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To Caite and Owynn  
Always follow your dreams

## PROLOGUE

### ARAYDA

With my heart racing in my chest, I felt my way through the dimly lit tunnel, my mind firmly on the task ahead. One offer. One wish. The rough stone underneath my fingers reminded me of the times ahead if I didn't do this—the dry air I inhaled a promise of what it would feel like every day if I didn't succeed. Even though she was next in line, Azra could not ascend the throne, no matter the cost. If she did, we would lose everything us Ilvannians treasured to her totalitarian regime.

The royal healer had been clear—one more child, or I wouldn't live long enough to raise the next. One child, and she had to be a girl, for the sake of Ilvanna. I love my sons, and I love my husband, but on their behalf and everyone else's, I had to do this, if only because the Council rejected a law enabling a male to inherit the throne.

No man would ever rule Ilvanna.

Breathing in deeply—inhaling the scent of chamomile, lavender, and rosemary on the air—I stepped through a set of heavy curtains into a circular cavern room lit by hundreds upon hundreds of candles.

I did not envy the *haniya* in charge of this sacred duty.

A giant slab of stone stood in the middle of the room, and up close I could see it was engraved with intricate lines and the marks of the Gods. I trailed my fingers delicately over the lines, following every curve, groove, and mark, until I found the one I was looking for—two crescent moons drawn within a full moon depicting the beginning and ending of life. According to our scholars, a second concept was of it being a mother's womb at the start, middle, and end of a pregnancy.

It made perfect sense since it was Xiomara's mark after all.

I traced my fingers over the other symbols reverently, knowing them all by heart. If anything, Mother had instilled a healthy dose of respect for the Pantheon into me, even if she had done it through veiled threats. Little did I know they would be the ones I would turn to in my hour of need. My hand traced along the lines of the dagger, and the snake coiling around the cup which were the marks of Esahbyen and Aeson, respectively. The coiled snake was a strange mark, but then, Aeson was a strange God—paragon for artists, musicians, and healers. The dagger on the other hand was plain and simple, apt for the God of War.

Stepping back, I regarded the altar with mixed feelings. Mahrleyah, leader of *Hanyarah*, hadn't been very specific in her instructions for this part of the ritual. All she had been clear about was to bring an offer for the Gods if I wanted my wish granted. It had been hard finding one. The tight feeling in my throat did nothing to alleviate my nerves as I placed my Mother's sapphire necklace on the altar before I went down on my knees. From this angle, I could see candlelight play over its multi-faceted surface, sending its reflection dancing on the cavern walls. A smile tugged at my lips as a stone settled itself in my stomach. It had been a gift from Mother before she died, and the last tangible item of hers that I owned. I breathed in deeply, and willed my pounding heart to calm down.

It was now or never.

Sweat trickled down my back, my chest, and stomach.

Had it been so hot all this time?

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, rubbing my hands over my thighs before settling them in my lap.

“Xiomara, lady of life, mother of women, guardian of the womb, I beseech you. Troubled times are ahead for my people. Please, hear the prayer of a faithful daughter.”

As expected, it remained eerily quiet and for a moment, I felt like a complete and utter idiot.

I tried again.

“Please,” I continued, “I need your help for the sake of my people. For the sake of Ilvanna. I don’t know who else to turn to.”

Tears stung my eyes, and as they fell down my cheeks, my hands lay shaking in my lap. If this failed, the consequences would be dire, even if they were hundreds of years away. If anything happened to me, and I had no heir to the throne, everyone would be at *her* mercy.

I had only one chance.

“I like it when they beg,” a deep, smoky, masculine voice came from behind me.

“You just like them on their knees,” a second, more melodious, and feminine voice answered, “begging or not.”

A deep, rumbling laugh echoed through the cavern, sending my heart into a wild frenzy. “You know me well, Sister.”

The woman snorted. I didn’t recognise either of the voices, but as it was a slow and painful death for a man to enter the sacred valley of *Hanyarah*, it left only one conclusion for me to come to. Surely they couldn’t be a God and Goddess, could they? It was too outrageous to even consider them as actual living and breathing beings, let alone answer the call of someone like me.

“Arayda, is it?” the woman asked.

I nodded demurely, not sure if I should move or stay where I was. It made me acutely aware of what I was wearing, or rather, what I wasn’t wearing.

“Please, get up,” she said, her voice gentle. “I don’t much enjoy talking to someone’s back.”

Rising to my feet, I wrapped the robe tighter around me, keeping my eyes downcast as I turned towards them.

“No need to cover up,” the man purred, a playful grin ghosting around his lips.

“Esah!”

The man called Esah harrumphed. “What? It’s true.”

Glancing up from under my lashes, I observed the two who couldn’t be anything but Gods. They were tall, even for Ilvannian standards, both beyond handsome with hair the colour of pearls and eyes the colour of the ever-changing skies. Both were clad in traditional clothing—tight floor-length robes with long sleeves and a wide sash around the waist. Hers was the colour of ice on a clear winter’s day, while his was the colour of smouldering embers at the bottom, blending into the russet-gold colour of dancing flames.

He had to be Esahbyen, judging from the way she called him. I guessed her to be Xiomara.

“My apologies for letting you wait,” she said. “I had a hard time convincing my stubborn mule of a brother to come.”

My head snapped up, and I stared at her slack-jawed. Had she really just apologised to me? I shook my head and bowed deeply.

“It is your time, *Irà*. I am the one who should be patient.”

“Well-mannered too,” Esahbyen commented. “This is getting better and better.”

“Ignore him,” Xiomara said as she glared at him, only to let her gaze settle back on me, “for now...”

My eyes drifted over to Esahbyen, and I caught him smirking at me while cleaning his nails with a knife. A shiver ran down my back.

“What you ask is quite something.” Xiomara fixed me with a hard stare. “Are you willing to pay the price?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Anything to keep my people safe.”

“Are you willing to pay *any* price?” Esahbyen asked. “Any we ask of you?”

“Yes.”

Xiomara looked somewhat troubled at my answer, her lips a thin line, her eyes hard.

Esahbyen grinned at her. “I like her spirit.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said with a sigh before turning to me. “You’re asking for a life, Arayda. You are aware of that?”

I nodded again. Annoyance at their amount of questions began building up inside of me, but I needed their help, so I gritted my teeth and dampened my anger. Esahbyen stalked closer, much like a predator would its prey. He moved behind me and stopped, his body a mere inch from mine. Strong hands ran down my shoulders and arms, warm breath tickling my skin as he leaned forward, sending my heart into a frantic beat.

“I can give you exactly what you want,” he whispered, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, his voice like a lover’s caress. “No questions asked, but you will not like what I ask in return.”

I looked at him confused. “But you’re the God of War. How—?”

The moment I opened my mouth to ask this question, I realised what he meant. I glanced at Xiomara, whose expression was unreadable.

“It is he who shall grant you your wish,” she said, “and so it shall be he who claims the price. Are you willing to accept that?”

“What will you ask?” My voice was barely a whisper as I stood shaking in his arms.

I felt the deep rumble in his chest as he laughed. “You will not know until such a time as I claim it. Are you still willing to move forward?”

Apprehension filled me at having to make a commitment to something I didn’t know the terms of. I had been trained to negotiate with people—not with Gods. There was no compromise in this. There was nothing to settle.

*But what if his request would be to send my sons off to a war they might not get back from? What if he wants one of them in exchange for a daughter? What if he—?*

I broke off the thought as a sickening feeling threatened to overwhelm me. It didn't do to dwell on the what ifs. I either accepted his terms and receive what I desired, or I did not and would be left with a fifty-fifty chance of conceiving a girl.

