



**Ashes of Dearen: Book 1**  
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Recommended for Mature Readers

# Chapter 1

## The Joyful Curse

“Where do you think the Haze comes from?”

“I don’t think about it at all.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I?”

The brother and sister strolled the hillsides beyond the grand Dearen palace. As heirs to the throne of Dearen, Kyne and Fayr Violeni spent more of their time within the palace than without. Today they took the rare opportunity to stare at their home from afar. From a distance, it became more obvious that the soft glowing Haze covering the whole land of Dearen lay most thickly upon their own royal abode. What made this fog distinct from any other in the world was the magic substance that floated within it: a glittering dust known as safra.

Safra brought intense pleasure and joy to anyone who consumed it—anyone, that is, but for the few remaining members of the royal Violenese bloodline.

The large fortress glittered like a pile of jewels in the distance. Part of the palace’s charm was its inconsistency; some sections gleamed with deep silver stone, others with crystalline pillars, while yet more sections dazzled the eye with inset gems. The sprawled structure was a compilation of sections built by different cultures and peoples, all of whom came to Dearen for a pinch of the safra obtained from the Haze.

But as young Prince Kyne had observed, the beauty of the palace was offset by the coils of smoke drifting from its surface. Sometimes, the smoke had a beauty of its own. Tiny pieces of debris caught the sunshine and sparkled with brilliance. Across the vast landscape, the rolling Haze diffused the light and made the entire land glow as if with an enchanted fog.

"Do you think safra creates the Haze, or the Haze creates safra?" asked Kyne. His eyes opened wide with wonder, even though his purple hair lashed sharply against his face.

"Neither!" Fayr turned up her sharp little nose, enjoying how highly she towered over her brother. She had just turned eighteen. He was not yet thirteen years of age. She liked to think she knew a lot more about the world than he did, although at times like this, the difference seemed slight. She had to take pride in what little knowledge she had, or else spurn it altogether. "The Haze always has safra in it. They are both created, simultaneously, by something else. At least, that seems obvious enough to me."

"Then what creates them?"

"You already asked that."

"Not exactly. Anyway, you didn't answer."

"Nor will I ever. You sound like a commoner, asking such foolish questions!"

"Why is it foolish? Why can't we ask where the safra comes from?"

"Because we can't!"

Fayr began to feel flustered by the conversation. Once upon a time, she pondered the same questions as her younger brother. In truth, she still did sometimes. But she gave up asking them a long time ago. Better not to ask such things; better not to think of them at all.

A wind blew and made the Haze ripple across the landscape. As she breathed the fresh air, Fayr realized something strange. For just a moment, she smelled the air as it should smell: pure, without safra. And it smelled wonderful.

"Look over there," said Fayr suddenly. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Over there!" The Haze was settling again, but in one area, it remained thin enough to see through.

"What is it?"

"I think those are the cliffs of Vikand!"

"Are you sure?" He strained, as she did, to stare through the silver grip of the Haze. But there, on the edge of the foggy horizon, lay a large shadow, slicing the smoke with sharp black crags. "How could it be? I thought Vikand was further away!"

"Dearen is a small place, physically," said Fayr. "Haven't you paid any attention to Jayn's lectures?"

"Yes, but ... "

"The entire kingdom of Dearen can be crossed in a day on horseback."

"Are we really so small?" Prince Kyne's little face drooped at the thought.

She put a hand on his velvety shoulder. "Only in size, brother. And yet we are the most powerful kingdom in the world. Don't let it bother you."

He seemed comforted by this, although he could not rip his eyes from the looming shadow of Vikand. Neither could she.

"Let's get closer to it," said Fayr. The mere thought set her heart pounding.

"How much closer?"

She didn't answer, but turned and made her way to the dense grove of lemon trees where they'd tethered their horses. She looked down at herself, watched the undulating colors of her skirt ripple beneath her, and pondered the strange sensations roiling through her body. She relished the quickening of her heart and the warm excitement in her belly. And that wind ... why had it smelled so good? She'd lived in the palace all her life. She was accustomed to the strange Haze that made most people happy. Most people said it smelled like roses. But now that she was further away from it, she wondered if it stank.

A strand of purple hair fell into her vision and she reached to brush it back. It reminded her that she was not like most people in more ways than one. The violet hair shared by herself, her brother, and her father made them different from anyone else in the world. It indicated their ancient heritage, and thus their distinct inability to enjoy safra.

In the silky soft shade of the grove, she found their horses. There were three steeds in all: two white palfreys for herself and the prince, and a gray destrier for Sir Gornum of the royal guard. The guardian himself lay spread under a berry bush, his bearded mouth hanging open, his large eyes closed in sleep. He wore no armor, only studded cloth, for who needed armor in Dearen? She hoped the studs jabbed him as she kicked his drooping belly.

"Gornum. Gornum, wake up!" She sent a scowl to her brother, who trailed doggedly behind her. "You gave him too much safra."

"Father told me to!"

"He told you to *reward* him with safra, small pinches at a time, and only after he has completed each service. Don't you understand? That is how it works. Why can't you ever get it right?"

"Oh ... " Kyne's nose crinkled a little. He blinked rapidly.

"What are you doing now?" She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. "Are you about to *cry*?"

"Of course not!" But the moisture in his eyes betrayed him.

"I can't believe you, Kyne. If Father saw you right now, or if he heard the sort of questions you were asking ... "

"Please don't tell him. Please, Fayr!" His blinks became more rapid and violent.

She shook her head and clicked her tongue reproachfully. "Not this time, I won't." She moved to her horse, grabbed the saddle, and climbed upon its back.

"Are we going back home now?" asked Kyne.

"No." She huffed as she settled her skirts about her. The heavy jewelry upon her neck and wrists only made her movements awkward. She resisted an impulse to rip them all off. "I want to go further."

"Father won't like that at all!"

Fayr flung her head back and breathed deeply of the air. "Can you smell it, little brother? I didn't realize it until now. The Haze. It stinks!"

"Mother says it smells like jasmine."

Their mother was not like the two of them. She was their mother, of course. But she did not have the Violenese blood of their father. She did not share the bright purple hair of her husband and children. "Does it smell that way to *you*?"

"Well ..." He bowed his head, letting his short purple locks fall over his brow. "I suppose not ... "

"Come on then." Her horse could feel her impatience. She pulled on the reins as the beast writhed beneath her. "Let's go just a little further. Let's get away from the safra."

"But Father says the Haze covers all of Dearen!"

"Then we'll get closer to the cliffs of Vikand!"

"What about Gornum?"

"Never mind him. If the Haze covers all of Dearen, then it will protect us as always."

She did not wait for him, but kicked her horse and bounded forward. She did not even care if he followed.

Now that she had caught a whiff of fresh air, she wanted more. She wanted it like a horse wants water after running for miles. All her life, she had lived in the safra-infused Haze and endured it. While it intoxicated everyone else with joy, it blinded her with its constant glow. The stench, which she'd breathed so long that she stopped noticing it, had been suffocating her since birth. Now she needed to escape, if only for a moment. She needed to breathe pure air. She did not know if she would

find such purity any closer to the cliffs of Vikand. But it seemed worth a try.

The palfrey's white hooves thudded down the slope and into a thickening stretch of trees. The cliffs of Vikand always seemed to cast a long shadow over the Dearen valleys underneath, even if the sun shone upon them. For this reason, the forest growing beneath them was called the Shadowed Woods. The tree limbs cast shapes like intertwined hands across the soft auburn soil. Dandelion tufts from the meadows floated through the air and brushed her skin as she passed. The darkness wrapped around her and sent a chill down her back. For some reason, she liked it.

"Fayr? Fayr!"

She glanced over her shoulder and saw her brother galloping after her. Very well. He would catch up to her, or he wouldn't. It didn't matter. The only creatures in the woods were birds and tigers, and the latter never attacked Dearen natives: only strangers. Whether the siblings got separated or not, neither of them faced any danger.

A dark shape flitted past her vision.

For a moment, she felt fear. But almost as quickly as it came, the fear dissipated. She had thought she saw a man in strange leather clothes. For a moment he had seemed to glitter, but of course this was probably a consequence of the safra in the air. Even here, deep in the Shadowed Woods, safra hovered about, drifting and sparkling. In one sense, its presence continued to irritate her. But on the other, she was relieved, because wherever there was safra, there was safety. It was a tremendous blessing, even if sometimes it felt like a curse.

Her horse neighed and flung Fayr from its back.

As she flew through the air, she watched the soil rise up to meet her, and in that moment before she struck, she pondered what had happened. A breath ago, she and her horse had thundered through the forest with a perfect rhythm. The shadows danced, the safra blurred by, and her hair trailed behind her in soft purple streams, unable to keep up with her momentum. Now everything stopped, and her hair spilled ahead of her.

Her cry became lost in the soil as she smacked against the dirt.

Pain. Pain. Pain. She forgot that anything else existed. Then she heard the moans of her horse. She also heard the snapping of twigs as something crept towards her. The second sound came from the opposite direction.

With a groan, she tried to rise up. The world spun. She wondered how long she had been lying there, and how badly she was hurt. But more importantly, what had happened? Horses were rarely so clumsy as to fall like that. She saw the beautiful white beast sprawled in the dirt some distance from her. Crimson blood rolled down its leg.

A leather hand wrapped around her mouth and nostrils. A knee struck her between the shoulder-blades and pushed her back down. The pain was excruciating, but she couldn't scream. She couldn't even breathe.

"Fayr? Fayr!"

Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision. Even through the watery ripples, she saw the white shape of her brother riding closer.

"Call to him." The voice of her captor was as deep and grating as metal against stone. It also sounded muffled, as if he spoke through a mask.

She wriggled and thrashed, but this only tightened his grip on her. He flung her around, pressing her back against the earth. He straddled her chest, and if she could have, she would have screamed with terror as she looked up at him. He was the same man she glimpsed running through the trees. He wore a tight suit of leather, and indeed it did glitter, but not because of any safra. It glittered because it was covered with metal spikes, small but sharp. A mask covered his face, shaped and painted to resemble a wolf's. Through two small holes she saw his real eyes, glinting with a cruel shade of red.

Cold metal pressed to her neck. This surprised her because he did not seem to be holding something as large as a knife. "Call him here, or you die now."

He let go of her, but for a moment, the weight of her fear kept her paralyzed. She was too dizzy and frightened to breathe, let alone make a decision. As soon as she was capable, she screamed.

He struck her in the face. Her head rattled as she thrashed again. But his strength pressed her down, and she glimpsed the flash of his weapon—a curved metal shard—as he returned it to her neck. This time she knew he would kill her.

A pale shape arose behind her captor. For a ridiculous moment, Fayr thought her horse was coming to her rescue. Then she realized that it was a man wearing blue, except for his hat, which was full of colorful feathers. He did not seem like a typical hero in the least: he was slender of build, dark of skin, and his clothes seemed almost clownish. But she did not have a chance now to consider his strange appearance, nor his choice of attire; all that mattered was that he had managed to sneak up

on the man in the wolf-mask, then whack him over the head with a large stick.

Her rescuer struck in such a way that the wolf-mask cracked and fell off. The man growled and reached for it, but too late to catch it. Much of his face remained hidden, nonetheless, for he wore a handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

Fayr's hero grabbed the handkerchief, using it to yank the assassin backwards. "Safra!" cried the fellow in the feather-hat. "Get safra!"

Fayr scrambled to obey as her captor and protector fought against each other. The man in the wolf-mask had been caught by surprise, but he was regaining control of himself quickly. As the feathery fellow pulled at the kerchief, working to undo it, the wolf-man twirled the naked metal across his gloves. His red eyes flicked to his opponent's feet, which he aimed for with his strange weapon.

While all of this happened, Fayr pulled a pouch of safra from her belt.

"Now!" cried the rescuer, tearing off the kerchief.

It was almost as if it had all been pre-planned. Just as the kerchief fell away, baring the assassin's mouth, Fayr opened the pouch and flung safra towards him. A fountain of glittering dust sprayed into the villain's face. He gagged as he first breathed it in. Then his entire body went slightly limp. The blade fell from his fingers. His lids grew heavy over his red irises. He sagged forward, nearly falling upon Fayr with his leather suit of spikes. Only chance, or perhaps luck, kept himself from doing so. He caught himself with one hand. Fayr had a brief moment to stare into his face, a face wrinkled with age and scars, gleaming with red eyes that burned with fury even as the safra overcame him. Then she wriggled out from under him.

The assassin fell against the soil, suspended slightly by the studs along his clothing. Then he shook suddenly with laughter. "Ha. Haha. Hahahahah!"

Fayr's hero crouched down beside her and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Princess?"

Fayr just gaped back at her strange savior. Her whole body trembled against his touch. She thought she might break into tears if she wasn't more careful. She mustn't do that. Her father was going to kill her already. Best not to break his most adamant rule of all, which was to never cry in public, and thus reveal to everyone that safra had no effect on the few of royal blood. "I ... I ... I'm fine," she gasped at last.

"Good." The man in the feather-hat smiled. His black eyes softened and his muscles sagged with relief. The safra in the air must have

affected him, too. "Strange thing, isn't it? I don't often take a stroll in the Shadowed Woods like this. The one day I do, I find you, the princess herself, and then I save your life! How very lovely."

"Yes. Lovely." She forced a smile onto her face. She had become very skilled at faking smiles, over the years. "What is your name?"

