri demanded. "Talk to me. What are you going to do with us?"

The labyrinth of the God King's palace was complex, and it was sometimes difficult even still for her to find her way about. They'd traveled down a stairwell but now seemed to be going up a different one.

Bluefingers didn't answer. He walked with his customary nervousness, wringing his hands. The fighting in the hallways seemed to be decreasing. In fact, once they left the stairwell, this newest hallway was dreadfully quiet.

Siri walked with Susebron's nervous arm around her waist. She didn't know what he was thinking—they hadn't been able to pause long enough for him to write anything. He gave her a comforting smile, but she knew that this all must be just as terrifying for him as it was for her. Probably more so.

"You can't do this, Bluefingers," Siri said, snapping at the little balding man.

"It is the only way we'd ever be able to break free," Bluefingers said, not turning, but finally responding to her.

"But, you can't!" Siri said. "The Idrians are innocent!"

Bluefingers shook his head. "How many of my people would you sacrifice, if it would mean the freedom for yours?"

"None!" she said.

"I should like to see you say that if our positions were reversed," he said, still not meeting her eyes. "I'm... sorry for your pain. But your people are *not* innocent. They're the same as the Hallandren. In the Manywar, you rolled over us, made us your workers and slaves. Only at the end, when the Royal family fled, did Idris and Hallandren split."

"Please," Siri said.

Susebron suddenly punched a Lifeless.

The God King growled, struggling as he kicked at another. There were dozens of them. He looked at her, waving a hand, motioning for her to flee. She didn't intend to leave him. Instead, she tried to grab Bluefingers, but a Lifeless was too quick. It took her arm, holding her firm, even when she batted at it. A couple of men in the robes of Susebron's priesthood came out of a stairwell ahead of them, carrying lanterns. Siri, looking closely, immediately recognized them as being from Pahn Kahl. They were too short and their skin was just faintly off.

I've been a fool, she thought.

Bluefingers had played the game so well. He'd driven a wedge between her and the priests from the start. Most of her concern and worry, she'd gotten from him—and it had been reinforced by the priest's arrogance. All part of his plan to someday use her to gain freedom for his people.

"We have Lightsong's security phrase," one of the new men said to Bluefingers. "We have checked it, and it works. We changed it to the new one. The rest of the Lifeless are ours."

Siri glanced to the side. The Lifeless had pulled Susebron to the ground. He yelled—though it came out as more a moan. Siri yanked, trying to escape her Lifeless and help him. She began to cry.

To the side, Bluefingers nodded to his accomplices, looking fatigued. "Very well. Give the Command. Order the Lifeless to march on Idris."

"It will be done," the man said, laying a hand on Bluefingers' shoulder.

Bluefingers nodded, looking morose as the others withdrew.

"What do you have to be sad about?" she spat.

Bluefingers turned toward her. "My friends now are the only ones who know the Command Phrases for Hallandren's Lifeless army. Once those Lifeless march on Idris—with orders to destroy everything they find there—my friends will kill themselves with poison. There won't be ably left alive who can stop the creatures."

Austre... Siri thought, feeling numb. *Lord of Colors...*

"Take the God King below," Bluefingers said, waving to several Lifeless. "Hold him until it is time." They were joined by a Pahn Kahl scribe wearing fake priest's robes as they towed Susebron toward the stairwell. Siri reached for him. He continued to struggle, reaching back, but the Lifeless were too strong. She listened to his yells echoing down the stairwell.

"What will you do with him?" Siri asked, tears cold on her cheeks.

Bluefingers glanced at her, but once again, would not meet her eyes. "There will be many in the Hallandren government who see the Lifeless charge as a political faux pas, and they may seek to stop the war. Unless Hallandren actually commits itself to this fight, then our sacrifice will be useless."

"I don't understand."

"We will take the bodies of Lightsong and Blushweaver—the two gods with the Command Phrases—and leave them in the Lifeless barracks, surrounded by dead Idrians we took from the city. Then we will leave the corpse of the God King to be discovered in the palace dungeons. Those who investigate will assume that Idrian assassins attacked and killed him—we've hired enough mercenaries from the Idrian slums that it shouldn't be too difficult to believe. Those of my scribes who survive the night will confirm the story."

Siri blinked out tears. Everyone will assume that Blushweaver and Lightsong sent the armies as retribution for the death of the God King.

And with the king dead, the people will be furious.

"I wish you hadn't gotten involved in all of this," Bluefingers said, motioning for her Lifeless captors to pull her along. "It would have been easier for me if you'd been able to keep yourself from getting pregnant."

"I'm not!" she said.

"The people think you are," he said with a sigh as they walked toward the stairwell. "And that's enough. We have to break this government *and* we have to make the Idrians mad enough to want to destroy the Hallandren. I think your people will do better in this war everyone says,

especially if the Lifeless march without leadership. Your people will ambush them, making sure this is not an easy war for either side.”

He glanced at her. “But, for this war to work right, the Idrians have to *want* to fight. Otherwise, they’ll flee and vanish into those highlands. No, both sides have to hate each other, pull as many allies into the battle as possible so that everyone is too distracted ...”

And what better way to make Idris willing to fight, she thought with horror, than to kill me? Both sides will see the death of my child as an act of war. This won’t simply be a fight for domination. It will be a drawn out war of hatred. The fighting could last for decades.

And nobody will ever realize that our real enemy—the one who started it all—is the peaceful, quiet province to the south of Hallandren.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Vivenna hung outside the window, breathing deeply, sweating heavily. She'd peeked inside. Denth was in there, as was Tonk Fah. Vasher hung from a rope at the ceiling. He was bloodied, and he held no Breath, but he seemed to be alive.

Can I stop both Denth and Tonk Fah? she thought. Her arms were tired. She had a length of Awakened rope in her pocket. What if she threw it and missed? She had seen Denth fight. He was faster than she'd thought possible. She would have to surprise him. And if she missed, she would die.

What am I doing? she thought. Hanging from a wall, about to challenge two professional soldiers?

Her recent past gave her the strength to push down her fear. They might kill her, but that would be a quick end. She'd survived betrayals, deaths of friends, and a time going mad from the fatigue, hunger, and terror of living on the streets. She'd been pushed down, forced to admit that she'd betrayed her people. There wasn't really any more they could do to her.

For some reason, those thoughts gave her power. Surprised at her own determination, she quietly recovered the Breath from her cloak and her leggings. She Awakened a pair of rope bits, telling them to grab when thrown. She said a quiet prayer to Austre, then pulled herself up through the window and into the room.

Vasher was groaning. Tonk Fah was dozing in the corner. Denth, holding a bloody knife, looked up immediately as she hopped through the window. The look of utter shock on his face was, in itself, almost worth everything she'd been through. She tossed the rope at him then threw the other at Tonk Fah.

Denth reacted immediately, cutting the rope out of the air with his dagger. The pieces of it twisted and wiggled, but weren't long enough to grab anything. The one she threw at Tonk Fah, however, hit. He cried out, coming awake as it wrapped around his face and neck.

Vivenna pulled to a halt beside Vasher's swinging body. Denth had his sword out; he'd pulled it free more quickly than she could track. She gulped, then pulled out her own sword, holding it forward as Vasher had taught her. Denth paused just briefly in surprise.

That was enough. She swung—not for Denth, but for the rope holding Vasher to the ceiling. He fell with a grunt, and Denth struck, slamming the point of his dueling blade through her shoulder.

She fell, gasping in pain.

Denth stepped back. "Well, Princess," he said, warily holding his blade. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Tonk Fah made a gagging sound as the rope twisted around his neck, choking him. He struggled to pull it free with little success.

Once, the pain in her shoulder might have been debilitating. But after the beatings she'd taken on the street, it seemed somewhat familiar to her. She looked up, and met Denth's eyes.

"Was this supposed to be a rescue?" Denth asked. "Because honestly, I'm not very impressed."

Tonk Fah knocked over his stool in his thrashing. Denth glanced at him, then back at Vivenna. There was a moment of silence, save for Tonk Fah's weakening struggles. Finally, Denth cursed and jumped over to cut at the rope on his friend's neck.

"You all right?" Vasher asked from beside her. She was shocked by how solid his voice sounded, despite his bloodied body.

She nodded.

"They're going to send Lifeless marching on your homeland," he said. "We've been wrong about this all along. I don't know who's behind it, but I think they're winning the fight for the palace."

Denth finally got the rope cut free.

"You need to run," Vasher said, wiggling his hands free from their rope bonds. "Get back to your people, tell them not to fight the Lifeless. They need to flee the country, head through the northern passes, hide in the highlands. *Do not fight* or bring other kingdoms into the war."

Vivenna glanced back at Denth, who was smacking Tonk Fah back awake. Then she closed her eyes. "Your Breath to mine," she said, drawing back in the Breath from her hand tassels. She reached out, placing her hand on Vasher's back.

"Vivenna..." he said.

"My life to yours," she said. "My Breath become yours."

Her world became a thing of dullness. Beside her, Vasher gasped, then began to convulse at the bestowal of Breath. Denth stood up, spinning.

"You do it, Vasher," Vivenna whispered. "You'll be far better at it than I will be."

"Stubborn woman," Vasher said as he overcame the convulsions. He reached out, as if to restore her Breath to her, but he noticed Denth.

Denth smiled, raising his blade. Vivenna put a hand to her shoulder, stopping the blood flow, and she began to push herself back toward the window—though, without Breath, she wasn't certain what she intended to do there.

Vasher stood up, taking her sword in his hand. He wore only the bloody undershorts, but his stance was firm. He slowly wrapped the rope that had been holding him up around his waist, forming his characteristic belt.

How does he do it? she thought. Where does his strength come from?

"I should have hurt you more," Denth said. "I took my time. Savoring it too much."

Vasher snorted, tying off the belt. Denth seemed to be waiting, anticipating something.

"I've always found it funny that we bleed, just like regular men," Denth said. "We might be stronger, but we die just the same."

"Not the same," Vasher said, raising Vivenna's blade. "Other men die with far more honor than we, Denth."

Denth smiled. Vivenna could see excitement in his eyes. He always claimed that there was no way Vasher could have beat his friend, Arsteel, in a duel, she thought. He wants to fight Vasher. He wants to prove to himself that Vasher isn't as good as he is.

Blades whipped into motion. And after just a quick exchange, Vivenna could see that there was no contest. Denth was the better. Perhaps it was Vasher's wounds. Perhaps it was the growing anger she saw in Vasher's eyes as he fought, marring his ability to be calm and collected during the fight. Maybe he really just wasn't as good as Denth. However, as Vivenna watched, she realized that Vasher was going to lose.

I didn't do all of this so you could just die! she thought, rising to try to help.

A hand fell on her shoulder, pushing her back down. "I don't think so," Tonk Fah said, looming over her. "Nice trick with the rope, by the way. Very clever. I know a few tricks with ropes myself. Did you know, for instance, that a rope can be used burn a person's flesh?" He smiled. Then, he leaned down. "Mercenary humor, you see."

His cloak slid slightly off his shoulder, falling against her cheek.

It couldn't be, she thought. I escaped from him. I tried to Awaken his cloak, but used a bad Command. Could he have been dumb enough to keep wearing it?

She smiled, glancing over her shoulder. Vasher had backed against the far wall, to the window, and he was sweating profusely, bloody drops falling to the ground. Denth forced him back again, and Vasher stepped up on the table by the far wall, seeking high ground.

She looked back at Tonk Fah, his cloak still touching her cheek. "Your Breath to mine," she said.

She felt a sudden, welcoming burst of Breath.

"Huh?" Tonk Fah said.

"Nothing," she said. "Just... Attack and grab Denth!" Command made, visualization made, the cloak began to quiver. Tonk Fah's shirt drained of color, and his eyes widened with surprise. The cloak suddenly whipped into the air, yanking Tonk Fah to the side causing him to stumble away from her.

That's why I'm the princess, and you're just a mercenary, she thought with satisfaction, rolling over.

Tonk Fah cried out. Denth spun at the sound, crying out as the very large, very uncoordinated Pahn Kahl man rammed into him, cloak whipping about.

Denth slammed backward, catching Vasher by surprise as they rammed together. Tonk Fah grunted. Denth cursed.

And Vasher was shoved backward out the window.

Vivenna blinked in surprise. That wasn't what she'd been intending. Denth cut away the cloak, pushing Tonk Fah back, cursing to himself.

All was silent in the room for a moment.

"Go grab our squad of Lifeless!" Denth said. "Now!"

"You think he'll live?" Tonk Fah asked.

"He just fell out a three story window, plummeting toward certain doom," Denth said. "Of course he'll live! Send the squad for the front doors to slow him!" Denth glanced at Vivenna. "You, Princess, are far too much trouble for what you're worth."

"So people are fond of telling me," she said with a sigh, raising her bloodied hand to her shoulder again, too exhausted to be terrified like she probably should be.

#

Vasher fell toward the hard stone blocks below. He watched the window retreat above him. *Almost*, he thought with frustration. *I just about had him!*

Wind whistled. He screamed in frustration, pulling free the rope at his waist, Vivenna's Breath a lively strength within him.

“Grab things,” he Commanded, whipping it out, drawing color from his blood-stained shorts. They bled to grey, and the rope wrapped around an outcropping of stone on the side of the palace. It pulled taught, and he ran sideways along the ebony blocks, slowing his fall.

“Your Breath to mine,” he yelled as his momentum slowed. The rope dropped free and he landed on the first block. “Become as my leg and give it strength!” he Commanded, drawing color from the blood on his chest. The rope twisted down, wrapping around his leg and foot as he leaped off. He landed on the next block, one foot down, the coiled rope—and its strange, inhuman muscles—bearing the brunt of the shock.

Four hops and he hit the ground. A group of soldiers stood amidst some bodies at the front gates, looking confused. Vasher barreled toward them, translucent, colorless blood dropping from his skin as he drew his Breath back from his rope.

He scooped a sword off of a fallen soldier. The men in front of the gates turned and readied their weapons. He didn’t have the time, or the patience, for pleasantries. He struck, cutting men down with quick efficiency. He wasn’t as good as Denth, but he was very well practiced.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of men. Maybe too many to fight. Vasher cursed, spinning between them, dropping another one. He bent down, slapping his hand against the waist of a fallen soldier, touching both shirt and pants.

“Fight for me, as if you were me,” he Commanded, draining the man’s shoes completely grey. Vasher spun, blocking a sword strike. Another came from the side, and another. He couldn’t block them all.

A sword flashed in the air, blocking a weapon that would have hit Vasher. The dead man’s shirt and trousers, having pulled themselves free, stood holding a blade. They struck, as if controlled by an invisible person inside, blocking and attacking with skill. Vasher put his back to the Awakened construct. When he had a chance, he made another one, draining away his remaining Breath.

They fought in a trio, Vasher and his two sets of Awakened clothing. The guards cursed, much more wary now. Vasher eyed them, planning an attack. At that moment, a troop of some fifty Lifeless barreled around the corner, charging toward him.

Colors! Vasher thought. He growled in rage, striking and taking down another soldier.

Colors, colors, colors!

You shouldn’t swear, a voice said in his head. Shashara told me that was evil.

Vasher spun toward the sound. A little line of smoke was trailing out from beneath the closed front doors of the palace.

Aren’t you going to thank me? Nightblood said. I came to save you.

One of his sets of clothing fell, the leg cut free by a clever strike from a soldier. Vasher reached back, drawing the Breath back from the second set of clothing, then stepped with an unclothed toe on the fallen set, drawing the Breath from it as well. The soldiers backed away, wary, apparently wanting to let the Lifeless take him.

And in that moment of peace, Vasher charged for the gates to the palace. He threw his shoulder against the door, slamming it open, skidding into the entryway.

A large group of men lay dead on the ground. Nightblood sprouted from one man’s chest, as usual, hilt pointing toward the sky. Vasher hesitated only briefly. He could hear Lifeless charging up behind him.

He ran forward and grabbed Nightblood’s hilt and pulled the sword free, leaving the sheath behind in the body.

The blade sprayed a wave of black liquid as he swing it. The liquid dissolved into smoke before touching walls or floor, like water in an oven. Smoke twisted, some rising from the blade, some falling in a stream to the floor, dripping like black blood.

Destroy! Nightblood's voice boomed in his head. *The evil must be destroyed!* A pain shot up Vasher's arm, and he felt his Breath being leached away, sucked into the blade, fueling its hunger. Drawing the weapon had a terrible cost. At that moment, he didn't really care. He spun toward the charging Lifeless and—enraged—attacked.

Each creature he struck with the blade immediately flashed and became smoke. A single scratch and the bodies dissolved like paper being consumed by an invisible fire, leaving behind only large stain of blackness in the air. Vasher spun among them, striking with wrath, killing Lifeless after Lifeless. Black smoke churned around him, and his arm twisted with pain as vein-like tendrils climbed up the hilt around his forearm—like black blood vessels that latched onto his skin, feeding off his Breath.

In a matter of minutes, the Breath Vivenna had given him had been reduced by a half. Yet in those moments, he destroyed all fifty Lifeless. The soldiers outside pulled to a halt, watching the display. Vasher stood amidst a churning mass of deep ebony smoke. It slowly rose to the air, the only remnants of the fifty creatures he had destroyed.

The soldiers ran away.

Vasher screamed, charging toward the side of the room. He slammed Nightblood through a wall. The stone dissolved just as easily as flesh had, puffing away before him. He burst through the dissolving black smoke, entering the next room. He didn't bother with a stairwell. He simply jumped onto a table and rammed Nightblood into the ceiling.

A circle ten feet wide vanished. Dark, mist-like smoke fell around him like streaks of paint. He Awakened his rope again then tossed it up, using it to pull himself up onto the next floor. A moment later, did it again, climbing onto the third floor.

He spun, slashing through walls, bellowing as he ran back toward Denth. The pain in his arm was incredible, and his Breath was draining away at an alarming rate. Once it was gone, Nightblood would kill him.

Everything was growing fuzzy. He slashed through a final wall, finding the room where he had been tortured.

It was empty.

He cried out, arm shaking. *Destroy... evil...* Nightblood said in his mind, all lightness gone from the tone, all familiarity. It boomed like a command. An awful, inhuman thing. The longer Vasher held the sword, the faster it drained his Breath.

Gasping, he threw the sword aside and fell to his knees. It skidded, tearing a rip in the ground that puffed away into smoke, but hit a wall with a pling and fell still. Smoke rose from the blade.

Vasher knelt, arm twitching. The black veins on his skin slowly evaporated. He was left with just barely enough Breath to reach the First Heightening. Another few seconds, and Nightblood would have sucked the rest away. He shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

Something fell to the carpet in front of him. A dueling blade. Vasher looked up.

"Stand up," Denth said, eyes hard. "We're going to finish what we started."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Bluefingers led Siri—held by several Lifeless—up to the fourth floor of the palace. The top floor. They entered a room decorated with lavish colors, even for Hallandren. Lifeless guards there let them pass, bowing their heads to Bluefingers.

All the Lifeless in the city are controlled by Bluefingers and his scribes, she thought. But even before that, the scribes had amazing power over the bureaucracy and workings of the kingdom. Did the Hallandrens realize that they were dooming themselves by regulating the Pahn Kahl people to such lowly—yet important—positions?

“My people will not fall for this,” Siri found herself saying as she was pulled to the front of the room. “They won’t fight Hallandren. They’ll retreat through the passes. Take refuge in the highland valleys or one of the outer kingdoms.”

The front of the room held a black block of stone, shaped like an altar. Siri frowned. From behind, a group of Lifeless entered the room, carrying the corpses of several priests. She saw Tridees’s body among them.

What? Siri thought.

Bluefingers turned toward her. “We’ll make certain they’re angry,” he said. “Trust me. When this is through, Princess, Idris will fight until either it or Hallandren is destroyed.”

#

They tossed someone into the cell next to Lightsong. He looked up with tired eyes, uncaring. It was another Returned. Which of the Gods had they taken captive now?

The God King, he thought. Interesting.

He looked down again. What did it matter? He’d failed Blushweaver. He’d failed everyone. The Lifeless armies were probably already marching on Idris. Hallandren and Idris would fight and the Pahn Kahl would have their revenge. It had been three hundred years coming.

#

Vasher stood up with difficulty. He held the sword in a weak hand, looking at Denth, still shaken by his use of Nightblood. The empty black hallway was now open around them. Vasher had destroyed several of the walls.

Corpses littered the floor, the result of the conflicts which had occurred when Denth’s men had taken over the palace.

“I’ll let you die easily,” Denth said, raising his blade. “Just tell me the truth. You never beat Arsteel in a duel, did you?”

Vasher raised his own blade. The cuts, the pain in his arm, the tiredness of being awake so long... it was all wearing on him. Adrenaline could only get him so far, and even *his* body could only take so much.

“Have it your way,” Denth said, attacking.

Vasher backed away, forced to the defensive. Denth had always been better at swordplay. Vasher had been better at research, but what had that earned him? Discoveries that had caused the Manywar.

He fought. He fought well, he knew, considering how tired he was. But it did little good. Denth drove his blade through Vasher's left shoulder—Denth's favorite place for a first strike. It allowed his opponent to keep fighting, wounded. Drew out the fight for Denth's enjoyment.

"You *never* beat Arsteel," Denth whispered.

#

"You're going to kill me on an altar," Siri said, standing in the room, held by Lifeless. Around her, other Lifeless placed bodies on the floor. Priests. "It doesn't make sense, Bluefingers. You don't worship their religion. Why do this?"

Bluefingers stood to the side, holding a knife. She could see the shame in his eyes. "Bluefingers," she said, forcing her voice to remain even, her hair to stay black. "Bluefingers, you don't have to do this."

Bluefingers finally looked at her. "After all I've already done, do you think one more death will mean anything to me?"

"After all you've done," she said, "do you really think one more death will matter for your cause?"

He glanced at the altar. "Yes," he said. "You know how the Idrians whisper of the things that go on in the Court of Gods. Your people hate and distrust the Hallandren priests; they speak of murders done on dark altars in the backs of the palaces. Well, we are going to let a group of those Idrian mercenaries see this, once you are dead. We'll show them that we were too late to save you, that the priests had already killed you on one of their twisted altars. We'll show them the dead priests we killed trying to save you.

"The Idrians will riot in the city. They're strained to snapping anyway—we have you to thank for that. The city will be in chaos, and there will be a slaughter like hasn't been seen since the Manywar. Those that live will return to Idris to tell the tale. They'll let everyone know that the Hallandrens only wanted a princess of the royal blood so that they could sacrifice her to their God King. It is exaggerated and foolish to think that the Hallandrens would really do such a thing, but the Idrians will believe it. You know they will."

And she did. She'd heard similar stories told in Idris from her childhood. Hallandren was distant to her people: frightening, bizarre. Siri struggled, feeling even more worried.

Bluefingers glanced back at her. "I truly am sorry."

#

I am nothing, Lightsong thought. Why couldn't I save her? Why couldn't I protect her?

He was crying again. Oddly, someone else was too. The man in the cell next to him. The God King. Susebron moaned with frustration, pounding against the bars of his cage. He didn't speak, though, or denounce his captors.

I wonder why that is, Lightsong thought.

Men approached the God King's cell. Pahn Kahl men, with weapons. Their expressions were grim.

Lightsong found it hard to care.

You are a god. Llarimar's voice still challenged him. The high priest lay in his own cell, to Lightsong's left, eyes closed against the terrors around them.

You are a god. To me at least.

Lightsong shook his head. No. I'm nothing! No god. Not even a good man.

You are... to me...

Water splashed against him. Lightsong shook his head, shocked. Thunder sounded, distant, in his head. Nobody else seemed to notice.

It was growing dark.

What?

He was on a ship. Tossing, churning, on a dark sea. Lightsong stood on the deck, trying to stay upright on the slick boards. Part of him knew it was simply a hallucination, that he was still back in the prison cell, but it felt real. Very real.

The waves churned, black sky ripped by lightning ahead, and the ship's motion slammed his face against the outside wall of the ship's cabin section. Light from a pole-mounted lantern flickered uncertainly. It seemed weak compared to the lighting which was so violent and angry.

Lightsong blinked. His face was pressed up against something painted on the wood. A red panther, glistening in the lanternlight and the rain.

The name of the ship, he remembered, the Red Panther.

He wasn't Lightsong. Or he was, but he was a much pudgier version of himself. A man accustomed to being a scribe. To working long hours counting coins. Checking legers.

Seeking for lost money. That's what he'd done. People hired him to discover where they'd been cheated or if a contract hadn't been paid right. His job was to look through the books, searching out hidden or confusing twists of math. A detective. Just not the sort he had expected.

Waves crashed against the boat. Llarimar, looking a few years younger, yelled for help from the prow. Deckhands rushed to his aid. It wasn't Llarimar's ship, or even Lightsong's. This had been borrowed it for a simple pleasure trip. Sailing was a hobby of Llarimar's.

The storm had come suddenly. Lightsong lurched back to his feet, barely managing to stay up as he made his way forward, clutching the railing. Waves surged across the deck, and sailors struggled to keep the boat from capsizing. The sails were gone, tattered. Wood creaked and cracked around him. Dark, black water churned in the ocean just to his right.

Llarimar yelled to Lightsong, asking him to lash down the barrels. Lightsong nodded, grabbing a rope and tying one end to a deck clasp. A wave hit, and he skidded, almost falling over the edge into the water.

He froze, gripping the railing, looking into the sea's mad, terrifying depths. He shook himself free, then grabbed his rope, tying a wide slip knot. It came naturally to him. Llarimar had taken him on enough sailing trips now.

Llarimar called for help again. And, suddenly, a young woman left the cabin and ran across the deck, grabbing ropes as if to lend aid. "Tatara!" a woman called from the cabin. There was terror in her voice.

Lightsong looked up. He recognized the girl. He reached out, rope looped in his hands. He shouted for her to go back below, but his voice was lost in the thunder.

She turned to look at him.

The next wave tossed her into the ocean.

Llarimar cried out in despair. Lightsong watched, shocked. The deep blackness claimed his niece. Engulfed her. Swallowed her.

Such great, horrible chaos. The sea in a storm. He felt useless, his heart thumping with fright as he watched the young woman get swept into the churning current. He saw remnants of her

golden hair twisting in the water. A weak splash of color passing his side of the ship. It would soon be gone.

Men cursed. Llarimar screamed. A woman wept. Lightsong just stared into the bubbling deep, with its alternating froth and blackness. The terrible, terrible blackness.

He still held the rope in his hand.

Without thinking, he leaped up onto the railing and threw himself into the darkness. Icy water took him, but he reached out, thrashing and churning in the tempest. He barely knew how to swim. Something passed him in the darkness.

He grabbed it. Her foot. He threw the loop around her ankle, somehow managing to get the knot tight despite the water and the waves. As soon as he did, a surge in the undulating water yanked him away.

Down. Into the black deep.

Claimed by the void.

He blinked, waves and thunder fading. He sat on the cool stones of his cell. The void had taken him, but something had sent him back. He'd Returned.

Because he'd seen war and destruction.

The man beside him was yelling in fear. Lightsong looked over as the fake priests grabbed Susebron, and Lightsong could see into the God King's mouth. *No tongue*, Lightsong thought. *Of course. To keep him from using all that BioChroma. It makes sense.*

He turned to the side. Blushweaver's body lay red and bloodied. He'd seen that it in a vision. He'd thought she was blushing, but now he understood. He looked to the side. Llarimar, eyes closed as if asleep—though he now realized the man simply had them shut as he wept.

The God King in prison. Lightsong seen that too.

By the Colors... Lightsong thought, standing up as the priests forced the God King to his knees. *I am a god.*

Lightsong stepped forward, moving up to the bars of his cage. He saw pain and tears in the God King's face and somehow understood them. He did love Siri. Lightsong had seen the same thing in Siri's eyes. She had somehow come to care for the man who was to oppress her.

"You are my king," Lightsong whispered. "And lord of the gods."

The Pahn Kahl men forced the God King face down on the stones. One of the priests raised a sword. The God King's legs jutted out, his feet toward Lightsong.

I have seen the Void, he thought. And I came back. I understand now.

And then Lightsong reached through the bars and touched the God King's leg. A fake priest looked up with alarm.

Lightsong met the man's eyes, then smiled broadly.

#

Denth slashed, wounding Vasher in the leg.

Vasher stumbled, going down on one knee. Denth struck again, and Vasher barely managed to keep the sword away.

Denth backed off, shaking his head. "You are pathetic, Vasher. There you kneel, about to die. And you still think you're better than the rest of us. You judge me for becoming a mercenary? What else was I to do? Take over kingdoms? Rule and start wars, as you did?"

Vasher bowed his head. Denth growled and ran forward, lashing out with his sword. Vasher tried to defend himself, but he was just too weak. Denth knocked Vasher's weapon aside, then kicked him in the stomach, sending Vasher backward against the wall.

Vasher slumped down, sword lost. He reached for a knife on the belt of a fallen soldier, but Denth stepped up and put his booted foot on Vasher's hand.

"You think I should just go back to the way I was before?" Denth spat. "The happy, friendly man that everyone loved?"

"You were a good man," Vasher whispered.

"That man saw and did terrible things," Denth said. "I've tried, Vasher. I've *tried* going back. But the darkness I know... it's inside. I can't escape it. My laughter has an edge to it. I can't forget."

"I can make you," Vasher said. "I know the Commands."

Denth froze.

"I promise," Vasher said. "I will take it all from you, if you wish."

Denth stood for a long moment, foot on Vasher's arm, sword pointed down. Then, finally, he shook his head. "No. I don't deserve that. Neither of us do. Goodbye, Vasher."

He raised his blade to strike. And, Vasher moved his arm up, touching Denth's leg.

"My life to yours, my Breath become yours."

Denth froze, then stumbled. Fifty Breaths fled from Vasher's chest and surged into Denth's body. They would be unwelcome, but he couldn't turn them away. Fifty Breaths. Not many.

But enough. Enough to make Denth shake with pleasure. Enough to make him lose control for just a second, falling to his knees. And, in that second, Vasher stood—ripping the dagger free from the corpse beside him—then slashed it through Denth's throat.

The mercenary fell back, eyes wide, neck bleeding. He shook amidst the pleasure of gaining new Breaths even as his life flowed from him.

"Nobody ever expects it," Vasher whispered, stepping forward. "Breath is worth a fortune. To put it into someone, then kill them, is to lose more money than most men will probably ever know. They never expect it."

Denth stopped moving, life fading away, new Breaths and old both vanishing.

"You wanted to learn how I killed Arsteel," Vasher said, spitting blood to the side. "Well, now you know."

#

Bluefingers picked up a knife. "The least honor I can do," he decided, "is to kill you myself, rather than letting the Lifeless do it. I promise it will be quick. We will make it look like a pagan ritual afterward, sparing you the need to die in a painful way." He turned to her Lifeless captors. "Tie her to the altar."

Siri struggled against the Lifeless which were holding her by the shoulders, but it was useless. They were terribly strong, and even without them, her hands were tied together. "Bluefingers!" she snapped, holding his eyes. "I will *not* die tied to some rock like a useless maid from one of the stories. You want me dead, then have the decency to let me die standing up."