*I'm sorry Gaervin.*

"I accept," I said, straightening my shoulders, refusing to look at him.

A lazy grin spread across his immaculate features, which up close were even more exquisite than I had initially thought.

"I think it's time for you to leave, *Sister*."

He didn't even so much as glance at her as he said this, his arms snaking around me to undo the knot of my robe. Xiomara disappeared in front of my eyes, a faint echo of her voice in my head wishing me good luck. I tensed when he dropped the robe from my shoulders and slowly turned me around.

Esahbyen looked solemn.

"You understand that by accepting, you agree to all my terms?"

I nodded, but remained silent.

"As you wish, *Tarien*."

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It was a beautiful summer night, the scent of lavender and marigold heavy on the air when my daughter arrived safely into the world. It had been nine months since I'd bonded with a God to have her, and while it filled me with complete joy, a sense of dread overshadowed the event. Gaervin looked happy and extremely proud at the little bundle in my arms, tears brimming his eyes.

I couldn't tell him he wasn't her biological father—to do so would be to admit adultery—and even though Ilvannians were known to have someone on the side, we were mostly monogamous after we'd chosen a partner. Gaervin was mine, and the father of our sons Evanyan and Haerlyon, who came bounding up to my bed in happy ecstasy at that moment.

It would be best if none of them knew.

"She's so tiny." Evanyan breathed.

"She's so pretty," Haerlyon murmured, placing a small hand on her cheek.

Having all of them here in my room, on my bed, made me the happiest woman in the world. For the last nine months, a single thought had been foremost on my mind, and now with Shalitha born, it returned.

*A life for a life, Tarien. That is what I desire.*

Esahbyen had told me his terms just before he left me in the cavern room, a dark, solemn look in those ever-changing eyes. I had cried for a very long time after, realising what I had condemned someone to. I had cursed myself, wished even he had not gotten me pregnant, but as time wore on and my moon-cycles didn't come, I knew he had done exactly as he had promised.

He'd kept his end of the deal.

I feared it was mine now.

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That night, when everyone aside from myself was subject to deep, blissful sleep, the God Esahbyen appeared. His ember-and-russet-gold robe was replaced by a jet-black version, his pearlescent hair shimmering in the candlelight as he walked over, ephemeral eyes fixed on the little bundle asleep in my arms.

“Can I... hold her?”

The question took me by surprise, leaving me slack-jawed. For a moment, insecurity passed those graceful features, before he composed himself. Carefully I lifted our daughter into his arms, endeared by how gently he held her, cooing and murmuring to her in the old language.

“You’ll be a feisty one, *shareye*,” he whispered, “and you’ll turn many heads, but I’m afraid there’s more in store for you. For when past and future come together, and love and hatred silently gather, when darkness your only companion at night, only then shall be your return to the light.”

My heart stopped when I heard his words.

“What have you done?” I stared at him wide-eyed.

He looked at me solemnly. “Our daughter is meant to be more than just the average *Tari*, Arayda. She’s the one who will bring change to Ilvanna the likes of which have never been seen before. Her path shall not be easy, and there is no guarantee she will live through it, but it has been set.”

“You said it would be a life for a life.” I barely caught the sob in my throat. “I never imagined it would be hers! That’s cruel!”

He smirked at me. “Is that what you think?”

“I’m not sure what to think anymore,” I replied with a scowl. “You just damned her to... to... whatever that was!”

Esahbyen watched me gravely. “Who says it’s damning her? Now, as for our agreement, it’s why I’m here.”

He handed me back our daughter, and I couldn’t help but hold her tight against me—perhaps a little too tight, because she started to fuss and cry.

“I’ve chosen that life.”

I swallowed hard, closing my eyes. “Who?”

“Your husband.”

My eyes flew open, and tears started rolling down my cheeks of their own accord as I watched him. Shalitha started to cry too, and while shushing her and inhaling her new scent—trying to regain a sense of serenity—I bargained with the God of War one more time.

“Please, not yet,” I said. “Let her grow up with a father who can be here. Let him teach her the things she needs in life. Let my children grow up with him until they are old enough.”

Esahbyen looked from me at the bundle in my arms, ever-changing eyes guarded. “For her sake, I shall agree, but on one condition.”

“Name it.” I whispered.

“On the day of her one hundred and twentieth birthday, the day she will be regarded a child no longer, it is by your hand he shall die.”

A sob caught in my throat. “But I am no fighter.”

“By your hand or mine,” Esahbyen said. “Mercy or torture. Your choice.”

And so I struck another bargain with a God to prolong a life I wasn't ready to take. The thought of it being my hands which would eventually kill Gaervin nearly drove me insane over the course of the next weeks, giving the healers reason to believe it was a malady of the womb. As time wore on, however, and the children grew up, I put the fear aside. One hundred and twenty years wasn't anywhere close, giving me enough time to come up with a humane way to kill my husband.

Until then, I would enjoy every single moment with them.



## CHAPTER ONE

Perched high on the city-walls, one foot dangling over the edge, I savoured the apple I had filched from the kitchens, watching people go about their usual business. Merchants and farmers from all over the country came to sell their wares, or to trade. People left the city to go on business elsewhere, while others came here looking for jobs. The main gate was always a bustle of people, and it never ceased to impress me.

Just as it never ceased my desire to get out.

I envied the people who came and went as they pleased, having no one to answer to but themselves. If I'd ever go outside the walls on my own, I'd sail the seas, journey to different lands and meet new people. I'd learn new languages, and new cultures, and come back home more educated. I'd bring gifts for my brothers, and maybe for my nieces and nephews if Evan ever got serious with a woman. As it was though, my every step was watched, my every decision questioned, and there was always somebody I had to answer to.

I was a prisoner in my own home.

If I ever did go out of the gates without permission, it would only be a matter of time before my guards found me and hauled me back to the palace, where I'd be subjected to one of the many lectures I could recite by heart. Even without going out of the city, they'd find me within no time. It never stopped me from running away though, if only because the exercise it gave me—while my guards were giving chase—was a good one.

A sudden disturbance at the gate caught my attention. I sat up and swung my other leg over the side to have a better view of what was going on down below. Two guards halted a young man not much older than myself, asking him something. I was too far away to understand what it was or what he answered, but from the squared shoulders and set jaw of the young man I figured it wasn't anything positive.

One guard placed a hand on his hip, gesticulating heavily, most likely to get his point across.

"State your name and business," the guard said loud enough for the city to hear.

"Grayden Verithrien," the young man said, "and I'm looking for a job."

"There aren't any jobs here," the guard all but yelled. "Why don't you go back where you came from, *mahnèh?*"

Even from this distance I could hear the venom in the guard's voice on the last word.

"I've been told there's always a job in Ilvanna." Grayden folded his arms in front of him, not impressed by what the guard had told him. "Why don't you just let me through, before this gets ugly?"

The guard took a threatening step closer, but Grayden wasn't perturbed—he didn't even flinch. His unimpressed demeanour made me chuckle, and I was about to go down to mingle in the conversation when they both drew their sword. The second guard stepped forward, arguing with his companion before stepping away, throwing up his hands and shaking his head. He obviously didn't want to partake in this. I could hardly blame him.

Neither the guard nor Grayden backed down.

With a sudden lurch forward, the guard attacked him with a wide swing, leaving so much room, Grayden side-stepped easily. It surprised me the guard didn't get knocked down to his ass straight away. The next attack from the guard came from above, intent on plunging the sword into his shoulder, but Grayden fended off the blow with relative ease, looking positively bored.

"Is that all?" he asked. "I'm sure they'll have a job opening soon if you keep this up."