"Oh please, I am only a humble merchant."

"Well then ... Merchant. You will be rewarded with much safra."

"Fayr? FAYR!"

At long last, Kyne came galloping through the trees. Next to him rode their sleepy guard, Gornum. The prince—rather than Gornum, who seemed dazed enough to ride into oblivion—pulled his horse to a lurching stop as he took in the scene before him. First he caught sight of Fayr's fallen steed, then the Merchant in the feathered hat, and at last the would-be assassin, face-down in the dirt and shaking with giggles.

Kyne's face turned bleached white. "*What happened?*"

Fayr stood up and brushed off her satin dress, but it was her composure she straightened more than anything. Somehow, she found it easiest to feign calmness around her little brother. Perhaps because she did it for his own sake, too. "No matter. All is well."

"Maybe it is now." Kyne gulped, preparing himself to make his wisest statement yet. "But it won't be when Father hears of this."

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King Joyhan of Dearen was a short man with thick muscular build. He had purple hair to his ears and a crown of gold and jewels softened round with furs. Beneath the crown, his purple eyebrows knitted together in a scowl. He ate his expensive meal of crab-meat with violent crunching and gnashing of his teeth. Clearly he did not care to linger over the taste of the stuff, despite its worth in gold.

The royal family sat around a glass table within the Crystal Dining Hall. Candlelight danced upon the walls and reflected the various colors of silk lining the ceiling. In an adjacent hallway, a servant played chimes that reverberated through the chamber. On the royal table lay a splendid smorgasbord of food from across the continent. They had fish and crab roasted in honey-sauce, sliced melons and sugared berries.

Despite all this splendor, only one person at the table was cheerful. This was the mother, Queen Lilyana: the only person at the table without purple hair. She hummed quietly to herself between bites of food. Her entire plate glittered with all the safra she had sprinkled over her meal like a spice. Fayr didn't even know why she bothered. The Haze was so thick in the palace that most people were happy just breathing in the

safra. But then again, Fayr would probably never understand the happiness that safra gave most people—everyone, that is, but for herself, her brother, and her father.

King Joyhan ate out of duty and Queen Lilyana ate with delight. Fayr and Kyne, however, could not bring themselves to eat at all. They had not yet touched a crumb of their own food. Fayr, at least, had an excuse: she had talked throughout the meal thus far, relating to her father what had happened that day as quickly and casually as possible. Kyne, on the other hand, neither moved nor spoke at all, but stared at his plate and kept his mouth shut.

“So,” said King Joyhan, wiping his purple beard with cloth, “what happened to this Merchant fellow?”

Princess Fayr gulped, even though she had no food in her mouth to provide an excuse. She had already explained the most traumatic event of her story and hoped she could stop there. Back here in the safety of the Dearen palace, the entire incident seemed like a garish nightmare, hardly real. She thought if only she had a moment alone, she might convince herself that it had all been a dream. But the more her father questioned her about it, the more he forced her to accept its reality. The Merchant, in his own way, was the most troubling memory of all, for his behavior had never made sense to her.

“He, uh ... he left,” she said at last.

“Did you not offer him a reward for helping you?”

“Of course.” She squirmed in her seat, then poked at her food with a knife. “I suspect that when I flung safra on my attacker, the Merchant breathed some, also. After a moment, he probably ceased to care about the future, for he was already so happy. You know how it is.”

“Hm.” The king stopped eating and stared deeply into the table. So far, he had offered very little reaction to her story. This worried her more than if he had expressed his anger immediately. Just as he had trained his children to restrain all unhappy emotions, so he had trained himself long ago. As a result, the emotions built up inside of him until he could contain them no longer and they burst out in the ugliest fashion. The longer his emotions built up, the worse the explosion. “What became of your horse?”

“The Merchant, um ... ” She coughed a little to loosen her throat. “The Merchant took it.”

“Oh? Even though it was lame?”

“Yes. He was very kind, and gave us his horse in exchange. It’s a beautiful horse.”

“How odd.”

“Not really.” She could not look her father in the eyes. “I think he simply wanted to help the poor beast.” Her heart raced in her chest. Why did the Merchant trouble her so much? Perhaps because she wondered the same questions about him that her father did. She wanted to toss him from her mind; she wanted to dismiss him as no more than another safra addict, helping her so that she would reward him with safra. But something about his behavior was strange, nonetheless.

Against her wishes, she remembered how the rest of the incident had played out.

She remembered getting closer to her fallen horse and seeing how badly it was wounded. The creature remained kicking on the ground while bleeding profusely. From its flesh stuck a piece of metal like the one the assassin had pressed to her neck—except this one was buried so deep, she only saw its tip.

Her throat had tightened up. She knew why. She wanted to sob. But she couldn't, especially in front of a stranger, like the Merchant. She swallowed her sorrow back down. She needed to get out of here. More than ever, she just wanted to go home.

“Well I suppose we should be getting back,” she said, then looked at Kyne. “I'll need to ride with you.”

“Wait.” The Merchant stepped towards her, and once more, Fayr took note of his unusual appearance. He was so lanky and tall, but he moved with the grace of a breeze. He had such dark skin, a startling contrast to his light blue clothing, and his irises were two deep pools of black. All of his hair was hidden, stuffed underneath his ridiculous hat. “Surely you don't mean to leave him behind?” He pointed to the attacker.

In another situation, Fayr would have reprimanded someone for taking that tone with her. But right now, she was too rattled. Worse, she knew he had a good point. “We can't carry him. His suit is covered with spikes!”

“Ah. That does pose a problem.” The Merchant tapped his bony chin. “Perhaps if we tear some of it off.”

“What?!”

The Merchant produced a knife from his strange, angular tunic and spun the handle across his fingers. “This should do it.”

Almost immediately, he bent himself to this task. He was a graceful man, but he had also inhaled some safra, so his movements were a bit sloppy as he struggled to cut through the leather. He devoted himself to

the task, nonetheless, and paused only to turn to the princess and say, "Perhaps your guard could help me with this?"

And so it had been. Sir Gornum helped slice the villain's suit and peel it down so that his top half was free of the harmful barbs. And the Merchant had not stopped there: he next offered to care for Fayr's wounded horse and give her his own, a large speckled beast with black spots and long sweeping hair down its hooves and neck. Fayr had coveted the beautiful creature as soon as she saw it, and gladly accepted the Merchant's offer. Next they threw the dazed, half-naked attacker onto Gornum's horse and rode back to the palace, surely and simply.

Except somewhere along the way back, the Merchant vanished.

If he had helped them in the hopes of obtaining more safra, why had he vanished so suddenly?

Now that her father asked the same question, Fayr was desperate to change the subject, even if by doing so, she jumped to the next most unpleasant one. "Father, when I mentioned that the attacker wore a wolf-mask, you acted as if you had heard of one before. What does it mean?"

The king laid his large hands upon the table. His rings and jewelry thudded heavily against the wood. "I am done discussing this with the two of you. Lilyana, let's get you to bed."

For a moment, Fayr was stunned. She should have been relieved. Ever since she sat down, she ached for the chance to stand back up and flee to her room. All the same, she had expected something to happen by then. She expected to be reprimanded at the very least, or, even better, to make sense of the day's events somewhere in the retelling. Instead, she only felt more confused. What did her father know that he wasn't telling her? Why was he ready to let the entire topic slide and send everyone off to bed? What was he hiding?

"Father," she said. Her voice was small and tight in her throat, but her desperation must have rang clearly enough, for the king of Dearen took pause. "Please. Why was that man after us?"

King Joyhan did not move for a moment. Fayr worried that he was coming up with a new way to steer her away from the truth. He did it so often that it seemed second nature to him. Since her birth, he had contrived hundreds of ways to hide what he alone knew and no one else did. Where did the safra come from? Why was the royal bloodline immune to it? And what was its connection to the Haze?

"Father," she said again. Hot tears burned her eyes. Her chin quivered. She wasn't sure if she could hold back her sorrow any longer. She needed to cry, and sometimes, her attempts to hold back only made it

harder to do so. "Please. I'm eighteen now. How long must I wait before I understand what the *hell* is going on around here?" She slammed the table with her fist, rattling all the dishes upon it.

After her outburst, she nearly apologized. Then she saw the flash of emotion in her father's eyes. She realized that if he was going to break, she would have to help him do it. So she met his stare and for once, she didn't back down from it.

"Lilyana," said the king, "go to bed. Fayr, Kyne: come with me."

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On her way to the dungeons, Fayr wondered what she had gotten herself into.

She had never been to the dungeons before. She knew they existed. Occasionally, she saw people go into them. She didn't always know why. There weren't many criminals in Dearen. People didn't tend to commit crimes when they were happy, and the Haze kept them all happy. But she knew that every once in awhile, the king sent people down here. It was one of those things she wasn't supposed to talk about.

The strangest part was that she never saw people come back out.

The king himself was the only one with the key. This she knew also, for whenever people entered the dungeons, her father went with them. Because of this unfortunate fact, their newly-acquired prisoner would have to enter tonight beside the king and his family. Now, he sat with hands bound beside the large stone door with a guard on either side of him. The royal family found him thus, slumped against the wall with his horrible suit hanging in tatters from his waist, his bare torso scraped and bruised, probably from contact with his own cruel weaponry.

The king stood over the prisoner, his cloak billowing outward as if to swallow him whole. "You're a Wolven, aren't you?"

The man did not reply. Once again, Fayr was surprised by his age; he was so fit that she would never have guessed how old he was from afar. Wrinkles and scars criss-crossed across his expressionless face.

"Show me the mask!" cried the king.

One of the guards handed it over.

It was a ceramic thing, rather simple in design and crude in creation. Here in the smoky light of the palace, it hardly looked threatening at all. It was no longer the face of a ghoulish monster that had pushed her to the forest floor and pressed sharp metal to her neck. It was just a mask, and a cheap one, at that.

Then she looked at her father and saw the terror deep within his wide-open eyes. She had never seen him so horrified in all her life. The color

drained from his skin. His hands shook as they held the flimsy frame. He was silent for such a long time she wondered if he would ever speak again.

King Joyhan flung the mask to the ground and broke it to pieces.

Next he dove towards the assassin, gripping the man's chin with his bare fingers. He forced the captive to stare at him, and when he did, Fayr looked once more upon the red irises she had glimpsed in the Shadowed Forest. Fear crawled through her belly, and her fingernails dug into her palms just as her father's squeezed into the captive's.

"You *are* a Wolven!" gasped the king.

The man with red eyes smiled.

"You fucking bastard." Joyhan's voice was so low and guttural, Fayr could barely hear it. "I am going to slice you into a hundred pieces. And I'm going to keep you alive while I'm doing it, so you can watch yourself burn, piece by piece, into hell."

The Wolven laughed.

The king drew back, mortified. He took one step back after another, nearly tripping over himself, until he backed into the opposite wall.

Fayr felt a little hand clasp hers. Her brother drew close to her, clutching her with fear.

"Get that shit out of my sight," snapped the king.

The guards looked dumbly from the king, to the dungeon door, then back again.

"Not that. Not tonight," said Joyhan. "I can't ... I can't tonight. Just take him away, cover him with chains, and keep him under constant watch."

The guards moved to obey.

"Wait." The king looked suddenly to his daughter. Now Fayr was the one clutching her brother for support. "You said you saw him wearing a kerchief."

"Y-yes."

"Do you have it?"

Fayr wished that she didn't. But for some ridiculous reason, after she had recovered from the attack, she picked up the kerchief and stashed it in her dress. Then she made the second mistake of mentioning it to her father when she described the encounter. Like her father, she must have sensed the importance of the object, somewhere in her mind. And like many other things that day, part of her wanted to forget about, to toss it away and pretend it never existed. Yet her damnable curiosity revealed itself as she pulled out the kerchief and held it aloft.

Joyhan snatched it from her hand. Then he brought it to his nose and inhaled deeply. His breath caught and his eyes opened wide.

"I knew it. Anti-safra!"

Fayr shared a puzzled look with her brother. "Anti-safra? What does that mean?"

"What do you think?" Then he turned to his guards. "Get him up. On his knees!"

The guards complied. The assassin did nothing to fight back. He merely hung limp in their arms, that horrible smile on his face. Fayr knew that the expression was probably a result of the safra in the Haze, which was especially thick here next to the dungeon. Even so, something about his expression sent chills through her body.

With no preamble, King Joyhan lifted the handkerchief and tied it tightly around the Wolven's mouth and nose. "Breathe your anti-safra now, you son of a whore," hissed the king. Then he pulled a knife from his tunic.

"Father—!"

The blade sank into flesh. It seemed to go in so easily, like sticking a needle into a pin-cushion. At least her father made it look that way. Then the blood trickled out. A sound came out of the assassin's mouth. His red eyes opened wide—so wide—all the Haze vanished from them completely. Now that he wore the kerchief again, he no longer breathed the joy of the Haze.

Joyhan pulled out the blade and stepped back, letting the blood run free. The Wolven sagged once more in his captors' arms. His wound was in the shoulder. He would bleed all night, and he would feel much pain, but he would live to see tomorrow. But Fayr heard his ragged breathing, his nearly-silent whimper. She saw the veins bulging along his neck and forehead, his muscles rippling. She saw his fingers curl into fists, and knew that he had felt everything her father had done to him.

"Get him out of here."