Bluefingers hesitated, but the authority in her voice actually seemed to make him cringe. He raised a hand, stopping the Lifeless as they pulled her to the altar.

"Very well," he said. "Hold her tightly."

“You realize the wonderful opportunity you waste by killing me,” she said as he approached. “The wife of the God King would make a wonderful hostage. You are a fool to kill me, and...”

He ignored her this time, taking the knife, placing it against her chest. She started to feel numb. She was going to die. She was actually going to *die*.

And the war would start.

“Please,” she whispered.

He looked at her, hesitated, then grew grim and pressed with the dagger.

The building began to shake.

Bluefingers looked to the side in alarm, glancing toward several of his scribes. They shook their heads in confusion.

“Earthquake?” one asked.

The floor began to turn white. The color moved like a wave of sunlight across the land as the sun rose above the mountains. The walls, the ceiling, the floor—all of the black stone faded. The priests stepped away from it, looking frightened, one hopping onto a rug to keep from touching the strange white stones.

Bluefingers looked at her, confused. The ground continued to tremble, but he raised his blade anyway—raised it, held in fingers that had been stained repeatedly by ink. And, strangely, Siri saw the whites of his eyes bend and release a rainbow of colors.

The entire room burst with color, the white stones fuzzing and splitting, like light through a prism. The doors to the room exploded. A twisting mass of colorful cloths shot through it, like the hundred tentacles of an enraged sea leviathan. They churned and curled, and Siri recognized tapestries, carpets, and long lengths of silk from the palace decorations.

Awakened cloth slapped aside Lifeless, curling around them, tossing them into the air. Priests cried out as they were snatched up, and a long, thin length of violent cloth snapped forward and wrapped around Bluefinger’s arm.

The surging mass undulated, churning, and Siri could finally see a figure walking in the middle of it. A man of epic proportions. Black of hair, white of face, youthful in appearance, but of great age. Bluefingers struggled to ram his knife into Siri’s chest, but the God King raised a hand.

“You will *stop!*” Susebron said in a clear voice.

Bluefingers froze, looking toward the God King in amazement. The dagger slipped from his stunned fingers as an Awakened carpet twisted around him, pulling him away from the Siri.

Siri stood, dumbfounded. Susebron’s cloth lifted him up and over beside her, and a pair of small silken handkerchiefs reached forward, twisting around the ropes around her hands, untying them with ease.

Freed, she grabbed him, letting him lift her into his arms, weeping.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

The closet door opened, letting in lanternlight. Vivenna looked up, gagged and bound, at Vasher's silhouette. He drug Nightblood behind him, covered—as always—by his silver sheath.

Looking very tired, Vasher knelt and undid her gag.

"About time," she noted.

He smiled wanly. "I don't have any Breath remaining," he said quietly. "It was very hard to locate you."

"Where did it all go?" she asked as he undid the ropes on her hands.

"Nightblood devoured most of it."

I don't believe him, Nightblood said happily. I... can't really remember what happened. But we did slay a lot of evil!

"You drew him?" Vivenna asked as Vasher untied her feet.

Vasher nodded.

Vivenna rubbed her hands. "Denth?"

"Dead," Vasher said. "No sign of Tonk Fah or the woman, Jewels. I think they took their money and fled."

"So it's over."

Vasher nodded, sliding down to seat himself, resting his head back against the wall. "And we lost."

She frowned, grimacing at the pain of her wounded shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Vasher was being employed by some of the Pahn Kahl scribes in the palace," Vasher said. "They wanted to start a war between Idris and Hallandren in the hopes that it would weaken both kingdoms and let Pahn Kahl gain independence."

"So? Denth is dead now."

"So are the scribes who had the Command Phrases for the Lifeless armies," Vasher said. "And they already sent the troops marching. The Lifeless left the city over an hour ago, charging for Idris."

Vivenna fell silent.

"All of this fighting, everything with Denth, that was secondary," Vasher said, knocking his head back against the wall. "It distracted us. I couldn't get to the Lifeless in time. The war has begun. There's no way to stop it."

#

Susebron led Siri down into the depths of the palace. Siri walked beside him, carefully cradled in his arm, a hundred twisting lengths of cloth spinning around them.

Even with that many things Awakened, he still had enough Breath to make every color they passed glow brightly. Of course, that didn't work for many of the stones they passed. Though large chunks of the building were still black, a good half of it had been turned white.

Not just the grey of normal Awakening. They had been made a bone white. And, becoming that white, they now reacted to his incredible BioChroma, splitting back into colors. *Like a circle, somehow*, she thought. *Colorful, then white, then back to color.*

He led her into a particular chamber, and she saw what he'd told her to expect. Scribes crushed by the carpets that he'd awakened, bars ripped from their mountings, walls broken down. A ribbon shot from Susebron, turning over a body so that she wouldn't have to see its wound. She wasn't paying much attention. In the midst of the rubble were a pair of corpses. One was Blushweaver, bloody and red, face down. The other was Lightsong, his entire body drained of color. Like he was a Lifeless.

His eyes were closed, and he slept, as if at peace. A man sat next to him—Lightsong's high priest, holding the god's head in his lap.

The priest looked up. He smiled, though she could see tears in his eyes.

"I don't understand," she said, looking at Susebron.

"Lightsong gave his life to heal me," the God King said. "He somehow knew that my tongue had been removed."

"The Returned can heal one person," the priest said, looking down at his god. "It's their duty to decide who and when. They come back for this purpose, some say. To give life to one person who needs it."

"I never knew him," Susebron said.

"He was a very good person," Siri said.

"I realize that. Though I never spoke to him, somehow he was noble enough to die so that I might live."

The priest smiled down. "The amazing thing is," he said, "Lightsong did that twice."

He told me that I couldn't depend on him in the end, Siri thought, Smiling slightly, though sorrowful at the same time. I guess he lied about that. How very like him.

"Come," Susebron said. "We must gather what is left of my priests. We have to find a way to stop our armies from destroying your people."

#

"There has to be a way, Vasher," Vivenna said. She knelt next to him.

He tried to push down his rage, his anger at himself. He'd come to the city to stop a war. Once again, he'd been too late.

"Forty thousand Lifeless," he said, pounding his fist against the floor. "I can't stop that many. Not even with Nightblood and the Breaths of every person in the city. Even if I could somehow keep up with their marching, one would eventually get in a lucky strike and kill me."

"There *has* to be a way," Vivenna said.

Has to be a way.

"I thought the same thing before," he said, putting his head in his hands. "I wanted to stop it. But, by the time I realized what was happening, it had gone too far. It had taken a life of its own."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Manywar," Vasher whispered.

Silence.

"Who *are* you?"

He kept his eyes closed.

They used to call him Talaxin, Nightblood said.

“Talaxin,” Vivenna said, amused. “Nightblood, that’s one of the Five Scholars. He…”

She trailed off.

“… he lived over three hundred years ago,” she finally said.

“BioChroma can keep a man alive a long time,” Vasher said, sighing and opening his eyes. She didn’t argue.

They used to call him other things, too, Nightblood said.

“If you’re really one of them,” Vivenna said, “then you’ll know how to stop the Lifeless.”

“Easy,” Vasher said wryly. “With other Lifeless.”

“That’s it?”

“The easiest. Barring that, we can chase them down and grab them one at a time, then Break them and replace their Command phrases. But, even if you had the Eighth Heightening to let you break Commands instinctively, changing so many would take weeks.”

He shook his head. “We could have an army fight them, but they *are* our army. The Hallandren forces aren’t large enough to fight the Lifeless on their own, and they wouldn’t be able to get to Idris with any semblance of speed. The Lifeless will beat them by days. Lifeless don’t sleep, don’t eat, and can march tirelessly.”

“Ichor-alcohol,” Vivenna said. “They’ll run out.”

“It’s not like food, Vivenna. It’s like blood. They need a new supply if they get cut and drained or if it gets corrupted—but that takes time. A few will probably stop working without maintenance, but only a small number.”

She fell silent. “Well then, we Awaken an army of our own to fight them.”

He smiled wanly. He felt so light headed. He’d bound his wounds—the bad ones, anyway—but he wouldn’t be doing any more fighting anytime soon. Vivenna didn’t look much better, with that bloody stain on her shoulder.

“Awaken an army of our own?” he said. “First, where would we get the Breath? I used all of yours. Even if we find my clothing that still has some in it, we’ll only have a couple hundred. It takes one per Lifeless. We’re severely overmatched.”

“The God King,” she said.

“Can’t use his Breath,” Vasher said. “The man’s tongue was removed when he was a child.”

“And you can’t get it out of him somehow?”

Vasher shrugged. “The Tenth Heightening allows a man to Command mentally, without speaking, but it can take months of training to learn how to do that—even if you have someone to teach you. I think his priests must know how, so they can transfer it from one king to another, but I doubt they’ve trained him in it yet. One of their duties is to keep him from using his Breaths in the first place.”

“He’s still our best option,” Vivenna said.

“Oh? And you’ll use his power how? Make Lifeless? Are you forgetting that we’ll need to find *forty-thousand* bodies?”

She sighed, resting back against the wall.

Vasher? Nightblood asked in his mind. Didn’t you leave an army behind here last time?

He didn't reply. Vivenna opened her eyes, however. Apparently Nightblood had decided to include her in all of his thoughts now.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Nothing," Vasher said.

No, no it's not, Nightblood said. I remember. You talked to that priest, told him to take care of your Breath for you, should you need it again. And, you gave him your army. It stopped moving. You called it a gift for the city. Don't you remember? It was just yesterday.

"Yesterday?" Vivenna asked.

When the Manywar stopped, Nightblood said. When was that?

"He doesn't understand time," Vasher said. "Don't listen to him."

"No," Vivenna said, studying him. "He knows something. Tell me, Vasher."

He eyed her. "You're ask me to give Hallandren a tool, Vivenna. A terrible tool. Something worse than the Lifeless."

"And if those Lifeless slaughter my people?" Vivenna asked. "Could what you're talking about give them more power than that?"

"Yes."

She fell silent.

"Do it anyway," she said.

He glanced at her.

"Please, Vasher."

He closed his eyes again, remembering the destruction he had caused. The wars that had started. All because of the things he'd learned to create. "You would give your enemies such power?"

"They're not my enemies," she said. "Even if I hate them."

He regarded her for a moment, then finally stood. "Let's find the God King. If he even still lives, then we shall see."

#

"My lord and lady," said the priest, bowing with his face down before them. "We heard rumors of a plot to attack the palace. That's why we locked you away. We wanted to protect you!"

Siri looked at the man, then glanced at Susebron. The God King rubbed his chin in thought. They both recognized this man as one of his actual priests, rather than an imposter. They'd only been able to determine that for certain with a handful of priests.

They imprisoned the others, sending for the city guard to come in and start cleaning up the wreckage of the palace. The breeze blew Siri's hair—red, to show her displeasure—as they stood atop the palace.

"There, my lord!" a guard said, pointing.

Susebron turned, walking over to the edge of the palace, his twisting cloths still Awakened and alive. In the distance, Siri could make out a smudge and what looked like smoke.

"The Lifeless army," the guard said. "Our scouts have confirmed that it's marching toward Idris. Almost everyone in the city saw it pass through and out the gates."

"That smoke?" Siri asked.

“Dust of its passing, my lady,” the guard said. “That’s a lot of soldiers.”

She looked up at Susebron. He frowned. “I could stop them.” His voice was stronger than she had expected it to be. Deeper.

“My lord?” the guard asked.

“With this much Breath,” Susebron said. “I could charge them, use these cloths to tie them up.”

“My lord,” the guard said hesitantly. “There are *forty thousand* of them. They would cut at the cloth, overwhelm you.”

Susebron seemed resolute. “I have to try.”

“No,” Siri said, laying a hand on his chest.

“Your people...”

“We’ll send messengers,” she said. “explaining our regret. My people can withdraw, ambush the Lifeless. We can send troops to help.”

“We don’t have many,” he said. “And they won’t get there very quickly. Could your people really get away?”

No, she thought, heart wrenching. But you don’t know that. You’re innocent enough to believe it.

Her people might survive as a whole, but many would die. Susebron getting himself killed fighting the creatures wouldn’t be of much use, however. He had amazing power, but fighting so many Lifeless was well beyond the scope of what he could do.

He saw the look in her face, and surprisingly, he read it well. “You don’t believe that they can get away,” he said. “You’re just trying to protect me.”

Surprising how well he understands me already.

“My lord!” a voice said from behind.

Susebron turned, looking across the top of the palace. They’d come to the top partially to get a look at the Lifeless, but also because both Siri and Susebron were tired of being closed in tight quarters. They wanted to be in the open, where it would be harder to sneak up on them.

A guard came out of the stairwell, then walked over, hand on sword. He bowed. “My lord. There’s someone here to see you.”

“I don’t want to see anyone,” Susebron said. “Who are they?”

Amazing how well he can speak, she thought. Never having had a tongue. What did Lightsong’s Breath do? It healed more than his body. It gave him the capacity to use the regrow tongue.

“My lord,” the guard said. “The visitor... she has the royal locks!”

“What?” Siri asked with surprise.

The guard turned, and—shockingly—Vivenna stepped up onto the roof of the palace. Or Siri *thought* it was Vivenna. She wore trousers and a tunic, with a sword tied at her waist, and she appeared to have a bloody wound on one arm. She saw Siri, and smiled, her hair turning yellow with joy.

Vivenna’s hair changing? Siri thought. It can’t be her.

But the woman laughed, dashing across the top of the roof. Some guards stopped her, but Siri waved for them to let the woman pass. She ran over, embracing Siri.

“Vivenna?”

The woman smiled ruefully. “Yes, mostly,” she said. She glanced at Susebron. “I’m sorry,” Vivenna said quietly. “I came to the city to try rescuing you.”

“That was very kind of you,” Siri said. “But I don’t need rescuing.”

Vivenna frowned more deeply.

“And who is this, Siri?” Susebron asked.

“My eldest sister.”

“Ah,” Susebron said, bowing his head cordially. “Siri has told me much about you, Princess Vivenna. I wish we could have met under better circumstances.”

Vivenna stared at the man with shock.

“He’s not really as bad as they say,” Siri said, smiling. “Most of the time.”

“That is sarcasm,” Susebron said. “She is quite fond of it.”

Vivenna turned from the God King. “Our homeland is under attack.”

“I know,” Siri said. “We’re working on that. I’m preparing messengers to send to Father.”

“I have a better way,” Vivenna said. “But you’ll have to trust me.”

“Of course,” Siri said.

“I have a friend who needs to speak with the God King,” Vivenna said. “Alone.”

Siri paused hesitantly. *Silly, she thought. This is Vivenna. I can trust her.*

She’d thought she could trust Bluefingers too. Vivenna regarded her with a curious expression.

“If this help save Idris,” Susebron said, “then I will do it. Who is this person?”

#

Moments later, Vivenna stood quietly on the roof of the palace, the God King of Hallandren beside her. A short distance away, Vasher stood with arms upraised, letting a couple of soldiers search him for weapons. He had wisely left Nightblood behind and didn’t have anything else on him. He didn’t even have any Breath.

“Your sister is an amazing woman,” the God King said.

Vivenna glanced at him. This was the man she was to have married. The terrible creature that she was supposed to have given herself to. She’d never expected to end up like this, pleasantly chatting with him.

She’d also never expected that she’d like him.

It was a quick judgment. She had gotten over chastising herself for making those, though she had learned to leave herself open to reinterpret. She saw kindness in his eyes. How had a man like this ended up as God King of terrible Hallandren?

“Yes,” she said. “She is.”

“I love her,” Susebron said. “I would have you know this.”

Slowly, Vivenna nodded.

To the side, the guards took Vasher around to a changing screen. They obviously wanted to be certain none of his clothing was Awakened. He left a few moments later, wearing a wrap around his waist, but nothing else. His chest was cut and bruised, and Vivenna thought it shameful that he should be forced to undergo such humiliation.

He suffered it, walking across the rooftop with an escort. Siri stood in the distance, watching the Lifeless churn dust in the distance.

She's changed so much, Vivenna thought. *When did she become so regal, with that commanding bearing and ability to keep her hair black?* Her little sister, no longer quite as little, seemed to wear the expensive dress well. It fit her. Odd.

As Vasher approached, Siri walked back over, eyes watching him keenly. She no longer seemed to take pride in being unimportant. Vasher arrived, and Susebron dismissed the guards. Behind him, the jungles extended to the north, toward Idris.

Vasher glanced at Vivenna, and she thought he might tell her to go. However, he finally just turned away from her, looking resigned.

"Who are you?" Susebron asked.

"The one responsible for you getting your tongue cut out," Vasher said.

Susebron raised an eyebrow.

Vasher closed his eyes, and muttered something. A Command, which Vivenna could barely hear—and, with his hand placed on his chest, it seemed that the Awakening was directed toward *him*.

She only caught one word. "Return."

He started to glow. Not like a lantern would glow, not as the sun glowed, but with an aura that made colors brighter. Vivenna started, eyes opening wide as Vasher increased in size. He adjusted the wrap at his waist, making room for his growth. His chest became more firm, the muscles bulging, and the beard scrub on his face retreated, leaving him clean shaven.

His hair turned golden. He still bore the cuts to his body, but they seemed inconsequential. He seemed... divine. The God King watched impassively. He was now faced by a fellow god, a man of his own stature.

"I don't care if you believe me or not," Vasher said, his voice sounding more... noble. "But I will have you know that I left something here, long ago. A wealth of power that I promised to one day recover. I gave instructions for its care, and a charge that it should not be used. The priests, apparently, took this to heart."

Susebron, surprisingly, dropped to one knee. "My lord. Where have you been?"

"Paying for what I've done," Vasher said. "Or trying to. My presence is unimportant. Stand."

What is going on? Vivenna thought. Siri looked equally confused, and the sisters shared a look.

Susebron stood, though he kept his posture reverent.

"You have a group of rogue Lifeless," Vasher said. "You've lost control of them."

"I'm sorry, my lord," the God King said.

Vasher regarded him. Then he glanced at Vivenna. She nodded her head. "I trust him."

"It's not about trust," Vasher said, turning back to Susebron. "Either way, I am going to give you something."

"What?"

"My army," Vasher said.

Susebron frowned. "But, my lord. Our Lifeless just marched away, to attack Idris."

“No,” Vasher said. “Not that army. I’m going to give you the one I left behind three hundred years ago. The force by which I made Hallandren to stop its war.”

“Stop the Manywar, my lord?” Susebron said. “You did that by negotiation.”

Vasher snorted. “You don’t know much about war, do you?”

The God King paused, then shook his head. “No.”

“Well, learn,” Vasher said. “Because I charge you with this army. Use it to protect, not attack. Only use it in an emergency.”

The God King nodded dumbly.

Vasher glanced at him, then sighed. “Your arms become flesh, your eyes gain sight, your feet learn to step.”

“What?” Susebron asked.

“It’s a Command,” Vasher said. “The one you can use to Awaken the stone statues I left in your city.”

“My lord!” Susebron said. “Stone cannot be awakened.”

“It can if it has in the shape of a man and has human bones.”

Human bones. Vivenna felt a chill. He’d told her that bones were usually bad to awaken for it was hard to keep in them in the right shape of a man during the Awakening process. That, and they took some fifty Breath to awaken each.

But... what if those bones were encased in stone? Stone which held their shape, stone which would protect them from harm, make them nearly impossible to hurt or break...

Colors!

“Go,” Vasher said. “There are some thousand D’Denir in the city. You should have enough Breath to awaken them all, and you are of the Tenth Heightening. You can Awaken without touching objects directly, so you need not feel the bones inside to bring them to life. This is an army that, of all men, only *you* can use. Your thousand should be able to hunt down and fight that army of Lifeless. Their weapons will be virtually useless against the stone.”

Susebron nodded again.

“Do better with them than I did,” Vasher said, turning away.

Epilogue

The next day, an army of a thousand stone soldiers charged from the gates of the city, running down the pathway after the Lifeless who had left the day before.

Vivenna stood outside the city, leaning against the wall, watching them go.

How often did I stand beneath the gaze of those D'Denir, she thought. *Never knowing their purpose?* Everyone said that Peacegiver had left them behind as a gift to the people, a symbol to remind them not to go to war. She'd always found it strange. A bunch of statues of soldiers, a gift to remind the people that war was terrible?

And yet, they were a gift. The gift that had ended the Manywar.

She turned toward Vasher. He leaned against the city wall, Nightblood in one hand. His form had returned back to that of a regular person, scraggly hair and all.

"What was that first thing you taught me about Awakening?" she asked.

"That we don't know much?" he asked. "That there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Commands that we haven't discovered yet?"

"That's the one," she said, turning to watch the Awakened statues charge into the distance. "I think you were right."

"You think?"

She smiled. "Will they really be able to stop the Lifeless?"

"Probably," Vasher said, shrugging. "They'll be fast enough to catch up—the Lifeless won't be able to march as quickly as men with stone feet. I've seen those things fight before. They're *really* tough to beat."

She nodded. "So my people will be safe."

"Until that God King decides to use the statues to conquer them."

She snorted. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a grump, Vasher?"

Finally, Nightblood said. Someone agrees with me!

Vasher scowled. "I'm not a grump," he said. "I'm just bad with words."

She smiled.

"Well, that's it, then," he said, picking up his pack. "See you around." With that, he began to walk along the pathway away from the city.

Vivenna walked up next to him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Going with you," she said.

"You're a princess," he said. "Stay with that girl who rules Hallandren or go back to Idris and be proclaimed as the one who saved them. Either one will give you a happy life."

"No," she said. "I don't think so. Even if my father *did* take me back, I doubt that I'll ever be able to live a happy life in either plush palace or a quiet town."

"You'll think differently, after a little time on the road. It's a difficult life."

"I know," she said. "But... well, everything I've been—everything I was trained to do—has been a lie wrapped in hatred. I don't want to go back to it. I'm not that person. I don't want to be."

“Who are you, then?”

“I don’t know,” she said, nodding toward the horizon. “But I think I’ll find it out there.”

They walked for another short time.

“Your family will worry about you,” Vasher finally said.

“They’ll get over it,” she replied.

Finally, he just shrugged. “All right. I don’t really care. You might as well come.”

She smiled. *It’s true*, she thought. *I don’t want to go back*. Princess Vivenna was dead. She’d died on the streets of T’Telir. Vivenna the Awakener had no desire to bring her back.

“So,” she asked as they walked along the jungle road, “I can’t figure it out. Which one are you? Klad, who started the war, or Peacegiver, who ended it?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “It’s odd,” he finally said, “what history does to a man. I guess people couldn’t understand why I suddenly changed. Why I stopped fighting, and why I brought my armies back to seize control of my own kingdom. So they decided I was two people. A man can get confused about his identity when things like that happen.”

She grunted in assent. “You’re still Returned, though.”

“Of course I am,” he said.

“Where did you get the Breath?” she asked. “The one a week you need to survive.”

“I carried it with me,” Vasher said. “Returned aren’t quite what people think they are. They don’t have hundreds or thousands of Breath.”

“But—”

“They’re of the Fifth Heightening,” Vasher said, interrupting her. “But they don’t get there by number of Breaths, but by quality. Returned have a single, powerful Breath. One that takes them all the way to the Fifth Heightening. It’s a... divine Breath, you might say. But their body feeds on Breath, like...”

“The sword.”

Vasher nodded. “Nightblood only needs it when he’s drawn. Returned feed off their Breath once a week. So, if you don’t give them one, they essentially eat themselves—devouring their one, single Breath. Killing them. However, if you give them extra Breath, on top of their single divine one, they’ll feed off those each week.”

“So the Hallandren gods could be fed more than one,” Vivenna said. “They could have a stock of Breaths, a buffer to keep them alive if one couldn’t be provided.”

Vasher nodded. “Wouldn’t make them as dependant on their religion to care for them, though.”

“That’s a cynical way of looking at it.”

He shrugged.

“So you’re going to burn up a Breath every week,” she said. “Reducing our stock?”

He nodded. “I used to have thousands of Breath.”

“Thousands? But it would take you years and years to...” she trailed off. He’d been alive for over three hundred years. At fifty Breaths a year, that *was* thousands of Breath. “You’re an expensive guy to keep around,” she noted. “How do you keep yourself from looking like a Returned?”

“That’s my secret,” he said, not looking at her. “Though you should have figured out that Returned can change their forms.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve got Returned blood in you,” he said. “The royal line. Where do you think that ability to change your hair color comes from?”

“Does that mean I can change more than just my hair?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Takes time to learn. Go stroll around the Hallandren Court of the Gods sometime, though. You’ll find that the Gods look exactly as they think they should. The old ones look old, the heroic ones become strong, the ones who think a Goddess should be beautiful become unnaturally voluptuous. It’s all about how they perceive themselves.”

She nodded, her life sense letting her feel the jungle around them. They’d recovered Vasher’s cloak, shirt, and trousers—the ones that Denth had originally taken from him. There had been enough Breath in those to split among the two of them and get them each to the Second Heightening. It wasn’t as much as she was used to, but it was a fair bit better than nothing.

“So where are we going, anyway?”

“Ever heard of Kuth and Huth?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. “They were your main rivals in the Manywar.”

“Somebody’s trying to restore them,” he said. “A tyrant of some kind. He’s apparently recruited an old friend of mine.”

“Another one?” she asked.

He shrugged. “There were five of us. Me, Denth, Shashara, Arsteel, and Yesteel. It looks like Yesteel has resurfaced, finally.”

“He’s related to Arsteel?” Vivenna guessed.

“Brothers.”

“Great.”

“I know. He’s the one who originally figured out how to make Ichor-Alcohol. I hear rumors that he’s got a new form of it. More potent.”

“Even better.”

They walked in silence for a time longer.

I’m bored, Nightblood said. Pay attention to me. Why doesn’t anyone ever talk to me?

“Because you’re annoying,” Vasher snapped.

The sword huffed.

“What’s your real name?” Vivenna finally asked.

“My real name?” Vasher asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Everyone calls you things. Peacegiver. Klad. Vasher. Talaxin. Is that last one your real name, the name of the scholar?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Well, what is it, then?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I can’t remember the time before I Returned.”

“Oh,” she said.

“When I came back, however, I did get a name,” he finally said. “The Cult of Returned—those who eventually founded the Hallandren Iridescent Tones—found me and kept me alive with Breaths. They gave me a name. I didn’t like it much. Didn’t seem to fit me, considering my temper.”

“Well?” she asked. “What was it?”

“Warbreaker the Peaceful,” he finally admitted.

She raised an eyebrow.

“What I can’t figure out,” he said, “is whether that was truly prophetic, or if I’m just trying to live up to it.”

“Does it matter?” she asked.

He walked for a time in silence. “No,” he finally said. “No, I guess it doesn’t. I just wish I knew if there really were something spiritual about the Returns, or if it were all just happenstance.”

“Probably not for us to know.”

“Probably,” he agreed.

Silence.

“Should have called you Wartlover the ugly,” she finally said.

“Very mature,” he replied. “You really think those sorts of comments are proper for a princess?”

She smiled broadly. “I don’t care,” she said. “And I never have to again.”

Ars Arcanum

Table of the Heightenings

<i>Heightening Number</i>	<i>Approximate Breath Needed to Reach this Heightening</i>	<i>Effects of the Heightening</i>
First	50	Aura Recognition
Second	200	Perfect Pitch
Third	600	Perfect Color Recognition
Fourth	1,000	Perfect Life Recognition
Fifth	2,000	Agelessness
Sixth	3,500	Instinctive Awakening
Seventh	5,000	Invested Breath Recognition
Eighth	10,000	Command Breaking
Ninth	20,000	Greater Awakening, Audible Command
Tenth	50,000	Color Distortion, Perfect Invocation, ????

Note One: Most Reaching above the sixth Heightening is incredibly rare, and so few people understand the powers of the Seventh Heightening and above. Very little research has been done. The only known people to ever reach the Eighth Heightening and above are the Hallandren God Kings.

Note Two: Returned appear to achieve the Fifth Heightening by virtue of their Breath. It is theorized that they do not actually receive two thousand Breaths when they Return, but instead receive a single, powerful Breath which brings with it the powers of all five first Heightenings.

Note Three: The numbers used in the table above are only estimates, as very little is known about the upper Heightenings. Indeed, even for the lower levels, fewer or more Breaths may be required to achieve a given Heightening, depending on circumstances and the strength of the Breath.

Note Four: Each gained Breath grants some things, no matter which Heightening an Awakener has achieved. The more breath one has, the more resistant to disease and aging a person is, the easier it is for them to distinguish colors, and the stronger their life sense.

Heightening Powers:

Aura Recognition: The First Heightening grants a person the ability to see the Breath Auras of others instinctively. This allows them to judge roughly how many Breaths the person contains and the general health of that Breath. Persons without this Heightening have a much more difficult time judging auras, and must rely on how deeply the colors around a person change when they enter the aura. Without at least the First Heightening, it is generally impossible for the naked eye to notice an Awakener with fewer than about thirty Breaths.

Perfect Pitch: The Second Heightening grants perfect pitch to those who achieve it.

Perfect Color Recognition: While each gained Breath leads a person to greater appreciation of colors, it isn't until one reaches the Third Heightening that they can instantly and instinctively determine exact shades of colors and their hue harmonics.

Perfect Life Sense: At the Fourth Heightening, an Awakener's life sense achieves its maximum strength.

Agelessness: At the Fifth Heightening, an Awakener's resistance to aging and disease reaches its maximum strength. These persons are immune to most toxins, including the effects of alcohol, and most physical ailments. (Such as headaches, colds, and the like.) The person no longer ages, and becomes functionally immortal.

Instinctive Awakening: All persons of the Sixth Heightening and above immediately understand and can use basic Awakening Commands without training or practice. More difficult Commands are easier for them to master and to discover.

Breath Recognition: Those few persons who have reached the Seventh Heightening gain the ability to recognize the auras of objects, and can tell when something has been Invested with Breath via Awakening.

Command Breaking: Any persons of the Eighth Heightening or more gain the ability to over-ride Commands in other Invested objects, including Lifeless. This requires concentration and leaves the Awakener exhausted.

Greater Awakening: Persons of the Ninth Heightening are reportedly able to Awaken stone and steel, though doing so requires large Investitures of Breath and specialize Commands. This ability has not been studied or confirmed.

Audible Command: Persons of the Ninth Heightening also gain the ability to Awaken objects which they are not physically touching, but which are within the sound of their voice.

Color Distortion: One of the many abilities gained by the Tenth Heightening is the natural and intrinsic ability of the Awakener to bend light around white objects, creating colors from them as if from a prism.

Perfect Invocation: Awakeners of the Tenth Heightening can draw more color from objects they use to fuel their art. This leaves objects drained to white, rather than grey.

Other: There are rumors of other powers granted by the Tenth Heightening which are not understood or have not been made known by those who have achieved it.