His words angered the guard enough for him to drop his sword and charge Grayden instead.

"There she is!"

My thoughts were interrupted by voices I knew only too well. I cursed when I looked down at the gate where two of the *Arathrien*—also known as my personal guard—had appeared. One of them pointed in my direction.

"Come down *Tarien!*" Elara yelled. "Don't make us come and get you."

I flashed them a grin, and dropped myself from the wall on the other side as quickly as possible, hopping down the ledge, dashing into a crowd of people while pulling my hood over my face. Grinning madly, I weaved my way through the city streets into the third circle.

*Catch me if you can.*

I passed dirty, white bricked houses in my headlong flight through narrow, windy streets, startling people as I passed. The scent of bruised fruit mingled with unwashed bodies, and mouldy wood with rotting flowers, hung in the air like a heavy blanket. People sat inside their front door on rickety stools, chatting to their neighbours, while dust-covered children were playing games in the streets, some of which ran along the moment I sped by. Others hailed me with waves and shouts.

"*Tarien!* Stop!" Xaresh bellowed.

I stopped, turned, and placed my hands defiantly on my hips, waiting for them to catch up. As soon as I felt they were getting too close, I bolted with a triumphant laugh escaping my lips, disappearing into the crowd or around a corner.

Where was the fun if they'd lost me altogether?

I glanced over my shoulder quickly, and after I turned a corner, ran into someone so hard, I fell back on my ass. Disoriented, my eyes zeroed in on a pair of stormy ones, set in a handsome face haloed by pristine white hair. Elongated ears were the most prominent feature, aside from perhaps the deep scowl on his face. I grinned impishly at Talnovar—*Anahràn* or Captain—of my guards, and scrunched my nose.

"Up."

"Yes, Sir."

He hauled me to my feet without a by-your-leave. Folding my arms in front of me, I scowled at him. Behind us, my others guards had finally caught up, and doubled over, gasping for air.

"By *Vehda*, you're slow." I flashed them a wicked grin.

"I'd hold that tongue if you wish to keep it, *Tarien.*"

The tone in Talnovar's voice warned me not to mess with him, so I quickly snapped my mouth shut, biting back the retort on the tip of my tongue. He stepped behind me, placed his hand on my shoulder, and propelled me forward through the crowd we'd gathered. The look on his face made them part so quickly they stepped on each other's toes.

I tried not to chuckle.

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Once back in the first circle of the city the crowd had thinned to only a few people, and Talnovar stopped and turned to me, covering his eyes with his hand. I bit my lip, and glanced apologetically at Xaresh and Elara, my other two guards.

"On a day like this," Tal said with a sigh, "you really had to run away?"

"I didn't run away," I replied, straightening my back. "You knew exactly where I was."

He raised an eyebrow, glancing over at the others.

"Oh, you mean them..."

Xaresh gave me a deadpan stare as I shrugged. Elara barely kept her face in check, and I realised she didn't mind this as much as the others did.

"You owe them an apology."

I grinned. "I owe them a drink."

Talnovar stared at me so profoundly, I quickly offered my apologies to the both of them, signalling I'd get them a drink once we were back.

"I swear," Talnovar muttered, "you'll be my death one day."

"I doubt that."

We walked back to the palace in relative silence—Talnovar up front with Xaresh, conversing in low voices, Elara next to me, motioning Tal had a stick up his behind. It sent me into a laughing fit in no time. Both men looked over their shoulders at us, and I could have sworn Talnovar even looked somewhat amused.

"How much trouble am I in?" I asked Elara in a whisper.

She shrugged. "Depends on who gets to you first I suppose."

I groaned loud enough for Talnovar to hear, and this time it was he who chuckled. When we arrived at the palace gate I stopped, captivated by the sight of Grayden talking to Evanyan. Two surly guards stood off to the side, one of them glaring at the young man.

"Wait up, please," I said, and jogged over to my brother.

Talnovar started to protest, but I was out of his reach faster than he could stop me. When Evanyan saw me, he waved me over, the look on his face promising no good. I regretted walking up to him, and considered turning tail, having no mind to listen to my brother's lecture, but I had to speak on the stranger's behalf. He could fight, and we could use everyone able to hold the proper end of a weapon.

"I wish I could say I'm surprised to see you here, sis," Evan said, his lip curling into a half-smile. "Gave them a good hunt?"

I shrugged. "Just Xaresh and Elara. You know Talnovar doesn't do the chasing part."

Evan shook his head slowly.

"I'm glad I'm not an *Arathrien*," he said, looking thoughtful. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

I grinned impishly, looking at the young man from the gate who was trying his hardest not to stare at me. His appearance up close was a bit of a surprise. Although his complexion was as light as my own, his hair was as black as the night, highlighted with snow white streaks, a trait uncommon in Ilvannians. It was his eyes which caught me off guard the most—a grey so light it looked almost translucent.

With a shake of my head, I turned to Evan.

"As a matter of fact," I replied, "you can, and it concerns him."

I nodded in Grayden's direction.

Evan's brows shot up in surprise. "Oh?"

"I saw him fight at the gates," I said. "You should let him try out."

"I know he did." Evan sighed. "It's why he's here, as well as *them*."

He pointed at the two sullen guards standing off to the side, kept in check by one of the men-at-arms on horseback. From the *araith* on his arm, I could tell he was a *Sveràn*—lieutenant in the common tongue—although his division eluded me. That was Evan's department.

"About that," I said. "The left one didn't fight. The other made a very poor attempt."

Grayden broke out coughing when I said that and turned away with a mumbled apology. The guard in question glowered at me, fists balled at his sides.

"Anyway," I continued unfazed, "I'm probably expected for a lecture somewhere. See you around Ev."

Pecking my brother on the cheek, I left them and walked back to Elara and the others.

"What was that about?" Talnovar asked, guiding us inside.

"I told Evan to let that young man try out," I replied with a shrug. "He's got fighting skills."

He stared at me flatly.

"What?" I asked. "I was watching them when *they* found me."

I jerked my thumb behind us, indicating Xaresh—whose brows shot up in surprise—and Elara, who flipped me off unladylike.

"All right, sorry," I murmured.

Talnovar looked amused. *Arathrien* weren't just hired, nor were they just any man or woman capable of fighting—they were men and women who'd stood out in one way or another, and all of them could fight exceptionally well. They'd been handpicked either by Talnovar or by his father Cerindil, my *Anahràn* before him.

I think Xaresh had been chosen because of his everlasting patience. The Gods knew I'd try it before the new *Arathrien* even got a foot into the door. Elara was especially skilled in the use of several weapons—most of which were small and hidden.

"You," Talnovar began, waiting for me to catch up, "need to freshen up and change into a dress."

I scowled at him.

“Your mother is expecting you.”

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Ilvannian dresses were renowned for their glamorous looks, and torturous dressing time. Fortunately, the dress they’d helped me in today only had two layers instead of four, which was reserved for formal attire. The underdress was a smooth silk—which I always thought felt sensuous on bare skin—and the overdress was a sheer affair, cinched at the waist with a wide sash.

I kept adjusting it with a sneer on my face, afraid it would come undone and reveal more than I cared for as I followed Talnovar to Mother’s reception chamber. During our walk there, he quickly updated me on what I could expect—mostly formal stuff Mother wanted me to learn so I would get an idea of what it would be like as *Tari*.

“It might still be two-hundred years from now,” I said with a deep sigh, “before I have to take over.”

“Or just two,” Talnovar replied, a gentle smile on his lips. “It’s part of the job, so put on your game face and suffer through it. I’ll see you on the fields after for training.”

I nodded and squared my shoulders. “Deal.”