The guards dragged the prisoner away, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

Fayr's arm ached from how fiercely Kyne clutched it. She realized that she wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor, but the only reason she didn't was because if she fell, Kyne would fall, too. "Father," she gasped at last, her voice barely audible.

He pulled a small flask from the depths of his sleeve, unscrewed it, and tossed back a gulp. Afterward, he took a deep breath. "Liquor," he sighed. "It's not safra, but at least it works on us. Would you like some?"

Fayr glared back at him. Her nails dug into her brother's shoulder, but the emotion she felt now was not fear. It was anger. "Father, what's in the dungeon?"

"Let's talk somewhere else." He coughed. "The Haze is so thick here."

"What's in the dungeon?"

"Well." The gaze Joyhan fixed his daughter was filled with annoyance more than anything else. "It's where I make safra."

\*

They went to the topmost balcony, where the moon glowed behind the glittery veil of the Haze, and the purr of distant tigers rumbled through the darkness.

The king stared thoughtfully into the silver light. It drained the color from his purple hair and beard. He pulled off his crown, releasing his hair to the wind, and for a moment he looked like a common man.

"The Wolvens killed my family," he said at last, "and they won't stop until our entire bloodline is extinct."

Fayr could not believe what she was hearing. "I thought your mother died of illness! And your brothers and sisters ... "

"Poison." His voice came out like the growl of a dog. "Poisoned, all of them. Except my mother, who the assassin smothered when she started to regain health."

"How on earth did you survive?"

"Funny thing," laughed the king without mirth. "I was already sick before the Wolven came—typical sour stomach. I threw up everything I ate, so I never ingested the poison. Guards killed the assassin before he got to me."

Fayr tried to imagine it but she couldn't. It was too terrible. She didn't think things like that happened in Dearen. How had her father carried this terrible memory within him, all of his life, while the rest of the world remained oblivious? "Why would anyone do that to you? Who are the Wolvens?"

King Joyhan turned to face his children, one eye catching the moonlight and glowing brightly. "A family bloodline, like our own, of which few remain. They are known for their red eyes and profound lack of empathy for their fellow human beings." One side of his face pulled up with a sardonic smile. "I also suspect that like our own family, their ancestors made a pact with an ancient god."

Fayr blinked a few times. "What?"

"A pact." Joyhan drank more from his flask, then put it away. "Our own Violeneese ancestors made a pact with the gods to gain the power to

create safra—pure happiness in a simple powder form—but never enjoy its benefits for ourselves.”

“I don’t understand.” Fayr could not even breathe. “Why would we want the power to make safra if we can’t enjoy it?”

“For the same reason I’ve been trying to explain to you all your *life!*”

The vehemence of his voice made both the children flinch. Fayr remembered her father sticking the blade into the assassin’s shoulder. She’d always known that her father had a temper. But after what she’d seen tonight ...

Joyhan exhaled heavily. The smell of alcohol in his breath cut through the Hazy air. “We make safra to control people. People would do anything to obtain happiness. But if we had it already, why would we care?”

The more he said, the more he confused her.

The king looked to the moon, his eyes clouding over. “Now both of you, go to bed.”

“But Father—”

“Tomorrow I will show you both what you want to know. If you thought today was bad, then prepare to discover something worse tomorrow.”

“Both of us?”

Joyhan looked in puzzlement from one of his children to the other. He could not understand why Fayr found this upsetting.

“It’s all right, sister,” said Kyne. But he sounded about as confident as a bunny rabbit hopping from one bush to another. “I can handle it.”

“That’s not what bothers me!”

“Go to bed, Kyne,” snapped their father. Then, more softly, “We’ll talk again soon.”

Kyne bowed his head and rushed timidly away.

“Something wrong, Fayr?”

She wasn’t sure she could take any more drama today, any more confrontation. She already quivered inside like a bowl of soup. But she couldn’t let this go without saying anything at all. “I have waited such a long time. Asked the same questions over and over ... I’m eighteen years old now. But you’re going to let Kyne watch you make safra before he’s *thirteen?*”

“Any more of this attitude,” said Joyhan, “and I may change my mind about showing you at all.”

“It isn’t *fair!*”

“Neither is life.”

“How can you be so casual about this? Right now, you’re the last person alive who knows how safra is made!”

He struck her across the face. She felt an explosion of pain, then a rush of wind against her cheek, then the cold scrape of stone under her fingertips. She had fallen sideways and caught herself against the wall, where she now remained, trembling.

“Maybe that’s how it should be,” he said, breathing heavily. Then he walked away.

\*

As she lay in bed that night, Fayr cradled her aching cheek and wondered about all her father had been through. She had never really thought of it much before. She had always feared him too much to wonder about such things.

Today, her fear of him dissipated. Today, even though he had stricken her across the face, she did not feel afraid anymore. She only felt angry.

How could he let Kyne discover the truth at the same time she did? Kyne had only been asking questions for a few days now. She had asked for some ten years or more. She’d had no choice but to shut her mouth and force her mind into solitude. She had drowned her emotions in the neverending struggle to seem “happy,” and as a result she’d grown increasingly troubled and confused inside, for she never understood why she must do it. Why couldn’t she be happy like everyone else in the first place, always and without effort?

It was all her father’s fault. He was a cruel and terrible man. She had always known it, deep down, but she had never dwelt on it until now. She had always been intimidated by his power and by the great secrets he harbored. Tonight she understood that he clung to his secrets like a pirate clings to gold. He was selfish and greedy, and he used his knowledge to control everyone else.

*People would do anything to obtain happiness. But if we had it already, why would we care?*

She understood now what he meant by that. King Joyhan used safra to control people, and his ancestors must have done the same. Fayr should have figured out that much already. Her own mother was the most obvious example. Joyhan used safra to control Queen Lilyana all the time.

When Fayr was twelve years of age, she had discovered her father fornicating with a palace maid. It had been quite an accident, and no fault of her own. She had merely been wandering around the palace, twiddling her fingers and bored out of her mind. Whenever she was bored she liked to walk down the Striped Corridor. It was a hallway painted

with gradient shades of orange, red, and gold. Lashing these colors with sharp contrast were jagged stripes of black. The entire corridor was made to mimic the fur of a tiger. It was both gaudy and elegant, simple but magical, and whenever Fayr walked through the place, she felt as elegant as one of the great cats herself.

Yet on this day, she had glimpsed two figures far down the hall, locked together but undulating with movement. She took a few steps closer before she realized what they were doing. She had seen people have public sex before. In Dearen, people rarely took the time to retreat to a private bedroom if the mood overcame them. She witnessed it most often with visiting nobles, who would often become so exhilarated by the safra in their system that they no longer knew how to contain themselves.

But this was not a visiting noble. Nor was it a foolish commoner. It was her own father, and Fayr didn't realize it until she had merely passed them by. There he was, his purple hair thrashing as he moved, his cheeks red and flushed, his hips pumping rhythmically towards this total stranger, who seemed so be-spelled by safra that she was half-asleep.

"Father?"

She shouldn't have said anything. She just couldn't help herself. She was so shocked by his behavior that her reaction came out unchecked. Perhaps she hoped that when he turned and looked at her she would realize it was another man, perhaps wearing a wig to mimic the king. But there was no mistaking the face that turned towards her.

King Joyhan paused, clutching the woman to him like a shield as he looked upon his daughter. "Get out of here," he snarled.

She obeyed. She fled, even though he stayed behind, apparently determined to finish what he'd started.

When Fayr next encountered her father at dinner, he acted as if nothing had happened. Fayr tried to convince herself of the same thing, that night and several thereafter. But she could not forget her father's flushed face, the maid's glazed eyes. And over time, the fact Joyhan acknowledged nothing bothered her more than anything else. So at last, she confided in her mother.

A shadow had flickered over Queen Lilyana's face. It was a strange sight, to say the least. Lilyana almost always smiled. Her face was practically stuck in that expression. Yet all the sudden, her lips drooped, her nose tightened, and her brows knitted together.

“Let’s talk to your father about this,” she said, “and see what he has to say for himself.”

For a fleeting moment, Fayr felt hopeful. Perhaps whatever was about to happen would not be good, but at least it was *something*. Anything to resolve the feelings stirring inside of her ever since she caught the king with the maid. Anything to reassure her that she was not crazy for feeling disturbed.

So they’d confronted King Joyhan. Lilyana had introduced the issue with a grave tone of voice. Then Fayr had related what she’d witnessed, her words fast and jumbled with excitement. All the while Joyhan listened with that blank expression of his, the one he was so skilled at faking.

When the mother and daughter were finished, he picked up a chalice from his bedside. First he sprinkled into it a sparkling pinch of safra. Then he poured plum juice over it, stirring the concoction calmly. When he was finished, he walked to his wife and placed it in her eager fingertips.

“I am sorry, my love,” he said to the queen. “It was a moment of weakness. Do you forgive me?”

Lilyana took a sip of the glittering liquid. She sloshed it in her mouth and closed her eyes as the drink slid down her throat. Her brows unraveled. Her lips curled into a smile. When she opened her eyes again, they were clouded over, as if filled with the Haze itself. “Oh, I forgive you, darling.” She reached up and brushed his purple beard with her fingertips. “It is a beautiful evening. No need to let this spoil it.”

Thus the matter had been settled, and no one ever brought it up again.

Now six years later, Fayr’s fingers dug into her bedsheets. Her teeth gnashed together as she felt all the anger, all the confusion she’d ignored throughout her lifetime rising suddenly to the surface, threatening to drown her.

She needed to stop thinking about it. She needed to accept the fact that tomorrow, at long last, she would learn the truth behind safra. Even though this made her excited, anxious, and angry all at once, she needed to stop obsessing over it so that she could finally get some sleep.

Then a yell shook the air.

For a moment, she thought she had imagined it. Who would scream in Dearen? People under the influence of safra could still feel physical pain to a degree, but normally they remained so calm they barely reacted to it. This voice had been wrought with agony and fear. She knew how such a thing sounded, for she had made a yell like that not so long ago.

She waited and waited, wondering if she had imagined it. Perhaps it had only been an echo from her own haunting memory.

Then it came again.

She started and jumped out of bed. Her heart nearly leapt from her chest. Struggling to keep a level head, she scrambled over the floor to her wardrobe. She wore only a thin silk gown, which left most of her legs and arms bare. It was low enough to reveal the swell of her breasts, and she knew that in strong candlelight, it was practically see-through. The cool night air made the little hairs prickle all over her body as a sense of vulnerability came over her.

She didn't have time to change clothes. She knew that danger lurked nearby. She could not afford to tarry. She must investigate immediately.

*The Wolvens killed my family, the king had said. And they won't stop until our entire bloodline is extinct.*

A sheen of steel in the moonlight caught her attention. It was an ancient baselard, or short-sword, the hilt of which glittered with diamond shards. For years it had hung on her wall in the name of decoration. Now she looked upon its sharp edge and knew it was the closest thing she might find to protection. She reached up and grabbed it. The jewels of the hilt were cold in her fingertips.

Holding her breath, she crept out into the hallway.

Torches blazed into the darkness. The Royal Chambers, somewhat ironically, were the simplest compartments in the entire palace, probably because they belonged to the first and oldest section. The walls were made of rocks from the cliffs of Vikand. Though the jagged edges of stone had been smoothed, dark lines splintered the grainy surface, hinting at the might of the great crags her ancestors tamed. Here and there, gold and jewel decorations broke up the daunting black space, casting flashes of ruby red or emerald green into the shadows. These decorations, normally pleasant, only ceased to distract and irritate her as she walked slowly over the stones. Now that the echoes of the first yell had faded, she heard nothing but the wind as it stirred against the rocks—that and the sound of her own breath, ragged and shallow, which only seemed to intensify the harder she tried to control it.

She tripped over something on the floor. The baselard swayed in her grip and she watched its tip dance towards her. She barely managed to catch herself, but not soon enough to keep from imagining impaling herself on the blade as she fell. What a fool she was! She did not even know how to hold a sword, much less use one.

She looked back to see what she had tripped on and found a dead body.

She clamped a hand over her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

The body of the guard was familiar. She couldn't remember his name. He was a fool and an oaf who stuffed himself daily with both food and safra. Sometimes he told funny jokes, which was the only reason she had granted him the honor of guarding her bedroom. Now he lay sprawled on the floor, his plump lips hanging open in death, his blood pouring out from a wound in his chest. She leaned closer and saw metal shard sticking out of the wound.

A shadow moved.

She turned and ran.

The whole world spun around her. She did not even know where she was going; fortunately, her feet led her of their own accord. If her guard was dead, the assassin must have passed through the Royal Chambers. But if Fayr was not yet dead ...

She swung open the door to her parents' bedroom.

"NO!"

The sheets were strewn every which way. A flame danced on the floor where a fallen candle struggled for life against the stones. Its bright red light illuminated the face of her mother, white with death. Her lips still smiled, even as blood trickled from them.

The king lay face-down on the stones, a sword protruding from his back. Fayr recognized the weapon as one which had decorated the walls of the king's bedroom, just as the baselard in her hands had decorated her own.

She backed out into the hallway. This was a nightmare. It had to be. Her close encounter in the woods gave her bad dreams—that was all. Things this awful didn't really happen. The assassin had been chained and shackled. He couldn't have gotten free. He had also been dazed by all the safra she flung in his face. Then her father had tied the anti-safra kerchief back over the assassin's mouth ...

A rattle scraped her eardrums.