Revisions done in Version 4.0

This draft was still largely working on medium-level and large-level problems. Because of this, I haven't yet 'spot fixed' chapters. Larger changes for this version include:

A rewrite of the character Peprin, whose name has been changed to Parlin. The old name fit the old character; the new character was different enough that I wanted a new feel for his name. Peprin wasn't working, in my opinion, as he was too over-the-top. He was a little TOO dense, and we already had plenty of humor in the Vivenna sections—humor done much better and more intelligently by Denth and Tonks. I felt that Peprin's goofiness was detracting from the story and wasn't gaining anything, so I backed off and made the character far less 'present' in the narrative. In doing so, I hope to actually make him more sympathetic. This may take another draft to get right.

Vivenna is now more aware of why her father sent Siri instead of her. Readers were feeling that Vivenna was too dense in these early chapters. It was obvious to them why the king would make the change; it should have been obvious to Vivenna. I agreed as I re-read the narrative, and did a reworking here. This effected her motivations for going to T'Telir in the first place, and I think strengthens her as a character.

My agent wanted more of a sense of danger in the early chapters—a better understanding of the oncoming war, the inevitability, and the threat it posed. I worked on this noticeably at the beginning in an attempt to establish better 'rooting interest' for Idris. This also played in with Vivenna's reworked motivations at the beginning.

I split the "Vivenna living on the streets" chapter in two and added a little bit more material there to draw out her time. I felt that having her get tossed onto the streets in one chapter, then get captured again in the very next seriously weakened this phase of the book. The reader and she both needed more time to suffer. It's still not terribly long, but I think that the slight fiddling with pacing here will have a large impact on the tempo of the story here.

Slightly better transition of Vivenna being scared of Vasher and agreeing to help him.

A lot of people were having trouble understanding 1) Why Susebron could awaken objects at the end without dying and 2) Why the statues could be Awakened in the first place. I decided that for the first, I would simply be more explicit in my explanations. For the second, I decided that I needed to revise the narrative to fix a plot hole. Hence the change to give the statues human bones, which I had considered in the first draft and discarded. I think it works better here. Both of these things are going to require a little more polishing in draft #5, but I think the climax finally has all of the explanations it needs.

I filled out what the different Heightenings are and explained them in more detail, including an Ars Arcanum.

I made a bunch of smaller changes on the paragraph or scene level to smooth the story. I probably also introduced a lot of typos in doing so. ;)

Sample Chapters of ELANTRIS

This book, originally released in 2005, is now out in paperback. Hardback copies are still on Amazon as of January 2008. It won the Romantic Times award for best epic fantasy of the year and was chosen by Barnes and Noble.com as the best sf/fantasy book of the year.

It is a stand-alone epic fantasy novel, and was the first book I published.

Prologue

Elantris was beautiful, once. It was called the city of the gods: a place of power, radiance, and magic. Visitors say that the very stones glowed with an inner light, and that the city contained wondrous arcane marvels. At night, Elantris shone like a great silvery fire, visible even from a great distance.

Yet, as magnificent as Elantris had been, its inhabitants had been more so. Their hair a brilliant white, their skin an almost metallic silver, the Elantrians seemed to shine like the city itself. Legends claimed that they were immortal, or at least nearly so. Their bodies healed quickly, and they were blessed with great strength, insight, and speed. They could perform magics with a bare wave of the hand; men visited Elantris from all across Opelon to receive Elantrian healings, food, or wisdom. They were divinities.

And anyone could become one.

The Shaod, it was called. The Transformation. It struck randomly—usually at night, during the mysterious hours when life slowed to rest. The Shaod could take beggar, craftsman, nobleman, or warrior. When it came, the fortunate person's life ended and began anew; he would discard his old, mundane existence, and move to Elantris. Elantris, where he could live in bliss, rule in wisdom, and be worshipped for eternity.

Eternity ended ten years ago.

Part One: The Shadow of Elantris

Chapter One

Prince Raoden of Arelon awoke early that morning, completely unaware that he had been damned for all eternity. Still drowsy, Raoden sat up, blinking in the soft morning light. Just outside his open balcony windows he could see the enormous city of Elantris in the distance, its stark walls casting a deep shadow over the smaller city of Kae, where Raoden lived. Elantris's walls were incredibly high, but Raoden could see the tops of black towers rising behind them, their broken spires a clue to the fallen majesty hidden within.

The abandoned city seemed darker than usual. Raoden stared at it for a moment, then glanced away. The huge Elantrian walls were impossible to ignore, but people of Kae tried very hard to do just that. It was painful to remember the city's beauty, to wonder how ten years ago the blessing of the Shaod had become a curse instead...

Raoden shook his head, climbing out of bed. It was unusually warm for such an early hour—he didn't feel even a bit chilly as he threw on his robe, then pulled the servant's cord beside his bed, indicating that he wanted breakfast.

That was another odd thing. He was hungry—*very* hungry. Almost ravenous. He had never liked large breakfasts, but this morning he found himself waiting impatiently for his meal to arrive. Finally, he decided to send someone to see what was taking so long.

"Ien?" he called in the unlit chambers.

There was no response. Raoden frowned slightly at the Seon's absence. Where could Ien be?

Raoden stood, and as he did, his eyes fell on Elantris again. Resting in the great City's shadow, Kae seemed like an insignificant village by comparison. Elantris. An enormous, ebony block—not really a city anymore, just the corpse of one. Raoden shivered slightly.

A knock came at his door.

"Finally," Raoden said, walking over to pull open the door. Old Elao stood outside with a tray of fruit and warm bread.

The tray dropped to the ground with a crash, slipping from the stunned maid's fingers even as Raoden reached out to accept it. Raoden froze, the tray's metallic ring echoing through the silent morning hallway.

"Merciful Domi!" Elao whispered, her eyes horrified and her hand trembling as she reached up to grab the Korathi pendant at her neck.

Raoden reached out, but the maid took a quivering step away, stumbling on a small melon in her haste to escape.

"What?" Raoden asked. Then he saw his hand. Illuminated by the hallway's flickering lantern, Raoden could see what had been hidden in the shadows of his darkened room.

Raoden turned, throwing furniture out of his way as he stumbled to the tall mirror at the side of his chambers. The dawn's light had grown just strong enough for him to see the reflection that stared back at him. A stranger's reflection.

His brown eyes were the same, though they were wide with terror. His hair, however, had changed from sandy blonde to limp gray. The skin was the worst. The mirrored face was covered with sickly black patches, like dark bruises. The splotches could only mean one thing.

The Shaod had come upon him.

The Elantris city gate boomed shut behind him with a shocking sound of finality. Raoden slumped against it, thoughts numbed by the day's events.

It was as if his memories belonged to another person. His father, King Iadon, hadn't met Raoden's gaze as he ordered the priests to prepare his son and throw him into Elantris. It had been done swiftly and quietly; Iadon couldn't afford to let it be known that the crown prince was an Elantrian. Ten years ago, the Shaod would have made Raoden a god. Now, instead of making people into silver-skinned deities, it changed them into sickly monstrosities.

Raoden shook his head in disbelief. The Shaod was a thing that happened to other people—distant people. People who deserved to be cursed. Not the crown prince of Arelon. Not Raoden.

The city of Elantris stretched out before him. Its high walls were lined with guardhouses and soldiers—men intended not to keep enemies out of the city, but to keep its inhabitants from escaping. Since the Reod, every person taken by the Shaod had been thrown into Elantris to rot—the fallen city had become an expansive tomb for those whose bodies had forgotten how to die.

Raoden could remember standing on those walls, looking down on Elantris's dread inhabitants, just as the guards now regarded him. The city had seemed far away then, even though he had been standing just outside of it. He had wondered, philosophically, what it would be like to walk those blackened streets.

Now he was going to find out.

Raoden pushed against the gate for a moment, as if to force his body through, to cleanse his flesh of its taint. He lowered his head, releasing a quiet moan. He felt like curling into a ball on the grimy stones and waiting until he woke from this dream. Except, he knew he would never awaken. The priests said this nightmare would never end.

But, somewhere, something within urged him forward. He knew he had to keep moving—for if he stopped, he feared he'd simply give up. The Shaod had taken his body. He couldn't let it take his mind as well.

So, using his pride like a shield against despair, dejection and—most importantly—self-pity, Raoden raised his head to stare damnation in the eyes.

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Before, when Raoden had stood on the walls of Elantris to look down—both literally and figuratively—on its inhabitants, he had seen the filth that covered the city. Now he stood in it.

Every surface—from the walls of the buildings to the numerous cracks in the cobblestones—was coated with a patina of grime. The slick, oily substance had an equalizing effect on Elantris's colors, blending them all into a single depressing hue—a color that mixed the pessimism of black with the polluted greens and browns of sewage.

Before, Raoden had been able to see a few of the city's inhabitants. Now he could hear them as well. A dozen or so Elantrians lay scattered across the courtyard's fetid cobblestones. Many sat uncaringly, or unknowingly, in pools of dark water; the remains of the night's rainstorm. And they were moaning. Most of them were quiet about it, mumbling to themselves or whimpering with some unseen pain. One woman at the far end of the courtyard, however, screamed with a sound of raw anguish. She fell silent after a moment, her breath or her strength giving out.

Most of them wore what looked like rags—dark loose-fitting garments that were as soiled as the streets. Looking closely, however, Raoden recognized the clothing. He glanced down at his own white burial cloths. They were long and flowing, like ribbons sewn together into a loose robe. The linen on his arms and legs was already stained with grime from brushing up against the city gate and stone pillars. Raoden suspected they would soon be indistinguishable from the other Elantrians' garb.

This is what I will become, Raoden thought. It has already begun. In a few weeks I will be nothing more than a dejected body, a corpse whimpering in the corner.

A slight motion on the other side of the courtyard brought Raoden out of his self pity. Some Elantrians were crouching in a shadowed doorway across from him. He couldn't make out much from their silhouetted forms, but they seemed to be waiting for something. He could feel their eyes on him.

Raoden raised an arm to shade his eyes, and only then did he remember the small thatch basket in his hands. It held the ritual Korathi sacrifice sent with the dead into the next life—or, in this case, into Elantris. The basket contained a loaf of bread, a few thin vegetables, a handful of grain, and a small flask of wine. Normal death sacrifices were far more extensive, but even a victim of the Shaod had to be given something.

Raoden glanced up at the figures in the doorway, his mind flashing to rumors he'd heard on the outside—stories of Elantrian brutality. The shadowed figures had yet to move, but their study of him was unnerving.

Taking a deep breath, Raoden took a step to the side, moving along the city wall toward the east side of the courtyard. The forms still seemed to be watching him, but they didn't follow. In a moment he could no longer see through the doorway, and a second later he had safely passed into one of the side streets.

Raoden released his breath, feeling that he had escaped something, though he didn't know what. After a few moments, he was certain no one followed, and he began to feel foolish for his alarm. So far, he had yet to see anything that corroborated the rumors about Elantris. Raoden shook his head and continued moving.

The stench was almost overwhelming. The omnipresent sludge had a musty, rotten scent, like that of dying fungus. Raoden was so bothered by the smell that he nearly stepped directly on the gnarled form of an old man huddled next to a building's wall. The man moaned piteously, reaching up with a thin arm. Raoden looked down, and felt a sudden chill. The 'old man' was no more than sixteen years old. The creature's soot-covered skin was dark and spotted, but its face was that of a child, not a man. Raoden took an involuntary step backward.

The boy, as if realizing his chance would soon pass, stretched his arm forward with the sudden strength of desperation. "Food?" he mumbled through a mouth only half-full of teeth. "Please?"

Then the arm fell, its endurance expended, and the body slumped back against the cold stone wall. His eyes, however, continued to watch Raoden. Sorrowful, pained eyes. Raoden had seen beggars before in the Outer Cites, and he had probably been fooled by charlatans a number of times. This boy, however, was not faking.

Raoden reached up and pulled the loaf of bread from his sacrificial offerings, then handed it to the boy. The look of disbelief that ran across the boy's face was somehow more disturbing than the despair it had replaced. This creature had given up hope long ago—he probably begged out of habit rather than expectation.

Raoden left the boy behind, turning to continue down the small street. He had hoped that the city would grow less gruesome as he left the main courtyard—thinking, perhaps, that the dirt was a result of the area's relatively frequent use. He had been wrong; the alley was covered with just as much filth as the courtyard, if not more.

A muffled thump sounded from behind. Raoden turned with surprise. A group of dark forms stood near the mouth of the side-street, huddled around an object on the ground. The beggar. Raoden watched with a shiver as five men devoured his loaf of bread, fighting amongst themselves and ignoring the boy's despairing cries. Eventually one of the newcomers—obviously annoyed—brought a makeshift club down on the boy's head with a crunch that resounded through the small alley.

The men finished the bread, then turned to regard Raoden. He took an apprehensive step backward—it appeared that he had been hasty in assuming he hadn't been followed. The five men stalked forward slowly, and Raoden spun, taking off at a run.

Sounds of pursuit came from behind. Raoden scrambled away in fear—something, as a prince, he had never needed to do before. He ran madly, expecting his breath to run short and a pain to stab him in the side, as usually happened when he overextended himself. Neither occurred. Instead he simply began to feel horribly tired, weak to the point that he knew he would soon collapse. It was a harrowing feeling, as if his life were slowly seeping away.

Desperate, Raoden tossed the sacrificial basket over his head. The awkward motion threw him off-balance, and an unseen schism in the cobblestones sent him into a maladroitness that didn't end until he collided with a rotting mass of wood. The wood—which might once have been a pile of crates—squished, breaking his fall.

Raoden sat up quickly, the motion tossing shreds of wood pulp across the damp alleyway. His assailants, however, were no longer concerned with him. The five men crouched in the street's muck, picking scattered vegetables and grain off the cobblestones and out of the dark pools. Raoden felt his stomach churn as one of the men slid his finger down a crack—scraping up a dark handful that was more sludge than corn—then rammed the entire mass between eager lips. Brackish spittle dribbled down the man's chin, dropping from a mouth that resembled a mud-filled pot boiling on the stove.

One man saw Raoden watching. The creature growled, reaching down to grab the almost-forgotten cudgel at his side. Raoden searched frantically for a weapon, finding a length of wood that was slightly less rotten than the rest. He held the weapon in uncertain hands, trying to project an air of danger.

The thug paused. A second later, a cry of joy from behind drew his attention—one of the others had located the tiny skin of wine. The struggle that ensued apparently drove all thoughts of Raoden from the men's minds, and the five were soon gone—four chasing after the one who had been fortunate, or foolish, enough to escape with the precious liquor.

Raoden sat in the debris, overwhelmed. *This is what you will become...*

"Looks like they forgot about you, sule," a voice observed.

Raoden jumped, looking toward the sound of the voice. A man, his smooth bald head reflecting the morning light, reclined lazily on a set of steps a short distance away. He was definitely an Elantrian, but before the transformation he must have been of a different race—not from Arelon, like Raoden. The man's skin bore the tell-tale black splotches of the Shad, but the unaffected patches weren't pale, but a deep brown instead.

Raoden tensed against possible danger, but this man showed no signs of the primal wildness or the decrepit weakness Raoden had seen in the others. Tall and firm-framed, the man had wide hands and keen eyes set in a dark-skinned face. He studied Raoden with a thoughtful attitude.

Raoden breathed a sigh of relief. "Whoever you are, I'm glad to see you. I was beginning to think everyone in here was either dying or insane."

"We can't be dying," the man responded with a snort. "We're already dead. Kolo?"

Kolo. The foreign word was vaguely familiar, as was the man's strong accent. "You're not from Arelon?"

The man shook his head. "I'm Galladon, from the sovereign realm of Duladel. I'm most recently from Elantris, land of sludge, insanity, and eternal perdition. Nice to meet you."

“Duladel?” Raoden said. “But the Shaod only affects people from Arelon.” He picked himself up, brushing away pieces of wood in various stages of decomposition, grimacing at the pain in his stubbed toe. He was covered with slime—the raw stench of Elantris now rose from him as well.

“Duladel is of mixed blood, sule. Arelish, Fjordell, Teoish—you’ll find them all. I—”

Raoden cursed quietly, interrupting the man.

Galladon raised an eyebrow. “What is it, sule? Get a splinter in the wrong place? There aren’t many *right* places for that, I suppose.”

“It’s my toe!” Raoden said, limping across the slippery cobblestones. “There’s something wrong with it—I stubbed it when I fell, but the pain isn’t going away.”

Galladon shook his head ruefully. “Welcome to Elantris, Sule. You’re dead—your body won’t repair itself like it should.”

“What?” Raoden flopped to the ground next to Galladon’s steps. His toe continued to hurt with a pain as sharp as the moment he stubbed it.

“Every pain, sule,” Galladon whispered. “Every cut, every nick, every bruise, and every ache—they will stay with you until you go mad from the suffering. As I said, welcome to Elantris.”

“How do you stand it?” Raoden asked, massaging his toe, an action that didn’t help. It was such a silly little injury, but he had to fight to keep the pained tears from his eyes.

“We don’t. We’re either *very* careful, or we end up like those rulos you saw in the courtyard.”

“In the courtyard... Idos Domi!” Raoden pulled himself to his feet and hobbled toward the courtyard. He found the beggar boy in the same location, near the mouth of the alley. He was still alive ... in a way.

The boy’s eyes stared blankly into the air, the pupils quivering. His lips worked silently, no sound escaping. The boy’s neck had been completely crushed, and there was a massive gash in its side, exposing the vertebrae and throat. The boy tried without success to breathe through the mess.

Suddenly Raoden’s toe didn’t seem so bad. “Idos Domi...” Raoden whispered, turning his head as his stomach lurched. He reached out and grabbed the side of a building to steady himself, his head bowed, as he tried to keep from adding to the sludge on the cobblestones.

“There isn’t much left for this one,” Galladon said with a matter-of-fact tone, crouching down next to the beggar.

“How... ?” Raoden began, then stopped as his stomach threatened him again. He sat down in the slime with a plop and, after a few deep breaths, continued. “How long will he live like that?”

“You still don’t understand, sule,” Galladon said, his accented voice sorrowful. “He isn’t alive—none of us are. That’s why we’re here. Kolo? The boy will stay like this forever. That is, after all, the typical length of eternal damnation.”

“Is there nothing we can do?”

Galladon shrugged. “We could try burning him, assuming we could make a fire. Elantrian bodies seem to burn better than those of regular people, and some think that’s a fitting death for our kind.”

“And...” Raoden said, still unable to look at the boy. “And if we do that, what happens to him—his soul?”

“He doesn’t have a soul,” Galladon said. “Or so the priests tell us. Korathi, Derethi, Jesker—they all say the same thing. We’re damned.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Will the pain stop if he is burned?”

Galladon looked down at the boy. Then, eventually, he just shrugged. “Some say that if you burn us, or cut off our head, or do anything that completely destroys the body, we’ll just stop existing. Others, they say the pain goes on—that we *become* pain. They think we’d float thoughtlessly, unable to feel anything but agony. I don’t like either option, so I just try to keep myself in one piece. Kolo?”

“Yes,” Raoden whispered. “I Kolo.” He turned, finally getting the courage to look back at the wounded boy. The enormous gash stared back at him. Blood seeped slowly from the wound—as if the liquid were just sitting in the veins, like stagnant water in a pool.

With a sudden chill Raoden reached up and felt his chest. “I don’t have a heartbeat,” he realized for the first time.

Galladon looked at Raoden as if he had made an utterly idiotic statement. “Sule, you’re dead. Kolo?”

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They didn’t burn the boy. Not only did they lack the proper implements to make fire, but Galladon forbade it. “We can’t make a decision like that. What if he really has no soul? What if he stopped existing when we burned his body? To many, an existence of agony is better than no existence at all.”

So, they left the boy where he had fallen—Galladon doing so without a second thought, Raoden following because he couldn’t think of anything else to do, though he felt the pain of guilt more sharply than even the pain in his toe.

Galladon obviously didn’t care whether Raoden followed him, went in another direction, or stood staring at an interesting spot of grime on the wall. The large, dark-skinned man walked back the way they had come, passing the occasional moaning body in a gutter, his back turned toward Raoden with a posture of complete indifference.

Watching the Dula go, Raoden tried to gather his thoughts. He had been trained for a life in politics; years of preparation had conditioned him to make quick decisions. He made one just then—he decided to trust Galladon.

There was something innately likable about the Dula, something Raoden found indefinably appealing, even if it was covered by a grime of pessimism as thick as the slime on the ground. It was more than Galladon’s lucidity, more than just his leisurely attitude. Raoden had seen the man’s eyes when he regarded the suffering child. Galladon claimed to accept the inevitable, but he felt sad that he had to do so.

The Dula found his former perch on the steps and settled back down. Taking a determined breath, Raoden walked over and stood expectantly in front of the man.

Galladon glanced up. “What?”

“I need your help, Galladon,” Raoden said, squatting on the ground in front of the steps.

Galladon snorted. “This is Elantris, sule. There’s no such thing as help. Pain, insanity, and a whole lot of slime are the only things you’ll find here.”

“You almost sound like you believe that.”

“You are asking in the wrong place, sule.”

“You’re the only non-comatose person I’ve met in here who hasn’t attacked me,” Raoden said. “Your actions speak much more convincingly than your words.”

“Perhaps I simply haven’t tried to hurt you because I know you don’t have anything to take.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Galladon shrugged an ‘I don’t care what you believe’ shrug and turned away, leaning back against the side of the building and closing his eyes.

“Are you hungry, Galladon?” Raoden asked quietly.

The man’s eyes snapped open.

“I used to wonder when King Iadon fed the Elantrians,” Raoden mused. “I never heard of any supplies entering the city, but I always assumed that they were sent. ‘After all,’ I thought, ‘the Elantrians stay alive.’ I never understood. If the people of this city can exist without heartbeats, then they can probably exist without food. Of course, that doesn’t mean the hunger goes away. I was ravenous when I awoke this morning, and I still am. From the looks in the eyes of those men who attacked me, I’d guess the hunger only gets worse.”

Raoden reached under his grime-stained sacrificial robe, pulling out a thin object and holding it up for Galladon to see. A piece of dried meat. Galladon’s eyes opened all the way, his face changing from bored to interested. There was a glint in his eyes—a bit of the same wildness that Raoden had seen in the savage men earlier. It was more controlled, but it was there. For the first time Raoden realized just how much he was gambling on his first impression of the Dula.

“Where did that come from?” Galladon asked slowly.

“It fell out of my basket when the priests were leading me here, so I stuffed it under my sash. Do you want it or not?”

Galladon didn’t answer for a moment. “What makes you think I won’t simply attack you and take it?” The words were not hypothetical—Raoden could tell that a part of Galladon was actually considering such an action. How large a part was still indeterminable.

“You called me ‘sule,’ Galladon. How could you kill one you’ve dubbed a friend?”

Galladon sat, transfixed by the tiny piece of meat. A thin drop of spittle ran unnoticed from the side of his mouth. He looked up at Raoden, who was growing increasingly anxious. When their eyes met, something sparked in Galladon, and the tension snapped. The Dula suddenly bellowed a deep, resounding laugh. “You speak Duladen, sule?”

“Only a few words,” Raoden said modestly.

“An educated man? Rich offerings for Elantris today! All right, you conniving rulo, what do you want?”

“Thirty days,” Raoden said. “For thirty days you will show me around and tell me what you know.”

“Thirty days? Sule, you’re kayana.”

“The way I see it,” Raoden said, moving to tuck the meat back in his sash, “the only food that ever enters this place arrives with the newcomers. One must get pretty hungry with so few offerings and so many mouths to feed. One would think the hunger would be almost maddening.”

“Twenty days,” Galladon said, a hint of his former intensity showing again.

“Thirty, Galladon. If you won’t help me, someone else will.”

Galladon ground his teeth for a moment. “Rulo,” he muttered, then held out his hand. “Thirty days. Fortunately, I wasn’t planning any extended trips during the next month.”

Raoden tossed him the meat with a laugh.

Galladon snatched the meat. Then, though his hand jerked reflexively toward his mouth, he stopped. With a careful motion he tucked the meat into a pocket and stood up. “So, what should I call you?”

Raoden paused. Probably best if people don't know I'm royalty, for now. "Sule works just fine for me."

Galladon chuckled. "The private type, I see. Well, let's go then. It's time for you to get the grand tour."

Chapter Two

Sarene stepped off of the ship to discover that she was a widow. It was shocking news, of course, but not as devastating as it could have been. After all, she had never met her husband. In fact, when Sarene had left her homeland, she and Raoden had only been engaged. She had assumed that the kingdom of Arelon would wait to hold the wedding until she actually arrived. Where she came from, at least, it was expected that both partners would be present when they were married.

"I never liked that clause in the wedding contract, my lady," said Sarene's companion—a melon-sized ball of light hovering at her side.

Sarene tapped her foot in annoyance as she watched the packmen load her luggage onto a carriage. The wedding contract had been a fifty-page beast of a document, and one of its many stipulations made her betrothal legally binding if either she or her fiancé died before the actual wedding ceremony.

"It's fairly common clause, Ashe," she said. "That way, the treaty of a political marriage isn't voided if something happens to one of the participants. I've never seen it invoked."

"Until today," the ball of light replied, its voice deep words and well-enunciated.

"Until today," Sarene admitted. "How was I to know Prince Raoden wouldn't last the five days it took us to cross the Sea of Fjorden?" She paused, frowning in thought. "Quote the clause to me, Ashe. I need to know exactly what it says."

"If it happens that one member of the aforementioned couple is called home to Merciful Domi before the prearranged wedding time," Ashe said, "then the engagement will be considered equivalent to marriage in all legal and social respects."

"Not much room for argument, is there?"

"Afraid not, my lady."

Sarene frowned distractedly, folding her arms and tapping her cheek with her index finger, watching the packmen. A tall, gaunt man directed the work with bored eyes and a resigned expression. The man, an Arelish court attendant named Ketol, was the only reception King Iadon had seen fit to send her. Ketol had been the one to 'regretfully inform her that her fiancé had died of an unexpected disease during her journey.' He had made the declaration with the same dull, uninterested tone that he used to command the packmen.

"So," Sarene clarified, "as far as the law is concerned, I'm now a princess of Arelon."

"That is correct, my lady."

"And the widowed bride of a man I never met."

"Again, correct."

Sarene shook her head. "Father is going to laugh himself sick when he hears about this. I'll never live it down."

Ashe pulsed slightly in annoyance. "My lady, the king would never take such a solemn event with levity. The death of Prince Raoden has undoubtedly brought great grief to the sovereign family of Arelon."

"Yes. So much grief, in fact, that they couldn't even spare the effort it would take to come meet their new daughter."

"Perhaps, my lady," Ashe noted, "King Iadon would have come himself if he'd had more warning of our arrival..."

Sarene frowned, but the Seon had a point. Her early arrival, several days ahead of the main wedding party, had been intended as a pre-wedding surprise for Prince Raoden. She'd wanted a few days, at least, to spend time with him privately and in person. Her secrecy, however, had worked against her.

"Tell me, Ashe," she said. "How long do Arelish people customarily wait between a person's death and their burial?"

"I'm not sure, my lady," Ashe confessed. "I left Arelon long ago, and I lived here for such a short time that I can't remember many specifics. However, my studies tell me that Arelish customs are generally similar to those of your homeland."

Sarene nodded, then waved over King Iadon's attendant.

"Yes, my lady?" Ketol asked in a lazy tone.

"Is a funeral wake being held for the prince?" Sarene asked.

"Yes, my lady," the attendant replied. "Outside the Korathi chapel. The burial will happen this evening."

"I want to go see the casket."

Ketol paused. "Uh... his majesty asked that you be brought to him immediately..."

"Then I won't spend long at the funeral tent," Sarene said, walking toward her carriage.

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Sarene surveyed the busy funeral tent with a critical eye, waiting as Ketol and a few of the packmen cleared a way for her to approach the casket. She had to admit, everything was irreproachable—the flowers, the offerings, the praying Korathi priests. The only oddity about the event was how crowded the tent was.

"There certainly are a lot of people here," she noted to Ashe.

"The prince was very well-liked, my lady," the Seon replied, floating beside her. "According to our reports, he was the most popular public figure in the country."

Sarene nodded, walking down the passageway Ketol had made for her. Prince Raoden's casket sat at the very center of the tent, guarded by a ring of soldiers who only let the masses approach so far. As she walked, she sensed true grief in the faces of those in attendance.

So it is true, she thought. The people did love him.

The soldiers made way for her, and she approached the casket. It was carved with Aons—most of them symbols of hope and peace—after the Korathi way. The entire wooden casket was surrounded by a ring of lavish foods—an offering made on behalf of the deceased.

"Can I see him?" she asked, turning toward one of the Korathi priests—a small, kindly-looking man.

"I'm sorry, child," the priest said. "But the prince's disease was unpleasantly disfiguring. The king has asked that the prince be allowed dignity in death."

Sarene nodded, turning back to the casket. She wasn't sure what she had expected to feel, standing before the dead man she would have married. She was oddly... angry.

She pushed that emotion away for the moment, instead turning to look around the tent. It almost seemed *too* formal. Though the visiting people were obviously grieved, there tent, the offerings, and the decorations seemed sterile.

A man of Raoden's age and supposed vigor, she thought. Dead of the coughing shivers. It could happen—but it certainly doesn't seem likely.

“My... lady?” Ashe said quietly. “Is something wrong?”

Sarene waved to the Seon and walked back toward their carriage. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. “Something just doesn’t feel right here, Ashe.”

“You have a suspicious nature, my lady,” Ashe pointed out.

“Why isn’t Iadon having a vigil for his son? Ketol said he was holding court, as if his own son’s death didn’t even bother him.” Sarene shook her head. “I spoke with Raoden just before I left Teod, and he seemed fine. Something is wrong, Ashe, and I want to know what it is.”

“Oh, dear ...” Ashe said. “You know, my lady, your father *did* ask me to try and keep you out of trouble.”

Sarene smiled. “Now there’s an impossible task. Come on, we need to go meet my new father.”

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Sarene leaned against the carriage window, watching the city pass as she rode toward the palace. She sat in silence for the moment, a single thought crowding everything else out of her mind.

What am I doing here?

Her words to Ashe had been confident, but she had always been good at hiding her worries. True, she was curious about the prince’s death, but Sarene knew herself very well. A large part of that curiosity was an attempt to take her mind off of her feelings of inferiority and awkwardness—anything to keep from acknowledging what she was: a lanky, brusque woman who was almost past her prime. She was twenty-five years old; she should have been married years ago. Raoden had been her last chance.

How dare you die on me, prince of Arelon! Sarene thought indignantly. Yet, the irony did not escape her. It was fitting that this man, one she had thought she might actually grow to like, would die before she even got to meet him. Now she was alone in an unfamiliar country, politically bound to a king she did not trust. It was a daunting, lonely feeling.

You’ve been lonely before, Sarene, she reminded herself. You’ll get through it. Just find something to occupy your mind. You have an entire new court to explore. Enjoy it.

With a sigh, Sarene turned her attention back to the city. Despite considerable experience serving in her father’s diplomatic corps, she had never visited Arelon. Ever since the fall of Elantris, Arelon had been unofficially quarantined by most other kingdoms—no one knew why the mystical city had been cursed, and everyone worried that the Elantrian disease might spread.