Training always made me feel better.

He escorted me into the room with a soft chuckle, bowed respectfully to Mother and took his leave. I envied him for making that decision with no one batting an eyelash. With the politest of smiles—which I didn’t feel—I turned to Mother and walked over, placing a soft kiss on her cheek as they expected me to do.

“Daughter.”

Although it was the way for her to acknowledge me in a formal situation, it always felt strange and distant. Most of the time it felt as if she poured a bucket of ice-cold water over me—it stung that much. I inclined my head as I sat down at the table, folding my hands in my lap to keep from fidgeting. Whatever this was about, having most of the council members present meant it was serious.

“As you are all well aware,” Mother began, “there have been sightings of Therondian forces at the border, and there have been skirmishes resulting in casualties amongst our people.”

People murmured and nodded. I remained quiet, staring at my hands in my lap with a slight frown.

“On top of that,” she continued, “we need to find new ways to generate income, or it will become a problem in a few years.”

“We can increase taxes?” someone offered.

“Or create more money,” another one said.

“Neither will work,” I said quietly without looking up. “Creating more money will devalue our coin, whereas an increase in taxes will ensure people will spend less. If anything, you should decrease taxes based on income.”

The council members stared at me as if I’d gone utterly mad. Mother looked impressed.

“And how do you propose we do that?” Yllinar spoke up.

Yllinar Arolvyen was one of the local noblemen living in the city, well-known for his wealth and general bad temper, not to mention his dislike for women in a position of power.

I imagined it was hard for him living in a matriarchy.

“People who have little money won’t be able to pay the same amount as those with money do,” I said watching him calmly. “It would only be fair if those with more money paid a little more taxes than those with less. People without money can’t even pay it and should therefore be exempted, up to a certain extent.”

Yllinar huffed, rising to his feet in defence. “You’re telling me you want to take more of *my* money, money I worked hard for, than from some dirt-poor *lyadrin*?” I was about to reply when Mother held up her hand.

“That’s enough,” she said. “My daughter has a valid idea, but we need to look into it before we make any decisions. Sit down Yllinar.”

Throughout the meeting, he kept staring at me with such a brooding expression on his face it sent shivers down my spine. After Mother adjourned the meeting, I excused myself quickly and made my way out of the council chamber, hoping to be fast enough.

I wasn’t.

In the chaos of leaving the room with everyone else, Yllinar grabbed hold of my wrist, pulling me closer to him.

“I don’t like your ideas, *Tarien*,” he hissed as he walked me outside. “You’d be wise to think before you speak.”

I stared at him. “I don’t care for threats to my face. Let me go, or I’ll call for the guards.”

The moment I did, the guards would respond, and Yllinar would be in more trouble than he bargained for. He took a menacing step closer before letting go of my wrist, looking at me as if I were filthier than the dirt under his shoes. I watched him walk off in a brisk pace.

I released my breath, unaware I’d been holding it.

“Is everything all right?” Elara asked as she stepped up to my side.

I smiled at her and nodded, not entirely sure I was.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied. “I need to redress. Again. Talnovar’s expecting me on the fields.”

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Talnovar was already training with the other *Arathrien*. Surrounded by the four of them, the many rookies watching him were proof of how impressive he looked while fighting them off. On the field, with a fiendish grin on his face and not a care in the world, he looked young, free of the burden of being in control all the time.

He looked happy.

As *Anahràn*, he usually behaved much older than he was, pretending to be an uptight bastard and a stickler for rules. I disliked him when he was in such a mood. Watching them train awakened my eagerness to participate.

I grinned at Elara. “Shall we join them?”

Amongst my *Arathrien*, Elara was the only woman, but she fought as well—if not better—than any of the men. Without warning, we stepped into the fight, eliciting gasps and whispers from the rookie crowd. While it wasn't unusual for women to take up arms, it usually wasn't the noble ones who did, and both Elara and I were exactly that.

My focus was on Talnovar, and him alone, while I circled him, sword positioned to strike. The moment he parried a blow from Xaresh, I stepped in for an attack, which he bypassed easily. He twirled around fast and whacked me on my ass with the flat of his sword.

I yelped.

“Focus!”

I unlocked my knees, bending them slightly as I watched him and circled him, biding my time while the others attacked him or parried his blows. It was during one of his attacks I stepped in low, dodged his swing and tapped him on the ass. He turned on me with a growl, dropped his sword, and charged me. People around us squealed and yelped in pure shock. I discarded my sword and ran away from him at high speed, knowing full well he was the fastest of us two. He suddenly grabbed me around my waist, yanked me back and dropped me to the ground, drawing out a loud grunt.

He held a small knife at my throat.

“Yield?”

I flashed him a playful grin. “Never.”

Turning away from the knife, I twisted his arm and hit him on the wrist hard, so he had no choice but to drop it. I grabbed the knife, got to my feet and launched myself at him, all in a matter of seconds. Surprised by this move, he could not stop me, and we went down in a tangle of limbs. Triumphant, I sat down on his chest, holding the knife in both hands at the hollow of his throat.

“Yield?”

He laughed, dropped his head and arms to the ground, and tapped out. “I yield.”

Grinning madly, I rose to my feet and helped Talnovar up.

“Well done,” he said, his breath hitching.

I beamed. He didn't compliment often.

We walked back to the others quietly, both stretching and slowing down our breathing. Halfway there, Talnovar suddenly stopped and looked at me impressed.

“Where did you learn that?”

“Elara.”

He shook his head with a chuckle. “I should have known. She's got some mean tricks up her sleeve.”

“She does.” I grinned. “And they're very helpful.”

He rolled his eyes.

Elara beamed at me proudly when we returned, giving me a high-five as I took up position next to her to listen to Talnovar as he went over the next part of the training session. This time I would stand in the middle and had to defend myself while the rest attacked. I assumed a guarding stance, my legs wide apart, steadily planted into the ground, and my arms up to shield my face, weapon at the ready. I focused my eyes, trying to notice every movement around me. No matter how remarkable they were as fighters,

they were bound to project their intentions in some way. All I had to do was catch this hardly visible motion in my peripheral vision.

Xaresh stepped forward first, moved into a frontal attack, and pulled his arm back, aiming to strike me in my sternum. I caught his movement and stepped back quickly, applying a middle block to deflect his punch, easily. But while I was preoccupied with Xaresh, I failed to notice Elara. She moved in from my side stealthily—her attack a complete surprise. I had to take a few quick steps to close the distance between us and as I did, she pushed off the ground, turned her hip, and extended her leg forward into a forceful jump. Her instep collided with my unprotected side, crashing into my ribs.

I grunted. The force of the impact pushed me back, but I kept my balance. Anger and frustration boiled up within me as adrenaline spiked through my system. Suppressing the pain, I breathed out deeply, regrouped and assumed a guarding stance, ready for the next attack.

While recovering from Elara's kick, I circled in place, trying to catch their next move. I caught Xaresh's attack on time and parried his blow, but in the time it took me to fend it off, Talnovar blindsided me, placing his sword at my throat, stormy emerald eyes watching me unamused.

"Focus, *Tarien*," Talnovar said, stepping back.

"I am!" I growled in response.

The next series of attacks came in rapid succession, and side-stepping, parrying and counter-attacking became increasingly more difficult as they continued relentlessly. I knew Talnovar wouldn't just give up because I was tired—he'd make me push through, because the enemy would too. There would be no rest in a real fight until you were the last man standing. His reasoning was sound, but it was hard to keep going if the ones opposite you weren't your enemy, knowing they'd stop before they hurt you.

When Xaresh accidentally cut my arm and drew blood during one of his attacks, Tal called it quits.