She turned and saw a dark shape standing by her brother's doorway. His torso was bare, the skin gleaming gold in the torchlight. He still wore dark leather around his legs, glittering with spikes. His hand was on the doorknob to Kyne's room. But at the sound of Fayr's gasp he turned. She saw that the bottom-half of his face was covered by the familiar kerchief. Above this, his eyes caught the light and blazed red.

"KYNE!" screamed Fayr. "RUN!"

Then she followed her own advice.

She not only knew that the assassin would come after her; she hoped it. If this was a nightmare, let the Wolven kill her and wake her up. If not, then at least by dying, she may save her brother. And at least, by dying, something—*something*—would happen.

Her feet carried her from the stones of the Royal Chambers to the great expanse of the Fountain Foyer. Hundreds of candles glowed in a ring around the chamber, casting a soft amber glow on the waters that sprayed from the mouths of stone figures. Tigers, lizards, and wolves spat colorful streams into the white de-saturation of moonlight. She glanced over her shoulder past the thrashing tendrils of her hair to see his dark shape running towards her. She clenched her baselard until its diamonds bit the skin of her palms and pushed her bare feet faster.

The thrusting of her legs took her from the Fountain Foyer and into the Garden of Delights. Here vines and flowers cascaded down a stone staircase into a jungle of blossoms and foliage. It was a maze in its own right, and most people were happy to get lost in it. Deep in the Garden of Delights, one could feast on the fruits of its trees and bushes, drink from its glittering fountains, and never come out for days. A thick canopy of branches and vines made one easily lose track of where he entered or where he might exit.

Except that Fayr knew the maze by heart.

When she had run far enough into it, she pretended to trip.

She chose the spot carefully. Here, the pebbled walkway was softened by velvety red soil. The fall was painful, but not too much so. As she sprawled into the dirt, she threw the baselard under a bush of Sweet-Sickle flowers. This, too, she chose on purpose. The bush's seeds, buried within its blossoms, shone with a soft green light, casting a mossy glow wherever they grew. The aroma of Sweet-Sickle flowers was rumored to awaken the senses and stir one's desire.

Belatedly, she realized this would not matter if her attacker still wore his accursed kerchief.

She did not know what else to do. Her bare legs felt like jelly from the hips down. She had run as far as she could bear to run. Not only because she was exhausted and in shock, but also because it did not seem right to keep running from the still-bleeding bodies of her mother and father. What else could she do now but turn and face her attacker?

His footsteps padded closer. She could hear his breath, coarse and heavy. She remembered suddenly how her father had injured him with a

knife to the shoulder. Surely he had lost a lot of blood, and the pain of his wound must be draining him.

"It won't hurt so much if you breathe in some safra," she said, rolling onto her back to face him.

Her voice felt like someone else's as it rang from her throat. She wasn't sure where her own confidence came from. She only knew that she had no other ideas besides this one, so she might as well try it.

His shape cut a jagged silhouette against the dim Haze. He took another step forward, bathing himself in the soft aquamarine glow of the Sweet-Sickle bushes.

As she stared up at him, Fayr felt her body tingle all over. Her fingers played with the flimsy folds of her night-gown as she pulled it up her thighs. Perhaps she was simply getting caught up in her own act. Or perhaps, unlike the safra, the Sweet-Sickle bush held at least a little sway over her senses. Whatever the case, her skin came alive with sensation, and her heart pounded with excitement. She felt the tickle of her hair against her shoulders. She felt the cool night air brush the tender skin of her chest. Her nipples tightened and became super-sensitive against the soft caress of her gown. She hoped the Wolven noticed this, too.

His eyes became very wide, so that a clear ring of white shone round the red irises. The metal weapon in his hand jerked, then fell into the soil.

"Please," she whispered. "Don't kill me. I'll do anything. Anything you want."

He groaned and sank down onto his knees. She wondered if the spikes caused him any discomfort as they stuck into the dirt. If so, he did not show it. He watched in a daze as her fingers continued to play with her gown. She pushed herself up onto one elbow, allowing one strap of her gown to slip down her shoulder. Her other hand caressed herself, up, up, up, until her finger nearly touched the sensitive tip of her own breast.

"I know the truth," she said. "You're very tired. You've come all this way, through so many trials, yet you cannot even enjoy the pleasures of Dearen, now that they're right beneath your nose. Don't you want to? Don't you wish to enjoy yourself?"

His hand searched the soil for the fallen piece of metal. Blood rolled down in his shoulder in a dark, viscous stream. His fingers found the weapon, but then he played with it, gently, almost caressing the steel. His gaze did not stray from her body.

"You think I am mad at you? I am not as mad as you think. My father told me about your family bloodline. You are only doing what you were

born and raised to do. It is the same with me. Except that I don't want to be like my family. I despise the Violeneese, my own ancestors. I hate them for this curse they've given me. I hate my father for raising me in their shadow, never even giving me the knowledge to choose a fate for myself. I am glad that ... I am glad that he's dead and I want to thank you. I want to thank you for freeing me."

The assassin reached out and grabbed her shoulders. He pushed her down with a forceful shove. Her arms splayed out on either side of her body as he pressed her to the earth. He straddled her again, the metal spikes of his thighs ripping her gown. It was almost like the exact scene she'd experienced earlier today, except that this time, he did not hold the metal to her neck. Instead, his bare hand gripped her flesh. At first the pressure of his touch was crushing. Then it softened to a light caress. His hand trailed down her her throat and paused against her chest.

The violence of her own breath made his hand rise and fall with her bosom. His red eyes stared pointedly at her nipple. Then, with little warning, he wrapped his hand around her breast. She gasped, arching against his touch involuntarily. A warmth seemed to spread from his palm through the whole of her body. She wondered if he could feel her heartbeat pounding up toward his hand.

"You won't be able to enjoy it with that stuff around your nose," she breathed, even though she wasn't sure whether that was true. "Nor will you be able to kiss me."

He grew very stiff all the sudden. His nails dug into her skin. Perhaps she had overdone it. He leaned down, the spikes of his thighs digging into her ribs until she squirmed with discomfort. "Two more," he hissed. "Just two more, and it is finished forever."

Fayr's hand wrapped around the hilt of the baselard.

He leaned back, twirling his metal shard across his fingertips. His eyes still bored into her chest, but now it was because he aimed to stab her in the heart.

"Goodbye," she said. Then she swept the blade across his throat.

It was a clumsy, unpracticed movement. But her desperation served its purpose. The blood sprayed, the assassin thrashed, and his own weapon flew from his grasp.

She crawled out from under him, scrambling through the soil to get away. She closed her eyes, clamped her bloody hands over her ears, but she could still hear his groaning as he died. She lurched as her sorrow overcame her. A terrible cry ripped from her throat as her rage and

despair burst from her body; hot tears swelled from her lashes and dripped, glittering, into the soil of the gardens.

## Chapter 2

### The Wolven Way

"I'll accept half my promised payment," said Sean. "No less, and no more."

"It seems to me you didn't complete your assignment." The Vikand chief shifted on his feet, showing off the rolling sway of his large body, making sure the axe against his hip gave off a nice, bright sheen. "That means no payment."

"Two bodies, two assignments." Sean gritted his teeth with frustration. Why must he always explain such simple reasoning? "I killed one, therefore I completed one assignment. And now I will accept my payment."

"Ram shit." The chief pulled his axe from his belt. A matching movement rippled among his three companions as they drew their own weapons in turn. They probably felt empowered here, miles from any town, watched only by a jagged landscape of scrub and rocks. They had followed him here on their giant rams and mountain goats, probably hoping to startle him into submission. They didn't, of course: he had smelled their stinky steeds half-a-day away, and he had picked this very spot to confront them. "You're going to finish the job, Wolven. Or you get nothing, and you leave here with your tail between your legs."

"Neither," said Sean.

This reply took the chief by surprise, and it took him a moment to reply. "I don't understand," he said at last. "I thought you Wolvens killed anyone. You'll kill a woman but you won't kill a fucking blind man? You could have killed him with your little finger!"

Sean shrugged, but used this movement to grab a throwing star from his suit. Most people assumed that the sharp metal studs along his leather outfit were purely ornamental. The truth was that they served both as armor and a weapon in hand-to-hand combat. But most importantly, they camouflaged his throwing stars: small shards of metal curved and shaped to fly like an arrow when cast with a proper flick of the wrist.

Along the sides of his legs and forearms, he kept a dozen of the shards for easy retrieval.

"Maybe you're not as tough as they say," snarled the chief. "Maybe you're just a Belazar-burned—"

"I would advise you," said Sean, "not to insult me. Especially in the name of Belazar."

"Chief," said one of his wise companions. "Maybe we should let it go."

This advice only seemed to enrage the chief further, for he next stared straight into Sean's red eyes, lowered his voice, and said, "I said you and your Belazar can come over and suck my cock!"

The throwing star seemed to sprout spontaneously from the chief's neck, so quickly did it appear. Sean had actually thrown a great deal of strength into the maneuver, and his arm had moved further than most people would ever realize to gather the necessary momentum. But to anyone watching, they only saw a slight twist of his body, a blur of movement around his arm, and perhaps a glitter of metal as it sped through the air. It took a great deal longer for the chief to die than it took for Sean to kill him. For a moment his eyes goggled in the shock of his own mortality. Then the blood poured, and his limbs weakened, and finally with a wet sigh, he fell to the earth.

His comrades took a few breaths before recovering from their own horror. By then, Sean had already made his next move. He lunged upon the largest man first, who had begun to lift his own axe. Sean waited until the man held the heavy weapon in such a position that his balance would be compromised. Sean then ducked and swept his leg around, knocking the man's feet out from under him. Then Sean rose in time to aid the giant's fall with a quick jab to the chest. The large man's weight did the rest of the work, knocking the wind from his lungs as he struck the earth. Sean threw a star onto the man's breast—gently, only hard enough to make it stick. Then he placed his foot against the curve of the metal and stomped on it.

Two more remained, and they came at him quickly. A swing of one man's blade spat sparks as it glanced off one of Sean's spikes. Sean dodged this blow and another simultaneously, though he had trouble discerning the second attack, for a black blur seemed to snap at him from thin air. He came up behind the man with the blade, caught his arm mid-swing, and snapped it at the joint.

The sudden rope around his neck caught him completely by surprise, perhaps because when he turned to confront it, he saw that it was not a

rope exactly, but a whip. The woman who held it gave it a firm yank and pulled him several feet across the earth. He used the spikes along his arms to grip the earth and stop himself, though this caused the whip to tighten around his throat. He held himself long enough to grab the axe discarded by his fallen chief, then released himself to the woman's pull.

He could only guess that she planned to kill him with a dagger once she'd pulled him close enough, for she didn't have him tightly enough to choke him. He put his hands behind his head, making it appear as if he would grab the whip and wrestle it. Instead, he angled his body into the direction of her pull, and when the time was right, he curled into it. He kicked his legs up and over his head, then pushed off the ground with his hands. His boot struck her in the face, and as she fell, he uprighted himself atop her.

He finished it quickly with a swing of the axe, then left the blade where it lie. From his neck, however, he recovered the whip and then hung it against his hip.

For a moment he nearly left them that way. The vultures already circled above, and Sean thought it rude to keep them waiting. But as much as he loved throwing his stars, they were a costly and rare weapon, and his father would surely kill him if any went missing. So he gathered them all, wiped them of blood, and tossed the remaining droplets into the soil for good measure. "To Belazar," he said. "*Afithi fenturus zentaya.*"

He didn't even know what the words meant. He only knew that he should always say them, after every kill, as his family had done for generations. Then he rummaged through the dead chief's pockets and took his payment, which equaled half the agreed amount: not a penny less, not a penny more.

\*

Sean and his father lived on one of the most dangerous mountains in Vikand other than the Great Volcano itself. For generations, members of the Wolven bloodline had lived here, for who else would want to? The so-called Wolven mountain was notorious for its sharp granite spikes, its walls of white and gray foliated slate, and its jagged talus of broken obsidian around the base. The small mountain held a plethora of fatal falls, flat unscalable surfaces, and mazes of black glassy stones that could distort one's vision and trap him forever in illusion.

Sean knew the path to his home because his father had trained him to traverse it as a small boy, and Sean had practiced it many times since.

The only other person who knew the same path was his sister, Shora, and she had left this continent for another long ago.

Sometimes, Sean looked forward to the climb homeward more than home itself. The act of climbing helped clear Sean's head of the noise of civilization. He loved the sound of the wind against the bluffs. He loved the solidity of the stone under his fingertips. The path home would never change, unless the earth itself willed it. Only an earthquake could morph the path, or perhaps an eruption of the far-off volcano, which had not erupted for centuries. But no matter how often mortal men raged wars or built kingdoms, this mountain would stay the same.

That's what he told himself, anyway, as the powdery slate rubbed the blood from his fingertips.

The simple shack of his home, unlike the process of climbing, sometimes required a harsh adjustment from city-life. At first, he would begrudge the long trips to the stream to collect water. He would also hate the taste of old meat, packed and salted for his return. The silence within the wooden walls could be deafening. The heat of his own hearth-fire would stifle him, yet he would curse the long trek back down the rocks to gather timber. He knew that it was neither the simplicity of nature nor the loss of civilization that bothered him most. The hardest part was adjusting to his own irksome company.