Sarene was surprised, however, by the lushness she saw in Kae. The city thoroughfares were wide and well-maintained. The people on the street were well-dressed, and she didn’t see a single beggar. To one side, a group of blue-robed Korathi priests walked quietly through the crowd, leading an odd, white-robed person. She watched the procession, wondering what it could be, until the group disappeared around a corner.

From her vantage, Kae reflected none of the economic hardship Arelon was supposed to be suffering. The carriage passed dozens of fenced-in mansions, each one built in a different style of architecture. Some were expansive, with large wings and pointed roofs, following Duladen construction. Others were more like castles, their stone walls looking as if they had been directly transported from the militaristic countryside of Fjorden. The mansions all shared one thing, however—wealth. The people of this country might be starving, but Kae—seat of Arelon’s aristocracy—didn’t appear to have noticed.

Of course, one disturbing shadow still hung over the city. The enormous wall of Elantris rose in the distance, and Sarene shivered as she glanced at its stark imposing stones. She had heard stories about Elantris for most of her adult life, tales of the magics it had once produced, and the monstrosities that now inhabited its dark streets. No matter how gaudy the houses, no matter how wealthy the streets, this one monument stood as a testament that all was not well in Arelon.

“Why do they even live here, I wonder?” Sarene asked.

“My lady?” Ashe asked.

“Why did King Iadon build his palace in Kae? Why choose a city that is so close to Elantris?”

“I suspect the reasons are primarily economic, my lady,” Ashe said. “There are only a couple of viable ports on the northern Arelish coast, and this is the finest.”

Sarene nodded—the bay formed by the merging of the Aredel River with the ocean made for an enviable harbor. But even still...

“Perhaps the reasons are political,” Sarene mused. “Iadon took power during turbulent times—maybe he thinks that remaining close to the old capital will lend him authority.”

“Perhaps, my lady,” Ashe said.

It's not like it really matters that much, she thought. Apparently, proximity to Elantris—or Elantrians—didn't actually increase one's chances of being taken by the Shaod.

She turned away from the window, looking over at Ashe, who hovered above the seat beside her. She had yet to see a Seon in the streets of Kae, though the creatures—said to be the ancient creations of Elantris magic—were supposed to be even more common in Arelon than in her homeland. If she squinted, she could barely make out the glowing Aon at the center of Ashe's light.

“At least the treaty is safe,” Sarene finally said.

“Assuming you remain in Arelon, my lady,” Ashe said in his deep voice, “at least, that is what the wedding contract says. As long as you stay here, and ‘remain faithful to your husband,’ King Iadon must honor his alliance with Teod.”

“Remain faithful to a dead man,” Sarene mumbled with a sigh. “Well, that means I have to stay, husband or no husband.”

“If you say so, my lady.”

“We need this treaty, Ashe,” Sarene said. “Fjorden is expanding its influence at an incredible rate. Five years ago I would have said we didn't need to worry, that Fjorden's priests would never be a power in Arelon. But now...” Sarene shook her head. The collapse of the Duladen Republic had changed so much.

“We shouldn't have kept ourselves so removed from Arelon these last ten years, Ashe,” she said. “I probably wouldn't be in this predicament if we had forged strong ties with the new Arelish government ten years ago.”

“Your father was afraid their political turmoil would infect Teod,” Ashe said. “Not to mention the Reod—no one was certain that whatever struck the Elantrians wouldn't affect normal people as well.”

The carriage slowed, and Sarene sighed, letting the topic drop. Her father knew Fjorden was a danger, and he understood that old allegiances needed to be reforged—that was why she was in Arelon. Ahead of them, the palace gates swung open. Friendless or not, she had arrived, and Teod was depending on her. She had to prepare Arelon for the war that was coming—a war that had become inevitable the moment Elantris fell.

Sarene's new father, King Iadon of Arelon, was a thin man with a shrewd face. He was conferring with several of his administrators when Sarene entered the throne room, and she stood unnoticed for nearly fifteen minutes before he even nodded to her. Personally, she didn't mind the wait—it gave her a chance to observe the man she was now sworn to obey—but her dignity couldn't help being a little offended by the treatment. Her station as a princess of Teod alone should have earned her a reception that was, if not grand, at least punctual.

As she waited, one thing struck her immediately. Iadon did not look like a man mourning the passing of his son and heir. There were no signs of grief in his eyes, none of the haggard fatigue that generally accompanied the passing of a loved one. In fact, the air of the court itself seemed remarkably free of mourning signs.

Is Iadon a heartless man, then? Sarene wondered curiously. Or is he simply one who knows how to control his emotions?

Years spent in her father's court had taught Sarene to be a connoisseur of noble character. Though she couldn't hear what Iadon was saying—she had been told to stay near the back of the room and wait for permission to approach—the king's actions and mannerisms gave her an idea of his character. Iadon spoke firmly, giving direct instruction, occasionally pausing to stab his table-map with a thin finger. He was a man with a strong personality, she decided—one with a definite idea of how he wanted things done. It wasn't a bad sign. Tentatively, Sarene decided that this was a man with whom she might be able to work.

She was to revise that opinion shortly.

King Iadon waved her over. She carefully hid her annoyance at the wait, and approached him with the proper air of noble submission. He interrupted her halfway through her curtsy.

"No one told me you would be so tall," he declared.

"My lord?" she said, looking up.

"Well, I guess the only one who would have cared about that isn't around to see it. Eshen!" he snapped, causing an almost unseen woman near the far side of the room to jump in compliance.

"Take this one to her rooms and see that she has plenty of things to keep her occupied. Embroidery or whatever else it is that entertains you women." With that, the king turned to his next appointment—a group of merchants.

Sarene stood mid-curtsy, stunned at Iadon's complete lack of courtesy. Only years of courtly training kept her jaw from dropping. Quick but unassertive, the woman Iadon had ordered—*Queen Eshen*, the king's wife—scuttled over and took Sarene's arm. Eshen was short and slight of frame, her brownish-blond Aonic hair only beginning to streak with gray.

"Come, child," Eshen said in a high-pitched voice. "We mustn't waste the king's time."

Sarene allowed herself to be pulled through one of the room's side doors. "Merciful Domi," she muttered to herself. "What have I gotten myself into?"

#

"... and you'll love it when the roses come in. I have the gardeners plant them so you can smell them without even leaning out the window. I wish they weren't so big, though."

Sarene frowned in confusion. "The roses?"

"No, dear," the queen continued, barely pausing, "the windows. You can't believe how bright the sun is when it shines through them in the morning. I asked them—the gardeners, that is—to

find me some orange ones, because I *so* adore orange, but so far all they found were some ghastly yellow ones. ‘If I wanted yellow,’ I said to them, ‘I would have had you plant Aberteens.’ You should have seen them apologize—I’m sure we’ll have some orange ones by the end of next year. Don’t you think that would be lovely, dear? Of course, the windows will still be too big. Maybe I can have a couple of them bricked off.”

Sarene nodded, fascinated—not by the conversation, but by the queen. Sarene had assumed that the lecturers at her father’s Academy had been skilled at saying nothing with lots of words, but Eshen put them all to shame. The queen flitted from one topic to the next like a butterfly looking for a place to land, but never finding one suitable enough for an extended stay. Any one of the topics would have been potential fuel for an interesting conversation, but the queen never let Sarene grab hold of one long enough to do it justice.

Sarene took a calming breath, telling herself to be patient. She couldn’t blame the queen for being the way she was—Domi taught that all people’s personalities were gifts to be enjoyed. The queen was charming, in her own meandering way. Unfortunately, after meeting both king and queen, Sarene was beginning to suspect that she would have trouble finding political allies in Arelon.

Something else bothered Sarene—something odd about the way Eshen acted. No one could *possibly* talk as much as the queen did; she never let a silent moment pass. It was almost like the woman was uncomfortable around Sarene. Then, in a moment of realization, Sarene understood what it was. Eshen spoke on every imaginable topic except for the one most important—the departed prince. Sarene’s narrowed her eyes with suspicion. She couldn’t be certain—Eshen was, after all, a very flighty person—but it seemed that the Queen was acting far too cheerful for a woman who had just lost her son.

“Here is your room, dear. We unpacked your things, and added some as well. You have clothing in every color, even yellow, though I can’t imagine why you would want to wear it. Horrid color. Not that your hair is horrid, of course. Blonde isn’t the same as yellow, no. No more than a horse is a vegetable. We don’t have a horse for you yet, but you are welcome to use any in the king’s stables. We have lots of fine animals, you see, Duladel is beautiful this time of year.”

“Of course,” Sarene said, looking over the room. It was small, but suited her tastes. Too much space could be as daunting as too little could be cramped.

“Now, you’ll be needing these, dear,” Eshen said, pointing a small hand at a pile of clothing that wasn’t hanging like the rest—as if it had been delivered more recently. All of the dresses in the pile shared a single attribute.

“Black?” Sarene asked.

“Of course. You’re ... you’re in ...” Eshen fumbled with the words.

“I’m in mourning,” Sarene realized. She tapped her foot with dissatisfaction—black was *not* one of her favorite colors.

Eshen nodded. “You can wear one of those to the funeral this evening. It should be a nice service—I did the arrangements.” She began talking about her favorite flowers again, and the monologue soon degenerated into a discourse on how much she hated Fjordell cooking. Gently, but firmly, Sarene led the woman to the door, nodding pleasantly. As soon as they reached the hallway, Sarene pled fatigue from her travels, and plugged the queen’s verbal torrent by closing of the door.

“That’s going to get old *very* quickly,” Sarene said to herself.

“The queen does have a robust gift for conversation, my lady,” a deep voice agreed.

“What did you find out?” Sarene asked, walking over to pick through the pile of dark clothing as Ashe floated in through the open window.

"I didn't find as many Seons as I had expected. I seem to recall that this city was once overflowing with us."

"I noticed that too," Sarene said, holding up a dress in front of the mirror, then discarding it with a shake of her head. "I guess things are different now."

"They are indeed. As per your instructions, I asked the other Seons what they knew of the prince's untimely death. Unfortunately, my lady, they were hesitant to discuss the event—they consider it extremely ill-omened for the prince to die so soon before he was to be married."

"Especially for him," Sarene mumbled, pulling off her clothing to try on the dress. "Ashe, something strange is going on. I think maybe someone killed the prince."

"Killed, my lady?" Ashe's deep voice was disapproving, and he pulsed slightly at the comment. "Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know, but... something feels odd about the prince's death. This doesn't seem like a court that is in mourning. Take the queen, for instance. She didn't appear distraught when she spoke to me—you'd think she would be at least a little bothered by the fact that her son died yesterday."

"There is a simple explanation for that, my lady. Queen Eshen is not Prince Raoden's mother. Raoden was born of Iadon's first wife, who died over twelve years ago."

"When did he re-marry?"

"Right after the Reod," Ashe said. "Just a few months after he took the throne."

Sarene frowned. "I'm still suspicious," she decided, reaching around awkwardly to button the back of her dress. Then she regarded herself in the mirror, looking at the dress critically. "Well, at least it fits—even if it does make me look pale. I was half afraid it would cut off at my knees. These Arelish women are all so unnaturally short."

"If you say so, my lady," Ashe replied. He knew as well as she did that Arelish women weren't that short—even in Teod, Sarene had been a head taller than most of the other women. Her father had called her Leky-stick as a child—borrowing the name of the tall thin post that marked the goal line in his favorite sport. Even after filling out during adolescence, Sarene was still undeniably lanky.

"My lady," Ashe said, interrupting her contemplations.

"Yes, Ashe?"

"Your father is desperate to talk to you. I think you have some news he deserves to hear."

Sarene nodded, holding in a sigh, and Ashe began to pulse brightly. A moment later the ball of light that formed his essence melted into a bust-like glowing head. King Eventeo of Teod.

"'Ene?" her father asked, the glowing head's lips moving. He was a robust man, with a large oval face and a thick chin.

"Yes, father. I'm here." Her father would be standing beside a similar Seon—probably Dio—who would have changed to resemble a glowing approximation of Sarene's head.

"Are you nervous for the wedding?" Eventeo asked anxiously.

"Well, about that wedding..." she said slowly. "You'll probably want to cancel your plans to come next week. There won't be much for you to see."

"What?"

Ashe had been right—her father didn't laugh when he heard Raoden was dead. Instead, his voice turned to one of sharp concern, the glowing face worried. His worry increased when Sarene explained how the death was as binding as an actual wedding.

“Oh, ‘Ene, I’m sorry,” her father said. “I know how much you were expecting from this marriage.”

“Nonsense, father.” Eventeo knew her far too well. “I hadn’t even met the man—how could I have had any expectations?”

“You hadn’t met him,” said her father’s soothing voice, “but you had spoken with him through Seon, and you had written all those letters. I know you, ‘Ene—you’re a romantic. You would never have decided to go through with this if you hadn’t thoroughly convinced yourself that you could love Raoden.”

The words rang true, and suddenly Sarene’s loneliness returned. She had spent the trip across the Sea of Fjorden in a state of disbelieving nervousness, both excited and apprehensive at the prospect of meeting the man who was to become her husband. More excited, however, than apprehensive.

She had been away from Teod many times, but she had always gone with others from her homeland. This time she had come by herself, traveling ahead of the rest of the wedding party to surprise Raoden. She had read and reread the prince’s letters so many times that she had begun to feel she knew him, and the person she’d constructed from those sheets of paper was a complex, compassionate man that she had been very anxious to meet.

And now she never would. She felt more than alone, she felt rejected—again. Unwanted. She had waited all these years, suffered by a patient father who didn’t know how the men of her homeland avoided her, how they were frightened by her forward, even arrogant, personality. Finally, she had found a man who was willing to have her, and Domi had snatched him away at the last moment.

Sarene finally began to let herself feel some of the emotions she had been keeping in a tight noose since stepping off the ship. She was glad the Seon only transferred her features, for she would have been mortified if her father had seen the tear rolling down her cheek.

“That’s silly, father,” she said. “This was a simple political marriage, and we all knew it. Now our countries have more in common than just language—our royal lines are related.”

“Oh, honey ... ” her father whispered. “My little Sarene. I had so hoped this would work out—you don’t know how your mother and I prayed that you would find happiness there. Idos Domi! We shouldn’t have gone through with this.”

“I would have made you, father,” Sarene said. “We need the treaty with Arelon far too badly. Our armada won’t keep Fjorden off our shores for much longer—the entire Svordish navy is under Wyrn’s command.”

“Little Sarene, all grown up now,” her father said through the Seon link.

“All grown up and fully capable of marrying herself off to a corpse.” Sarene laughed weakly. “It’s probably for the best. I don’t think Prince Raoden would have turned out as I had imagined—you should meet his father.”

“I’ve heard stories. I hoped they weren’t true.”

“Oh, they are,” Sarene said, letting her dissatisfaction with the Arelish monarch burn away her sorrow. “King Iadon has to be just about the most disagreeable man I have ever met. He barely even acknowledged me before sending me off to, as he put it, ‘go knit, and whatever else you women do.’ If Raoden was anything like his father, then I’m better off this way.”

There was a momentary pause before her father responded. “Sarene, do you want to come home? I can void the contract if I want, no matter what the laws say.”

The offer was tempting—more tempting than she would ever admit. She paused. “No, father,” she finally said with an unconscious shake of her head. “I have to stay. This was my idea, and

Raoden's death doesn't change the fact that we need this alliance. Besides, returning home would break tradition—we both know that Iadon is my father now. It would be unseemly for you to take me back into your household."

"I will always be your father, 'Ene. Domi curse the customs—Teod will always be open for you."

"Thank you father," Sarene said quietly. "I needed to hear that. But I still think I should stay. For now, at least. Besides, it could be interesting. I have an entirely new court full of people to play with."

"'Ene..." her father said apprehensively. "I know that tone. What are you planning?"

"Nothing," she said. "There's just a few things I want to poke my nose into before I give up completely on this marriage."

There was a pause, then her father chuckled. "Domi protect them—they don't know what we've shipped over there. Go easy on them, Leky-stick. I don't want to get a note from Minister Naolen in a month telling me that King Iadon has run off to join a Korathi monastery and the Arelish people have named you monarch instead."

"All right," Sarene said with a wan smile. "I'll wait at least two months then."

Her father burst into another round of his characteristic laughter—a sound that did her more good than any of his consolations or counsels. "Wait for a minute, 'Ene," he said after his laughter subsided. "Let me get your mother—she'll want to speak with you." Then, after a moment, he chuckled, continuing, "She's going to faint dead away when I tell her you've already killed off poor Raoden."

"Father!" Sarene said—but he was already gone.

Chapter Three

None of Arelon's people greeted their savior when he arrived. It was an affront, of course, but not an unexpected one. The people of Arelon—especially those living near the infamous city of Elantris—were known for their godless, even heretical, ways. Hrathen had come to change that. He had three months to convert the entire kingdom of Arelon, otherwise Holy Jaddeth—Lord of all creation—would destroy it. The time had finally come for Arelon to accept the truths of the Derethi religion.

Hrathen strode down the gangplank. Beyond the docks, with its continuous bustle of loading and unloading, stretched the city of Kae. A short distance beyond Kae, Hrathen could see a towering stone wall—the old city of Elantris. On the other side of Kae, to Hrathen's left, the land sloped steeply, rising to a tall hill—a foothill of what would become the Dathreki Mountains. Behind him was the ocean.

Overall, Hrathen was not impressed. In ages past, four small cities had surrounded Elantris, but only Kae—the new capital of Arelon—was still inhabited. Kae was too unorganized, too spread out, to be defensible, and its only fortification appeared to be a small, five-foot high wall of stones—more a border than anything else.

Retreat into Elantris would be difficult, and only marginally effective. Kae's buildings would provide wonderful cover for an invading force, and a few of Kae's more peripheral structures looked like they were built almost against Elantris's wall. This was not a nation accustomed to war. Yet, of all the kingdoms on the Syclan continent—the land named 'Opelon' by the Arelish people—only Arelon itself had avoided domination by the Fjordell Empire. Of course, that too was something Hrathen would soon change.

Hrathen marched away from the ship, his presence causing quite a stir among the people. Workers halted their labors as he passed, staring at him with impressed amazement. Conversations died when eyes fell upon him. Hrathen didn't slow for anyone, but that didn't matter, for people moved quickly from his path. It could have been his eyes, but, more likely, it was his armor. Blood red and glittering in the sunlight, the plate armor of a Derethi imperial high priest was an imposing sight even when one was accustomed to it.

He was beginning to think he would have to find his own way to the city's Derethi chapel when he made out a spot of red weaving its way through the crowd. The speck soon resolved into a stumpy balding figure clad in red Derethi robes. "My Lord Hrathen!" the man called.

Hrathen stopped, allowing Fjon—Kae's Derethi head arteth—to approach. Fjon puffed and wiped his brow with a silken handkerchief. "I'm terribly sorry, your grace. The register had you scheduled to come in on a different ship. I didn't find out you weren't on board until they were halfway done unloading. I'm afraid I had to leave the carriage behind; I couldn't get it through the crowd."

Hrathen's narrowed his eyes with displeasure, but he said nothing. Fjon continued to blather for a moment before finally deciding to lead Hrathen to the Derethi chapel, apologizing again for the lack of transportation. Hrathen followed his pudgy guide with a measured stride, dissatisfied. Fjon trotted along with a smile on his lips, occasionally waving to passers on the streets, shouting pleasantries. The people responded in kind—at least, until they saw Hrathen, his blood cloak billowing behind him and his exaggerated armor cut with sharp angles and harsh lines. Then they fell silent, greetings withering, their eyes following Hrathen until he passed. Such was as it should be.

The chapel was a tall stone structure, complete with bright red tapestries and towering spires. Here, at least, Hrathen found some of the majesty he was accustomed to. Within, however, he was confronted by a disturbing sight—a crowd of people involved in some kind of social activity.

People milled around, ignoring the holy structure in which they stood, laughing and joking. It was too much. Hrathen had heard, and believed, the reports. Now he had confirmation.

“Arteth Fjon, assemble your priests,” Hrathen said—the first words he had spoken since his arrival on Arelish soil.

The arteth jumped, as if surprised to finally hear sounds coming from his distinguished guest. “Yes, my lord,” he said, motioning for the gathering to end.

It took a frustratingly long time, but Hrathen endured the process with a flat expression. When the people had left, he approached the priests, his armored feet clicking against the chapel’s stone floor. When he finally spoke, his words were directed at Fjon.

“Arteth,” he said, using the man’s Derethi title, “the ship that brought me here will leave for Fjorden in one hour. You are to be on board.”

Fjon’s jaw dropped in alarm. “Wha—”

“Speak Fjordell, man!” Hrathen snapped. “Surely ten years amongst the Arelish heathens hasn’t corrupted you to the point that you have forgotten your native tongue?”

“No, no, your grace,” Fjon replied, switching from Aonic to Fjordell. “But I—”

“Enough,” Hrathen interrupted again. “I have orders from Wyrn himself. You have spent far too long in the Arelish culture—you have forgotten your holy calling, and are unable to see to the progress of Jaddeth’s Empire. These people don’t need a friend; they need a priest. A Derethi priest. One would think you were Korathi, watching you fraternize. We’re not here to love the people; we are here to help them. You will go.”

Fjon slumped back against one of the room’s pillars, his eyes widening and his limbs losing their strength. “But who will be head arteth of the chapel in my absence, my lord? The other arteths are so inexperienced.”

“These are pivotal times, Arteth,” Hrathen said. “I’ll be remaining in Arelon to personally direct the work here. May Jaddeth grant me success.”

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He had hoped for an office with a better view, but the chapel, majestic as it was, held no second floor. Fortunately, the grounds were well-kept, and his office—Fjon’s old room—overlooked nicely trimmed hedges and carefully-arranged flower beds.

Now that he had cleared the walls of paintings—agrarian nature scenes, for the most part—and thrown out Fjon’s numerous personal effects, the chamber was approaching a level of dignified orderliness appropriate for a Derethi gyorn. All it needed was a few tapestries and maybe a shield or two.

Nodding to himself, Hrathen turned his attention back to the scroll on his desk. His orders. He barely dared hold them in his profane hands. He read the words over and over again in his mind, imprinting both their physical form and their theological meaning on his soul.

“My lord... your grace?” a quiet voice asked in Fjordell.

Hrathen looked up. Fjon’s entered the room, then crouched in a subservient huddle on the floor, his forehead rubbing the ground. Hrathen allowed himself to smile, knowing the penitent arteth couldn’t see his face. Perhaps there was hope for Fjon yet.

“Speak,” Hrathen said.

“I have done wrong, my lord. I have acted contrary to the plans of our Lord Jaddeth.”

“Your sin was complacency, Arteth. Contentment has destroyed more nations than any army, and it has claimed the souls of more men than even Elantris’s heresies.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You still must leave, Arteth,” Hrathen said.

The man’s shoulders slumped slightly. “Is there no hope for me then, my lord?”

“That is Arelish foolishness speaking, Arteth, not Fjordell pride.” Hrathen reached down, grasping the man’s shoulder. “Rise, my brother!” he commanded.

Fjon looked up, hope returning to his eyes.

“Your mind may have become tainted with Arelish thoughts, but your soul is still Fjordell. You are of Jaddeth’s chosen people—all of the Fjordell have a place of service in His Empire. Return to our homeland, join a monastery to reacquaint yourself with those things you have forgotten, and you will be given another way to serve the Empire.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Hrathen’s grip grew hard. “Understand this before you leave, Arteth. My arrival is more of a blessing than you can possibly understand. All of Jaddeth’s workings are not open to you; do not think to second-guess our God.” He paused, debating his next move. After a moment he decided—this man still had worth. Hrathen had a unique chance to reverse much of Arelon’s perversion of Fjon’s soul in a single stroke. “Look there on the table, Arteth. Read that scroll.”

Fjon looked toward the desk, eyes finding the scroll resting thereon. Hrathen released the man’s shoulder, allowing him to walk around the desk and read.

“This is the official seal of Wyrn himself!” Fjon said, picking up the scroll.

“Not just the seal, Arteth,” Hrathen said. “That is his signature as well. The document you hold was penned by his Holiness himself. That isn’t just a letter—it is scripture.”

Fjon’s eyes opened wide, and his fingers began to quiver. “Wyrn himself?” Then, realizing in full what he was holding in his unworthy hand, he dropped the parchment to the desk with a quiet yelp. His eyes didn’t turn away from the letter, however. They were transfixed—reading the words as voraciously as a starving man devoured a joint of beef. Few people actually had an opportunity to read words written by the hand of Jaddeth’s prophet and Holy Emperor.

Hrathen gave the priest time to read the scroll, then re-read it, and then read it again. When Fjon finally looked up, there was understanding—and gratitude—in his face. The man was intelligent enough. He knew what the orders would have required of him, had he remained in charge of Kae.

“Thank you,” Fjon mumbled.

Hrathen nodded graciously. “Could you have done it? Could you have followed Wyrn’s commands?”

Fjon shook his head, eyes darting back to the parchment. “No, your Grace. I could not have... I couldn’t have functioned—couldn’t have even thought—with that on my conscience. I do not envy your place, my lord. Not anymore.”

“Return to Fjorden with my blessing, brother,” Hrathen said, taking a small envelope from a bag on the table. “Give this to the priests there. It is a letter from me telling them you accepted your reassignment with the grace befitting a servant of Jaddeth. They will see that you are assigned to a monastery. Perhaps someday you will be allowed to lead a chapel again—one well within Fjorden’s borders.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord.”

Fjon withdrew, closing the door behind him. Hrathen walked to his desk and slid another envelope—identical to the one he had given Fjon—from his letter bag. He held it for a few moments, then turned it to one of the desk's candles. The words it held—condemning Arteth Fjon as a traitor and an apostate—would never be read, and the poor, pleasant arteth would never know just how much danger he had been in.

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“With your leave, my Lord Gyorn,” said the bowing priest, a minor dorven who had served under Fjon for over a decade. Hrathen waved his hand, bidding the man to leave. The door shut silently as the priest backed from the room.

Fjon had done some serious damage to his underlings. Even a small weakness would build enormous flaws over two decades' time, and Fjon's problems were anything but 'small.' The man had been lenient to the point of flagrancy—he had run a chapel without order, bowing before Arelish culture rather than bringing the people strength and discipline. Half of the priests serving in Kae were hopelessly corrupted—including men as new to the city as six months. Within the next few weeks, Hrathen would be sending a veritable fleet of priests back to Fjorden. He'd have to pick a new head arteth from those who remained, few though they were.

A knock came at the door. “Come,” Hrathen said. He had been seeing the priests one at a time, feeling out the extent of their contamination. So far, he had not often been impressed.

“Arteth Dilaf,” the priest said, introducing himself as he entered.

Hrathen looked up—the name and words were Fjordell, but the accent was slightly off. It sounded almost ... “You're Arelish?” Hrathen said with surprise.

The priest bowed with the proper amount of subservience—his eyes, however, were defiant.

“How did you become a priest of Derethi?” Hrathen asked.

“I wanted to serve the Empire,” the man replied, his voice quietly intense. “Jaddeth provided a way.”

No, Hrathen realized. *It isn't defiance in this man's eyes—it's religious fervor.* One did not often find zealots in the Derethi religion—such people were more often drawn to the frenzied lawlessness of the Jeskeri Mysteries than the militaristic organization of Shu-Dereth. This man's face, however, burned with fanatical passion. It was not a bad thing—while Hrathen himself spurned such lack of control, he had often found zealots to be useful tools.

“Jaddeth always provides a way, Arteth,” Hrathen said carefully. “Be more specific.”

“I met a Derethi arteth in Duladel twelve years ago. He preached to me, and I believed. He gave me copies of the *Do-Keseg* and the *Do-Dereth*, and I read them both in one night. The holy arteth sent me back to Arelon to help convert those in my home country, and I set up in Rain. I taught there for seven years, until the day I heard that a Derethi chapel had been built in Kae itself. I overcame my loathing for the Elantrians, knowing that Holy Jaddeth had struck them down with an eternal punishment, and came to join with my Fjordell brethren.

“I brought my converts with me—fully half of the believers in Kae came with me from Rain. Fjon was impressed with my diligence. He granted me the title of arteth and allowed me to continue teaching.”

Hrathen rubbed his chin thoughtfully, regarding the Arelish priest. “You know what Arteth Fjon did was wrong.”

“Yes, my lord. An arteth cannot appoint another to his own position. When I speak to the people, I never refer to myself as a priest of Derethi, only a teacher.”

A *very good teacher*, Dilaf's tone implied. "What did you think of Arteth Fjon?" Hrathen asked.

"He was an undisciplined fool, my lord. His laxness kept Jaddeth's kingdom from growing in Arelon, and has made a mockery of our religion."

Hrathen smiled—Dilaf, though not of the chosen race, was obviously a man who understood the doctrine and culture of his religion. However, his ardor could be dangerous. The wild intensity in Dilaf's eyes was barely under control—either he would have to be watched very closely, or he would have to be disposed of.

"It appears that Arteth Fjon did one thing right, even if he didn't have the proper authority," Hrathen said. Dilaf's eyes burned even more brightly at the declaration. "I make you a full arteth, Dilaf."

Dilaf bowed touching his head to the ground. His mannerisms were perfectly Fjordell, and Hrathen had never heard a foreigner speak the Holy Tongue so well. This man could prove useful indeed—after all, one common complaint against Shu-Dereth was that it favored the Fjordell. An Arelish priest could help prove that all were welcome within Jaddeth's Empire—even if the Fjordell were the most welcome.

Hrathen congratulated himself on creating such a useful tool, completely satisfied until the moment Dilaf looked up from his bow. The passion was still there in Fjon's eyes—but there was something else as well. Ambition. Hrathen frowned slightly, wondering whether or not he had just been manipulated.

There was only one thing to do. "Arteth, are you sworn as any man's odiv?"

Surprise. Dilaf's eyes opened wide as he stared up at Hrathen, uncertainty flashing therein. "No, my lord."

"Good. Then I will make you mine."

"My lord ... I am, of course, your humble servant."

"You will be more than that, Arteth," Hrathen said, "if you would be my odiv, I your hroden. You will be mine, heart and soul. If you follow Jaddeth, you follow him *through me*. If you serve Wyrn, you do it under me. Whatever you think, act, or say will be by my direction. Am I understood?"

Fire burned in Dilaf's eyes. "Yes," he hissed. The man's fervor wouldn't let him reject such an offer. Though his lowly rank of arteth would remain unchanged, being odiv to a gyorn would enormously increase Dilaf's power and respectability. He *would* be Hrathen's slave, if that slavery would carry him higher. It was a very Fjordell thing to do—ambition was the one emotion Jaddeth would accept as readily as devotion.

"Good," Hrathen said. "Then your first order is to follow the priest Fjon. He should be getting on the ship to Fjordell right at this moment—I want you to make sure he does so. If Fjon gets off for any reason, kill him."

"Yes, my gyorn." Dilaf rushed from the room. He finally had an outlet for his enthusiasm—all Hrathen had to do now was keep that enthusiasm focused in the right direction.