"Apologies *Tarien*," Xaresh said, looking guilt-stricken.

I smiled. "It's fine. A cut won't kill me."

"I'll bring her to see a healer," Talnovar said. "Xaresh, Elara, make sure you're guarding her room when we come back."

With a nod and a slight bow, they walked off, leaving Talnovar and me behind. The cut was still bleeding, so he ripped a piece of his shirt and wound it around my arm.

"You put up a good fight," he said, "but you have to remember to keep your arms up."

I rubbed my face. "I know, but they tire easily."

Talnovar nodded, the look on his face a dead giveaway he'd already thought of a solution to that problem. I rolled my eyes, not looking forward to whatever he'd come up with.

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True to his words, he brought me to the infirmary where one of the more ancient of our kind met us as he shuffled out of the antechamber, looking more than a little annoyed. Then again, Master Dahryen always looked like that.

“*Tarien. Anahràn*,” he said gruffly. “What can I help you with?”

Talnovar inclined his head. “Just a cut Master Dahryen, but one I’d like to be looked at.”

“All right, show me where.”

He gathered his equipment and sat Talnovar down on a stool. Biting my lip, I tried to keep a straight face, watching him amused.

“It’s not me,” he interjected. “It’s the *Tarien*.”

Master Dahryen’s brows rose in utter confusion. “Why her?”

“She’s the one with the injury.”

Talnovar looked somewhat bemused at the old healer, displaying the graceful patience he had with almost everyone but me.

“Oh,” the healer murmured, “right, *Tarien*, if you please.”

We switched places, and after removing the bandage, took my arm out of my shirt, wrapping the good one around myself. Talnovar had the decency to look away. Master Dahryen inspected my arm from up close, murmuring more to himself than to us. He cleaned it first, and followed up by prodding the surrounding skin with long, bony fingers.

“How did you say you got this injury?”

I smirked. “Training. With swords.”

The shocked look on his face was priceless—the warning look on Talnovar’s wasn’t.

“A *Tarien* shouldn’t be playing with swords,” Master Dahryen muttered. “It’s unheard of.”

“It may one day save her life,” Talnovar said.

The old healer huffed, his head shaking all the time he was administering his care upon me. It had to be stitched, which hurt so much I took to cursing in the old tongue. Master Dahryen looked smug when he finished it, and I had to admit it didn’t look half bad with a bandage around it.

“Don’t soak it within the next three days,” he said. “And if it gets dirty, clean it. I’ll see you at the end of the week to take the stitches out.”

“Yes, Sir,” I muttered, putting my arm back in my shirt.

Talnovar had somewhat of a mischievous look in his eyes as we left, but it was gone the moment we stepped out of the infirmary.

“He really doesn’t like me.”

“I don’t think he likes anyone,” Tal said.

I snorted. “Fair point.”

Silently, we walked to my bedroom so I could get presentable for dinner. Mother had made it very clear during breakfast she expected all of us there, no exceptions. It also meant she expected us to look our very best.

“We’ll be outside,” Talnovar said, opening the door to my bedroom. “Yell if you need anything.”

“What about some freedom?”

His lip quirked up in a half-smile. “Get yourself ready.”

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Dinner, as it turned out, was just with Mother and my brothers. She dismissed all guards and servants after we had received our plates. Evanyan, stoic as ever, waited quietly for whatever was to come—Haerlyon was lounging in his chair, not a care in the world. Neither of them seemed worried. I, on the other hand, was wringing my hands, regarding Mother apprehensively.

“You impressed me with your idea daughter,” Mother said in between bites, watching me. “It even impressed some council members.”

I huffed. “Not everyone seemed happy with the idea. Besides, it’s not even mine.”

Mother raised an eyebrow. Evan and Haerlyon both sat on the edge of their seats now, paying attention while shovelling their food in. It wasn’t often Mother praised me for doing something right.

“Your grandmother came with the idea many centuries ago,” I said. “Ilvanna has never been more prosperous.”

“I didn’t know you paid attention in history class,” Haerlyon looked smug. “Did it hurt?”

I glared at him. “Not as much as a spoon to the face will.”

He snorted, deigning me unworthy of a proper reply. Evan looked quietly amused, giving me a slight nod of encouragement when he noticed I was watching him.

“Did you know our grandmother’s grandmother was the best strategist Ilvanna has ever seen?” I said at length, looking at Haerlyon. “Not a single man alive or dead has ever defeated her, and she lived during the time wars happened every other week.”

Evan whistled in appreciation—Haerlyon stared at me as if I’d gone daft.

“And,” I continued, “she was the first woman who made her sons *Zheràn*, breaking with tradition only women could hold positions of power.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw Mother smile, a look of appreciation in her eyes.

“Regardless of who came up with it,” Mother said. “It’s an interesting concept, and the council would like to hear more. Are you up for it?”

I stared at Mother, food forgotten. “Seriously?”

“Why not? You pitched it the first time.”

Biting my lip, I stared at the broth in front of me, not sure of what I should do. The fact Mother approved of my idea was an achievement on its own, but to be allowed to speak to the council members all by myself was a real victory.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Mother smiled, but it was gone within the blink of an eye. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

Here it was—the real reason she had summoned us all for dinner. Evan perked up interestedly. Of course he would. Haerlyon looked plain and simply bored, regarding Mother with a lazy smile on his face. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“There have been offers for your hands,” Mother said. “Well, one for either Evanyan or Haerlyon, the other for Shalitha.”

The three of us frowned. Evan looked no longer interested, but the boredom was straight out of Haerlyon’s face.

“By whom?” Evan asked, eyes narrowing slightly.

Mother looked momentarily uncomfortable. “Nathair and Eamryel Arolvyen.”

“Over my dead body,” Haerlyon and I announced simultaneously.

Evan looked thoughtful. “Where did that suddenly come from?”

Mother told us the offer had come in slightly over a week ago when it became apparent our resources were dwindling faster than expected. Additional to the offer came a large sum of money.

“So he’s buying his way in,” Evan observed.

Mother nodded. “That is one way to put it.”

“And you are seriously considering this?” Haerlyon asked.

“That man is no good,” I added, “and his children clearly follow in his footsteps.”

Mother raised her chin, brushing her palms together. “Yllinar is too important a figure to have against us. I have to throw him a bone.”

“By marrying us off to his hell spawn?” I muttered. “That’s quite a bone if you ask me.”

She glared at me. “I will not marry you off to his son. That would give him too much power. Nathair however...”

She left the words unspoken, looking at both my brothers. Haerlyon turned a deadly shade of pale, which was quite a feat considering our complexion was nearly white to begin with. Evan regarded our brother for a moment, drumming his fingers on the table, the tell-tale look of him coming to a decision on his fine features.

I knew what was coming next.

“I’ll do it,” Evan said. “I’ll marry her.”

Haerlyon sighed in deep relief, slumping back into his chair. Even though Evan had just agreed, I saw a momentary flicker of pain cross his eyes when he looked at me. I smiled faintly, lost for words.

“Very well,” Mother said. “I’ll see to the arrangements.”

From the tone of her voice, I could tell she wasn’t happy with them either, but she had more to worry about than just the three of us.

“Please excuse me,” Evan said, rising to his feet.

Without waiting for approval, he left the room, Haerlyon quick on his heels. Mother rubbed her temples, eyes closed.

“I hope you have a superb reason to do this Mother,” I said, getting up. “Otherwise you might just have alienated your son.”

I placed a kiss on her cheek and left the room, wrapping my arms tight around me. A disquieting feeling had settled in my stomach, leaving me cold and shivering.