Eventually, the adjustment would occur. He would feel peaceful in his home, and he would not have a care as to what happened next. Perhaps he would anticipate the day his father returned, sometimes with dread, sometimes with excitement. Other times, he might look forward to—or apprehend—his next inevitable assassination contract. Until then, he would dwell in a lengthy and peaceable span of solitude.

This time, however, he had not even had time to adjust when the sound of a trumpet blasted over the mountain and awoke him from silence.

Normally, Sean would ignore such a sound. Every once in awhile, people desiring the services of the Wolvens would blast their trumpets up the mountain in an attempt to lure one of them down. Sometimes, Sean or his father would answer the call. Most of the time, they did not.

This trumpet played a certain melody, however: one Sean recognized with a profound sense of dread. It was the tune of the royal Polemarch, Leonard Khan himself.

He walked from his shack to the edge of the mountain bluff. Far below, amidst the obsidian talus of the mountain, at least a hundred soldiers in their furs and plated armor awaited the Wolven's attention.

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A certain smell always hung about the Royal Horde, Sean had noticed. It was not altogether good nor altogether bad, as far as he could tell, but a fluctuating mixture. Depending on the strength of the breeze, one might catch a strong whiff of the ram-wool from the soldiers and archers important enough to ride them. It was a bitter and musky smell, typically foul, but a smell Sean had known since childhood, and therefore not completely unpleasant. Riding that odor in smaller but more potent splashes was the aroma of peppers and spices, for the Vikand royalty was notorious for its love of trenchant flavors.

Whatever his opinion on it, Sean did not have to breathe a great deal of the army's stench, for his wolf-mask protected him from its full pungency.

"Really?" barked a gruff voice. "You'd wear that mask *now*?"

The man who addressed him towered high above most other men. His shoulders bulged from both muscle and armor. Draga wool, the finest wool known to man and the hardest to obtain, draped his gold-plated armor in thick silver spirals. Judging by this and the heavy gold rings wrapping his arms and neck, he was royalty. His crisp blue eyes, coarse yellow hair, and boxy face provided yet another indication of his identity.

"High Chief Richard," said Sean. "Why have you called me?"

"I didn't." Richard jabbed a thumb in the direction of a large carriage behind him. Metal rods and carvings framed the vehicle, showing off the best of Vikand's metal-smithing. Bear hides hung from the roof to form the walls. Ropes bound two giant rams to the carriage, and their hooves scraped against the rocky earth as they stirred with impatience. Their spiraling horns gleamed with sharp metal spikes. "My father's the one who called you."

"Leonard Khan?"

"No shit. Now how about you tell me who *you* are?"

Sean just stared at him blankly through the wolf mask. He felt no need to point out the obvious.

"You know what I mean, shit-brains. Take off the mask!"

Sean did not move, except for a few of his fingers that twitched against his side. He would have loved to fling a throwing star into this idiot's throat. But today Sean wore a simple tunic and trousers, so only a knife and a few stars were stashed in his belt. Besides, even if he wore his full outfit, he would not have enough stars to fight the Royal Horde. To tell the truth, he felt out of sorts in this situation. The few times royalty had

come to call in the past, his father had been the one to answer them. And even then, the meetings had been discreet. A hundred hordesfolk had not marched to Wolven mountain just to give him an assignment.

So what on earth could this be about?

"I said *take off the mask!*"

Sean remained still.

"Friva-damn you!" Richard grabbed the hilt of his sword. It was a giant thing, nearly the width of his bulging arms, and the edge was serrated. Sean did not reach for his own weapon, but slightly adjusted his balance. The quickest way to best this oaf would be to use his own momentum against him.

"Richard, please hold your temper."

A new man stepped down from the carriage. His face and coloring shared some aspect of Richard's, but in all other things they were opposite. While Richard's skin was leathery and coarse with hair, this fellow had the complexion of a baby's; his round cheeks shone a rosy pink. He even had dimples. His blond hair was short and curly, as if casting a golden halo about his head. He wore no armor of any sort: only soft white linens. He lacked the muscular build of most men of Vikand; his frame—small though it was—more closely resembled the suppleness of freshly baked bread.

"Forgive my brother, won't you?" said the younger fellow, swaggering closer. "He tends to draw his steel prematurely. As well as thrust it. You mustn't fault him for it. He has been rewarded for such behavior all his life. As have you, I imagine."

Picard grinned as if this clever observation should make them all friends. Then he put one fist against his chest and bowed slightly in the traditional gesture of respect. The right arm remained at his side, as it should, but in this position Sean noticed something strange about it. The arm seemed strangely shaped, as if the joints were uneven, and it also seemed disproportionately small. He wore a black leather glove on his hand that disappeared up his white sleeve. Buckles and straps covered the glove, criss-crossing every which way, and Sean also caught the glint of metal under gaps in the fabric. His other hand, meanwhile, seemed completely normal.

"I am Archon Picard," the young politician went on. "Our father is Polemarch Leonard, also the khan of all Vikand. And you are a Wolven." He took a step closer, squinting his big blue eyes. Sean noticed something odd about them. His eyes had a flatness to them, like staring

into a stirred pond before the dirt settled. The gaze had no depth, or if it did, Sean could not determine it. "Won't you tell us your name?"

"All you need to know is that I am Wolven. And if you have an assignment for me, you must tell me quickly, or I will return home."

"Will you now?" Picard and his brother exchanged glances. Then Picard chuckled, as if sharing a joke with his brother, and snapped his fingers. "Fire!" he yelled.

Not much could startle Sean, but when Picard snapped his fingers, the Wolven flinched slightly. Picard made the motion with his right hand: the same hand wearing the ridiculous glove. If Sean had thought the arm was oddly-shaped before, he now hesitated to call it an arm at all. It did not move the way an arm should move. When the fingers snapped, they moved with uncanny swiftness, and made a clicking sound as if from within the flesh itself. Finally, Sean had noticed that just before snapping, Picard had pulled a strap of his glove with his other hand—almost like a trigger to set off the motion.

In any case, no one else seemed surprised by this, and a servant nearby even seemed to expect it. He walked up to Picard with a flint at the ready. Picard pulled a gray cigar from his tunic with his normal hand and held it up to the lackey. As the lackey struck the flint, Picard caught the spark, then sucked the cigar with great fervor. A flame caught and glowed red. When Picard exhaled, glittering smoke poured from his lips.

"There," he said, his cheeks dimpling with a happy smile. "Now what were we talking about? Ah yes: *you*. I wanted to be polite and let you introduce yourself, but you don't seem so inclined. Your name is Sean Wolven. Your father was Gray Wolven. He did not fulfill the most important assignment of his life, and so you have inherited it out of necessity. How was that?" He took another drag on his cigar, and for just a moment, the glitter of the smoke seemed to catch in his gaze.

Sean felt cold inside. He did not know how Picard knew his full name. But never mind that: a name was just a name. This didn't trouble him so much as the rest. "What happened to my father?"

"If you want to know," said Picard, "take off the mask and meet the Polemarch in his carriage. What does the mask matter anyway? I already know your name—as does everyone in hearing range—and even if I didn't, I suspect I could pick you out of any crowd by those red eyes of yours."

Sean wanted to take it off anyway. He could not see straight through the holes and his breath felt stifled by the ceramic. He only wore it because he thought it was expected of him, both by family tradition and

royal etiquette. Often, hiring a face-less assassin seemed like a good idea for both parties involved. But perhaps Picard was right. Perhaps there wasn't a point anymore.

"I'll take the mask off once I'm in the carriage," he said at last.

"No," said Picard. "Do it here."

Beads of sweat tickled Sean's brow. What else could he do? Call Picard's bluff and leave this all behind to climb back up the mountain? Or do whatever he asked and learn more?

His hand trembled as he grabbed the mask and began to pull. A welcome breeze splashed his face as he bared it. He lowered the mask to his side and reluctantly met Picard's gaze.

"Very good," said Picard. The archon's expression increased Sean's dread. Picard looked more pleased than he ought to, as if he had won a much greater battle. "Now into the carriage. But as we go, I suppose I should forewarn you of one little fact. Your father is dead."

Sean staggered mid-stride. He could not remember the last time in his entire life he had staggered. Picard watched it happen, for even as he pretended to shift his attention, his eyes fixed on Sean, and for a moment they looked like clear, bottomless pools.

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"What else did you tell him?" grumbled Leonard Khan. "What the hell did the two of you say?"

Within the carriage, Sean could hardly breathe, much less keep his wits about him. Why must he meet the khan here? It was so dark that he could have kept his mask on and no one would have known the difference. The khan himself was just a bright blur in the corner. Only one candle burned next to him, and this barely illuminated his bear-skin clothes, his Khan Collar of rubies and steel, and his stark white hair. Meanwhile, the strange smoke from Picard's cigar filled the carriage with its glittery billows, and something about its smell bothered Sean very much. His nose itched and his head spun.

"If you're unhappy with my performance," Picard told his father, "then next time do it yourself."

"Yes I will," growled the khan, "then I'll strip you of your archonship."

Picard chuckled, pouring out another stream of smoke. "I look forward to the day."

The khan coughed and turned back to Sean, who still knelt awkwardly on the metal floor of the carriage. "So, you're the last Wolven left?"

Sean's fingers dug into the cloth of his tunic. "No. I don't think so."

“But if there are any others left,” said Leonard Khan, “they’ve gone renegade.”

Sean forced his voice through gnashing teeth. “That is not for me to say.” He honestly didn’t know how many of his bloodline were left. He knew only of his sister, Shora, who had left many years ago to explore other continents. She remained committed to her ancestors’ cause of destroying the Violnese bloodline, but unlike most, she believed that the people of the purple-hair may have originated somewhere else in the world.

“Well,” sighed the khan and Polemarch, “I really don’t give a shit anyway. All I care about is whether you’re as devoted as your father to wiping the Violnese family from the face of the earth. Are you?”

Sean bowed his head, wishing more than ever that he wore a mask just to hide his torn expression. What could he say? He didn’t know that answer, himself. But perhaps what he really felt didn’t matter. His father had always taught him that an employer should never know a Wolven’s feelings at all. “I am committed to my assignments,” he said. “It is as simple as that.”

Leonard Khan made a little grunt of uncertainty.

Picard stepped forward between his father and Sean. His gloved hand twitched against his side. “I think this is a very good response.” He spoke as if to the both of them. “I have heard that the relationship between the Wolvens and Violnese has often been misunderstood, anyway. Some believe that your own ancestors, Sean, never really swore to eradicate the Violnese race. They were merely very good at it, and because the Violnese posed such a problem for others, they became a common assignment for the Wolvens. Others believe your families were enemies long ago because you worshiped opposing gods. Who knows?”

Sean shifted uncomfortably. He did not like the fact Picard addressed him by his first name. Nor that he appeared to know more about the Wolvens than Sean himself. Worse, Picard seemed to be gloating about it.

“In any case,” Picard went on, “it is important for us to know that you will pursue this cause not for your own purposes, but for ours. After all, right now we only desire the death of Prince Kyne. Isn’t that right, Father?”

Leonard Khan grumbled under his breath.

“I have to piss,” said Richard suddenly. Then he lumbered out of the carriage. No one seemed to care. His absence gave them a little more space to breathe.

"You see," Picard turned back towards Sean, "Gray Wolven did succeed in killing King Joyhan of Dearen and his wife. Only the two royal children remain: Prince Kyne and Princess Fayr. They had both been assigned to your father. However, right now we only want you to kill Prince Kyne."

Sean lowered his head even further. If he could, he would have sunk through the floor and scampered away from here. "His assignments become my own. It is the Wolven way. If you already told him to kill the royal family, then I will succeed where he failed."

"You Wolvens!" Leonard Khan laughed and slapped his knee. "I love your way of doing business."

Sean felt dizzy again. A very pleasant smell had filled the air, one he hadn't been able to place until now. It reminded him of the fruit-filled pastries his mother used to bake him as a child. But how could that be? He looked over at the glittering smoke flowing from Picard's lips. When Picard first started smoking the cigar, the smell struck Sean as bitter and unpleasant. Yet the more he breathed it, the more he liked it.

"I will ... complete ... the assignment," he grumbled at last.

"Relax," sighed Picard. "No one's asking you to break your precious principles. We had not yet paid your father a single gold penny. That is also the Wolven way, is it not? No payment until completion? So think of it this way: you have inherited your father's assignment, but you will not kill the princess until we say so."

"I don't understand," said Sean. "Do you want her dead or don't you?"

The glow of Picard's cigar faded. He had smoked it down to a stub. With a flick of his mechanical hand, he threw the paper wrapping to the floor, then smashed it with his foot. His voice had a new edge to it as he said, "What we want is none of your concern. Do as we say and we'll pay you your fucking fee."

"Picard!" yelled his father.

Sean continued to stare in a daze at the glittery remains of the cigar. As the smoke cleared, so did his head. "In that case," said Sean, "I will require the payment for the first two assignments. Now."

"What?" Leonard Khan leaned forward.

"Each kill is an assignment," Sean intoned habitually. "I will collect my father's payment for the first two kills. Then I will kill Prince Kyne, and I will receive that payment. Then I will take no further action unless you tell me to. If you choose not to kill Princess Fayr, I will receive no further payment, and our business will be concluded."

"The other Wolven agreed to a lump sum!" yelled the khan. "A lump sum! We agreed!"

"These are my terms," said Sean.

"He's being quite reasonable," Picard said to his father. "The terms of our original arrangement have changed. After all, I am sure Sean needs some money now for his own expenses: anti-safra and such. That is the key to a Wolven's success, and comes all the way from the kingdom of Yamair. Isn't that right, Sean?"