Hrathen stood for a moment after the Arelish man had gone, then shook his head and turned back to his desk. The scroll still lay where it had fallen from Fjon's unworthy fingers; Hrathen picked it up with a smile, his touch reverent. He was not a man who delighted in possessions—Hrathen set his sights on much grander accomplishments than the simple accumulation of useless baubles. However, occasionally an object came along that was so unique, Hrathen reveled in simply knowing it belonged to him. One did not own such a thing for its usefulness, or for its ability to impress others, but because it was a privilege to possess. The scroll was such an object.

It had been scribed in front of Hrathen by Wyrn's own hand. It was revelation directly from Jaddeth; scripture intended for only one man. Few people ever got to meet Jaddeth's anointed, and even amongst the gyorns, private audiences were rare. To receive orders directly from Wyrn's hand... such was the most exquisite of experiences.

Hrathen ran his eyes over the sacred words again, even though he had long since memorized their every detail.

Behold the words of Jaddeth, through his servant Wyrn Wulfden the Fourth, Emperor and king.

High Priest and Son, your request has been granted. Go to the heathen peoples of the west and declare to them my final warning, for while my Empire is eternal, my patience will soon end. Not much longer will I slumber within a tomb of rock. The Day of Empire is at hand, and my glory will soon shine forth, a second sun blazing forth from Fjorden.

The pagan nations of Arelon and Teod have been blackened scars upon my land for long enough. Three hundred years have my priests served amongst those tainted by Elantris, and few have hearkened to their call. Know this, High Priest, my faithful warriors are prepared and they wait only the word of my Wyrn. You have three months to prophesy to the people of Arelon. At the end of that time, the holy soldiers of Fjorden will descend on the nation like hunting predators, rending and tearing the unworthy life from those who heed not my words. Only three months will pass before the destruction of all who oppose my Empire.

The time for my ascension nears, my son. Be stalwart, and be diligent.

Words of Jaddeth, Lord of all Creation, through his servant Wyrn Wulfden the fourth, Emperor of Fjordell, Prophet of Shu-Dereth, Ruler of Jaddeth's Holy kingdom, and Regent of all Creation.

The time had finally come—only two nations resisted. Fjorden had regained its former glory, glory lost hundreds of years ago when the First Empire collapsed. Once again, Arelon and Teod were the only two kingdoms who resisted Fjordell rule. This time, with the might of Jaddeth's holy calling behind it, Fjorden would prevail. Then, with all mankind united under Wyrn's rule, Jaddeth could rise from his throne beneath the earth and reign in glorious majesty.

And Hrathen would be the one responsible for it. The conversion of Arelon and Teod was his urgent duty. He had three months to change the religious temperament of an entire culture; it was a monumental task, but it was vital that he succeed. If he did not, Fjorden's armies would destroy every living being in Arelon, and Teod would soon follow—the two nations, though separated by water, were the same in race, religion, and abstinence.

The people might not yet know it, but Hrathen was the only thing standing between them and utter annihilation. They had resisted Jaddeth and his people in arrogant defiance for far too long—Hrathen was their last chance.

Someday they would call him their savior.

Sample Chapters of Mistborn

Book One: The Final Empire

(Originally published in 2006, this is the first of my epic fantasy trilogy. The paperback was out in July of 2007, and Book Two was released in August, 2007. Book three is due October 2008. Warbreaker is next in line after it, scheduled for 2009.)

Sometimes, I worry that I'm not the hero everyone thinks I am...

The philosophers assure me that this is the time, that the signs have been met. But I still wonder if they have the wrong man. So many people depend on me. They say I will hold the future of the entire world on my arms.

What would they think if they knew that their champion—the Hero of Ages, their savior—doubted himself? Perhaps they wouldn't be shocked at all. In a way, this is what worries me most. Maybe, in their hearts, they wonder—just as I do.

When they see me, do they see a liar?

Prologue

Ash fell from the sky.

Lord Tresting frowned, glancing up at the ruddy, mid-day sky as his servants scuttled forward, opening a parasol over Tresting and his distinguished guest. Ashfalls weren't that uncommon in the Final Empire, but Tresting had hoped to avoid getting soot stains on his fine new suit coat and red vest, which had just arrived via canal boat from Luthadel itself. Fortunately, there wasn't much wind—the parasol would likely be effective.

Tresting stood with his guest on a small hilltop patio which overlooked the fields. Hundreds of people in brown smocks worked in the falling ash, caring for the crops. There was a sluggishness to their efforts—but, of course, that was the way of the skaa. The peasants were an indolent, unproductive lot. They didn't complain, of course—they knew better than that. Instead, they simply worked with bowed heads, moving about their work with quiet apathy. The passing whip of a taskmaster would force them into dedicated motion for a few moments, but as soon as the taskmaster passed, they would return to their languor.

Tresting turned to the man standing beside him on the hill. "One would think," Tresting noted, "that a thousand years of working in fields would have bred them to be a little more effective at it."

The obligator turned, raising an eyebrow—the motion done as if to highlight his most distinctive feature, the intricate tattoos that laced the skin around his eyes. The tattoos were enormous, reaching all the way across his brow and up the sides of his nose. This was a full prelan—a very important obligator indeed. Tresting had his own, personal obligators back at the manor, but they were only minor functionaries, with barely a few marks around their eyes. This man had arrived from Luthadel with the same canal boat that had brought Tresting's new suit.

"You should see city skaa, Tresting," the obligator said, turning back to watch the skaa workers. "These are actually quite diligent, compared to those inside Luthadel. You have more... direct control over your skaa here. How many would you say you lose a month?"

“Oh, a half-dozen or so,” Tresting said. “Some to beatings, some to exhaustion.”

“Runaways?”

“Never!” Tresting said. “When I first inherited this land from my title, I had a few runaways—but I executed their families. The rest quickly lost heart. I’ve never understood men who have trouble with their skaa—I find the creatures easy to control, if you show a properly firm hand.”

The obligator nodded, standing quietly in his gray robes. He seemed pleased—which was a good thing. The skaa weren’t actually Tresting’s property. Like all skaa, they belonged to the Lord Ruler—Tresting only leased the workers from his God, much in the same way he paid for the services of His obligators.

The obligator looked down, checking his pocket watch, then glanced up at the sun. Despite the ashfall, the sun was bright this day, shining a brilliant crimson red behind the smoky blackness of the upper sky. Tresting removed a handkerchief and wiped his brow, thankful for the parasol’s shade against the mid-day heat.

“Very well, Tresting,” the obligator said. “I will carry your proposal to Lord Venture, as requested. He will have a favorable report from me on your operations here.”

Tresting held in a sigh of relief. An obligator was required to witness any contract or business deal between noblemen. True, even a lowly obligator like the ones Tresting employed could serve as such a witness—but it meant so much more to impress Straff Venture’s own obligator.

The obligator turned toward him. “I will leave back down the canal this afternoon.”

“So soon?” Tresting asked. “Wouldn’t you care to stay for supper?”

“No,” the obligator replied. “Though there is another matter I wish to discuss with you. I came not only at the behest of Lord Venture, but to... look in on some matters for the Canton of Inquisition. Rumors say that you like to dally with your skaa women.”

Tresting felt a chill.

The obligator smiled—he likely meant it to be disarming, but Tresting only found it eerie. “Don’t worry yourself, Tresting,” the obligator said. “If there had been any *real* worries about your actions, a Steel Inquisitor would have been sent here in my place.”

Tresting nodded slowly. Inquisitor. He’d never seen one of the inhuman creatures, but he had heard... stories.

“I have been satisfied regarding your actions with the skaa women,” the obligator said, looking back over the fields. “What I’ve seen and heard here indicates that you always clean up your messes. A man such as yourself—efficient, productive—could go far in Luthadel. A few more years of work, some inspired mercantile deals, and who knows?”

The obligator turned away, and Tresting found himself smiling. It wasn’t a promise, or even an endorsement—for the most part, obligators were more bureaucrats and witnesses than they were priests—but to hear such praise from one of the Lord Ruler’s own servants... Tresting knew that some nobility considered the obligators to be unsettling—some men even considered them a bother—but at that moment, Tresting could have kissed his distinguished guest.

Tresting turned back toward the skaa, who worked quietly beneath the bloody sun and the lazy flakes of ash. Tresting had always been a country nobleman, living on his plantation, dreaming of perhaps moving into Luthadel itself. He had heard of the balls and the parties, the glamour and the intrigue, and it excited him to no end.

I’ll have to celebrate tonight, he thought. There was that young girl in the fourteenth hovel that he’d been watching for some time...

He smiled again. A few more years of work, the obligator had said. But, could Tresting perhaps speed that up, if he worked a little harder? His skaa population had been growing lately. Perhaps if he pushed them a bit more, he could bring in an extra harvest this summer, fulfill his contract with Lord Venture in extra measure.

Tresting nodded as he watched the crowd of lazy skaa, some working with their hoes, others on hands and knees, pushing the ash away from the fledgling crops. They didn't complain. They didn't hope. They barely dared think. That was the way it should be, for they were skaa. They were—

Tresting froze as one of the skaa looked up. The man met Tresting's eyes, a spark—no, a fire—of defiance showing in his expression. Tresting had never seen anything like it, not in the face of a skaa. Tresting stepped backward reflexively, a chill running through him as the strange, straight-backed skaa held his eyes.

And smiled.

Tresting looked away. "Kurdon!" he snapped.

The burly taskmaster rushed up the incline. "Yes, my lord?"

Tresting turned, pointing at...

He frowned. Where had that skaa been standing? Working with their heads bowed, bodies stained by soot and sweat, they were so hard to tell apart. Tresting paused, searching. He thought he knew the place... an empty spot, where nobody now stood.

But, no. That couldn't be it. The man couldn't have disappeared from the group so quickly. Where would he have gone? He must be in there, somewhere, working with his head now properly bowed. Still, his moment of apparent defiance was inexcusable.

"My lord?" Kurdon asked again.

The obligator stood at the side, watching curiously. It would not be wise to let the man know that one of the skaa had acted so brazenly.

"Work the skaa in that southern section a little harder," Tresting ordered, pointing. "I see them being sluggish, even for skaa. Beat a few of them."

Kurdon shrugged, but nodded. It wasn't much of a reason for a beating—but, then, he didn't need much of a reason to give the workers a beating.

They were, after all, only skaa.

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Kelsier had heard stories.

He had heard whispers of times when once, long ago, the sun had not been red. Times when the sky hadn't been clogged by smoke and ash, when plants hadn't struggled to grow and when skaa hadn't been slaves. Times before the Lord Ruler. Those days, however, were nearly forgotten. Even the legends were growing vague.

Kelsier watched the sun, his eyes following the giant red disk as it crept toward the western horizon. He stood quietly for a long moment, alone in the empty fields. The day's work was done; the skaa had been herded back to their hovels. Soon the mists would come.

Eventually, Kelsier sighed, then turned to pick his way across the furrows and pathways, weaving between large heaps of ash. He avoided stepping on the plants—though he wasn't sure why he bothered. The crops hardly seemed worth the effort. Wan, with wilted brown leaves, the plants seemed as depressed as the people who tended them.

The skaa hovels loomed in the waning light. Already, Kelsier could see the mists beginning to form, clouding the air and giving the mound-like buildings a surreal, intangible look. The hovels stood unguarded—there was no need for watchers, for no skaa would venture outside once night arrived. Their fear of the mists was far too strong.

I'll have to cure them of that someday, Kelsier thought as he approached one of the larger buildings. *But, all things in their own time.* He pulled open the door and slipped inside.

Conversation stopped immediately. Kelsier closed the door, then turned with a smile to confront the room of about thirty skaa. A firepit burned weakly at the center, and the large cauldron beside it was filled with vegetable-dappled water—the beginnings of an evening meal. The soup would be bland, of course. Still, the smell was enticing.

“Good evening, everyone,” Kelsier said with a smile, resting his pack beside his feet and leaning against the door. “How was your day?”

His words broke the silence, and the women returned to their dinner preparations. A group of men sitting at a crude table, however, continued to regard Kelsier with dissatisfied expressions.

“Our day was filled with work, traveler,” said Tepper, one of the skaa elders. “Something you managed to avoid.”

“Fieldwork hasn’t ever really suited me,” Kelsier said. “It’s far too hard on my delicate skin.” He smiled, holding up hands and arms that were lined with layers and layers of thin scars. They covered his skin, running lengthwise, like some beast had repeatedly raked its claws up and down his arms.

Tepper snorted. He was young to be an elder, probably barely into his forties—at most, he might be five years Kelsier’s senior. However, the scrawny man held himself with the air of one who liked to be in charge.

“This is no time for levity,” Tepper said sternly. “When we harbor a traveler, we expect him to behave himself and avoid suspicion. When you ducked away from the fields this morning, you could have earned a whipping for the men around you.”

“True,” Kelsier said. “But those men could also have been whipped for standing in the wrong place, for pausing too long, or for coughing when a taskmaster walked by. I once saw a man beaten because his master claimed that he had ‘blinked inappropriately.’”

Tepper sat with narrow eyes and a stiff posture, his arm resting on the table. His expression was unyielding.

Kelsier sighed, rolling his eyes. “Fine. If you want me to go, I’ll be off then.” He slung his pack up on his shoulder and nonchalantly pulled open the door.

Thick mist immediately began to pour through the portal, drifting lazily across Kelsier’s body, pooling on the floor and creeping across the dirt like a hesitant animal. Several people gasped in horror, though most of them were too stunned to make a sound. Kelsier stood for a moment, staring out into the dark mists, their shifting currents lit feebly by the cooking pit’s coals.

“Close the door.” Tepper’s words were a plea, not a command.

Kelsier did as requested, pushing the door closed and stemming the flood of white mist. “The mist is not what you think. You fear it far too much.”

“Men who venture into the mist lose their souls,” a woman whispered. Her words raised a question. Had Kelsier walked in the mists? What, then, had happened to his soul?

If you only knew, Kelsier thought. “Well, I guess this means I’m staying.” He waved for a boy to bring him a stool. “It’s a good thing, too—it would have been a shame for me to leave before I shared my news.”

More than one person perked up at the comment. This was the real reason they tolerated him—the reason why even the timid peasants would harbor a man such as Kelsier, a skaa who defied the Lord Ruler’s will by traveling from plantation to plantation. A renegade he may be—a danger to the entire community—but he brought news from the outside world.

“I come from the north,” Kelsier said. “From lands where the Lord Ruler’s touch is less noticeable.” He spoke in a clear voice, and people leaned unconsciously toward him as they worked. On the next day, Kelsier’s words would be repeated to the several hundred people who lived in other hovels. The skaa might be subservient, but they were incurable gossips.

“Local lords rule in the west,” Kelsier said, “and they are far from the iron grip of the Lord Ruler and his obligators. Some of these distant noblemen are finding that happy skaa make better workers than mistreated skaa. One man, Lord Renoux, has even ordered his taskmasters to stop unauthorized beatings. There are whispers that he’s considering paying wages to his plantation skaa, like city craftsmen might earn.”

“Nonsense,” Tepper said.

“My apologies,” Kelsier said. “I didn’t realize that Goodman Tepper had been to Lord Renoux’s estates recently. When you dined with him last, did he tell you something that he did not tell me?”

Tepper blushed—skaa did not travel, and they certainly didn’t dine with lords. “You think me a fool, traveler,” Tepper said, “but I know what you’re doing. You’re the one they call the Survivor; those scars on your arms give you away. You’re a troublemaker—you travel the plantations, stirring up discontent. You eat our food, telling your grand stories and your lies, then you disappear and leave people like me to deal with the false hopes you give our children.”

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. “Now, now, Goodman Tepper,” he said. “Your worries are completely unfounded. Why, I have no intention of eating your food. I brought my own.” With that, Kelsier reached over and tossed his pack onto the earth before Tepper’s table. The loose bag slumped to the side, dumping an array of foods to the ground. Fine breads, fruits, and even a few thick, cured sausages bounced free.

A summerfruit rolled across the packed earthen floor and bumped lightly against Tepper’s foot. The middle-aged skaa regarded the fruit with stunned eyes. “That’s nobleman’s food!”

Kelsier snorted. “Barely. You know, for a man of renowned prestige and rank, your Lord Tresting has remarkably poor taste. His pantry is an embarrassment to his noble station.”

Tepper paled even further. “That’s where you went this afternoon,” he whispered. “You went to the manor. You... *stole from the master!*”

“Indeed,” Kelsier said. “And, might I add that while your lord’s taste in foods is deplorable, his eye for soldiers is far more impressive. Sneaking into his manor during the day was quite a challenge.”

Tepper was still staring at the bag of food. “If the taskmasters find this here...”

“Well, I suggest you make it disappear then,” Kelsier said. “I’d be willing to bet that it tastes a fare bit better than watered-down farlet soup.”

Two dozen sets of hungry eyes studied the food. If Tepper intended further arguments, he didn’t make them quickly enough, for his silent pause was taken as agreement. Within a few minutes, the bag’s contents had been inspected and distributed, and the pot of soup sat bubbling and ignored as the skaa feasted on a meal far more exotic.

Kelsier settled back, leaning against the hovel’s wooden wall and watching the people devour their food. He had spoken correctly—the pantry’s offerings had been depressingly mundane. However, this was a people who had been fed on nothing but soup and gruel since they were

children. To them, breads and fruits were rare delicacies—usually eaten only as aging discards brought down by the house servants.

“Your storytelling was cut short, young man,” an elderly skaa noted, hobbling over to sit on a stool beside Kelsier.

“Oh, I suspect there will time for more later,” Kelsier said. “Once all evidence of my thievery has been properly devoured. Don’t you want any of it?”

“No need,” the old man said. “The last time I tried lords’ food, I had stomach pains for three days. New tastes are like new ideas, young man—the older you get, the more difficult they are for you to stomach.”

Kelsier paused. The old man was hardly an imposing sight. His leathered skin and bald scalp made him look more frail than it did wise. Yet, he had to be stronger than he looked—few plantation skaa lived to such ages. Many lords didn’t allow the elderly to remain home from daily work, and the frequent beatings that made up a skaa’s life took a terrible toll on the elderly.

“What was your name again?” Kelsier asked.

“Mennis.”

Kelsier glanced back at Tepper. “So, Goodman Mennis, tell me something. Why do you let him lead?”

Mennis shrugged. “When you get to be my age, you have to be very careful where you waste your energy. Some battles just aren’t worth fighting.” There was an implication in Mennis’ eyes—he was referring to things greater than his own struggle with Tepper.

“You’re satisfied with this, then?” Kelsier asked, nodding toward the hovel and its half-starved, overworked occupants. “You’re content with a life full of beatings and endless drudgery?”

“At least it’s a life,” Mennis said. “I know what wages malcontent and rebellion bring. The eye of the Lord Ruler, and the ire of the Steel Ministry, can be far more terrible than a few whippings. Men like you preach change, but I wonder. Is this a battle we can really fight?”

“You’re fighting it already, Goodman Mennis. You’re just losing horribly.” Kelsier shrugged. “But, what do I know? I’m just a traveling miscreant, here to eat your food and impress your youths.”

Mennis shook his head. “You jest, but Tepper might have been right. I fear your visit will bring us grief.”

Kelsier smiled. “That’s why I didn’t contradict him—at least, not on the troublemaker point.” He paused, then smiled more deeply. “In fact, I’d say calling me a troublemaker is probably the only accurate thing Tepper has said since I got here.”

“How do you do that?” Mennis asked, frowning.

“What?”

“Smile so much.”

“Oh, I’m just a happy person.”

Mennis glanced down at Kelsier’s hands. “You know, I’ve only seen scars like those on one other person—and he was dead. His body was returned to Lord Trestring as proof that his punishment had been carried out.” Mennis looked up at Kelsier. “He’d been caught speaking of rebellion. Trestring sent him to the Pits of Hathsin, where he was worked until he died. The lad lasted less than a month.”

Kelsier glanced down at his hands and forearms. They still burned sometimes, though he was certain the pain was only in his mind. He looked up at Mennis and smiled. “You ask why I smile,

Goodman Mennis? Well, the Lord Ruler thinks he has claimed laughter and joy for himself. I'm disinclined to let him do so. This is one battle that doesn't take very much effort to fight."

Mennis stared at Kelsier, and for a moment Kelsier thought the old man might smile in return. However, Mennis eventually just shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't—"

The scream cut him off. It came from outside, perhaps to the north, though the mists distorted sounds. The people in the hovel fell silent, listening to the faint, high-pitched yells. Despite the distance and the mist, Kelsier could hear the pain contained in those screams.

Kelsier burned tin.

It was simple for him now, after years of practice. The tin sat with other Allomantic metals within his stomach, swallowed earlier, waiting for him to draw upon them. He reached inside with his mind and touched the tin, tapping powers he still barely understood. The tin flared to life within him, burning his stomach like the sensation of a hot drink swallowed too quickly.

Allomantic power surged through his body, enhancing his senses. The room around him became crisp, the dull firepit flaring to near-blinding brightness. He could feel the grain in the wood of the stool beneath him. He could still taste the remnants of the loaf of bread he'd snacked on earlier. Most importantly, he could hear the screams with supernatural ears. Two separate people were yelling. One was an older woman, the other a younger woman—perhaps a child. The younger screams were getting further and further away.

"Poor Jess," a nearby woman said, her voice booming in Kelsier's enhanced ears. "That child of hers was a curse. It's better for skaa not to have pretty daughters."

Tepper nodded. "Lord Tresting was sure to send for the girl sooner or later. We all knew it. Jess knew it."

"Still a shame, though," another man said.

The screams continued in the distance. Burning tin, Kelsier was able to judge the direction accurately. Her voice was moving toward the lord's manor. The sounds set something off within him, and he felt his face flush with anger.

Kelsier turned. "Does Lord Tresting ever return the girls after he's finished with them?"

Old Mennis shook his head. "Lord Tresting is a law-abiding nobleman—he has the girls killed after a few weeks. He doesn't want to catch the eye of the Inquisitors."

That was the Lord Ruler's command. He couldn't afford to have half-breed children running around—children who might possess powers that skaa weren't even supposed to know existed...

The screams waned, but Kelsier's anger only built. The yells reminded him of other screams. A woman's screams from the past. He stood abruptly, stool toppling to the ground behind him.

"Careful, lad," Mennis said apprehensively. "Remember what I said about wasting energy. You'll never raise that rebellion of yours if you get yourself killed tonight."

Kelsier glanced toward the old man. Then, through the screams and the pain, he forced himself to smile. "I'm not here to lead a rebellion among you, Goodman Mennis. I just want to stir up a little trouble."

"What good could that do?"

Kelsier's smile deepened. "New days are coming. Survive a little longer, and you just might see great happenings in the Final Empire. I bid you all thanks for your hospitality."

With that, he pulled open the door and strode out into the mist.

Mennis lay awake in the early hours of morning. It seemed that the older he became, the more difficult it was for him to sleep. This was particularly true when he was troubled about something, such as the traveler's failure to return to the hovel.

Mennis hoped that Kelsier had come to his senses and decided to move on. However, that prospect seemed unlikely—Mennis had seen the fire in Kelsier's eyes. It seemed such a shame that a man who had survived the Pits would instead find death here, on a random plantation, trying to protect a girl everyone else had given up for dead.

How would Lord Tresting react? He was said to be particularly harsh with anyone who interrupted his night-time enjoyments. If Kelsier had managed to disturb the master's pleasures, Tresting might easily decide to punish the rest of his skaa by association.

Eventually, the other skaa began to awake. Mennis lay on the hard earth—bones aching, back complaining, muscles exhausted—trying to decide if it was worth rising. Each day, he nearly gave up. Each day, it was a little harder. One day, he would just stay in the hovel, waiting until the taskmasters came to kill those who were too sick or too elderly to work.

But not today. He could see too much fear in the eyes of the skaa—they knew that Kelsier's night-time activities would bring trouble. They needed Mennis; they looked to him. He needed to get up.

And so, he did. Once he started moving, the pains of age decreased slightly, and he was able to shuffle out of the hovel toward the fields, leaning on a younger man for support.

It was then that he caught a scent in the air. "What's that?" he asked. "Do you smell smoke?"

Shum—the lad upon whom Mennis leaned—paused. The last remnants of the night's mist had burned away, and the red sun was rising behind the sky's usual haze of blackish clouds.

"I always smell smoke, lately," Shum said. "The Ashmounts are violent this year."

"No," Mennis said, feeling increasingly apprehensive. "This is different." He turned to the north, toward where a group of skaa were gathering. He let go of Shum, shuffling toward the group, feet kicking up dust and ash as he moved.

At the center of the group of people, he found Jess. Her daughter, the one they all assumed had been taken by Lord Tresting, stood beside her. The young girl's eyes were red from lack of sleep, but she appeared unharmed.

"She came back not long after they took her," the woman was explaining. "She came and pounded on the door, crying in the mist. Flen was sure it was just a mistwraith impersonating her, but I had to let her in! I don't care what he says, I'm not giving her up. I brought her out in the sunlight, and she didn't disappear. That proves she's not a mistwraith!"

Mennis stumbled back from the growing crowd. Did none of them see it? No taskmasters came to break up the group. No soldiers came to make the morning population counts. Something was very wrong. Mennis continued to the north, moving frantically toward the manor house.

By the time he arrived, others had noticed the twisting line of smoke that was just barely visible in the morning light. Mennis wasn't the first to arrive at the edge of the short hill-top plateau, but the group made way for him when he did.

The manor house was gone. Only a blackened, smoldering scar remained.

"By the Lord Ruler!" Mennis whispered. "What happened here?"

"He killed them all."

Mennis turned. The speaker was Jess's girl. She stood, looking down at the fallen house, a satisfied expression on her youthful face.

"They were dead when he brought me out," she said. "All of them—the soldiers, the taskmasters, the lords... dead. Even Lord Tresting and his obligators. The master had left me, going to investigate when the noises began. On the way out, I saw him lying in his own blood, stab-wounds in his chest. The man who saved me threw a torch in the building as we left."

"This man," Mennis said. "He had scars on his hands and arms, reaching past the elbows?"

The girl nodded silently.

"What kind of demon was that man?" one of the skaa muttered uncomfortably.

"Mistwraith," another whispered, apparently forgetting that Kelsier had gone out during the day.

But, he did go out into the mist, Mennis thought. And, how did he accomplish a feat like this... ? Lord Tresting kept over two dozen soldiers! Did Kelsier have a hidden band of rebels, perhaps?

Kelsier's words from the night before sounded in his ears. *New days are coming...*

"But, what of us?" Tepper asked, terrified. "What will happen when the Lord Ruler hears this? He'll think that we did it! He'll send us to the Pits, or maybe just send his koloss to slaughter us outright! Why would that troublemaker do something like this? Doesn't he understand the damage he's done?"

"He understands," Mennis said. "He warned us, Tepper. He came to stir up trouble."

"But, why?"

"Because he knew we'd never rebel on our own, so he gave us no choice."

Tepper paled.

Lord Ruler, Mennis thought. I can't do this. I can barely get up in the mornings—I can't save this people.

But what other choice was there?

Mennis turned. "Gather the people, Tepper. We must flee before word of this disaster reaches the Lord Ruler."

"Where will we go?"

"The caves to the east," Mennis said. "Travelers say there are rebel skaa hiding in them. Perhaps they'll take us in."

Tepper paled further. "But... we'd have to travel for days. Spend nights *in the mist*."

"We can do that," Mennis said, "or we can stay here and die."

Tepper stood frozen for a moment, and Mennis thought the shock of it all might have overwhelmed him. Eventually, however, the younger man scurried off to gather the others, as commanded.

Mennis sighed, looking up toward the trailing line of smoke, cursing the man Kelsier quietly in his mind.

New days indeed.

Part One: The Survivor of Hathsins

I consider myself to be a man of principle. But, what man does not? Even the cutthroat, I have noticed, considers his actions “moral” after a fashion.

Perhaps another person, reading of my life, would name me a religious tyrant. He could call me arrogant. What is to make that man’s opinion any less valid than my own?

I guess it all comes down to one fact: In the end, I’m the one with the armies.

Chapter One

Ash fell from the sky.

Vin watched the downy flakes drift through the air. Leisurely. Careless. Free. The puffs of soot fell like black snowflakes, descending upon the dark city of Luthadel. They drifted in corners, blowing in the breeze and curling in tiny whirlwinds over the cobblestones. They seemed so uncaring. What would that be like?

Vin sat quietly in one of the crew’s watch-holes—a hidden alcove built into the bricks on the side of the safehouse. From within it, a crewmember could watch the street for signs of danger. Vin wasn’t on duty—the watch-hole was simply one of the few places where she could find solitude.

And Vin liked solitude. *When you’re alone, no one can betray you.* Reen’s words. Her brother had taught her so many things, then had reinforced them by doing what he’d always promised he would—by betraying her himself. *It’s the only way you’ll learn. Anyone will betray you, Vin. Anyone.*

The ash continued to fall. Sometimes, Vin imagined she was like the ash, or the wind, or the mist itself. A thing without thought, capable of simply *being*, not thinking, caring, or hurting. Then she could be... free.

She heard a shuffling a short distance away, then the trap door at the back of the small chamber snapped open.

“Vin!” Ulef said, sticking his head into the room. “There you are! Camon’s been searching for you for a half hour.”

That’s kind of why I hid in the first place.

“You should get going,” Ulef said. “The job’s almost ready to begin.”

Ulef was a gangly boy. Nice, after his own fashion—naive, if one who had grown up in the underworld could ever really be called “naive.” Of course, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t betray her. Betrayal had nothing to do with friendship—it was a simple fact of survival. Life was harsh on the streets, and if a skaa thief wanted to keep from being caught and executed, he had to be practical.

And ruthlessness was the very most practical of emotions. Another of Reen’s sayings.

“Well?” Ulef asked. “You should go. Camon’s mad.”

When is he not? However, Vin nodded, scrambling out of the cramped—yet comforting—confines of the watch-hole. She brushed past Ulef and hopped out of the trap door, moving into a run-down pantry. The room was one of many at the back of the store that served as a front for the safehouse. The crew’s lair itself was hidden in a tunneled stone cavern beneath the building.

She left the building through a back door, Ulef trailing behind her. The job would happen a few blocks away, in a richer section of town. It was an intricate job—one of the most complex Vin had ever seen. Assuming Camon wasn’t caught, the payoff would be great indeed. If he was

caught... Well, scamming noblemen and obligators was a very dangerous profession—but it certainly beat working in the forges or the textile mills.

Vin exited the alleyway, moving out onto a dark, tenement-lined street in one of the city's many skaa slums. Skaa too sick to work lay huddled in corners and gutters, soot drifting around them. Vin kept her head down and pulled up her cloak's hood against the still-falling flakes.

Free. No, I'll never be free. Reen made certain of that when he left.

#

"There you are!" Camon lifted a squat, fat finger and jabbed it toward her face. "Where were you?"

Vin didn't let hatred or rebellion show in her eyes. She simply looked down, giving Camon what he expected to see. There were other ways to be strong. That lesson she had learned on her own.

Camon growled slightly, then raised his hand and backhanded her across the face. The force of the blow threw Vin back against the wall, and her cheek blazed with pain. She slumped against the wood, but bore the punishment silently. Just another bruise. She was strong enough to deal with it. She'd done so before.