“Are you all right?” Talnovar asked, falling in step beside me.

I nodded. “Just tired.”

The bland look on his face told me he didn’t believe me, but for once he didn’t pursue the issue. I was grateful for it. Although happy Mother wouldn’t marry me off just

like that, the fact she had to do so with Evan didn't sit right with me. The thought of Nathair becoming family was one I refused to entertain until I absolutely had no other choice.

She and I had never been the best of friends.

## Chapter 2

“Talnovar will be livid if he finds out you disappeared, again,” Elara said. I observed her from under my lashes as she ran a hand through her jaw-length hair. All noble-and-royal-born Ilvannians had been blessed with white hair, but both Elara and I liked to add colour to it. Today hers was green—mine had blue streaks throughout.

With her long legs swinging over the wall she looked every bit the truant I did, except she wouldn’t get into trouble.

“I brought you along,” I offered. “It should count for something.”

Elara snorted. “He will have my hide if he finds out I allowed you to miss lessons with your tutor to sit here.”

“I am forever in your debt.”

Her clear, hearty laugh rang out over the walls, lifting my spirits. Of all my *Arathrien*, she was probably the most like me, although perhaps less inclined to rebel and break rules. With a deep sigh I turned my head to the city.

“Care to share what’s on your mind?” she asked at length.

“Not particularly,” I replied with a shrug, “but that won’t stop you from badgering me until you know.”

“You know me too well.” She laughed. “Besides, it’s better to talk about it. Knowing you, you’ll end up throwing stuff around or running off, anyway.”

“Maybe.”

Pushing my hair out of my face, I watched the people down below scurry around like ants, contemplating how to tell Elara what had happened the night before. My serious dislike for Nathair was known far and wide due to our quarrels and the unparalleled abilities of courtiers and their less than altruistic gossip. Maybe that was all it was making me hate her marrying my brother. Regardless, I couldn’t shake the feeling her father had an ulterior motive.

He always did, and it made little sense he’d spend money on it, frugal as he was.

“Mother’s marrying Evan off to Nathair,” I said after a while, tucking my hands under my legs. “It was either him or Haerlyon.”

“Why her?”

“No idea. To get a foot in the door, perhaps?”

Elara furrowed her brow. “That makes no sense.”

“It happens all the time,” I pointed out. “Evan sacrificed himself.”

“Why would he do that?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Maybe because Evan likes her more than we gave him credit for?”

Elara shook her head. “No, that can’t be it. Knowing Evanyan, there’s more behind this than liking her. We all know he likes her about as much as a sack of sand.”

“She’s as useful as one.”

“Speaking of which,” Elara said with a nod of her head, “there he is.”

Evanyan came riding up to the gate looking rather splendid in his formal attire, and his long, white hair loosely over his shoulders. I frowned. He never wore it loose.

“I didn’t even know he had left.”

Getting to my feet, I watched as his horse entered the city, walking up the main street to the palace. People moved aside as he passed, inclining their head as he did. As my gaze zeroed in on the petite figure behind him, I felt a wide grin spread across my face.

I turned to Elara. "We need to go."

Dropping off the ledge, I waited for her to follow suit before hurtling myself through the crowd without checking if she was following me. I ran through the fourth circle gate on main street, and the third and second. It was the only road connecting the palace to the main gate and the circles to each other. The gates served as safety in case an enemy army came knocking at our door.

Close to the first circle, I slowed down to a jog, and while waving to a guard as I went through the gate, ran into someone. Next I knew, he grabbed my arm, and I was staring into Yllinar's face.

His nostrils flared and his lips tugged down at the corners, and when I tried to yank my arm loose, he wouldn't budge. We were just out of sight for the guards, and Elara wasn't there yet.

Why was she so slow?

"You again," he growled. "Are you deliberately out to get me, *Tarien*?"

I scoffed. "If I were out to get you, you'd know."

He tightened his grip around my arm, pulling me closer.

"Had you been my daughter," he hissed, "I'd have shown you some discipline right here, right now."

I smirked. "That explains a lot."

Just as he brought up his hand to strike me, Elara rounded the corner, so he let go of me quickly, stepping back.

"Stop being in my way," he hissed.

I snapped my mouth shut before it would get me into more trouble, and watched him walk away briskly, passing Elara with a muttered good morning.

"There you are," she panted, looking nowhere near amused. "I won't cover for you next time if you pull off a stunt like this again."

"Sorry," I murmured, rubbing my arm. "I was just excited."

Elara sighed and shook her head. "Fine, come on. Let's see why you were in such a hurry."

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We'd barely passed through the gate and into a corridor when a petite figure came barreling my way. Her violet hair streamed behind her like a banner, her dress rustling while her slippers *flip-flopped* on the marble tiles.

I was barely in time to catch her as she launched herself at me.

Twirling around, we both laughed, and when I placed her on her feet, Mehrean kissed me on the cheek. With her five-foot-two figure, she was probably one of the smallest women I'd ever seen, but she made up with a demanding personality you couldn't ignore.

Evanyan came strolling up with a lazy smile on his lips, fingers hooked in the collar of his chainmail.

“You’re back!” I grinned at Mehrean.

She chuckled. “I am.”

I tilted my head. “For how long?”

“For as long as you’ll have me,” she said. “The Sisterhood has agreed to my terms to serve the *Tari* and *Tarien* of Ilvanna indefinitely.”

Grinning madly, I hugged her again. “You must be exhausted.”

“It’s all right.” She smiled. “Evan was kind enough to come pick me up halfway.”

I raised an eyebrow and was about to ask how he would have known when I realised she’d have contacted him. Glancing at Evan, he shrugged nonchalantly, a catlike smile on his lips.

“Come on, let’s get you settled.”

We made our way into the palace together, excitement coursing through my veins as if they’d just told me I could go out of the city on my own. We were about to enter my room when Talnovar’s voice boomed through the corridors, alerting everyone there. I cursed softly, closing my eyes.

Mehrean chuckled. “What did you do this time?”

“I may or may not have failed to see my tutor,” I murmured, “but I didn’t go out alone!”

Mehr snorted. “Good luck. He doesn’t look happy.”

After resting a gentle hand on my arm, she stepped inside her bedroom. For a moment I considered slipping in after her, but Talnovar was already there.

“A word please, *Tarien*,” he said in a strained voice.

My bedroom was closest, so I invited him inside, closing the door quietly behind him. I glanced around my chambers, realising I’d made a mess of it that morning trying to find my shoes. For some reason—and I blamed the size of my room for it—I always lost something or other.

My eyes zeroed back in on Talnovar.

Leaning back against the door, I watched him warily. He turned to me quickly, an angry expression on his face. Whatever he saw on mine, however, stopped him, his lips frozen at the start of a sentence.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said with a sigh, pushing myself away from the door. “I know it was wrong, but I needed to get out.”

I laced my fingers together, pacing up and down my bedroom.

“What’s going on?” he asked, following my movements with his eyes.

I glanced up at him, biting my lip. “Last night, Mother told us there have been offers for our hands.”

He stiffened ever so slightly at the news. With a nod of his head, he sat down in a chair, hands clasped between his knees as he leaned forward.

His knuckles were whiter than usual.

“Go on.”

“The offers have come from Yllinar,” I continued, “for Eamryel to marry me, and Nathair to marry one of my brothers.”

Talnovar looked confused for a moment. "Why ever would he do that?"

I shrugged. "Power?"

He cast me a dark look.

I smiled faintly. "Anyway, she won't marry me off to his son for exactly that reason, but she will have to marry Evan off to his daughter."

Talnovar pinched the bridge of his nose, a soft groan escaping his lips.