Sean glared at the cocky archon with the full sharpness of his bright red eyes, too furious to respond. How the hell did he know about anti-safra?

"And what if we don't accept your terms?" asked Leonard Khan.

Sean had been waiting for an opportunity like this: an opportunity to show off his prowess. An opportunity to wipe the smile from Picard's round, dimpled cheeks. So he pounced sideways, grabbed Picard's arms, and twisted his body around. In a flash he twisted one wrist behind Picard's back while he probed the fleshy skin of Picard's throat with sharp metal.

"Then I have no more business with you," said Sean over Picard's shoulder.

Picard made a strange little whimpering sound. He did not make much of a struggle, and he felt almost like jelly under Sean's grip. Sean flinched when he realized that the wrist he held belonged to the right arm: the one that deviated from anatomical norms, the one covered with a glove that twitched and creaked with its various straps and bolts. Nonetheless, Sean recognized the feel of flesh under the leather: flesh that felt pain. So he did not relent.

"Easy, now," said Leonard Khan. "I meant no disrespect."

"If you don't pay what you owe me," said Sean, "then I take the money by force."

"No need for that," said Picard. His voice wavered and his body trembled. The joints of his mechanical hand twitched under Sean's grip. "Right, Father?"

"I am sorry if we offended you, Wolven," said the khan, though he sounded more annoyed than anything. "We will pay you your fee."

"There, you see?" Picard gulped, pushing his throat even harder against the metal. "Are you going to let me go now?"

Sean wanted very much to slit Picard's throat. Perhaps it was just habit, or perhaps it was something worse. He did not usually let people free once he had them under his blade. Furthermore, this fellow had an

air to him that got under Sean's skin, like a spider he wanted to smash under his boot. Unfortunately, this fellow was also the son of the khan of all Vikand.

With a fierce shove, Sean released the archon. Picard stumbled and caught himself awkwardly by grabbing the bear-skin walls. The entire carriage rocked from the movement.

This must have gotten the attention of High Chief Richard, for a moment later he pulled open the entrance and peered inside, spilling in strong rays of sunshine. "What's going on in here?"

"A bit late to be asking," grumbled Leonard Khan. He must have thought Richard's presence would have restrained Sean's behavior. He was wrong about that.

Picard's face was flushed with fear and exertion. His soft body trembled from head to foot. But his eyes gleamed with a strange delight as they returned to the Wolven, and his lips curled into a smile. "One good turn deserves another, doesn't it, Wolven? You agreed to kill Prince Kyne, but you did not swear in the name of Belazar. I trust you will do so now in a gesture of good faith?"

Sean's stomach churned with fear.

Richard and Leonard exchanged puzzled expressions.

"Your father swore the oath," said Picard snidely. "In fact, as I understand it, all Wolvens are supposed to commit to their kills in the name of Belazar. Is it not true that you Wolvens are as powerful as you are because the blood of Belazar himself runs in your—"

"I will swear." Sean could barely speak through the gnashing of his teeth. But he preferred anything right now to hearing Picard say another word about ancient Wolven practice. "I will swear the oath to Belazar when I am paid for my father's kills."

"Hm." Picard considered this. He stroked his chin for a moment, then beamed with an innocent smile. "Very well."

Leonard Khan sighed and settled back into his chair, relieved that the conversation was finally over. "Wait outside, Wolven. Someone will bring you the money shortly."

Sean bowed, then all but ran out the carriage.

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Sean waited for his payment at the top of the obsidian scree slope. As much as he wanted to be home and preparing his fire by now, he felt a certain satisfaction standing here above the army. He wondered whether his father would have been proud of his performance today, his first real encounter with royalty.

His heart twinged with pain as he realized he would never know what his father thought. He would never see his father again.

The physical sensations of his surroundings helped distract him from inner confusion. A gushing breeze flapped his tunic against his legs and lashed his dark hair against his cheek. The sun cast a red glow upon the mountainous horizon as it sank, pushing long skinny shadows over the gray earth. Sean thought to himself that if the shadows were tangible, they would slice the Royal Horde apart.

Flames sprouted from darkness as the Horde lit their torches. Hammers thrust pins into the rocky earth as they hastened to pitch a few tents. Whether they had intended to stay the night here or not, it appeared that they would.

Eventually a pale shape distinguished itself from the writhing mass of hordesfolk and picked its way up the rocks. The man was awkward against the jagged earth, slipping and sliding and waving his arms for balance. Sean took a deep breath in preparation. Here again was the curly-haired blond named Picard. Sean did not like most people. But he didn't like this man especially. And his fingers still itched for the lost opportunity to kill him.

When Picard finally reached him, he bent over and took a moment to catch his breath. Sean could surmise by the way he cradled his skinny right arm against his body that it was causing him an unusual amount of pain. His good hand reached into his white tunic, fumbled around, and pulled out a little gold pouch. He opened it under his nose and snorted heavily. When he pulled back up, the flatness had returned to his eyes, and a few pieces of the glittering dust remained stuck to his nose. His pink lips spread with a smile.

"Safrá," growled Sean. Then he made the sign of Belazar, holding one hand flat and forking it with two fingers of the opposite hand.

"What was that?" Picard chuckled. "Some sort of curse?"

"Where's my money?"

"I'm afraid there's been a delay."

Sean bristled and stepped towards him. His hands prepared to grab the archon for the second time that day and throw him down against the rocks. But something in the man's flat eyes stopped him.

"I wouldn't throw another temper tantrum if I were you," drawled the archon. "I suppose you wanted to prove something back there in the carriage. I understand, and I say well done. But I also wonder if you enjoyed it too much. And I did not take you for one who abuses the weak."

This comment took Sean aback, but he recovered as quickly as possible. "You don't know me at all."

A terrible smile pushed up Picard's cheeks. The flatness of his eyes caved in again, opening into two deep pits. "Don't I? I saw the bodies you left in your path. I know that you did not fulfill your last assignment. Some poor blind man, was it? Why didn't you kill him?"

Blood roared in Sean's ears. How did Picard know about that? How did he seem to know everything? "I ... I ... I didn't want to."

"Really? That's the best explanation you've got?"

Out of the corner of his eyes, Sean glimpsed a few hordesfolk watching them from afar. They probably couldn't see Sean as well as he could see them, however; their vision was not as sharp as a Wolven's. In any case, Sean knew where to pull Picard out of their sight. Sean could kill this safra-stuffed scum right now and get away with it, if he wanted. And yet despite all that, he could not resist the stifling urge—the *need*—to explain himself. "Anyone could have killed that man. It was beneath a Wolven to do so."

"Good try. But I'm still not convinced."

"Belazar didn't want him."

Picard laughed. "Oh please! That's your worst try yet. I think we both know that if you had promised that blood to Belazar, like a Wolven is supposed to do before each assignment ... well. Let's just say that your punishment would have been more severe than a lack of full payment."

Sean clenched his teeth so hard his head ached. He could think of no more excuses. How could he explain what he himself did not understand?

"So let's just say you didn't kill him because you didn't *want* to," sighed Picard. "The worst part is that when your employers complained, you turned on them."

Sean took another step towards Picard, his eyes flicking towards a nearby rock-face. If Sean killed him there, no one would see.

Picard just smiled wider, as if he knew even the silent thoughts in Sean's head. "I'm right, aren't I? And what do you suppose my father would do if I told him about that? Would you kill the whole Horde just so you could do as you please? Really, Sean. I thought you Wolvens had more discipline."

Something about that remark made the haze of anger clear from Sean's head. Picard's blatant accusation boiled all the rest down to a single problem. Lately—now, especially—Sean had been letting his feelings get the better of him. It was one of the few things a Wolven should *never* do.

What would his father have said about how he handled his last assignment? He would have been furious. But now he never would be, for he would never even know. Now it didn't matter.

He drew back from Picard suddenly as a strange wave of sensation crashed over him. His muscles turned to mush. He did not want Picard to notice, but perhaps it was already too late.

Picard cocked his head curiously. "You're really more interesting than I expected," he said. "How delightful."

"Fucking lunatic," snarled Sean. "What is your interest in me?"

"I'm sure you'd like to know." Picard's gloved arm twitched abruptly. He winced and grabbed it with his left hand. For a moment his breath became shallow and he struggled to recollect himself. Then he pushed another smile past his gritted teeth and went on as if nothing had happened. "But you'd probably be disappointed. The truth is primarily that I am thorough and I like to do my research, especially on a man to whom we're entrusting the fate of this nation. However, I will confess: you Wolvens fascinate me, as does anyone who claims to communicate with the gods. Tell me. Do you really believe in Belazar, or is it all just an act?"

"My father believed." Sean turned away, looking habitually up the mountain, blinking a strange sensation out of his eyes, and hoped this would be answer enough. "When will I get paid?"

"Give me a week to gather the money. But don't expect me to come trumpeting up your mountain like today. You'll have to come fetch it."

The Wolven flashed his teeth with anger.

"Sit, boy! It's a lot of money to gather on short notice. Do you even notice how much it is?" Picard chuckled. "Of course you do. And even if you don't, I shan't dare give a Wolven less than he was promised." With a happy sigh, he pulled the pouch of safra from his tunic again. Another violent sniff sent a small cloud of glittering dust into the air. "Never fear, Sean my friend. You'll get paid for your father's crimes. And then you'll do whatever we ask. Won't you?"

Sean glared back at the man's foppish smile.

Then, with almost disturbing quickness, the smile vanished. "Meet me in Fragan Town, at Gorla's Inn, seven days from now. Make it sunset." He extended his gloved hand.

With great reluctance, Sean took it. He felt metal rods shifting under the leather as their hands clasped. The strength of Picard's grip surprised him.

Picard released Sean with a firm shake. "It has been a pleasure, Wolven. I look forward to deepening our business relationship."

As Sean watched the fellow wobble away, he thought to himself that there was nothing he dreaded more.

# Chapter 3

## Metronome

“Anti-safra?” King-wife Eleanor stroked her chin thoughtfully. “I really don’t know what you mean by that.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and listened to the comforting sounds of metronomes ticking, gears turning, and hammers striking rhythmically outside. The beat of the Earth Mechanic could be heard in all things—even things which at first sounded cacophonous. God’s beat was hard to find within the shocking news that the king and queen of Dearen had been openly assassinated, even if it made little sense to her on its face. Underneath it all, the Mechanic must have his hand somewhere—turning a gear here, turning a gear there—all for the sake of creating something incredible.

She opened her eyes and studied her visitor with a freshly synchronized mind. He offered very little information about himself, not even a name. He called himself a merchant, and the rest she could only deduce by his unusual appearance. He had dark brown skin, like the bark of the mahogany trees that grew on the inner meadows of Yamair. His eyes were so black the irises could hardly be discerned from the pupils. But this did not distinguish him so much as his strange clothes. A hat full of feathers covered his head and hid all his hair. His blue suit was of a strange cut and design, all sharp lines and angles. The spin of the fabric was strange, also, comprised of undulating columns of thread, all so perfectly arranged she wished very much to know what loom created it.

That question, however, was for another day. Today she must learn as much about the momentous events in Dearen as she could—especially the valuable information this strange Merchant seemed to have of them.

“I know that you are reluctant to discuss your own involvement in the recent events of Dearen,” King-wife Eleanor said carefully. “But please understand I need more information if I’m to make sense of your accusations.”

The gentle scratch of a pen against parchment echoed her words. As always, the Royal Scholar sat nearby, writing down the events that took place. The Royal Scholar was a woman named Rebeka, ever present, ever silent except for the scratch of her pen. Sometimes, the king or king-wife asked the Scholar for factual information. The job of a scholar was to both store information and retrieve it. But most of the time, Eleanor forgot she was even there.

“Oh please, Majesty, I accuse you of nothing.” The Merchant pressed his dark palms together in a gesture of supplication. “I only wanted to warn you of the danger your kingdom might face, if you or a known Synergist of Yamair were ever implicated in the assassin’s activities.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” said the king-wife, though she wished she did not. She stood and walked to the Great Clock upon her mantelpiece. The click of its ticker set the tempo of every rhythm in Yamair. Considering that, it was such a small and simple thing, made of polished wood, golden gears, and sheets of crystal.

She could see her own reflection in the glassy surface, reminding her of her own smallness compared to her great responsibility. As King-wife of Yamair, her heartbeat was like the metronome of all her people. Normally the king served as metronome, of course. Eleanor was merely an echo of his own rhythm, a synchronized gear to his engine. But the king was gone now, and he had been gone for several weeks. No one knew the day of his return, and of its soonness, she could only guess. Until then, she ruled as King-wife. She served as Metronome to all the people of Yamair.

She dabbed the bound coils of her blond hair self-consciously, afraid that some piece might fall lose. Every button on her blouse must be secure, every frill symmetrical. The seams of her trousers must fit perfectly to her legs, and the soles of her shoes must remain in good condition. She must be the walking image of efficiency, the perfect example of Synchronization. She took a deep breath and tried as she might to wipe all emotion from her face as she turned back to her visitor. “Yes, I’m beginning to see why you came to me, and I grow increasingly thankful with the realization. You say the assassin wore a kerchief that seemed to shield him from the effects of safra. Meanwhile, the Synergists of Yamair are known for their ability to concoct chemicals affecting one’s moods and productivity. Persons in Vikand or Dearen would lack the means and motivation to create something like so-called ‘anti-safra.’ Therefore, it stands to reason that someone unpracticed in the arts of deduction—such as the prince or princess of Dearen—might make the

unwarranted assumption that Yamair was somehow involved in the assassination attempt.”