"Listen," Camon hissed. "This is an important job. It's worth thousands of boxings—worth more than you a hundred times over. I won't have you fouling it up. Understand?"

Vin nodded.

Camon studied her for a moment, his pudgy face red with anger. Finally, he looked away, muttering to himself.

He was annoyed about something—something more than just Vin. Perhaps he had heard about the skaa rebellion several days to the north. One of the provincial lords, Themost Tresting, had apparently been murdered, his manor burned to the ground. Such disturbances were bad for business—they made the aristocracy more alert, and less gullible. That, in turn, could cut seriously into Camon's profits.

He's looking for someone to punish, Vin thought. He always gets nervous before a job. She looked up at Camon, tasting blood on her lip. She must have let some of her confidence show, because he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and his expression darkened. He raised his hand, as if to strike her again.

Vin used up a bit of her Luck.

She expended just a smidgen—she'd need the rest for the job. She directed the Luck at Camon, calming his nervousness. The crewleader paused—oblivious to Vin's touch, yet feeling its effects nonetheless. He stood for a moment, then he sighed, turning away and lowering his hand.

Vin wiped her lip as Camon waddled away. The thief master looked very convincing in his nobleman's suit. It was as rich a costume as Vin had ever seen—it had a white shirt overlaid by a deep green vest with engraved gold buttons. The black suit coat was long, after the current fashion, and he wore a matching black hat. His fingers sparkled with rings, and he even carried a fine dueling cane. Indeed, Camon did an excellent job of imitating a nobleman—when it came to playing a role, there were few thieves more competent than Camon. Assuming he could keep his temper under control.

The room itself was less impressive. Vin pulled herself to her feet as Camon began to snap at some of the other crewmembers. They had rented one of the suites at the top of a local hotel. Not too lavish—but that was the idea. Camon was going to be playing the part of "Lord Jedue," a

country nobleman who had hit upon hard financial times and come to Luthadel to get some final, desperate contracts.

The main room had been transformed into a sort of audience chamber, set with a large desk for Camon to sit behind, the walls decorated with cheap pieces of art. Two men stood beside the desk, dressed in formal steward's clothing—they would play the part of Camon's menservants.

"What is this ruckus?" a man asked, entering the room. He was tall, dressed in a simple gray shirt and a pair of slacks, with a thin sword tied at his waist. Theron was the other crewleader—this particular scam was actually his. He'd brought in Camon as a partner; he'd needed someone to play Lord Jedue, and everyone knew that Camon was one of the best.

Camon looked up. "Hum? Ruckus? Oh, that was just a minor discipline problem. Don't bother yourself, Theron." Camon punctuated his remark with a dismissive wave of the hand—there was a reason he played such a good aristocrat. He was arrogant enough that he could have been from one of the Great Houses.

Theron's eyes narrowed. Vin knew what the man was probably thinking—he was deciding how risky it would be to put a knife in Camon's fat back once the scam was over. Eventually, the taller crewleader looked away from Camon, glancing at Vin. "Who's this?" he asked.

"Just a member of my crew," Camon said.

"I thought we didn't need anyone else."

"Well, we need her," Camon said. "Ignore her. My end of the operation is none of your concern."

Theron eyed Vin, obviously noting her bloodied lip. She glanced away. Theron's eyes lingered on her, however, running down the length of her body. She wore a simple white buttoned shirt and a pair of overalls. Indeed, she was hardly enticing—scrawny with a youthful face, she supposedly didn't even look her sixteen years. Some men preferred such women, however.

She considered using a bit of Luck on him, but eventually he turned away. "The obligator is nearly here," Theron said. "Are you ready?"

Camon rolled his eyes, settling his bulk down into the chair behind the desk. "Everything is perfect. Leave me be, Theron! Go back to your room and wait."

Theron frowned, then spun and walked from the room, muttering to himself.

Vin scanned the room, studying the décor, the servants, the atmosphere. Finally, she made her way to Camon's desk. The crewleader sat rifling through a stack of papers, apparently trying to decide which ones to put out on the desktop.

"Camon," Vin said quietly, "the servants are too fine."

Camon frowned, looking up. "What is that you're babbling?"

"The servants," Vin repeated, still speaking in a soft whisper. "Lord Jedue is supposed to be desperate. He'd have rich clothing left over from before, but he wouldn't be able to afford such rich servants. He'd use skaa."

Camon glared at her, but he paused. Physically, there was little difference between nobleman and skaa. The servants Camon had appointed, however, were dressed as minor noblemen—they were allowed to wear colorful vests, and they stood a little confidently.

"The obligator has to think that you're nearly impoverished," Vin said. "Pack the room with a lot of skaa servants instead."

"What do you know?" Camon said, scowling at her.

“Enough.” She immediately regretted the word—it sounded too rebellious. Camon raised a bejeweled hand, and Vin braced herself for another slap. She couldn’t afford to use up any more Luck—she had precious little remaining anyway.

However, Camon didn’t hit her. Instead, he sighed and rested a pudgy hand on her shoulder. “Why do you insist on provoking me, Vin? You know the debts your brother left when he ran away. Do you realize that a less-merciful man than myself would have sold you to the whoremasters long ago? How would you like that, serving in some nobleman’s bed until he grew tired of you and had you executed?”

Vin looked down at her feet.

Camon’s grip grew tight, his fingers pinching her skin where neck met shoulder, and she gasped in pain despite herself. He grinned at the reaction.

“Honestly, I don’t know why I keep you, Vin,” he said, increasing the pressure of his grip. “I should have gotten rid of you months ago, when your brother betrayed me. I suppose I just have too kindly a heart.”

He finally released her, then pointed for her to stand over by the side of the room, next to a tall indoor plant. She did as ordered, orienting herself so she had a good view of the entire room. As soon as Camon looked away, she rubbed her shoulder. *Just another pain. I can deal with pain.*

Camon sat for a few moments. Then, as expected, he waved to the two “servants” at his side.

“You two!” he said. “You’re dressed too richly. Go put on something that makes you look like skaa servants instead—and bring back six more men with you when you come.”

Soon, the room was filled as Vin had suggested. The obligator arrived a short time later.

Vin watched Prelan Laird step haughtily into the room. Shaved bald like all obligators, he wore a set of dark gray robes. The Ministry tattoos around his eyes identified him as a prelan, a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry’s Canton of Finance. A set of lesser obligators trailed behind him, their eye tattoos far less intricate.

Camon rose as the prelan entered, a sign of respect—something even the highest of Great House noblemen would show to an obligator of Laird’s rank. Laird gave no bow or acknowledgement of his own, instead striding forward and taking the seat in front of Camon’s desk. One of the crewmen impersonating a servant rushed forward, bringing chilled wine and fruit for the obligator.

Laird picked at the fruit, letting the servant stand obediently, holding the platter of food as if he were a piece of furniture. “Lord Jedue,” Laird finally said. “I am glad we finally have opportunity to meet.”

“As am I, your grace,” Camon said.

“Why is it, again, that you were unable to come to the Canton building, instead requiring that I visit you here?”

“My knees, your grace,” Camon said. “My physicians recommend that I travel as little as possible.”

And you were rightly apprehensive about being drawn into a Ministry stronghold, Vin thought.

“I see,” Laird said. “Bad knees. An unfortunate attribute in a man who deals in transportation.”

“I don’t have to go on the trips, your grace,” Camon said, bowing his head. “Just organize them.”

Good, Vin thought. Make sure you remain subservient, Camon. You need to seem desperate.

Vin needed this scam to succeed. Camon threatened her and he beat her—but he considered her a good luck charm. She wasn't sure if he knew why his plans went better when she was in the room, but he had apparently made the connection. That made her valuable—and Reen had always said that the surest way to stay alive in the underworld was to make yourself indispensable.

"I see," Laird said again. "Well, I fear that our meeting has come too late for your purposes. The Canton of Finance has already voted on your proposal."

"So soon?" Camon asked with genuine surprise.

"Yes," Laird replied, taking a sip of his wine, still not dismissing the servant. "We have decided not to accept your contract."

Camon sat for a moment, stunned. "I'm sorry to hear that, your grace."

Laird came to meet you, Vin thought. That means he's still in a position to negotiate.

"Indeed," Camon continued, seeing what Vin had. "That is especially unfortunate, as I was ready to make the Ministry an even better offer."

Laird raised a tattooed eyebrow. "I doubt it will matter. There is an element of the Council who feels that the Canton would receive better service if we found a more stable house to transport our people."

"That would be a grave mistake," Camon said smoothly. "Let us be frank, your grace. We both know that this contract is House Jedue's last chance. Now that we've lost the Farwan deal, we cannot afford to run our canal boats to Luthadel any more. Without the Ministry's patronage, my house is financially doomed."

"This is doing very little to persuade me, your lordship," the obligator said.

"Isn't it?" Camon asked. "Ask yourself this, your grace—who will serve you better? Will it be the house that has dozens of contracts to divide its attention, or the house that views your contract as its last hope? The Canton of Finance will not find a more accommodating partner than a desperate one. Let my boats be the one that bring your acolytes down from the north—let my soldiers escort them—and you will not be disappointed."

Good, Vin thought.

"I... see," the obligator said, now troubled.

"I would be willing to give you an extended contract, locked in at the price of fifty boxings a head per trip, your grace. Your acolytes would be able to travel our boats at their leisure, and would always have the escorts they need."

The obligator raised an eyebrow. "That's half the former fee."

"I told you," Camon said. "We're desperate. My house *needs* to keep its boats running. Fifty boxings will not make us a profit, but that doesn't matter. Once we have the Ministry contract to bring us stability, we can find other contracts to fill our coffers."

Laird looked thoughtful. It was a fabulous deal—one that might ordinarily have been suspicious. However, Camon's presentation created the image of a house on the brink of financial collapse. The other crewleader, Theron, had spent five years building, scamming, and finagling to create this moment. The Ministry would be remiss not to consider the opportunity.

Laird was realizing just that. The Steel Ministry was not just the force of bureaucracy and legal authority in the Final Empire—it was like a noble house unto itself. The more wealth it had, the better its own mercantile contracts, the more leverage the various Ministry Cantons had with each other—and with the noble houses.

Laird was still obviously hesitant, however. Vin could see the look in his eyes, the suspicion she knew well. He was not going to take the contract.

Now, Vin thought. *It's my turn.*

Vin used her Luck on Laird. She reached out tentatively—not even really sure what she was doing, or why she could even do it. Yet, her touch was instinctive, trained through years of subtle practice. She'd been ten years old before she'd realized that other people couldn't do what she could.

She pressed against Laird's emotions, dampening them. He became less suspicious, less afraid. Docile. His worries melted away, and Vin could see a calm sense of control begin to assert itself in his eyes.

Yet, Laird still seemed slightly uncertain. Vin pushed harder. He cocked his head, looking thoughtful. He opened his mouth to speak, but she pushed against him again, desperately using up her last pinch of Luck.

He paused again. "Very well," he finally said. "I will take this new proposal to the Council. Perhaps an agreement can still be reached."

If men read these words, let them know that power is a heavy burden. Seek not to be bound by its chains. The Terris prophecies say that I will have the power to save the world.

They hint, however, that I will have the power to destroy it as well.

Chapter Two

In Kelsier's opinion, the city of Luthadel—seat of the Lord Ruler—was a gloomy sight. Most of the buildings had been built from stone blocks, with tile roofs for the wealthy, and simple, peaked wooden roofs for the rest. The structures were packed closely together, making them seem squat despite the fact that they were generally three-stories high.

The tenements and shops were uniform in appearance—this was not a place to draw attention to one's self. Unless, of course, you were a member of the high nobility.

Interspersed throughout the city were a dozen or so monolithic keeps. Intricate, with rows of spear-like spires or deep archways, these were the homes of the high nobility. In fact, they were the *mark* of a high noble family—any family who could afford to build a keep and maintain a high profile presence in Luthadel was considered to be a Great House.

Most of the open ground in the city was around these keeps. The patches of space amidst the tenements were like clearings in a forest, the keeps themselves like solitary mounts rising above the rest of the landscape. Black mountains. Like the rest of the city, the keeps were stained by countless years of ashfalls.

Every structure in Luthadel—virtually every structure Kelsier had ever seen—had been blackened to some degree. Even the city wall, upon which Kelsier now stood, was blackened by a patina of soot. Structures were generally darkest at the top, where the ash gathered, but rainwaters and evening condensations had carried the stains over ledges and down walls. Like paint running down a canvas, the darkness seemed to creep down the sides of buildings in an uneven gradient.

The streets, of course, were completely black. Kelsier stood waiting, scanning the city as a group of skaa workers worked in the street below, clearing away the latest mounds of ash. They'd take it to the River Channerel, which ran through the center of the city, sending the piles of ash to be washed away, lest it pile up and eventually bury the city. Sometimes, Kelsier wondered why the entire empire wasn't just one big mound of ash. He supposed it must break down into soil eventually. Yet, it took a ridiculous amount of effort to keep cities and fields clear enough to be used.

Fortunately, there were always enough skaa to do the work. The workers below him wore simple coats and trousers, ash-stained and worn. Like the plantation workers he had left behind several weeks before, they worked with beaten-down, despondent motions. Other groups of skaa passed the workers, responding to the bells in the distance, chiming the hour and calling them to their morning's work at the forges or mills. Luthadel's main export was metal—the city was home to hundreds of forges and refineries. However, the surgings of the river provided excellent locations for mills, both to grind grains and make textiles.

The skaa continued to work. Kelsier turned away from them, looking up into the distance, toward the city center, where the Lord Ruler's palace loomed like some kind of massive, multi-spined insect. Kredik Shaw, the Hill of a Thousand Spires. The palace was several times the size of any nobleman's keep, and was by far the largest building in the city.

Another ashfall began as Kelsier stood contemplating the city, the flakes falling lightly down upon the streets and buildings. *A lot of ashfalls, lately*, he thought, glad for the excuse to pull up the hood on his cloak. *The ashmounts must be active.*

It was unlikely that anyone in Luthadel would recognize him—it had been three years since his capture. Still, the hood was reassuring. If all went well, there would come a time when Kelsier would want to be seen and recognized. For now, anonymity was probably better.

Eventually, a figure approached along the wall. The man, Dockson, was shorter than Kelsier, and he had a squarish face that seemed well-suited to his moderately stocky build. A nondescript brown hooded cloak covered his black hair, and he wore the same short half-beard that he'd sported since his face had first put forth whiskers some twenty years before.

He, like Kelsier, wore a nobleman's suit: colored vest, dark coat and trousers, and a thin cloak to keep off the soot. The clothing wasn't rich, but it was aristocratic—indicative of the Luthadel middle class. Most men of noble birth weren't wealthy enough to be considered part of a Great House—yet, in the Final Empire, nobility wasn't just about money. It was about lineage and history; the Lord Ruler was immortal, and he apparently still remembered the men who had supported him during the early years of his reign. The descendants of those men, no matter how poor they became, would always be favored.

The clothing would keep passing guard patrols from asking too many questions. In the cases of Kelsier and Dockson, of course, that clothing was a lie. Neither was actually noble—though, technically, Kelsier was a half-blood. In many ways, however, that was worse than being just a normal skaa.

Dockson strolled up next to Kelsier, then leaned against the battlement, resting a pair of stout arms on the stone. "You're a few days late, Kell."

"I decided to make a few extra stops in the plantations to the north."

"Ah," Dockson said. "So you *did* have something to do with Lord Tresting's death."

Kelsier smiled. "You could say that."

"His murder caused quite a stir among the local nobility."

"That was kind of the intention," Kelsier said. "Though, to be honest, I wasn't planning anything quite so dramatic. It was almost more of an accident than anything else."

Dockson raised an eyebrow. "How do you 'accidentally' kill a noblemen in his own mansion?"

"With a knife in the chest," Kelsier said lightly. "Or, rather, a pair of knives in the chest—it always pays to be careful."

Dockson rolled his eyes.

"His death isn't exactly a loss, Dox," Kelsier said. "Even among the nobility, Tresting had a reputation for cruelty."

"I don't care about Tresting," Dockson said. "I'm just considering the state of insanity that led me to plan another job with you. Attacking a provincial lord in his manor house, surrounded by guards... Honestly, Kell, I'd nearly forgotten how foolhardy you can be."

"Foolhardy?" Kelsier asked with a laugh. "That wasn't foolhardy—that was just a small diversion. You should see some of the things I'm *planning* to do!"

Dockson stood for a moment, then he laughed too. "By the Lord Ruler, it's good to have you back, Kell! I'm afraid I've grown rather boring during the last few years."

“We’ll fix that,” Kelsier promised. He took a deep breath, ash falling lightly around him. Skaa cleaning crews were already back at work on the streets below, brushing up the dark ash. Behind, a guard patrol passed, nodding to Kelsier and Dockson. They waited in silence for the men to pass.

“It’s good to be back,” Kelsier finally said. “There’s something homey about Luthadel—even if it is a depressing, stark pit of a city. You have the meeting organized?”

Dockson nodded. “We can’t start until this evening, though. How’d you get in, anyway? I had men watching the gates.”

“Hmm? Oh, I snuck in last night.”

“But how—” Dockson paused. “Oh, right. That’s going to take some getting used to.”

Kelsier shrugged. “I don’t see why. You always work with Mistings.”

“Yes, but this is different,” Dockson said. He held up a hand to forestall further argument. “No need, Kell. I’m not hedging—I just said it would take some getting used to.”

“Fine. Who’s coming tonight?”

“Well, Breeze and Ham will be there, of course. They’re very curious about this mystery job of ours—not to mention rather annoyed that I won’t tell him what you’ve been up to these last few years.”

“Good,” Kelsier said with a smile. “Let them wonder. How about Trap?”

Dockson shook his head. “Trap’s dead. The Ministry finally caught up with him a couple months ago. Didn’t even bother sending him to the Pits—they beheaded him on the spot.”

Kelsier closed his eyes, exhaling softly. It seemed that the Steel Ministry caught up with everyone eventually. Sometimes, Kelsier felt that a skaa Misting life wasn’t so much about surviving as it was about picking the right time to die.

“This leaves us without a Smoker,” Kelsier finally said, opening his eyes. “You have any suggestions?”

“Ruddy,” Dockson said.

Kelsier shook his head. “No. He’s a good Smoker, but he’s not a good enough man.”

Dockson smiled. “Not a good enough man to be on a thieving crew... Kell, I *have* missed working with you. All right, who then?”

Kelsier thought for a moment. “Is Clubs still running that shop of his?”

“As far as I know,” Dockson said slowly.

“He’s supposed to be one of the best Smokers in the city.”

“I suppose,” Dockson said. “But... isn’t he supposed to be kind of hard to work with?”

“He’s not so bad,” Kelsier said. “Not once you get used to him. Besides, I think he might be... amenable to this particular job.”

“All right,” Dockson said, shrugging. “I’ll invite him. I think one of his relatives is a Tineye. Do you want me to invite him too?”

“Sounds good,” Kelsier said.

“All right,” Dockson said. “Well, beyond that, there’s just Yeden. Assuming he’s still interested...”

“He’ll be there,” Kelsier said.

“He’d better be,” Dockson said. “He’ll be the one paying us, after all.”

Kelsier nodded, then frowned. “You didn’t mention Marsh.”

Dockson shrugged. “I warned you. Your brother never did approve of our methods, and now... well, you know Marsh. He won’t even have anything to do with Yeden and the rebellion any more, let alone with a bunch of criminals like us. I think we’ll have to find someone else to infiltrate the obligators.”

“No,” Kelsier said. “He’ll do it. I’ll just have to stop by to persuade him.”

“If you say so.” Dockson fell silent then, and the two stood for a moment, leaning against the railing and looking out over the ash-stained city.

Dockson finally shook his head. “This is insane, eh?”

Kelsier smiled. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Dockson nodded. “Fantastic.”

“It will be a job like no other,” Kelsier said, looking north—across the city and toward the twisted building at its center.

Dockson stepped away from the wall. “We have a few hours before the meeting. There’s something I want to show you. I think there’s still time—if we hurry.”

Kelsier turned with curious eyes. “Well, I *was* going to go and chastise my prude of a brother. But...”

“This will be worth your time,” Dockson promised.

#

Vin sat in the corner of the safehouse’s main lair. She kept to the shadows, as usual—the more she stayed out of sight, the more the others would ignore her. She couldn’t afford to expend Luck keeping the men’s hands off of her. She’d barely had time to regenerate what she’d used a few days before, during the meeting with the obligator.

The usual rabble lounged at tables in the room, playing at dice or discussing minor jobs. Smoke from a dozen different pipes pooled at the top of the chamber, and the walls were stained dark from countless years of similar treatment. The floor was darkened with patches of ash—like most thieving crews, Camon’s group wasn’t known for its tidiness.

There was a door at the back of the room, and beyond it lay a twisting stone stairway that led up to a false rain-grate in an alleyway. This room, like so many others hidden in the imperial capital of Luthadel, wasn’t supposed to exist.

Rough laughter came from the front of the chamber, where Camon sat with a half-dozen cronies enjoying a typical afternoon of ale and crass jokes. Camon’s table sat beside the bar, where the over-priced drinks were simply another way Camon exploited those who worked for him. The Luthadel criminal element had learned quite well from the lessons taught by the nobility.

Vin tried her best to remain invisible. Six months before, she wouldn’t have believed that her life could actually get worse without Reen. Yet, despite her brother’s abusive anger, he had kept the other crewmembers from having their way with Vin. There were relatively few women on thieving crews—generally, those women who got involved with the underworld ended up as whores. Reen had always told her that a girl needed to be tough—tougher, even, than a man—if she wanted to survive.

You think some crewleader is going to want a liability like you on his team? he had said. I don’t even want to have to work with you, and I’m your brother.

Her back still throbbed—Camon had whipped her the day before. The blood would ruin her shirt, and she wouldn't be able to afford another one. Camon was already retaining her wages to pay the debts Reen had left behind.

But, I am strong, she thought.

That was the irony. The beatings almost didn't hurt anymore, for Reen's frequent abuses had left Vin resilient, while at the same time teaching her how to look pathetic and broken. In a way, the beatings were self-defeating. Bruises and welts mended, but each new lashing left Vin more hardened. Stronger.

Camon stood up. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his golden pocket watch. He nodded to one of his companions, then he scanned the room, searching for... her.

His eyes locked on Vin. "It's time."

Vin frowned. *Time for what?*

#

The Ministry's Canton of Finance was an imposing structure—but, then, *everything* about the Steel Ministry tended to be imposing.

Tall and blocky, the building had a massive rose-window in the front, though the glass was dark from the outside. Two large banners hung down beside the window, the soot-stained red cloth proclaiming praises to the Lord Ruler.

Camon studied the building with a critical eye. Vin could sense his apprehension. The Canton of Finance was hardly the most threatening of Ministry offices—the Canton of Inquisition, or even the Canton of Orthodoxy, had far more ominous reputations. However, voluntarily entering any Ministry office... putting yourself in the power of the obligators... well, it was a thing to do only after serious consideration.

Camon took a deep breath, then strode forward, his dueling cane tapping against the stones as he walked. He wore his rich nobleman's suit, and he was accompanied by a half dozen crewmembers—including Vin—to act as his "servants."

Vin followed Camon up the steps, then waited as one of the crewmembers jumped forward to pull the door open for his "master." Of the six attendants, only Vin seemed to have been told nothing of Camon's plan. Suspiciously, Theron—Camon's supposed partner in the Ministry scam—was nowhere to be seen.

Vin entered the Canton building. Vibrant red light, sparkled with lines of blue, fell from the rose window. A single obligator, with mid-level tattoos around his eyes, sat behind a desk at the end of the extended entryway.

Camon approached, his cane thumping against the carpet as he walked. "I am Lord Jedue," he said.

What are you doing, Camon? Vin thought. You insisted to Theron that you wouldn't meet with Prelan Laird in his Canton office. Yet, now you're here.

The obligator nodded, making a notation in his ledger. He waved to the side. "You may take one attendant with you into the waiting chamber. The rest must remain here."

Camon's huff of disdain indicated what he thought of that prohibition. The obligator, however, didn't look up from his ledger. Camon stood for a moment, and Vin couldn't tell if he were genuinely angry or just playing the part of an arrogant nobleman. Finally, he jabbed a finger at Vin.

"Come," he said, turning and waddling toward the indicated door.

The room beyond was lavish and plush, and several noblemen lounged in various postures of waiting. Camon chose a chair and settled into it, then pointed toward a table set with wine and red-frosted cakes. Vin obediently fetched him a glass of wine and a plate of food, ignoring her own hunger.

Camon began to pick hungrily at the cakes, smacking quietly as he ate.

He's nervous. More nervous, even, than before.

"Once we get in, you will say nothing," Camon grumbled between bites.

"You're betraying Theron," Vin whispered.

Camon nodded.

"But, how? Why?" Theron's plan was complex in execution, but simple in concept. Every year, the Ministry transferred its new acolyte obligators from a northern training facility south to Luthadel for final instruction. Theron had discovered, however, that those acolytes and their overseers brought down with them large amounts of Ministry funds—disguised as baggage—to be strongholded in Luthadel.

Banditry was very difficult in the Final Empire, what with the constant patrols along canal routes. However, if one were running the very canal boats that the acolytes were sailing upon, a robbery could become possible. Arranged at just the right time... the guards turning on their passengers... a man could make quite a profit, then blame it all on banditry.

"Theron's crew is weak," Camon said quietly. "He expended too many resources on this job."

"But, the return he'll make—" Vin said.

"Will never happen if I take what I can now, then run," Camon said, smiling. "I'll talk the obligators into a down payment to get my convoy boats afloat, then disappear and leave Theron to deal with the disaster when the Ministry realizes that it's been scammed."

Vin stood back, slightly shocked. Setting up a scam like this would have cost Theron thousands upon thousands of boxings—if the deal fell through now, he would be ruined. And, with the Ministry hunting him, he wouldn't even have time to seek revenge. Camon would make a quick profit, as well as rid himself of one of his more powerful rivals.

Theron was a fool to bring Camon into this, she thought. But, then, the amount Theron had promised to pay Camon was great—he probably assumed that Camon's greed would keep him honest until Theron himself could pull a double-cross. Camon had simply worked faster than anyone, even Vin, had expected. How could Theron have known that Camon would undermine the job itself, rather than wait and try and steal the entire haul from the convoy?

Vin's stomach twisted. It's just another betrayal, she thought sickly. Why does it still bother me so? Everyone betrays everyone else. That's the way life is...

She wanted to find a corner—someplace cramped and secluded—and hide. Alone.

Anyone will betray you. Anyone.

But there was no place to go. Eventually, a minor obligator entered and called for Lord Jedue. Vin followed Camon as they were ushered into an audience chamber.

The man who waited inside, sitting behind the audience desk, was not Prelan Laird.

Camon paused in the doorway. The room was austere, bearing only the desk and simple gray carpeting. The stone walls were unadorned, the only window barely a handspan wide. The obligator who waited for them had some of the most intricate tattoos around his eyes that Vin had ever seen—she wasn't even certain what rank they implied, but they extended all the way back to the obligator's ears and up over his forehead.

“Lord Jedue,” the strange obligator said. Like Laird, he wore gray robes, but he was very different from the stern, bureaucratic men Camon had dealt with before. This man was lean in a muscular way, and his clean-shaven, triangular head gave him an almost predatory look.

“I was under the impression that I would be meeting with Prelan Laird,” Camon said, still not moving into the room.

“Prelan Laird has been called away on other business. I am High Prelan Arriev—head of the board that was reviewing your proposal. You have a rare opportunity to address me directly. I normally don’t hear cases in person, but Laird’s absence has made it necessary for me to share in some of his work.”

Vin’s instincts made her tense. *We should go. Now.*

Camon stood for a long moment, and Vin could see him considering. Run now? Or, take a risk for the greater prize? Vin didn’t care about prizes—she just wanted to live. Camon, however, had not become crewleader without the occasional gamble. He slowly moved into the room, eyes cautious as he took the seat opposite the obligator.

“Well, High Prelan Arriev,” Camon said with a careful voice. “I assume that since I have been called back for another appointment, the board is considering my offer?”

“Indeed we are,” the obligator said. “Though I must admit, there are some Council members who are apprehensive about dealing with a family that is so near to economic disaster. The Ministry generally prefers to be conservative in its financial operations.”

“I see.”

“But,” Arriev said, “there are others on the board who are quite eager to take advantage of the savings you offered us.”

“And with which group do you identify, your grace?”

“I, as of yet, have not made my decision.” The obligator leaned forward. “Which is why I noted that you have a rare opportunity. Convince me, Lord Jedue, and you will have your contract.”

“Surely Prelan Laird outlined the details of our offer,” Camon said.

“Yes, but I would like to hear the arguments from you personally. Humor me.”

Vin frowned. She remained near the back of the room, standing near the door, still half-convinced she should run.

“Well?” Arriev asked.

“We need this contract, your grace,” Camon said. “Without it we won’t be able to continue our canal shipping operations. Your contract would give us a much-needed period of stability—a chance to maintain our convoy boats for a time while we search for other contracts.”

Arriev studied Camon for a moment. “Surely you can do better than that, Lord Jedue. Laird said that you were very persuasive—let me hear you *prove* that you deserve our patronage.”

Vin prepared her Luck. She could make Arriev more inclined to believe... but, something restrained her. The situation felt wrong.

“We are your best choice, your grace,” Camon said. “You fear that my house will suffer economic failure? Well, if it does, what have you lost? At worst, my narrowboats would stop running, and you would have to find other merchants to deal with. Yet, if your patronage is enough to maintain my house, then you have found yourself an enviable long-term contract.”

“I see,” Arriev said lightly. “And why the Ministry? Why not make your deal with someone else? Surely there are other options for your boats—other groups who would jump at such rates.”

Camon frowned. “This isn’t about money, your grace, it is about the victory—the showing of confidence—that we would gain by having a Ministry contract. If you trust us, others will too. I *need* your support.” Camon was sweating now. He was probably beginning to regret this gamble. Had he been betrayed? Was Theron behind the odd meeting?

The obligator waited quietly. He could destroy them, Vin knew. If he even suspected that they were scamming him, he could give them over to the Canton of Inquisition. More than one nobleman had entered a Canton building and never returned.

Gritting her teeth, Vin reached out and used her Luck on the obligator, making him less suspicious.

Arriev smiled. “Well, you have convinced me,” he suddenly declared.

Camon sighed in relief.

Arriev continued, “Your most recent letter suggested that you need three thousand boxings as an advance to refurbish your equipment and resume shipping operations. See the scribe in the main hallway to finish the paperwork so that you may requisition the necessary funds.”

The obligator pulled a sheet of thick bureaucratic paper from a stack, then stamped a seal at the bottom. He proffered it toward Camon. “Your contract.”

Camon smiled deeply. “I knew coming to the Ministry was the wise choice,” he said, accepting the contract. He stood, nodding respectfully to the obligator, then motioned for Vin to open the door for him.

She did so. *Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.* She paused as Camon left, looking back at the obligator. He was still smiling.