"No wonder Evan stormed out last night," he said, "looking like he was about to commit murder."

"He wouldn't let Haerlyon make the choice. You know what he's like."

Talnovar nodded slowly. "Well, interesting times will be ahead."

"That's quite the understatement," I said.

His mouth curved into a smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes, and I realised despite my confession, I was still in trouble.

"Come on," he said. "Let's do something else."

I raised an eyebrow. "Do what?"

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I'd expected to get a scolding. Whenever I did something wrong, he had the tendency to give me a good talking to and point out the rules rather than choose my side. I had expected him to do anything but this. Instead of getting mad at me for running off, he steered me to the training fields with a smile on his face, his hand lingering gingerly between my shoulder blades.

*An* were sparring with the rookies. Haerlyon was standing off to the side yelling orders. One trainee looked at me with a smile, and I realised it was Grayden. Nodding in acknowledgement, I turned my attention back to Tal, knowing how displeased he would be if I didn't focus.

"We will start training your arms," he said. "Today."

I scowled. "You're joking?"

"Do I look like I am?" he watched me with steely eyes.

"You never do," I replied, giving him a flat stare, "but how is this punishment?"

"So you'd rather have me yell at you?" Tal smirked.

"Right now? Maybe?"

"I can still do that." He flashed me a roguish smile.

I awarded him a deadpan stare.

"And do the training," he added.

I stared at him. "You're mad."

He grinned. "Love you too. Now, down to the ground and give me fifty push-ups."

"Fifty!"

"Want me to make it a hundred?"

Glaring daggers his way, I went down to my knees slowly, not taking my eyes off of him. Placing two hands under my shoulders, my toes in the grass, I pushed myself up, and lowered myself again. Tal placed his foot on my backside.

"Keep everything straight."



The sutures in my arm didn't agree with the pressure put on them, but I wasn't about to give in, knowing Tal would expect me to do my best and more. In all truth, this was one of the few things worth doing my best for as far as I was concerned.

"How's your arm?"

"Painful."

He just nodded. "Fifteen more."

The last ten push-ups were pure, debilitating agony because my arms simply refused their task. I managed, but by the time I got to fifty, I wasn't able to push myself to my knees anymore. Instead, I just flopped down on the ground spread-eagled, enjoying the cool grass against my face.

"Get up."

"No."

"Get up," Tal hissed, prodding me in the side with his boot, "now."

I groaned. "Why?"

"Your mother's here."

I jumped to my feet, surprised my body did me this one favour after the torture I just put it through. I was barely in time to dust myself off and pull my shirt straight before she was upon us. Everyone around us bowed or inclined their head, even Talnovar. I just watched her approach with apprehension, annoyance rising within me.

"I'm in so much trouble," I muttered.

Talnovar smirked. "You think?"

Sarcastic *grissin*.

"Mother," I said, placing a kiss on her cheek when she was close. "What can I do for you?"

"Someone has told me you did not find your way to your tutor this morning," she said, looking at me.

A snort from behind me made me want to hit Talnovar with something. Hard. Mother merely raised an eyebrow, and he coughed an apology.

"Not at all Mother," I said. "I just had other plans."

"I'm glad you've got your priorities straightened out," Mother said, "and I might just let it slide, if you do me a favour."

I looked at her in suspicion of what was to come next. Mother didn't do favours, and she let nothing slide. She could order me to go to my tutor if I ever wanted to see the training fields again—babysit the smaller children of the palace—deal with people she didn't want to deal with. The possibilities were endless, and I shuddered at the thought.

I wrapped my arms around myself, furrowing my brows. "What kind of favour?"

"A week from now, we will be celebrating Evan's and Nathair's engagement," Mother said. "She will arrive at the palace two days from now. Make sure she feels welcome."

"But Mother..."

"This is the favour," she interjected, brooking no arguments. "You can turn it down, but I promise the punishment for your disobedience will be more severe."

Before I could answer, she had turned on her heel and walked away, followed by two of her *Arathri*. I just stood there staring after her, arms dropped to my sides, unsure if

what had just happened was real. Behind me, Tal was howling like a wolf, slapping his thighs.

“This is why you didn’t lecture me!” I yelled, turning on him. “You knew!”

He smirked. “You never listen to reason. This time, you had to feel it.”

I gave him a firm shove against the shoulders, and stomped away, considering briefly to leave the palace altogether. Instead I went to the palace gate, sitting down with my back against the wall and my knees drawn up. I wasn’t breaking any rules this way.

Rubbing my temples, I stared out into the distance, watching the main street snake lazily to the main gate as if it didn’t have a care in the world. The circle gates on its way were but a minor nuisance, nothing more.

“Judging by the look on your face, I can only assume you and Arayda are still at war?” a sensuous, feminine voice said.

My gaze shot up, and I felt a wide grin spread across my face as my eyes settled on the one person who’d never judged me.

“Aunt Azra!”

I jumped to my feet into her open arms, hugging her tight. She didn’t visit the palace often, but when she did, she always came back with incredible stories of her adventures, and more often than not, trinkets she’d gathered. It had been at least five years since last we’d seen her, and although it wasn’t much in Ilvannian terms, it was still long.

She put me at arm’s length, looking me over admiringly.

“You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman, little niece,” she said. “You must have men lining up for you.”

I looked over her shoulder and shook my head. “Not by the looks of it.”

“I see there’s still nothing wrong with that tongue of yours either.”

“You’re the only one who seems to think so,” I replied, giving her a one over. “Can I help you carry anything?”

She nodded. “Please, I’ve got some gifts here for you and your brothers, if you could bring those, I’d be much obliged.”

I took the bag from her and swung it over my shoulder, hissing at the movement pulling at the stitches.

It drew Azra’s attention.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I had a run in with a sword,” I replied with a shrug. “Nothing serious.”

“Arayda’s finally allowed you to train?”

I shook my head. “I think condone is a better word for it. She still doesn’t like it, but she can see its value by now.”

Azra just smiled.

A guard heralded our arrival at the palace, looking slightly confused as he couldn’t just announce *Tarien* and be done with it. Technically, we both were, but Azra refrained from using the title for reasons unknown to me. It gave her an independent flair I loved so much it made me wish I was more like her. She was a second daughter though, whereas I was first, and so I was destined to inherit the throne should Mother die.

For all I cared, Evan could rule the country.

“Mother might be in reception,” I said, looking thoughtful. “Let me bring you to your room.”

Azra nodded while I called for some servants, issuing orders to prepare my aunt’s room as quickly as possible. She chuckled softly as they scooted out of our way, off to do what I’d just asked them to do.

“You’ll make a fine *Tari* one day.”

I snorted. “I highly doubt that.”

“You shouldn’t,” she smiled at me, eyes warm and caring.

As we walked down the corridors to the royal quarters, Haerlyon waylaid us, bouncing down the hallway, looking as happy to see Aunt Azra as I was.

“Auntie!”

She hated when he called her that and he knew it, which was exactly why he kept doing it. He embraced her hard, lifted her from her feet and twirled her around. She might have hated that even more. Haerlyon laughed and put her back on the ground, placing a kiss on her cheek.

“Good to see you,” he said. “You look well.”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” she said, looking him all over. “Still as dashing as before, but twice the nuisance I bet.”

He looked perturbed. I laughed.

“You know you missed me Auntie,” he grinned.

She stared at him, her head tilted slightly, a glint of amusement in her eyes. Haerlyon was rocking back and forth on his heels, an impish grin on his face, looking for all the world like a child waiting for presents.

“The room is ready, *Tarien*.” A young servant had come up so quietly, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I smiled and nodded. “Thank you.”