The Merchant smiled so widely that his white teeth seemed to glow. “Your intelligence is dazzling, oh King-wife. You voice my own fears as if you could see into my mind.”

“Far from it.” As she glanced once more at the dark holes of his eyes, she only wished this was the case. “I am only utilizing the powers of rationalization granted to me by the Earth Mechanic himself.”

He laughed softly, his voice like a bell upon the breeze of the open window. “Very well. In that case I hope you can deduce my own interest in this most unfortunate affair?”

“I’m afraid not. I lack sufficient knowledge for that.” She sat down in the armchair across from her guest, crossing one leg over the other. Queens in other countries would probably sit in a “throne” rather than a simple armchair. But in Yamair, the effectiveness of the chair mattered more than anything else. To serve as a good chair, it needed only a strong frame and a comfortable cushion. To please the eyes, a hand-woven design of flowers served this purpose efficiently. “It is rational, of course, that I give you something in return for the information you gave to me. Nothing in life should be free; for everything of value there is something else of equal value, required to provide proper balance. So tell me, Merchant. What do you need?”

“Need?” The Merchant shrugged. His gaze meandered to moving gadgets along the cabinets and mantelpieces of Eleanor’s home. “I need very little. But the world needs very much.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Eleanor’s tone became sharp. “I’ll ask again. What do you require in return for your information?”

His gaze met hers, the dark eyes somehow deep and penetrating all at once. “I am a merchant, but I am also a traveler. The two go hand-in-hand, you might say. Therefore I am always looking for something valuable to trade.” He settled comfortably in his chair. A very calm and polite expression softened his features. “This anti-safra, if it exists, interests me very much. I care nothing for the politics involved and I promise you my utmost discretion. But if you know how to make anti-safra, or something like it, then I need the formula.”

For a moment, Eleanor felt petrified. She could not even breathe. She wondered if the Merchant noticed. She wondered what he thought of her if he did. But in the end, it hopefully wouldn’t matter. “What you ask for is too valuable,” she snapped at last. “Furthermore it puts me at risk. Ask for something else.”

"One bit of information for another," said the Merchant. He rose to his feet in a swift motion, his long slender body unfolding limb by limb. "It seems a fair trade to me, and it's the only one I'll accept." He bowed deeply. To her surprise, he reached up and pulled off his hat with the movement. Long, white hair spilled from the garment and over his cheekbones. It was such a contrast to his dark brown skin that she nearly gasped aloud. "I'll be staying in the Turbine Tavern if perchance you change your mind. 'Til then, King-wife."

He left without even waiting for her response, much less her dismissal. The weight of their discussion distracted Eleanor from any offense.

"Oh Byron," she whispered, "what would you do?"

\*

"Lever six one two. Pressure at thirty bars. Open gate 4B at the rate of two spans per second. Watch pressure. Turn auxiliary blades at fifty cycles. Now open gate 4C at the rate of—"

"Pressure climbing."

"Pressure should not surpass thirty-three bars."

"Pressure at thirty-five bars and counting."

"What?" Eleanor blinked a few times. All of her senses came alive at once. Sometimes she forgot about them when she got swept up in the rhythm of creation. Often this was a good thing, for it meant that she synchronized with the great Earth Mechanic, whose pace-setting drum could only be heard beneath the noise of physical sensations and emotional turmoil. But in this case, she could not explain where her mind had just gone. She watched the undulating barometers and levers all around her, moving at uncanny rates. She peered through the small glass window into the waters beyond, churning with various shades of blue. The roar of the rushing water grew deafening outside the thin metal hull of their sub-station.

Every day, she climbed down the long ladder to reach the metal sphere suspended in the middle of the Churning Lake. Here in this lake, rivers from throughout the kingdom of Yamair came together. Generations ago, some of the first Yamairan Synergists realized that if they harnessed the power of the moving waters, they could use it to power other things, like gears and machines. Since then, Synergists had learned how to harness the power of other elements, like wind and even fire. But this lake was where it had all started, and it was the king's duty to see that it continued to channel power through pipes and rivulets all over Yamair.

Except that while the king was gone, that duty fell to the king-wife.

"I told you to watch the pressure," Eleanor snapped.

"Thirty-six bars."

"No, it can't be!" Eleanor didn't understand. Where had she gone wrong? "Pressure should stay below thirty-three!"

"Thirty-seven bars!"

"Close the gates. Close 4B now!"

"4B closing ... " The cogman gulped and turned towards her. "It's too late, King-wife. The supports will fold at this pressure. We should evacuate. Now."

"Open the dorsal valve K17."

The voice seemed to ring out of nowhere, crisp and confident. Eleanor turned in a daze to see that her own humble Scholar, Rebeka, had been the one to speak. She stood with her papers rolled in a bundle, her feather pen tucked behind her ear. Eleanor had never noticed Rebeka's elegance until now, when her presence demanded everyone's full attention. Her long black coat perfectly framed her trousers and blouse. She stood with impeccable posture, her solid shoulders straight, her strong chin stuck high in the air.

"K17?" echoed Eleanor in a daze. "But that valve leads to the southern channel ... "

"It will ease the pressure." Rebeka's green eyes blazed with confidence as she looked upon the king-wife. "Trust me, Majesty. You shall see."

Eleanor did not know what other choice she had. Her heart pounded rapidly in her chest. Her blood burned in her veins and she knew without a doubt that her inner drum had been disrupted. When had it happened? Amidst her panic? Or beforehand? Perhaps it had been off before she even came into the sub-station. Perhaps if she had been better synchronized to begin with ...

"Pressure is dropping." The cogman fell back in his chair with a sigh of relief. "The waters are stabilizing, King-wife. Thirty-five bars. Thirty-four ... "

"Thirty-three." Eleanor's voice barely rose above a whisper. Her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. She could not meet the Scholar's gaze any longer. She struggled to douse conflicting feelings of anger and gratitude towards the woman. If she should feel any emotion at all right now, it should be shame.

\*

The ingredients for the concoction were simple, in themselves. The uniqueness of the drug lay not in its components, but in the art of combining them. To balance them all correctly took hours of measuring,

cooking, stirring, and more measuring. For this reason, among others, people called the drug Discipline.

Night lay heavily upon the kingdom of Yamair, and according to most logical conclusions, King-wife Eleanor should have been deeply asleep. But tonight, her heart and mind stirred with too much turmoil to allow her such quietude. Instead, as the clatter of the outer world faded and the sound of her clocks filled the air with unchallenged purity, she spent her waking hours cooking, stirring, and measuring.

Dip, stir, pour, measure, burn, stir, flush, pour ... The chiming of her spoon against the bowl, then the hum of the pipes as she flushed the liquid to the next canister, had a calming effect similar to her metronomes. The act of creating the drug affected one's mood almost as strongly as the drug itself. This is why she insisted on making it herself, even though she could have obtained prepared mixtures elsewhere. After all, nothing balanced one's inner drum more than the pursuit of productivity.

Some time around midnight she completed the concoction. She poured it into a small vile and knelt before the Grand Clock.

"Oh Earth Mechanic," she whispered, "help me hear the one and only rhythm. Pace my heart, and teach me discipline."

She brought the vial to her lips. Her fingers slipped. The vial slid right from her grasp. It fell onto the ground and smashed to pieces, splashing liquid across the floor.

For a moment she just stared in horror, unable to believe that her hours of work had been so quickly wasted. Then, with no warning at all, she burst into tears.

If King Byron were here he would have stopped her from crying. His mere presence would have reminded her that all emotions were fleeting and insignificant. Sometimes, emotions could be used as a clue towards rational action. Fear could indicate danger. Joy might result as a reward for good work. And sorrow ... sorrow came as a form of punishment for failure.

"No ... no no no no!"

She slammed her fist against the ground, sending pain up her arm. The despair in her veins self-perpetuated. The Discipline drug would have helped her, shielding her from both joy and sorrow, leaving nothing but rational thought. Instead her sorrow took her over, grabbing her heart and twisting it like a rag. Her body convulsed and her sobs ripped from her throat one after another. Her eyes swelled with water then gushed with tears. The sorrow within her grew stronger and stronger until she couldn't contain it at all.

“Nooo—!”

A hand wrapped suddenly around her mouth, stifling her screams. The hand was small but muscular, its grip secure. Whomever it belonged to held Eleanor from behind, cradling Eleanor’s body with her own.

“Ssh. Sshh.”

The hand fell away, and Eleanor turned to look upon her captor’s bright green eyes. The person who held her was none other than the Royal Scholar, Rebeka: the same woman who had worked silently for years, never speaking unless spoken to, until she suddenly forced Eleanor to notice her twice in one day. Eleanor found herself falling helplessly into Rebeka’s embrace. “Rebeka ... ?”

“Dearest King-wife. Why are you so upset?”

“I ... I’m sorry. No one was supposed to see me like this ... ” She tried to get back up, but another sob wracked her body, and Rebeka took hold of her firmly.

“Never mind. I have seen you now and that cannot be changed, not even by the Earth Mechanic himself. So we might as well discuss what is wrong.”

“But ... but ... ” Eleanor stared at the broken pieces of the vial scattered across the plywood floor. “I don’t want you to write about this,” she confessed at last. “You won’t write about this in your Chronicles, will you?”

A mischievous smile played at Rebeka’s lips. “I won’t if you tell me why you’re so upset.”

Eleanor’s fingers dug into the wooden floor. Now that she felt free to give in, the truth came pouring out of her. “It’s this potion. Discipline. I’ve worked so hard and ... what’s the point? Do you even know what it is?”

“Of course I do! It’s a potion you invented ten years ago. One of the greatest inventions Yamair has ever known! It’s what made you Prime Synergist, and eventually King-wife. It’s what got the king interested in you to begin with.”

“Of course *you* know. You’re a Scholar, and you’ve lived here watching me mix it and drink it for years.” Eleanor scoffed at the unfairness of it all. “You mentioned all those things about how it got me where I am today. But do you even know what it *does*?”

“Yes, King-wife.” Rebeka put a calming hand on Eleanor’s arm as another tremble seized her. “It nullifies emotions, giving reign to pure reason.”

"Yes. Yes it does." She put out her hand and ran her fingers across the wet floor. "Everyone praised it as an accomplishment once I made it. Synergists across the kingdom claimed they would give it to their workers. All the initial tests showed that this drug increased productivity almost two-fold. But then people stopped taking it."

"Interesting." Rebeka played with the folds of Eleanor's sleeve, her touch somewhere between playful and caressing.

"Interesting? That is not how I see it at all. It is tragic. It is an outrage." She slammed her fist suddenly against the ground. "It's that damn safra!"

"Safra?" Rebeka grew stiff against her. "But didn't you and the king make safra illegal, once your Discipline hit the market?"

"Yes. That's the worst part. Safra ruined everything, and the more we fought to get it out of Yamair, the more it kept trickling in. For about a year, everything seemed perfect. Then Byron found out that underground safra trades were happening all over the kingdom. Worse, it sold for more money than my own Discipline. Gradually, authorities turned a blind eye to it, because they wanted safra, too. My precious Discipline drug became almost obsolete in a matter of years because no one wanted to buy it. They only wanted safra. In fact, people only sold Discipline vials to *hide* safra contained within them!"

"I did know about some of those things. But when the king legalized safra again, he seemed so at peace with the decision!"

"Byron. Oh Byron ... " To Eleanor's shame, the sorrow was coming back again. At first, the effort of explaining her feelings to Rebeka helped Eleanor keep a distance from them. Now they threatened to smother her once more. "Rebeka, please. I need some Discipline. Do you have any?"

Rebeka's face crinkled with uncertainty. She was a very pretty woman, Eleanor realized, until she frowned. Her long face had an elegance to it, suggestive of her spirit. Her skin was of an interesting olive complexion, blending beautifully with her black hair and green eyes. But frowning did not suit her. "Are you sure that is best, Majesty? Sometimes we are meant to feel shame and despair, are we not? Sometimes our emotions are a consequence of rational thought, or at least a clue—"

"I will not be preached to!" Eleanor tore herself from Rebeka and fixed her with a furious glare. "You will do as I say. Get me some Discipline."

"I, uh ... " Rebeka's long black lashes threw a shadow over her green gaze as she lowered her head. "I think I have some in my satchel."

She got up, walked to her bag, and started rummaging through it.

Eleanor sighed and leaned against the wall, already missing the strength of Rebeka's embrace. "Byron ... disappointed me. I really shouldn't say so, but ... you have promised not to put this in your chronicles, and I feel I can't help myself. It's true. He disappointed me. I thought he understood what I wanted to achieve with Discipline. I thought he shared my dream. But when safra took over the market despite all our efforts, he folded. He legalized it again. His decision made almost no rational sense. People who used safra became less productive. Saffra poisoned our economy in so many ways, depleting productivity and sending revenue to Dearen. Saffra is more expensive than gold in volume. But the king, like so many others, ignored these things. You see, by then he had started using safra himself."

Rebeka became very still. Her hand paused in her bag, not making a sound.