A happy obligator was always a bad sign.

Yet, no one stopped them as they passed through the waiting room with its noble occupants. Camon sealed and delivered the contract to the appropriate scribe, and no soldiers appeared to arrest them. The scribe pulled out a small chest filled with coins, and then handed it to Camon with an indifferent hand.

Then, they simply left the Canton building, Camon gathering his other attendants with obvious relief. No cries of alarm. No tromping of soldiers. They were free. Camon had successfully scammed both the Ministry and another crewleader.

Apparently.

#

Kelsier stuffed another one of the little red-frosted cakes into his mouth, chewing with satisfaction. The fat thief and his scrawny attendant passed through the waiting room, entering the entryway beyond. The obligator who had interviewed the two thieves remained in his office, apparently awaiting his next appointment

“Well?” Dockson asked. “What do you think?”

Kelsier glanced at the cakes. “They’re quite good,” he said, taking another one. “The Ministry has always had excellent taste—it makes sense that they would provide superior snacks.”

Dockson rolled his eyes. “About the girl, Kell.”

Kelsier smiled as he piled four of the cakes in his hand, then nodded toward the doorway. The Canton waiting room was growing too busy for the discussion of delicate matters. On the way out, he paused and told the obligator secretary in the corner that they needed to reschedule.

Then, the two crossed through the entry chamber—passing the overweight crewleader, who stood speaking with a scribe. Kelsier stepped out onto the street, pulled his hood up against the still-falling ash, then led the way across the street. He paused beside a alleyway, standing where he and Dockson could watch the Canton building's doors.

Kelsier munched contentedly on his cakes. "How'd you find out about her?" he asked between bites.

"Your brother," Dockson replied. "Camon tried to swindle Marsh a few months ago, and he brought the girl with him then, too. Actually, Camon's little good-luck charm is becoming moderately famous in the right circles. I'm still not sure if he knows what she is or not. You know how superstitious thieves can get."

Kelsier nodded, dusting off his hands. "How'd you know she'd be here today?"

Dockson shrugged. "A few bribes in the right place. I've been keeping an eye on the girl ever since Marsh pointed her out to me. I wanted to give you an opportunity to see her work for yourself."

Across the street, the Canton building's door finally opened, and Camon made his way down the steps surrounded by a group of "servants." The small, short-haired girl was with him. The sight of her made Kelsier frown. She had a nervous anxiety to her step, and she jumped slightly whenever someone made a quick move. The right side of her face was still slightly discolored from a partially-healed bruise.

Kelsier eyed the self-important Camon. I'll have to come up with something particularly suitable to do to that man.

"Poor thing," Dockson muttered.

Kelsier nodded. "She'll be free of him soon enough. It's a wonder no one discovered her before this."

"Your brother was right then?"

Kelsier nodded. "She's at least a Misting, and if Marsh says she's more, I'm inclined to believe him. I'm a bit surprised to see her using Allomancy on a member of the Ministry, especially inside a Canton building. I'd guess that she doesn't know that she's even using her abilities."

"Is that possible?" Dockson asked.

Kelsier nodded. "Trace minerals in the water can be burned, if just for a tiny bit of power. That's one of the reasons the Lord Ruler built his city here—lots of metals in the ground. I'd say that..."

Kelsier trailed off, frowning slightly. Something was wrong. He glanced toward Camon and his crew. They were still visible in the near distance, crossing the street and heading south.

A figure appeared in the Canton Building's doorway. Lean with a confident air, he bore the tattoos of a high prelan of the Canton of Finance around his eyes. Probably the very man Camon had met with shortly before. The obligator stepped out of the building, and a second man exited behind him.

Beside Kelsier, Dockson suddenly grew stiff.

The second man was tall with a strong build. As he turned, Kelsier was able to see that a thick metal spike had been pounded tip-first through each of the man's eyes. With shafts as wide as an eye socket, the nail-like spikes were long enough that their sharp points jutted out about an inch from the back of the man's clean-shaven skull. The flat spike-ends shone like two silvery disks, sticking out of the sockets in the front, where the eyes should have been.

A Steel Inquisitor.

“What’s *that* doing here?” Dockson asked.

“Stay calm,” Kelsier said, trying to force himself to do the same. The Inquisitor looked toward them, spiked eyes regarding Kelsier, before turning in the direction that Camon and the girl had gone. Like all Inquisitors, he wore intricate eye tattoos—mostly black, with one stark red line—that marked him as a high-ranking member of the Canton of Inquisition.

“He’s not here for us,” Kelsier said. “I’m not burning anything—he’ll think that we’re just ordinary noblemen.”

“The girl,” Dockson said.

Kelsier nodded. “You say Camon’s been running this scam on the Ministry for a while. Well, the girl must have been detected by one of the obligators. They’re trained to recognize when an Allomancer tampers with their emotions.”

Dockson frowned thoughtfully. Across the street, the Inquisitor conferred with the other obligator, then the two of them turned to walk in the direction that Camon had gone. There was no urgency to their pace.

“They must have sent a tail to follow them,” Dockson said.

“This is the Ministry,” Kelsier said. “There’ll be two tails, at least.”

Dockson nodded. “Camon will lead them directly back to his safehouse. Dozens of men thieves will die. They’re not all the most admirable people, but...”

“They fight the Final Empire, in their own way,” Kelsier said. “Besides, I’m not about to let a possible Mistborn slip away from us—I want to talk to that girl. Can you deal with those tails?”

“I said I’d become boring, Kell,” Dockson said. “Not sloppy. I can handle a couple of Ministry flunkies.”

“Good,” Kelsier said, reaching into his cloak pocket and pulling out a small vial. A collection of metal flakes floated in an alcohol solution within. Iron, steel, tin, pewter, copper, bronze, zinc, and brass—the eight basic Allomantic metals. Kelsier pulled off the stopper and downed the contents in a single swift gulp.

He pocketed the now-empty vial, wiping his mouth. “I’ll handle that Inquisitor.”

Dockson looked apprehensive. “You’re going to try and take him?”

Kelsier shook his head. “Too dangerous. I’ll just divert him. Now, get going—we don’t want those tails finding the safehouse.”

Dockson nodded. “Meet back at the fifteenth crossroad,” he said before taking off down the alley and disappearing around a corner.

Kelsier gave his friend a count of ten before reaching within himself and burning his metals. His body came awash with strength, clarity, and power.

Kelsier smiled, then—burning zinc—he reached out and yanked firmly on the Inquisitor’s emotions. The creature froze in place, then spun, looking back toward the Canton building.

Let’s have a chase now, you and I, Kelsier thought.

We arrived in Terris earlier this week, and, I have to say, I find the countryside beautiful. The great mountains to the north—with their bald snowcaps and forested mantles—stand like watchful gods over this land of green fertility. My own lands to the south are mostly flat; I think that they might look less dreary if there were a few mountains to vary the terrain.

The people here are mostly herdsmen—though timber harvesters and farmers are not uncommon. It is a pastoral land, certainly. It seems odd that a place so remarkably agrarian could have produced the prophecies and theologies upon which the entire world now relies.

Chapter Three

Camon counted his coins, dropping the golden boxings one by one into the small chest on his table. He still looked a bit stunned, as well he should have. Three thousand boxings was a fabulous amount of money—far more than Camon would earn in even a very good year. His closest cronies sat at the table with him, ale—and laughter—flowing freely.

Vin sat in her corner, trying to understand her feelings of dread. Three thousand boxings. The Ministry should never have let such a sum go so quickly. Prelan Arriev had seemed too cunning to be fooled with such ease.

Camon dropped another coin into the chest. Vin couldn't decide if he was being foolish or clever by making such a display of wealth. Underworld crews worked under a strict agreement—everyone received a cut of earnings in proportion to their status in the group. While it was sometimes tempting to kill the crewleader and take his money for yourself, a successful leader created more wealth for everyone. Kill him prematurely, and you would cut off future earnings—not to mention earn the wrath of the other crewmembers.

Still, three thousand boxings... that would be enough to tempt even the most logical thief. It was all wrong.

I have to get out of here, Vin decided. Get away from Camon, and the lair, in case something happens.

And yet... leave? By herself? She'd never been alone before—she'd always had Reen. He'd been the one to lead her from city to city, joining different thieving crews. She loved solitude. But the thought of being by herself, out in the city, horrified her. That was why she'd never run away from Reen; that was why she'd stayed with Camon.

She couldn't go. But she had to. She looked up from her corner, scanning the room. There weren't many people in the crew for whom she felt any sort of attachment. Yet, there were a couple that she would be sorry to see hurt, should the obligators actually move against the crew. A few men who hadn't tried to abuse her, or—in very rare cases—who had actually shown her some measure of kindness.

Ulef was at the top of that list. He wasn't a friend, but he was the closest thing she had now that Reen was gone. If he would go with her, then at least she wouldn't be alone. Cautiously, Vin stood and moved along the side of the room to where Ulef sat drinking with some of the other younger crewmembers.

She tugged on Ulef's sleeve. He turned toward her, only slightly drunk. "Vin?"

"Ulef," she whispered. "We need to go."

He frowned. "Go? Go where?"

"Away," Vin whispered. "Out of here."

“Now?”

Vin nodded urgently.

Ulef glanced back at his friends, who were chuckling amongst themselves, shooting suggestive looks at Vin and Ulef.

Ulef flushed. “You want to go somewhere, just you and I?”

“Not like that,” Vin said. “Just... I need to leave the lair. And I don’t want to be alone.”

Ulef frowned. He leaned closer, a slight stink of ale on his breath. “What is this about, Vin?” he asked quietly.

Vin paused. “I... think something might happen, Ulef,” she whispered. “Something with the obligators. I just don’t want to be in the lair right now.”

Ulef sat quietly for a moment. “All right,” he finally said. “How long will this take?”

“I don’t know,” Vin said. “Until evening, at least. But we have to go. *Now.*”

He nodded slowly.

“Wait here for a moment,” Vin whispered, turning. She shot a glance at Camon, who was laughing at one of his own jokes. Then she quietly moved through the ash-stained, smoky chamber into the lair’s back room.

The crew’s general sleeping quarters consisted of a simple, elongated corridor lined with bedrolls. It was crowded and uncomfortable, but it was far better than the cold alleyways she’d slept in during her years traveling with Reen.

Alleyways that I might have to get used to again, she thought. She had survived them before. She could do so again.

She moved to her pallet, the muffled sounds of men laughing and drinking sounding from the other room. Vin knelt down, regarding her few possessions. If something did happen to the crew, she wouldn’t be able to come back to the lair. Ever. But, she couldn’t take the bedroll with her now—it was far too obvious. That only left the small box that contained her personal effects: a pebble from each city she’d visited, the earring Reen said Vin’s mother had given her, and a bit of obsidian the size of a large coin. It was chipped into an irregular pattern—Reen had carried it as some kind of good luck charm. It was the only thing he’d left behind when he’d snuck away from the crew half a year before. Abandoning her.

Just like he always said he would, Vin told herself sternly. I never thought he’d actually go—and that’s exactly why he had to leave.

She gripped the bit of obsidian in her hand, tucked the book into her overalls, and pocketed the pebbles. The earring she put in her ear—it was a very simple, steel thing. Little more than a stud, not even worth stealing, which was why she didn’t fear leaving it in the back room. Still, Vin had rarely worn it, for fear that the ornamentation would make her look more feminine.

She had no money, but Reen had taught her how to scavenge and beg. Both were difficult in the Final Empire, especially in Luthadel, but she would find a way, if she had to.

Vin left her box and bedroll, slipping back out into the common room. Maybe she was over-reacting—perhaps nothing would happen to the crew. But, if it did... well, if there was one thing Reen had taught her, it was how to protect her neck. Bringing Ulef was a good idea. He had contacts in Luthadel—if something happened to Camon’s crew, Ulef could probably get her and him jobs on—

Vin froze just inside the main room. Ulef wasn’t at the table where she had left him. Instead, he stood furtively near the front of the room. Near the bar. Near... Camon.

“What is this!” Camon stood, his face red as sunlight. He pushed his stool out of the way, then lurched toward her, half drunk. “Running away? Off to betray me to the Ministry, are you!”

Vin dashed toward the stairwell door, desperately scrambling around tables and past crewmembers.

Camon’s hurled wooden stool hit her square in the back, throwing her to the ground. Pain flared between her shoulders; several crewmembers cried out as the stool bounced off of her and thumped against the floorboards nearby.

Vin lay in a daze. Then... something within her— something she knew of but didn’t understand—gave her strength. Her head stopped swimming, her pain becoming a focus. She climbed awkwardly to her feet.

Camon was there. He backhanded her even as she stood. Her head snapped to the side from the blow, twisting her neck so painfully that she barely felt herself hit the floor again.

Camon bent over, grabbing her by the front of her shirt and pulling her up, raising his fist. Vin didn’t pause to think or to speak—there was only one thing to do. She used up all of her Luck in a single furious effort, pushing against Camon, calming his fury.

Camon teetered. For a moment, his eyes softened. He lowered her slightly.

Then the anger returned to his eyes. Hard. Terrifying.

“Damn wench,” Camon muttered, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her. “That backstabbing brother of yours never respected me, and you’re the same. I was too easy on you both. Should have...”

Vin tried to twist free, but Camon’s grip was firm. She searched desperately for aid from the other crewmembers—however, she knew what she would find. Indifference. They turned away, their faces embarrassed, but not concerned. Ulef still stood near Camon’s table, looking down guiltily.

In her mind, she thought she heard a voice whispering to her. Reen’s Voice. Fool! Ruthlessness—it’s the most logical of emotions. You don’t have any friends in the underworld. You’ll never have any friends in the underworld!

She renewed her struggles, but Camon hit her again, knocking her to the ground. The blow stunned her, and she gasped, breath knocked from her lungs.

Just endure, she thought, mind muddled. He won’t kill me. He needs me.

Yet, as she turned weakly, she saw Camon looming above her in the caliginous room, drunken fury showing in his face. She knew this time would be different—it would be no simple beating. He thought that she intended to betray him to the Ministry. He wasn’t in control.

There was murder in his eyes.

Please! Vin thought with desperation, reaching for her Luck, trying to make it work. There was no response. Luck, such as it was, had failed her.

Camon bent down, muttering to himself as he grabbed her by the shoulder. He raised an arm—his meaty hand forming another fist, his muscles tensing, an angry bead of sweat slipping off his chin and hitting her on the cheek.

A few feet away, the stairwell door shook, then burst open. Camon paused, arm upraised as he glared toward the door and whatever unfortunate crewmember had chosen such an inopportune moment to return to the lair.

Vin seized the distraction. Ignoring the newcomer, she tried to shake herself free from Camon’s grip, but she was too weak. Her face blazed from where he’d hit her, and she tasted blood

on her lip. Her shoulder had been twisted awkwardly, and her side ached from where she'd fallen. She clawed at Camon's hand, but she suddenly felt weak, her inner strength failing her just as her luck had. Her pains suddenly seemed greater, more daunting, more... demanding.

She turned toward the door desperately. She was close—painfully close. She had nearly escaped. Just a little farther...

Then she saw the man standing quietly in the stairwell doorway. He was unfamiliar to her. Tall and hawk-faced, he had light blonde hair and wore a relaxed nobleman's suit, his cloak hanging free. He was, perhaps, in his mid thirties. He wore no hat, nor did he carry a dueling cane.

And he looked very, very angry.

"What is this?" Camon demanded. "Who are you?"

How did he get by the scouts... ? Vin thought, struggling to get her wits back. Pain. She could deal with pain. *The obligators... did they send him?*

The newcomer looked down at Vin, and his expression softened slightly. Then he looked up at Camon and his eyes grew dark.

Camon's angry demands were cut off as he was thrown backward as if had been punched by a powerful force. His arm was ripped free from Vin's shoulder, and he toppled to the ground, causing the floorboards to shake.

The room fell quiet.

Have to get away, Vin thought, forcing herself up to her knees. Camon groaned in pain from a few feet away, and Vin crawled away from him, slipping beneath an unoccupied table. The lair had a hidden exit, a trap door beside the far back wall. If she could crawl to it—

Suddenly, Vin felt an overwhelming peace. The emotion slammed into her like a sudden weight, her emotions squished silent, as if crushed by a forceful hand. Her fear puffed out like an extinguished candle, and even her pain seemed unimportant.

She slowed, wondering why she had been so worried. She stood up, pausing as she faced the trap door. She breathed heavily, still a little dazed.

Camon just tried to kill me! the logical part of her mind warned. *And someone else is attacking the lair. I have to get away!* However, her emotions didn't match the logic. She felt... serene. Unworried. And more than a little bit curious.

Someone had just used Luck on her.

She recognized it somehow, even though she'd never felt it upon her before. She paused beside the table, one hand on the wood, then slowly turned around. The newcomer still stood in the stairwell doorway. He studied her with a critical eye, then smiled in a disarming sort of way.

What is going on?

The newcomer finally stepped into the room. The rest of Camon's crew remained sitting at their tables. They looked surprised, but oddly unworried.

He's using Luck on them all. But... how can he do it to so many at once? Vin had never been able to store up enough Luck to do more than give the occasional, brief push.

As the newcomer entered the room, Vin could finally see that a second person stood in the stairwell behind him. This second man was less imposing. He was shorter, with a dark half-beard and close-cropped straight hair. He also wore a nobleman's suit, though his was less sharply tailored.

On the other side of the room, Camon groaned and sat up, holding his head. He glanced at the newcomers. "Master Dockson! Why, uh, well, this is a surprise!"

“Indeed,” said the shorter man—Dockson. Vin frowned, realizing she sensed a slight familiarity to these men. She recognized them from somewhere.

The Canton of Finance. They were sitting in the waiting room when Camon and I left.

Camon climbed to his feet, studying the blonde newcomer. Camon looked down at the man’s hands, both of which were lined with the strange, overlapping scars. “By the Lord Ruler...” Camon whispered. “The Survivor of Hathsins!”

Vin frowned. The title was unfamiliar to her. Should she know this man? Her wounds still throbbed despite the peace she felt, and her head was dizzy. She leaned on the table for support, but did not sit.

Whoever this newcomer was, Camon obviously thought him important. “Why, Master Kelsier!” Camon sputtered. “This is a rare honor!”

The newcomer—Kelsier—shook his head. “You know, I’m not really interested in listening to you.”

Camon let out an “urk” of pain as he was thrown backward again. Kelsier made no obvious gesture to perform the feat. Yet, Camon collapsed to the ground, as if shoved by some unseen force.

Camon fell quiet, and Kelsier scanned the room. “The rest of you know who I am?”

Many of the crewmembers nodded.

“Good. I’ve come to your lair because you, my friends, owe me a great debt.”

The room was silent save for Camon’s groans. Finally, one of the crewmen spoke. “We... do, Master Kelsier?”

“Indeed you do. You see, Master Dockson and I just saved your lives. Your rather incompetent crewleader left the Ministry’s Canton of Finance about an hour ago, returning directly to this safehouse. He was followed by two Ministry scouts, one high-ranking prelan... and a single Steel Inquisitor.”

No one spoke.

Oh, Lord... Vin thought. She’d been right—she just hadn’t been fast enough. If there was an Inquisitor—

“I dealt with the Inquisitor,” Kelsier said. He paused, letting the implication hang in the air. What kind of person could so lightly claim to have “dealt” with an Inquisitor? Rumors said the creatures were immortal, that they could see a man’s soul, and that they were unmatched warriors.

“I require payment for services rendered,” Kelsier said.

Camon didn’t get up this time—he had fallen hard, and he was obviously disoriented. The room remained still. Finally, Milev—the dark-skinned man who was Camon’s second—scooped up the coffer of Ministry boxings and dashed forward with it. He proffered it to Kelsier.

“The money Camon got from the Ministry,” Milev explained. “Three thousand boxings.”

Milev is so eager to please him, Vin thought. This is more than just Luck—either that, or it’s some sort of Luck I’ve never been able to use.

Kelsier paused, then accepted the coinchest. “And you are?”

“Milev, Master Kelsier.”

“Well, Crewleader Milev, I will consider this payment satisfactory—assuming you do one other thing for me.”

Milev paused. “What would that be?”

Kelsier nodded toward the near-unconscious Camon. “Deal with him.”

“Of course,” Milev said.

“I want him to live, Milev,” Kelsier said, holding up a finger. “But I don’t want him to enjoy it.”

Milev nodded. “We’ll make him a beggar. The Lord Ruler disapproves of the profession—Camon won’t have an easy time of it here in Luthadel.”

And Milev will dispose of him anyway as soon as he thinks this Kelsier isn’t paying attention.

“Good,” Kelsier said, then he opened the coinchest and began counting out some golden boxings. “You’re a resourceful man, Milev. Quick on your feet, and not as easily intimidated as the others.”

“I’ve had dealings with Mistings before, Master Kelsier,” Milev said.

Kelsier nodded. “Dox,” he said, addressing his companion, “where were we going to have our meeting tonight?”

“I was thinking that we should use Clubs’ shop,” said the second man.

“Hardly a neutral location,” Kelsier said. “Especially if he decides not to join us.”

“True.”

Kelsier looked to Milev. “I’m planning a job in this area. It would be useful to have the support of some locals.” He held out a pile of what looked like a hundred boxings. “We’ll require use of your safehouse for the evening. This can be arranged?”

“Of course,” Milev said, taking the coins eagerly.

“Good,” Kelsier said. “Now, get out.”

“Out?” Milev asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” Kelsier said. “Take your men—including your former leader—and leave. I want to have a private conversation with Mistress Vin.”

The room grew silent again, and Vin knew she wasn’t the only one wondering how Kelsier knew her name.

“Well, you heard him!” Milev snapped. He waved for a group of thugs to go grab Camon, then he shooed the rest of the crewmembers up the stairs. Vin watched them go, growing apprehensive. This Kelsier was a powerful man, and instinct told her that powerful men were dangerous. Did he know of her Luck? Obviously—what other reason would he have for singling her out?

How is this Kelsier going to try and use me? she thought, rubbing her arm where she’d hit the floor.

“By the way, Milev,” Kelsier said idly. “When I say ‘private,’ I mean that I don’t want to be spied on by the four men watching us through peek-holes behind the far wall. Kindly take them up into the alley with you.”

Milev paled. “Of course, Master Kelsier.”

“Good. And, in the alleyway you’ll find the two dead Ministry spies. Kindly dispose of the corpses for us.”

Milev nodded, turning.

“And Milev,” Kelsier added.

Milev turned back again.

“See that none of your men betray us,” Kelsier said quietly. And Vin felt it again—a renewed pressure on her emotions. “This crew already has the eye of the Steel Ministry—do not make an enemy of me as well.”

Milev nodded sharply, then disappeared into the stairwell, pulling the door closed behind him. A few moments later, Vin heard footsteps from the peek-room, then all was still. She was alone with a man who was—for some reason—so singularly impressive that he could intimidate an entire room full of cutthroats and thieves.

She eyed the bolt-door. Kelsier was watching her. What would he do if she ran?

He claims to have killed an Inquisitor, Vin thought. And... he used Luck. I have to stay, if just long enough to find out what he knows.

Kelsier’s smile deepened, then finally he laughed. “That was *far* too much fun, Dox.”

The other man, the one Camon had called Dockson, snorted and walked toward the front of the room. Vin tensed, but he didn’t move toward her, instead strolling to the bar.

“You were insufferable enough before, Kell,” Dockson said. “I don’t know how I’m going to handle this new reputation of yours. At least, I’m not sure how I’m going to handle it and maintain a straight face.”

“You’re jealous.”

“Yes, that’s it,” Dockson said. “I’m terribly jealous of your ability to intimidate petty criminals. If it’s of any note to you, I think you were too harsh on Camon.”

Kelsier walked over and took a seat at one of the room’s tables. His mirth darkened slightly as he spoke. “You saw what he was doing to the girl.”

“Actually, I didn’t,” Dockson said dryly, rummaging through the bar’s stores. “Someone was blocking the doorway.”

Kelsier shrugged. “Look at her, Dox. The poor thing’s been beaten nearly senseless. I don’t feel any sympathy for the man.”

Vin remained where she was, keeping watch on both men. As the tension of the moment grew weaker, her wounds began to throb again. The blow between her shoulder-blades—that would be a large bruise—and the slap to her face burned as well. She was still a little dizzy.

Kelsier was watching her. Vin clinched her teeth. Pain. She could deal with pain.

“You need anything, child?” Dockson asked. “A wet handkerchief for that face, perhaps?”

She didn’t respond, instead remaining focused on Kelsier. *Come on. Tell me what you want with me. Make your play.*

Dockson finally shrugged, then ducked beneath the bar for a moment. He eventually came up with a couple of bottles.

“Anything good?” Kelsier asked, turning.

“What do you think?” Dockson asked. “Even among thieves, Camon isn’t exactly known for his refinement. I have socks worth more than this wine.”

Kelsier sighed. “Give me a cup anyway.” Then he glanced back at Vin. “You want anything?”

Vin didn’t respond.

Kelsier smiled. “Don’t worry—we’re far less frightening than your friends think.”

“I don’t think they were her friends, Kell,” Dockson said from behind the bar.

“Good point,” Kelsier said. “Regardless, child, you don’t have anything to fear from us. Other than Dox’s breath.”

Dockson rolled his eyes. “Or Kell’s jokes.”

Vin stood quietly. She could act weak, like she had with Camon, but instincts told her that these men wouldn’t respond well to that tactic. So, she remained where she was, assessing the situation.

The calmness fell upon her again. It encouraged her to be at ease, to be trusting, to simply do as the men were suggesting...

No! She stayed where she was.

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. “That’s unexpected.”

“What?” Dockson asked as he poured a cup of wine.

“Nothing,” Kelsier said, studying Vin.

“You want a drink or not, lass?” Dockson asked.

Vin said nothing. All her life, as long as she could remember, she’d had her Luck. It made her strong, and it gave her an edge over other thieves. It was probably why she was still alive. Yet, all that time, she’d never really known what it was or why she could use it. Logic and instinct now told her the same thing—that she needed to find out what this man knew.

However he intended to use her, whatever his plans, she needed to endure them. She had to find out how he’d grown so powerful.

“Ale,” she finally said.

“Ale?” Kelsier asked. “That’s it?”

Vin nodded, watching him carefully. “I like it.”

Kelsier rubbed his chin. “We’ll have to work on that,” he said. “Anyway, have a seat.”

Hesitant, Vin walked over and sat down opposite Kelsier at the small table. Her wounds throbbed, but she couldn’t afford to show weakness. Weakness killed. She had to pretend to ignore the pain. At least, sitting as she was, her head cleared.

Dockson joined them a moment later, giving Kelsier a glass of wine and Vin her mug of ale. She didn’t take a drink.

“Who are you?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. “You’re a blunt one, eh?”

Vin didn’t reply.

Kelsier sighed. “So much for my intriguing air of mystery.”

Dockson snorted quietly.

Kelsier smiled. “My name is Kelsier. I’m what you might call a crewleader—but I run a crew that isn’t like any you’ve probably known. Men like Camon, along with his crew, like to think of themselves as predators, feeding off of the nobility and the various organizations of the Ministry.”

Vin shook her head. “Not predators. Scavengers.” One would have thought, perhaps, that so close to the Lord Ruler, such things as thieving crews would not be able to exist. Yet, Reen had shown her that the opposite was true—powerful, rich nobility congregated around the Lord Ruler. And, where power and riches existed, so did corruption—especially since the Lord Ruler tended to police his nobility far less than he did the skaa. It had to do, apparently, with his fondness for their ancestors.

Either way, thieving crews like Camon's were the rats who fed on the city's corruption. And, like rats, they were impossible to entirely exterminate—especially in a city with the population of Luthadel.

"Scavengers," Kelsier said, smiling—apparently he did that a lot. "That's an appropriate description, Vin. Well, Dox and I, we're scavengers too... we're just a higher quality of scavenger. We're more well-bred, you might say—or perhaps just more ambitious."

She frowned. "You're noblemen?"

"Lord no," Dockson said.

"Or, at least," Kelsier said, "not full-blooded ones."

"Half-breeds aren't supposed to exist," Vin said carefully. "The Ministry hunts them."

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. "Half-breeds like you?"

Vin felt a shock. *How... ?*

"Even the Steel Ministry isn't infallible, Vin," Kelsier said. "If they can miss you, then they can miss others."

Vin paused thoughtfully. "Milev. He called you Mistings. Those are some kind of Allomancer, right?"

Dockson glanced at Kelsier. "She's observant," the shorter man said with an appreciative nod.

"Indeed," Kelsier agreed. "The man did call us Mistings, Vin—though the appellation was a bit hasty, since neither Dox nor I are technically Mistings. We do, however, associate with them quite a bit."

Vin sat quietly for a moment, sitting beneath the scrutiny of the two men. Allomancy. The mystical power held by the nobility, granted to them by the Lord Ruler some thousand years before as a reward for their loyalty. It was basic Ministry doctrine—even a skaa like Vin knew that much. The nobility had Allomancy and privilege because of their ancestors; the skaa were punished for the same reason.

The truth was, however, that she didn't really know what Allomancy was. It had something to do with fighting, she'd always assumed. One "Misting", as they were called, was said to be dangerous enough to kill an entire thieving team. Yet, the skaa she knew spoke of the power in whispered, uncertain tones. Before this moment, she'd never even paused to consider the possibility that it might simply be the same thing as her Luck.

"Tell me, Vin," Kelsier said, leaning forward with interest. "Do you realize what you did to that obligator in the Canton of Finance?"

"I used my Luck," Vin said quietly. "I use it to make people less angry."

"Or less suspicious," Kelsier said. "Easier to scam."

Vin nodded.

Kelsier held up a finger. "There are a lot of things you're going to have to learn. Techniques, rules, and exercises. One lesson, however, cannot wait. *Never* use emotional Allomancy on a obligator. They're all trained to recognize when their passions are being manipulated. Even the High Nobility are forbidden from Pulling or Pushing the emotions of a obligator. You are what caused that obligator to send for an Inquisitor."

"Pray the creature never catches your trail again, lass," Dockson said quietly, sipping his wine.

Vin paled. "You didn't kill the Inquisitor?"

Kelsier shook his head. “I just distracted him for a bit—which was quite dangerous enough, I might add. Don’t worry, many of the rumors about them aren’t true. Now that he’s lost your trail, he won’t be able to find you again.”

“Most likely,” Dockson said.

Vin glanced at the shorter man apprehensively.

“Most likely,” Kelsier agreed. “There are a lot of things we don’t know about the Inquisitors—they don’t seem to follow the normal rules. Those spikes through their eyes, for instance, should kill them. Nothing I’ve learned about Allomancy has ever provided an explanation for how those creatures keep living. If it were only a regular Misting Seeker on your trail, we wouldn’t need to worry. An Inquisitor... well, you’ll want to keep your eyes open. Of course, you already seem pretty good at that.”

Vin sat uncomfortably for a moment. Eventually, Kelsier nodded to her mug of ale. “You aren’t drinking.”

“You might have slipped something in it,” Vin said.