With a light blush on her cheeks, the girl left us, and Haerlyon and I escorted Aunt Azra to her room.

“I see you haven’t changed a thing,” she said with a smile, placing her bags inside. “Thank you.”

“If you need anything, just ask a servant. I’ll let Mother know you’ve arrived.”

Azra smiled. “Do not worry, *shareye*, I know my way around the palace. I’ll see Arayda at dinner tonight, and you.”

Excited, we left her room, almost skipping through the corridors like two happy children. Haerlyon laughed for a moment longer, and turned to me, a mischievous grin on his lips.

“I’m sorry for what Mother’s making you do.”

I pulled a face at him. “You’ve heard then?”

Haer smiled wryly. “Everyone has.”

I groaned while passing a hand over my eyes. “Thank you, I’d almost forgotten.”

“Good thing I didn’t.”

While I loved Haerlyon with all my heart, sometimes he could be a pain in the ass, especially at such moments where he was so incredibly thoughtful.

“You’re incorrigible,” I muttered.

He grinned. "You love me."

"Only on even days."

He kissed me on the cheek and left me to my own devices, whistling as he strutted through the corridors. If anyone was turning heads, it was him. There was something about him that made everyone love him, and as a sharp pain of jealousy went right through me upon that realisation, it dawned on me how much I envied him.

When I turned to make my way to my bedroom, voices caught my attention, and I was just in time to see Evan leave Mehrean's bedroom, holding her hand. I snuck closer to catch what they were saying, feeling horrible for doing so. He turned to face her, running a hand through her hair reverently.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," Evan said.

Mehrean cupped his cheek, almost standing on tiptoe to do so. "We knew this could happen, *shareye*. Don't be sorry for this ending—be happy for the times we spent together."

The ghost of a smile played on his lips, but by the way he hung his head, I knew he wasn't remembering those happy times right now. This was why he'd been so sad the night he agreed to marry Nathair.

He'd been in love with Mehrean.

My heart went out to him, and as quietly as I could, I slipped away, not wanting to impose on the little time they had left together. Nathair had better be kind to him, or she'd be in trouble.

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That evening, we assembled in Mother's chambers to welcome Azra home and listen to her stories. Mother hadn't been happy with her return, yet it didn't seem to bother Azra at all. I knew there was some history between them—I just didn't know what it was. It made me wonder what it was Mother couldn't forgive her for. No matter what Azra said or did, Mother always disapproved in some form or other, the scowl on her face as she watched her sister testify to that idea.

"I've brought you something," Azra said, putting her traveller's bag on her lap.

Haerlyon received a beautiful ornate dagger Azra told us came from far away Kyrintha. It wouldn't be practical, but it would sure look beautiful in his bedroom. Evan received a long sword inlaid with rubies and sapphires fit for a king, according to Azra. Ironically, Ilvanna had never had a king and would likely never see one either. Nevertheless, it impressed Evan, which didn't happen often.

For me she had two silver bracelets crafted as delicately as a spider's web, and a tiny knife I could hide in several places.

"The bracelets will look marvellous on you," Azra cooed as she locked them around my wrist. "They're made of the finest Kyrinthan silver."

"This is amazing!" I exclaimed, turning from the bracelets to flipping the knife over and over in my hand.

It was the size of my smallest finger, and much thinner than that, but no doubt deadly when applied in the right region. Elara would appreciate it. Haerlyon whistled

when he looked at it from all angles, almost reluctant to give it back. Mother appeared less pleased with the gift, but she said nothing. Evan shared Mother's feelings on it, scrunching his nose when I offered him to have a look. I was over the moon with the presents, grinning at Azra stupidly.

"Where did your journeys take you this time?" I asked, folding myself in a chair in front of the fire. "You've been gone so long!"

Azra chuckled softly. "Oh, I've been overseas little niece, and seen the most marvellous places, people, and even creatures! Did you know there are animals with one lump on their back which can be used as horses? They're called *camelles*."

"That sounds odd," Haerlyon said.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Mother shake her head softly as if she didn't believe one word of it. I scowled at her, wondering why for once she couldn't just enjoy the time together and be happy. Turning back to Azra, I focused on her instead as she told of faraway countries with miles and miles of sand, no water, and beautiful, colourful clothing the likes of which we couldn't even begin to imagine.

"When I was there," Azra said, turning to Haerlyon and myself, "a young son tried to overthrow his father. In secret, he'd gathered many followers, and then one day, he attacked out of nowhere! His father, a smart and rather cunning man, had seen the betrayal coming from miles away, and was prepared. Instead of killing his father, the young son killed a servant instead. It was too late when he found out his mistake, and come dawn, his father had him beheaded. It was rather gruesome if you ask me. Barbaric even!"

"Did this happen overnight?" Haerlyon asked curiously, leaning forward in his chair.

"Of course not," Azra said. "The young son had been planning this for years. He was just waiting for the right time."

I listened with rapt attention as she weaved a story of wondrous events. It all sounded like a fairy-tale, and although a part of me doubted the validity of her story, it was a great one nonetheless.

As the night wore on, Azra excused herself on account of having travelled for weeks with little rest, and left us with well-wishes and hand-kisses. All but Mother, who watched her with a guarded expression as she left, wished her a good night.

"Don't believe everything she tells you," Mother said while rising to her feet. "Doubtless less than half is the truth, and the remaining part is twisted in such a way it benefits her."

"Why do you hate Aunt Azra so much?" I asked. "What has she ever done to you?" Anger flashed in Mother's eyes in a way I'd never seen before, her lips set in a thin line.

"Out," she hissed. "Now!"

The tone in her voice was enough to frighten me, so I grabbed my gifts and bolted out of her room, not stopping until I was back in my own. My headlong flight startled Xaresh, who was on guard duty, so much, he stuck his head inside to check everything was all right.

"Fine," I murmured.

“You sure say fine a lot when you aren’t,” he commented drily.

Xaresh stepped into my room uninvited. I glared at him. He returned my look unimpressed, leaning back against the door with folded arms.

“What happened?”

“Mother got angry,” I said, throwing the bracelets to the side. Xaresh picked them up, and placed them gingerly on my dressing table, looking at me via the mirror.

“So?” he asked. “Your mother gets angry at you a lot.”

Biting my lip, I stared right back at him, and away, insecurity taking hold of me. I rubbed my arm, then folded them in front of me. In the end, I did look back at him, fingers nervously fumbling with the small knife.

“It wasn’t like that,” I whispered. “She was *furious*—you know? The kind of fury where she goes all quiet, and you can feel it in the air, but she will not yell at you?”

He just nodded.

“It wasn’t pretty.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Xaresh regarded me quietly. With a deep sigh, I placed the small knife on my bedside cabinet, staring at it for a bit longer, wondering if I’d ever need it.

“What did you do?” he said.

I turned to him, insecurity coursing through me. “I asked her why she hated Azra so much.”

Xaresh gave me one of those dazzling smiles lighting up his entire face and walked over to me. Gently, he took my hands in his.

“*Tarien*,” he began, “you’re a remarkable woman in general, but would you heed some advice?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Depends on what it is.”

“Think before you speak, *Tarien*,” he said. “It’ll get you into trouble less, and people will like you better for it.”

“Am I that unlikeable?”

He chuckled softly. “No, not at all, but your words can be harsh.”

“The truth’s seldom anything else.”

“It’s just not always yours to give.”

Regarding him in silence, I sighed and nodded. “All right, I’ll try.”

“Maybe...”

“Don’t push your luck.” I glowered at him. “Goodnight Xaresh.”

Xaresh looked amused. “Sweet dreams, *Tarien*.”