“Oh, there was no need for me to sneak something into your drink,” Kelsier said with a smile, pulling an object out of his suit coat pocket. “After all, you’re going to drink this vial of mysterious liquid quite willingly.”

He set a small glass vial on the tabletop. Vin frowned, regarding the liquid within. There was a dark residue at its bottom. “What is it?” she asked.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be mysterious,” Kelsier said with a smile.

Dockson rolled his eyes. “The vial is filled with an alcohol solution and some flakes of metal, Vin.”

“Metal?” she asked with a frown.

“Two of the eight basic Allomantic metals,” Kelsier said. “We need to do some tests.”

Vin eyed the vial.

Kelsier shrugged. “You’ll have to drink it if you want to know any more about this Luck of yours.”

“You drink half first,” Vin said.

Kelsier raised an eyebrow. “A bit on the paranoid side, I see.”

Vin didn’t respond.

Finally, he sighed, picking up the vial pulling off the plug.

“Shake it up first,” Vin said. “So you get some of the sediment.”

Kelsier rolled his eyes, but did as requested, shaking the vial, then downing half of its contents. He sat it back on the table with a click.

Vin frowned. Then she eyed Kelsier, who smiled. He knew that he had her. He had shown off his power, had tempted her with it. *The only reason to be subservient to those with power is so that you can learn to someday take what they have.* Reen’s words.

Vin reached out and took the vial, then she downed its contents. She sat, waiting for some magical transformation or surge of power—or even signs of poison. She felt nothing.

How... anticlimactic. She frowned, leaning back in her chair. Out of curiosity, she felt at her Luck.

And felt her eyes widen in shock.

It was there, like a massive golden hoard. A storage of power so incredible that it stretched her understanding. Always before, she had needed to be a scrimp with her Luck, holding it in reserve, using up morsels sparingly. Now she felt like a starving woman invited to a high nobleman's feast. She sat, stunned, regarding the enormous wealth within her.

"So," Kelsier said with a prodding voice. "Try it. Soothe me."

Vin reached out, tentatively touching her newfound mass of Luck. She took a bit, and directed it at Kelsier.

"Good." Kelsier leaned forward eagerly. "But we already knew you could do that. Now the real test, Vin. Can you go the other way? You can dampen my emotions, but can you enflame them too?"

Vin frowned. She'd never used her Luck in such a way—she hadn't even realized that she could. Why was he so eager?

Suspicious, Vin reached for her source of Luck. As she did so, she noticed something interesting. What she had first interpreted as one massive source of power was actually two different sources of power. There were different types of Luck.

Eight. He'd said there were eight of them. But... what do the others do?

Kelsier was still waiting. Vin reached to the second, unfamiliar source of Luck, doing as she'd done before and directing it at him.

Kelsier's smile deepened, and he sat back, glancing at Dockson. "That's it then. She did it."

Dockson shook his head. "To be honest, Kell, I'm not sure what to think. Having one of you around was unsettling enough. Two, though..."

Vin regarded them with narrowed, dubious eyes. "Two what?"

"Even among the nobility, Vin, Allomancy is modestly rare," Kelsier said. "True, it's a hereditary skill, with most of its powerful lines among the high nobility. However, breeding alone doesn't guarantee Allomantic strength.

"Many high noblemen only have access to a single Allomantic skill. People like that—those who can only perform Allomancy in one of its eight basic aspects—are called Mistings. Sometimes these abilities appear in skaa—but only if that Skaa has noble blood in his or her near ancestry. You can usually find one Misting in... oh, about ten thousand mixed-breed skaa. The better, and closer, the noble ancestry, the more likely the skaa is to be a Misting."

"Who were your parents, Vin?" Dockson asked. "Do you remember them?"

"I was raised by my half-brother, Reen," Vin said quietly, uncomfortable. These were not things she discussed with others.

"Did he speak of your mother and father?" Dockson asked.

"Occasionally," she admitted. "Reen said that our mother was a whore. Not out of choice, but the underworld..." She trailed off. Her mother had tried to kill her, once, when she was very young. She vaguely remembered the event. Reen had saved her.

"What about your father, Vin?" Dockson asked.

Vin looked up. "He is a High Prelan in the Steel Ministry."

Kelsier whistled softly. "Now *that's* a slightly ironic breach of duty."

Vin looked down at the table. Finally, she reached over and took a healthy pull on her mug of ale.

Kelsier smiled. “Most ranking obligators in the Ministry are high noblemen. Your father gave you a rare gift in that blood of yours.”

“So... I’m one of these Mistings you mentioned?”

Kelsier shook his head. “Actually, no. You see, this is what made you so interesting to us, Vin. Mistings only have access to one Allomantic skill. You just proved you have two. And, if you have access to at least two of the eight, then you have access to the rest as well. That’s the way it works—if you’re an Allomancer, you either get one skill or you get them all.”

Kelsier leaned forward. “You, Vin, are what is generally called a Mistborn. Even amongst the nobility, they’re incredibly rare. Amongst skaa... well, let’s just say I’ve only met one other skaa Mistborn in my entire life.”

Somehow, the room seemed to grow more quiet. More still. Vin stared at her mug with distracted, uncomfortable eyes. *Mistborn*. She’d heard the stories, of course. The legends.

Kelsier and Dockson sat quietly, letting her think. Eventually, she spoke. “So... what does this all mean?”

Kelsier smiled. “It means that you, Vin, are a very special person. You have a power that most high noblemen envy. It is a power that, had you been born an aristocrat, would have made you one of the most deadly and influential people in all of the Final Empire.”

Kelsier leaned forward again. “But, you weren’t born an aristocrat. You’re not noble, Vin. You don’t have to play by their rules—and that makes you even *more* powerful.”

Sample Chapters of Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians

(This is my middle grade fantasy series, the first book of which was published by Scholastic Press in October 2007. I've sold four books in the series, and the second will be out October 2008.)

Link to: [Amazon Page](#)

Author's Foreword

I am not a good person.

Oh, I know what the stories say about me. They call me Oculator Dramatus, Hero, Savior of the Twelve Kingdoms... Those, however, are just rumors. Some are exaggerations; many are outright lies. The truth is far less impressive.

When Mr. Bagsworth first came to me, suggesting that I write my autobiography, I was hesitant. However, I soon realized that this was the perfect opportunity to explain myself to the public.

As I understand it, this book will be published simultaneously in the Free Kingdoms and Inner Libraria. This presents something of a problem for me, since I will have to make the story understandable to people from both areas. Those in the Free Kingdoms, for instance, might be unfamiliar with things like bazookas, briefcases, and guns. However, those in Libraria—or, the Hushlands, as they are often called—will likely be unfamiliar with things like Oculators, Crystin, and the depth of the Librarian conspiracy.

To those of you in the Free Kingdoms, I suggest that you find a reference book—there are many that would do—that can explain unfamiliar terms to you. After all, this book will be published as a biography in your lands, and so it is not my purpose to teach you about the strange machines and archaic weaponry of Libraria. My purpose is to show you the truth about me, and to prove that I am not the hero that everyone says I am.

In the Hushlands—those Librarian-controlled nations such as the United States, Canada, and England—this book will be published as a work of fantasy. Do not be fooled! This is no work of fiction, nor is my name really “Brandon Sanderson”. Both are guises to hide the book from Librarian agents. Unfortunately, even with these precautions, I suspect that the Librarians will discover the book and ban it. In that case, our Free Kingdom agents will have to sneak into libraries and bookstores to put it on shelves. Count yourself lucky if you've found one of these secret copies.

For you Hushlanders, I know the events of my life may seem wondrous and mysterious. I will do my best to explain them, but please remember that my purpose is not to entertain you. My purpose is to open your eyes to the truth.

I know that in writing this I shall make few friends in either world. People are never pleased when you reveal that their beliefs are wrong.

But, that is what I must do. This is my story—the story of a selfish, contemptible fool.

The story of a coward.

Chapter One

So, there I was, tied to an altar made from outdated encyclopedias, about to get sacrificed to the dark powers by a cult of evil Librarians.

As you might imagine, that sort of situation can be quite disturbing. It does funny things to the brain to be in such danger—in fact, it often makes a person pause and reflect upon his life. If you’ve never faced such a situation, then you’ll simply have to take my word. If, on the other hand, you *have* faced such a situation, then you are probably dead, and aren’t likely to be reading this.

In my case, the moment of impending death made me think about my parents. It was an odd thought, since I hadn’t grown up with my parents. In fact, up until my thirteenth birthday, I really only knew one thing about my parents: that they had a twisted sense of humor.

Why do I say this, you ask? Well, you see, my parents named me ‘Al.’ In most cases, this would be short for ‘Albert’, which is a fine name. In fact, you have probably known an Albert or two in your lifetime, and chances are that they were decent fellows. If they weren’t, then it certainly wasn’t the name’s fault.

My name isn’t Albert.

‘Al’ also could be short for ‘Alexander.’ I wouldn’t have minded this either, since Alexander is a great name. It sounds kind of regal.

My name isn’t Alexander.

I’m certain that you can think of other names ‘Al’ might be short for. Alfonso has a pleasant ring to it. Alan would also be acceptable, as would have been Alfred—though I really don’t have an inclination toward butlery.

My name is not Alfonso, Alan, or Alfred. Nor is it Alejandro, Alton, Aldris, or Alonzo.

My name is Alcatraz. Alcatraz Smedry. Now, some of you Free Kingdomers might be impressed by my name. That’s wonderful for you, but I grew up in the Hushlands—in the United States itself. I didn’t know about Oculators or the like, though I did know about prisons.

And that was why I figured that my parents *must* have had a twisted sense of humor. Why else would they name their child after the most infamous prison in U.S. history?

On my thirteenth birthday, I received a second confirmation that my parents were—indeed—cruel people. That was the day when I unexpectedly received in the mail the only inheritance that they had left me.

It was a simple bag of sand.

I stood at the door, looking down at the unwrapped package in my hands, frowning as the postman drove away. The package looked old—its string ties were frayed, and its brown paper packaging was worn and faded. Inside of the package, I found a box containing a simple note.

Alcatraz, it read. Happy thirteenth birthday! Here is your inheritance, as promised.

Love, Mom and Dad.

Underneath the note, I found the bag of sand. It was small, perhaps the size of a fist, and was filled with ordinary brown beach sand.

Now, my first inclination was to think that the package was a joke. You would probably have thought the same. One thing, however, made me pause. I set the box down, then smoothed out its wrinkled packaging paper.

One edge of the paper was covered with wild scribbles—a little like those made by a person trying to get the ink in a pen to flow. On the front there was writing. It looked old and faded—almost illegible in places—and yet it accurately spelled out my address. An address I'd only been living at for eight months.

Impossible, I thought.

Then I went inside my house and set the kitchen on fire.

Now, I warned you that I wasn't a good person. Those who knew me when I was young would never have believed that one day *I* would be known as a hero. 'Heroic' just didn't apply to me. Nor did people use words like 'nice', or even 'friendly' to describe me. They might have used the word 'clever', though I suspect that 'devious' may have been more correct. 'Destructive' was another common one that I heard, though I didn't care for it. (It wasn't actually all that accurate.)

No, people never said good things about me. Good people don't burn down kitchens.

Still holding the strange package, I strode into my foster parents' house and wandered toward the kitchen, lost in thought. It was a very nice kitchen, modern looking with white wallpaper and lots of shiny chrome appliances. Anyone entering it would immediately notice that this was the kitchen of a person who took pride in their cooking skills.

I set my package on the table, then moved over to the kitchen stove. If you're a Hushlander, you would have thought I looked like a fairly normal American boy, dressed in loose jeans and a T-shirt. I've been told I was a handsome kid—and some even said that I had an 'innocent face'. I was not too tall, had dark brown hair, and was quite skilled at breaking things.

Quite skilled.

When I was very young, kids called me a klutz. I was always breaking things—plates, cameras, chickens. It seemed inevitable that whatever I picked up, I would end up dropping, cracking, or otherwise mixing up. Not exactly the most inspiring talent a young man ever had, I know. However, I generally tried to do my best despite it.

Just like I did this day. Still thinking about the strange package, I filled a pot with water. Next, I got out a few packs of instant ramen noodles. I set them down, looking at the stove. It was a fancy, gas one with real flames. Joan wouldn't settle for electric.

Sometimes it was daunting, knowing how easily I could break things. This one, simple curse seemed to dominate my entire life. Perhaps I shouldn't have gone down to fix dinner. Perhaps I should simply have remained in my room. But, what was I to do? Stay there all the time? Never go out because I was worried about the things I *might* break? Of course not.

I reached out and turned on the gas burner.

And, of course, the flames *immediately* flared up around the sides of the pan, reaching far higher than should have been possible. I quickly reached to turn off the flames, but the knob broke off in my hand. I tried to grab the pot and take it off of the stove. But, of course, the handle broke off, leaving the pot itself on the burner. I stared at the broken handle for a moment, then looked up at the flames. They flickered, starting the drapes on fire. The fire gleefully began to devour the cloth.

Well, so much for that, I thought with a sigh, tossing the broken handle over my shoulder. I left the fire burning—once again, I feel I must remind you that I'm not a very nice person—and picked up my strange package as I walked out into the den.

There, I pulled out the brown wrapper from my ‘inheritance’ box, flattening it against the table with one hand and looking the stamps. One had a picture of a woman wearing flight goggles, with an old-fashioned airplane in the background behind her. All of the stamps looked old—perhaps as old as I was. I turned on the computer and checked a database of stamp publication dates, and found that I was right. From the pictures on them, I could tell that they had been printed thirteen years ago.

Someone had taken quite a bit of effort to make it *seem* like my present had been packaged, addressed, and stamped over a decade earlier. That, however, was ridiculous. How would they have known where I’d be living? During the last thirteen years, I’d gone through dozens of sets of foster parents. Besides, my experience has been that the number of stamps it takes to send a package increases without warning or pattern. (The postage people are, I’m convinced, quite sadistic in that regard.) There was no way someone could have known, thirteen years ago, how much postage it would cost to send a package in my day.

I shook my head, standing up and tossing the ‘M’ key from the computer keyboard into the trash. I’d stopped trying to stick the keys back on—they always fell off again anyway. I got the fire extinguisher from the hall closet, then walked back into the kitchen, which was now quite thoroughly billowing with smoke. I put the box and extinguisher on the table, then picked up a broom, holding my breath as I calmly knocked the tattered remnants of the drapes into the sink. I turned on the water, then finally used the extinguisher to blast the burning wallpaper and cabinets, also putting out the stove.

The smoke alarm didn’t go off, of course. You see, I’d broken *that* previously. All I’d needed to do was rest my hand against its case for a second, and it had fallen apart.

I didn’t open a window, but did have the peace of mind to get a pair of pliers and twist the stove’s gas gage off. Then, I glanced at the curtains, smoldering as an ashen lump in the sink.

Well, that’s it, I thought, a bit frustrated. Joan and Roy will never continue to put up with me after this.

Perhaps you think I should have felt ashamed. But, what was I supposed to do? Like I said—I couldn’t simply just hide in my room all the time. Was I to avoid living just because life for me was a little different than it was for regular people? No. I had learned to deal with my strange curse. I figured that others would simply have to do so as well.

I heard a car in the driveway. Finally realizing that the kitchen was still rank with smoke, I opened the window and began using a towel to fan it out. My foster mother—Joan—rushed into the kitchen a moment later. She stood, horrified, looking at the fire damage.

I tossed aside the towel and left without a word, going up to my room.

#

“That boy is a disaster!”

Joan’s voice drifted up through the open window into my room. My foster parents were in the study down on the first floor, their favorite place for ‘quiet’ conferences about me. Fortunately, one of the first things that I’d broken in the house had been the study’s window rollers, locking the windows themselves permanently open so that I could listen in.

“Now, Joan,” said a consoling voice. That one belonged to Roy, my current foster father.

“I can’t take it!” Joan sputtered. “He destroys everything he touches!”

There was that word again. “Destroy.” I felt my hair bristle in annoyance. I don’t destroy things, I thought. I break them. They’re still there when I’m finished, they just don’t work right anymore.

“He means well,” Roy said. “He’s a kind-hearted boy.”

“First the washing machine,” Joan sputtered. “Then the lawn mower. Then the upstairs bath. Now the kitchen. All in less than a year!”

“He’s had a hard life,” Roy said. “He just tries too hard—how would you feel, being passed from family to family, never having a home... ?”

“Well, can you blame people for getting rid of him?” Joan said. “I—”

She was interrupted by a knock on the front door. There was a moment of silence, and I imagined what was going on between my foster parents. Joan was giving Roy “The Look.” Usually, it was the husband who gave “The Look,” insisting that I be sent away. Roy had always been the soft one here, however. I heard his footsteps as he went to answer the door.

“Come in,” Roy said, his voice faint, since he now stood in the entryway. I remained lying in my bed. It was still early evening—the sun hadn’t even set yet.

“Mrs. Sheldon,” a new voice said from below, acknowledging Joan. “I came as soon as I heard about the accident.” It was a woman’s voice, familiar to me. Businesslike, curt, and more than a little condescending. I figured those were all good reasons why Miss Fletcher wasn’t married.

“Miss Fletcher,” Joan said, faltering now that the time had come. They usually did. “I’m... sorry to...”

“No,” Miss Fletcher said. “You did well to last this long. I can arrange for the boy to be taken tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes, sighing quietly. Joan and Roy had lasted quite long—longer, certainly, than any of my other recent sets of foster parents. Eight months was a valiant effort when taking care of *me* was concerned. I felt a little twist in my stomach.

“Where is the boy now?” Miss Fletcher asked.

“He’s upstairs.”

I waited quietly. Miss Fletcher knocked, but didn’t wait for my reply before pushing open the door.

“Miss Fletcher,” I said. “You look lovely.”

It was a stretch. Miss Fletcher—my personal caseworker—*might* have been a pretty woman, had she not been wearing a pair of hideous, horn-rimmed glasses. She perpetually kept her hair up in a bun that was only slightly less tight than the dissatisfied line of her lips. She wore a simple white blouse and a black, ankle-length skirt. For her, it was a daring outfit—the shoes, after all, were maroon.

“The kitchen, Alcatraz?” Miss Fletcher asked. “Why the kitchen?”

“It was an accident,” I mumbled. “I was trying to do something nice for my foster parents.”

“You decided that you would be kind to Joan Sheldon—one of the city’s finest and most well-renowned chefs—by burning down her kitchen?”

I shrugged. “Just wanted to fix dinner. I figured even *I* couldn’t mess up ramen noodles.”

Miss Fletcher snorted. Finally, she walked into the room, shaking her head as she strolled past my dresser. She poked my inheritance package with her index finger, snorting quietly as she eyed the crumpled paper and worn strings. Miss Fletcher had a thing about messiness. Finally, she turned back to me. “We’re running out of families, Smedry. The other couples are hearing rumors. Soon, there won’t be any place left to send you.”

I remained quiet, still lying down.

Miss Fletcher sighed, folding her arms and tapping her index finger against one arm. “You realize, of course, that you are worthless.”

Here we go, I thought, feeling sick. This was my least favorite part of the process. I stared up at my ceiling.

“You are fatherless and motherless,” Miss Fletcher said, “a parasite upon the system. You are a child who has been given a second, third, and now *twenty-seventh* chance. And how have you received this generosity? With indifference, disrespect, and *destructiveness*!”

“I don’t destroy,” I said quietly. “I break. There’s a difference.”

Miss Fletcher sniffed in disgust. She left me then, walking out and pulling the door closed with a snap. I heard her say goodbye to the Sheldons, promising them that her assistant would arrive in the morning to deal with me.

It’s too bad, I thought with a sigh. Roy and Joan really were good people. They would have made great parents.

Chapter Two

Now, you're probably wondering about the beginning of the previous chapter, with its reference to evil Librarians, altars made from encyclopedias, and its general feeling of "Oh, No! Alcatraz is going to be sacrificed!"

Before we get to this, let me explain something about myself. I've been many things in my life. Student. Spy. Sacrifice. Potted plant. However, at this point, I'm something completely different from all of those—something more frightening than any of them.

I'm a writer.

You may have noticed that I began my story with a quick, snappy scene of danger and tension—but then quickly moved on to a more boring discussion of my childhood. Well, that's because I wanted to prove something to you: that *I am not a nice person*.

Would a nice person begin with such an exciting scene, then make you wait almost the entire book to read about it? Would a nice person write a book that exposes the true nature of the world to all of you ignorant Hushlanders, thereby forcing your lives into chaos? Would a nice person write a book which proves that Alcatraz Smedry, the Free Kingdoms' greatest hero, was just a mean-spirited adolescent?

Of course not.

I awoke grumpily that next morning, annoyed by the sound of someone banging on my downstairs door. I climbed out of bed, then threw on a bathrobe. Though the clock read 10:00 a.m., I was still tired. I had stayed up late, lost in thought. Then, Joan and Roy had to try and say goodbye. I hadn't opened my door to them. Better to get things over without all that gushing.

No, I was not happy to be reawoken at 10:00 a.m.—or, actually, *any* a.m.. I yawned, walking downstairs and pulling open the door, prepared to meet whichever 'assistant' Miss Fletcher had sent to retrieve me. "Hell—" I said. (I hadn't intended to swear, but a boisterous voice cut me off before I could get to the "o.")

"Alcatraz, my boy!" the man at the doorway exclaimed. "Happy Birthday!"

"—o," I said.

"You shouldn't swear, my boy!" the man said, pushing his way into the house. He was an older man who was dressed in a sharp black tuxedo, and who wore a strange pair of red-tinted glasses. He was quite bald save for a small bit of white hair running around the back of his head, and this puffed out in an unkempt fashion. He wore a similarly bushy white mustache, and he smiled quite broadly as he turned to me, his face wrinkled but his eyes alight with excitement.

"Well, my boy?" he said. "How does it feel to be thirteen?"

"The same as it did yesterday," I said, yawning. "When it was *actually* my birthday. Miss Fletcher must have told you the wrong date. I'm not packed yet—you're going to have to wait."

I began to walk tiredly toward the stairs.

"Wait," the old man said. "Your birthday was... yesterday?"

I nodded. I'd never met the man before, but Miss Fletcher had several assistants. I didn't know them all.

"Rumbling Rawns!" the man exclaimed. "I'm late!"

"No," I said, climbing the stairs. "Actually, you're early. As I said, you'll need to wait."

The old man rushed up the stairs behind me.

I turned, frowning. “You can wait downstairs.”

“Quickly, boy!” the old man said. “I can’t wait. Soon, you’ll be getting a package in the mail, and—”

“Stop. You know about the package?”

“Of course I do, of course I do. Don’t tell me it already came?”

I nodded.

“Blistering Brooks!” the old man exclaimed. “Where, lad? Where is it!”

I frowned. “Did Miss Fletcher send it?”

“Miss Fletcher? Never heard of her. Your parents sent that box, my boy!”

He’s never heard of her? I thought, realizing that I’d never verified the man’s identity. *Great. I’ve let a lunatic into the house.*

“Oh, blast!” the old man said, reaching into his suit pocket and pulling out a pair of yellow-tinted glasses. He quickly exchanged the light-red ones for these, then looked around. “There!” he said suddenly, rushing up the stairs, pushing past me in my surprise.

“Hey!” I called, but he didn’t stop. I muttered quietly to myself, following. The old man was surprisingly spry for one his age, and he reached the door to my room in just a few heartbeats.

“Is this your room, my boy?” the old man asked. “Lots of footprints leading here. What happened to the doorknob?”

“It fell off. My first night in the house.”

“How odd,” the old man said, pushing the door open. “Now, where’s that box...”

“Look,” I said, pausing in the doorway. “You have to leave. If you don’t, I’m going to call the police.”

“The police? Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re in my house,” I said. “Well... my ex-house, at least.”

“But, you let me in, lad,” the old man pointed out.

I paused. “Well, now I’m telling you to leave.”

“But why? Don’t you recognize me, my boy?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m your grandfather, lad! Leavenworth Smedry, Oculator Dramatus. Don’t tell me you don’t remember me—I was there when you were born!”

I blinked. Then frowned. Then cocked my head to the side. “You were there...?”

“Yes, yes,” the old man said. “Thirteen years ago! You haven’t seen me since, of course.”

“And I’m supposed to remember you?” I said.

“Well, certainly! We have excellent memories, we Smedries. Now, about that box...”

Grandfather? The man had to, of course, be lying. I don’t even have any parents. Why would I have a grandfather?

Now, looking back, I realize that this was a silly thought. Everybody has a grandfather—two of them, actually. Just because you haven’t seen them, doesn’t mean they don’t exist. In that way, grandfathers are kind of like kangaroos.

Either way, I most certainly *should* have called the police on this elderly intruder. He has been the main source of all my problems over the last five years. Unfortunately, I didn't throw him out. Instead, I just watched him put away his yellow-tinted spectacles, retrieving the reddish-tinted ones again. Then, he finally spotted the box on my dresser, scribbled-on brown paper still sitting beside it. The old man rushed over eagerly.

"*You* sent it," I accused. "Why did you use thirteen-year old stamps? And, why take such pains to make the box look old?"

Leavenworth didn't answer. He reached into the box, taking out the note with an oddly reverent touch. He read it, smiling fondly, then looked up at me.

"So, where is it?" Leavenworth asked.

"Where is what?"

"The inheritance, lad!"

"In the box," I said, pointing at the package.

"There isn't anything in here but the note."

"What?" I said, walking over. Indeed, the box was empty. The bag of sand was gone.

"What did you do with it?" I asked.

"With what?"

"The bag of sand," I said.

The old man breathed out in awe. "So, it really came?" he whispered, eyes wide. "There was actually a bag of sand in this box?"

I nodded slowly.

"What color was the sand, lad?"

"Um... sandy?"

"Galloping Gemmells!" Leavenworth exclaimed. "I'm too late! They must have gotten here before me. Quickly, lad. Who's been in this room since you received the box?"

"Nobody," I said. By this point, as you can imagine, I was growing a little frustrated and increasingly confused. Not to mention hungry, and still a bit tired. And a little sore from gym class the previous week—but that wasn't exactly all that relevant, was it?

"Nobody?" Leavenworth repeated. "Nobody else has been in this room?"

"Nobody," I snapped. "Nobody at all." Except... I frowned. "Except Miss Fletcher."

"Who *is* this Miss Fletcher you keep mentioning, lad?"

I shrugged. "My caseworker."

"What does she look like?"

"Glasses," I said. "Snobbish face. Usually has her hair in a bun."

"The glasses," Leavenworth said slowly. "Did they have... horn rims?"

"Usually."

"Hyperventilating Hobbs!" Leavenworth exclaimed. "A Librarian! Quickly, lad, we have to go! Get dressed; I'll go steal some food from your foster parents!"

"Wait!" I said, but Leavenworth had already scrambled from the room, moving with a sudden urgency.

I stood, dumbfounded.

Miss Fletcher? I thought. *Take the inheritance? That's stupid. Why would she want a silly bag of sand?* I shook my head, uncertain what to think. Now, I wasn't an easily-confused young man—however, insanity has a way of confusing even the most unconfusable. Finally, I just walked over to my dresser. Getting dressed, at least, seemed like a good idea. I threw on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and my favorite green jacket. Lightweight and rainproof, it bore no symbols or pictures.

As I finished, Leavenworth rushed back into my bedroom, carrying two of Roy's extra briefcases. I noticed a leaf of lettuce sticking halfway out of one, while the other seemed to be leaking a bit of catsup.

"Here!" Leavenworth said, handing me the lettuce briefcase. "I packed us lunches. No telling how long it will be before we can stop for food!"

I raised the briefcase, frowning. "You packed lunches inside of briefcases?"

"They'll look less suspicious that way. We have to fit in! Now, let's get moving. The Librarians could already be working on that sand."

"So?" I said.

"So?" the old man exclaimed. "Lad, with those sands, the Librarians could destroy kingdoms, overthrow cultures, dominate the world! We need to get them back. We'll have to strike quickly, and possibly at great peril to our lives. But, that's the Smedry way!"

I lowered the briefcase. "If you say so."

"Before we leave, I need to know what our resources are. What's your Talent, lad?"

I frowned. "Talent?"

"Yes," Leavenworth said. "Every Smedry has a Talent. What is yours?"

"Uh... playing the oboe?"

"This is no time for jokes, lad!" Leavenworth said. "This is serious! If we don't get that sand back..."

"Well," I said, sighing. "I'm also pretty good at breaking things."

Leavenworth froze.

Maybe I shouldn't play with the old man, I thought, feeling guilty. He may be a loon, but that's no reason to make fun of him.

"Breaking things?" Leavenworth said, sounding awed. "So it's true. Why, such a Talent hasn't been seen in centuries..."

"Look," I said, raising my hands. "I was just joking around. I didn't mean—"

"I knew it!" Leavenworth said eagerly. "Yes, yes, this improves our chances! Come, lad, we have to get moving." Leavenworth turned and left the room again, carrying his briefcase and rushing eagerly down the stairs.

I sighed, following the old man, intending to close the door on him. However, when I reached the doorway, I paused, looking out. Leavenworth waved toward me eagerly, standing on the doorstep in his little tuxedo.

There was a car parked on the curb. An old car. Now, when you read the words 'old car,' you likely think of a beat-up or rusted vehicle that barely runs. A car that is old, kind of in the same way that cassette tapes are old.

This was not such a car. It was not old like cassette tapes are old—it wasn't even old like records are old. No, this car was old like Beethoven is old. Or, at least, so it seemed. To me—and,

likely, to most of you living in the Hushlands—the car looked like an antique. Kind of like a Model T.

Now, that was an assumption on my part. I was actually wrong about the car's age. Grandpa Leavenworth had obtained this car only one year before, and it was still quite new. (Though, admittedly, it had a silimatic engine based on Free Kingdoms technology, and had only been disguised to look like an American car.)

The point is that many times, the first thing a person presumes about something—or someone—is inaccurate. Or, at the very least, incomplete. Take the young Alcatraz Smedry, for instance. After reading my story up to this point, you have probably made some assumptions. Perhaps you're—despite my best efforts—feeling a bit of sympathy for me. After all, orphans usually make very sympathetic heroes.

Perhaps you think that my habit of using sarcasm was simply a method of hiding my insecurity. Perhaps you've decided that I wasn't a cruel boy, just a very confused one. Perhaps you've decided, despite my feigned indifference, I didn't *like* breaking things.

Obviously, you are a person of very poor judgment. I would ask you to kindly refrain from drawing conclusions that I don't explicitly tell you to make. That's a very bad habit, and it makes authors grumpy.

I was none of those things. I was simply a mean boy who didn't really care whether or not he burned down kitchens. And, that mean boy was the one who stood on the doorstep, watching Grandpa Smedry leave.

Now, *perhaps* I'll admit that I felt just a little bit of longing. A... wishfulness, you might say. Getting a package that claimed to be from my parents had made me remember days back when—before I realized how foolish I was being—I had yearned to know my real parents. Days when I had longed to find someone who *had* to love me, if only because they were related to me.

Fortunately, I had grown past that age. My moment of weakness passed quickly, and I slammed the door closed and locked old man outside. Then I went to the kitchen to get some breakfast.

That, however, is when someone drew a gun on me.