"He didn't let on to the public, of course. Not even to you, our very own Scholar, who sees almost everything we do. No, I think I'm the only one who knew about it. And in a way that was the worst sort of betrayal. Surely he knew that I would disapprove more than anyone in the world, yet he kept using it anyway. And it's the real reason he left on this mysterious voyage of his. He told the rest of the world he was off to find a new natural resource to power our machines. It was a lie he concocted, after he'd already made up his mind to search the world for a new source of safra outside Dearen."

After a terrible silence, Rebeka's hand withdrew from her bag. In it she held a small vial full of the purple potion. "Here. I have some Discipline."

Eleanor smiled sadly. The fact she carried some in her bag, yet had forgotten whether she had any or not, indicated that Rebeka—like so many people—had ceased using Discipline long ago. "Good. Bring it here, then."

Rebeka obeyed. She handed the vial over with no hesitation at all. Eleanor opened the vial and knocked it back quickly. It had a bitter taste to it, strong enough to make some people gag. Some people chose to smell it instead, for this still had an effect, though arguably weaker. The first time she ever tried to drink it, she threw it back up. But she was past that now. She even allowed the aftertaste to linger on her tongue and, in its own way, it comforted her. She closed her eyes and waited for the potion to take effect.

"All of this is a profound injustice, King-wife," said Rebeka, "and I'm sorry you've had to suffer it. Now I know why you got so upset today."

That strange man—the Merchant—he took the injustice one step further, didn't he? He made it sound as if your Discipline potion could have played some part in the horrible tragedy of Dearen. As if it was the assassin's anti-safra!"

At last the Discipline settled over her. The roar of emotions in Eleanor's head faded. The sound of her clocks ticking returned to her ears, louder and clearer than ever. She realized her emotions had blinded her today even more than she'd realized, and it was a relief to be free of them. "It was."

Rebeka batted her black lashes with surprise. "What?"

"My Discipline potion and this so-called anti-safra: they are one and the same. Why not? Discipline would nullify the effects of safra." Eleanor's gaze settled on Rebeka's, calm and collected. "In fact, I'm not ashamed of the connection he made. Discipline helps people carry out their tasks and carry out their goals, whatever they may be. It is merely an unfortunate state of affairs that an assassin finds my drug more useful than a man who wants to build a house."

"But you didn't *know* Discipline was being used in this way." As the Scholar stared continuously into Eleanor's calm face, she grew more and more upset. "Did you?"

Eleanor shrugged. "I knew it was being sold to rather ... suspicious consumers. Soldiers. Slaves. People in ... undesirable positions. For some people safra is too expensive; for others with an important—but unsavory—job to do, safra often eradicates their motivation to do it at all. I know that over the last few years, these are the people who purchased Discipline. They were some of the only people who still did. So I let them. And if necessary, I ... supplied it. After all, not many people make it anymore."

"But, King-wife ... " Rebeka looked foolish to Eleanor now, so shocked and worried. What good would either of those emotions do her? "The Merchant said the princess of Dearen herself may have the kerchief doused with anti-safra. But if anyone connects the drug back to you ... "

"Nonsense." Eleanor reached out and put her hand against Rebeka's. This gesture seemed to surprise the Scholar. "It is not as if I sold the drug personally to the Wolvens." She put a smile on her face, not necessarily because she felt any pleasure, but it seemed like the proper expression to give with the delivery of her next statement. "And that is why I will call the Merchant back and teach him how to make it. Then there will be yet another person—a merchant, no less—who knows how to make it in addition to myself."

“Are you sure about this, King-wife?” Rebeka looked down at their entwined hands, as if this gave her comfort. “What if helping him implicates you even more?”

“Then let it implicate me.” Eleanor’s lips spread wider, pulling up to show her teeth. “I have done nothing wrong.”

# Chapter 4

## Lenses

"Maybe we should tie her legs, too?"

"Fine, yes, if it's really that necessary. But right now I'm a little more worried about her yelling."

"We've already tied a scarf around her mouth, what else can we do? Besides, we're the sons of the khan. No one's going to question us no matter how much she—AAAAGH!"

"Richard? Richard what happened?" Picard reluctantly turned away from his own project. "I look away for one second and the next you're bleeding from the nose?"

"She kicked me! She fucking *kicked* me!"

"Really, brother, why did I even bring you along? For Friva's sake, she's a twenty-year-old girl, and you can't even get her to sit still." Picard reached into his tunic for some safra. He felt particularly on edge today and he hadn't brought enough safra with him to last through the night. His right hand was spasming more than usual, too—probably because of his stress—and for Friva's sake, if he had just brought a little more safra ...

"Oh, I'll get her to sit still, all right." As Richard recovered from the kick to his nose, a new mood came over him. He grabbed her legs by the ankles and pushed them down with all his strength. This put him in a position he rather liked, crouched with his head between her knees, his eyes peering into the shadow under her skirt. The young woman trembled as she no doubt felt his breath against her thighs. "How about I teach her a lesson right now?"

Picard's finally found the pouch of safra against his breast. His hands shook as he pulled the pouch open. The pain in his hand shot up his arm and shoulder, making his entire body jerk. "Fuck!" he cried, watching a few precious pieces of the glittering dust flutter to the ground. He felt so desperate that he nearly bent down and tried to retrieve them from the

floor. But this inn was a nasty place; dirt covered the wooden floorboards, beetles scurried amongst the rushes, and Friva only knew what else waited in the shadows of all that dust and straw.

"You said we could rough her up a bit," said Richard, running one hand up the woman's leg.

"Tie those ankles first, or you'll get kicked again. Idiot!" The last part he muttered a little more quietly. Richard did not care to be insulted. But Richard had his mind on other things now, and it was a small blessing from Friva that he bothered listening to Picard at all. Tying her ankles meant that he could use his hands for other things, so he grabbed more rope and got to work.

Picard poured a little safra in his mouth and swished it around slowly. He would have preferred smoking or sniffing it—more savory that way—but this was the surest way to make sure none was wasted. He peered into his pouch and considered eating more. But what if he needed it later? He took a deep breath as he waited for the drug to take effect.

"I'm not so sure you should rape her," he said after a moment. "It seems a bit distasteful. Don't you think? Besides, we should give her a wound that's a little more ... obvious."

The girl tried to yell through the scarf in her mouth.

Richard scowled at his brother, losing some of his good mood. "If I can't have a little fun, I won't help you next time."

"Yes, yes, I know." Picard took a deep breath. He felt the warm current of safra magic running through him. His anxiety fell away and a gentle bliss arose in its place. He remained aware of the pain in his arm, a constant burn in the distance, but he ceased to care about it. As he exhaled a smile settled over his face. "Be patient, brother. The sun will set soon. Help me do what I need to do, and then you may do as you please."

He turned to face the young woman. Her eyes were big, so very big and full of fear. He remembered the same sensation of fear creeping over him just a few moments ago. In hindsight, it seemed like a sweet feeling, almost like the pain in his arm. Safra made everything sweet.

"Maybe we don't need to do this," he mused.

Richard grunted and rolled his eyes. "That fucking safra always makes you lose your nerve. And yet safra's the reason you do everything in the first place, isn't it? You're such a pussy, Picard, eating that shit."

Picard's right hand gave a violent twitch.

"You're just jealous you can't fuck her yourself, you impotent bastard." Richard chuckled.

Picard struck the woman across the face with his mechanical hand. Enough metal lay outside the leather that it scratched her skin and left a good mark. As he struck her, he wondered if her pain felt anything like his own, or if pain felt different to everyone. He felt a warm wave of pleasure run through him and considered striking her again. But that didn't seem necessary, as he had already drawn blood. "That'll do," he said. "Now give me the lenses, Richard."

With his gloved hand, Picard grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. He used his other hand to balance the first lens on his fingertip and push up her eyelid with his thumb.

"Now if I were you," he said, "I would hold very still."

\*

Picard waited for Sean in the front tavern of Gorla's Inn. He stretched back in his chair, watching the hues of the sunlight change outside the window as the sun set, and felt very pleased with himself. He remembered the way Richard had insulted him, but it only made his smile widen.

People like Richard made fun of him for using safra all the time, but only because they didn't understand. They avoided it because Vikand society rejected warriors who resorted to safra magic to give them courage in battle. After all, safra rendered warriors useless in combat, as Picard himself proved the first time he ever tried it. But Picard would never be a warrior now, so it didn't matter, and he was glad. They could laugh all they wanted, because their laughter would never ring as truly as Picard's. They did not know pure joy. They didn't even know pure pain. They just wallowed somewhere in the middle, like the fools that they were.

Picard sighed and ran his bare hand across the grains of the table. Richard understood less than anyone. He called Picard impotent. But the pleasure Richard felt right now while fucking that helpless young woman would be fleeting. In fact, if Picard knew his brother at all, Richard would be in a worse mood afterward than he was to begin with. Meanwhile, Picard's safra would make him happy for ... well. At least another hour or so. He didn't eat much of it ...

His thoughts returned to the pleasurable fact of the moment, which was that everything had gone according to plan so far, and there was little reason to worry that the rest should not fall into place. It was a funny thing, what his brother had said to him. *That fucking safra always*

*makes you lose your nerve. And yet safra's the reason you do everything in the first place, isn't it?* His comment carried some truth to it, as well as irony. Perhaps Richard was smarter than Picard gave him credit for.

Picard was laughing softly to himself when Sean entered the room.

Picard did not notice him right away. The assassin wore a thick cloak over his muscular frame and a hood long enough to shadow most of his face. Picard recognized him primarily by the grace of his movement, almost like one of those tigers known to roam in Dearen. Perhaps he moved more like a wolf, but Picard had never seen one of those. In any case, Sean's blatant caution gave him away most of all. His head turned every which way, scrutinizing every corner of the tavern. His arms stayed folded under his cloak, no doubt clasping desperately to some sort of weapon.

"Sean! Sean, my friend! Over here!" Picard yelled and waved at him, drawing the attention of almost everyone in the tavern.

Sean froze in place, mortified. But after a moment, everyone turned back to their own drinks and meals. Sean walked reluctantly to the table, then stopped next to it, looming over the archon like a tower. "You brought my payment?"

"Friva's bosom! You're an impatient one. Why don't you sit down so we can talk for a moment? The money's here and I plan to give it to you, don't worry. Just sit down first."

Sean didn't move.

"Whoops, you're not wearing your spiked suit under that cloak, are you? Can a person even sit in that wild outfit of yours? I'm curious now."

Sean grumbled under his breath and sat down.

Picard smiled and waved to a wench with his gloved hand. He felt a flash of pain, somewhere far away. He smiled because he knew it could not reach him now. A buxom blond returned his glance, her eyebrows furrowing with worry. Perhaps she recognized him. Perhaps she'd heard the yells coming from the room he'd paid for. Oh well.

"Yes, Archon? What can I do for you?" Her pink lips spread with a smile. If she worried about anything, she hid it well.

"Vino, please, for myself and my friend," Picard told her.

"I don't want any," said Sean.

"Don't listen to him," Picard told the wench. "I'll pay for his."

"Yes, sir." She put her fist to her chest in a gesture of respect, then hurried away. Picard watched her curiously. She had beautiful hips that swayed as she walked, and Picard did not mind watching them. But he

felt no different about them than he felt about everything else. "Do you think she's pretty?"

"What?"

"Are you attracted to her?"

"What the hell does that have to do anything?"

"Nothing, I suppose." Picard sighed and folded his hands over the table. "I was just curious. If you'd like, I could buy her for you. You know. For the night?"

A painful sensation sprang suddenly up Picard's foot. His body jerked of his own accord, but it took his consciousness a moment to catch up. Sean's boot was pressing down into Picard's, almost hard enough to crush his toes. "I don't have time for this," snarled the Wolven. "If you wanted to talk to me about something, then talk. Then pay me so I can leave."

"Get. Off. My. Foot."

Something in Picard's voice must have had the proper effect, for Sean released it.

Picard resettled his body in his chair, then patted his golden hair self-consciously. "I thought I was being nice."

"Two vinos, for two fine gentlemen." The wench set down their goblets. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thank you. You're rather annoying, now. So run along."

She blinked her eyes in confusion, then hastily obeyed.

The two men sat quietly a moment, neither one touching his drink.

Picard finally reached out and grabbed his goblet. He didn't always like drinking liquor. But sometimes, he'd noticed, it made the safra last longer. Sometimes it made the effects of safra a little more unpredictable. No matter. He was desperate, so he brought it to his lips and drank. When he finished, he set down the cup with a resolved smack.

"Very well, Wolven. I have a proposal for you. I want to give you an unusual assignment. One that doesn't involve killing."

"No," said Sean.

Picard's head swam a little. No doubt the safra and alcohol were already interacting with one another. "For Friva's sake," he said, "would you please lower that hood? I can't even see your face."

"You know why I can't."

"Yes, I do, and that's the problem. Those red eyes are quite a hassle, aren't they? They limit you a great deal."

"*Limit me?*" Hood or no hood, Picard could sense Sean's irritation. The Wolven did not like to think of himself as limited in any way at all, which is exactly what Picard had been counting on.

"Yes." Picard grinned. "Come now, let's be honest with one another. You don't always feel like killing. You proved that when you recently let an assignment of yours—a blind man, at that—walk free. But you have no choice about your lifestyle, do you? You are a Wolven, and you're an assassin, and that is how everyone sees you. They know who you are as soon as they see your red eyes. But what if you tried doing something different? What if there was a way to hide your identity, while baring that handsome face of yours? Pretend you're someone other than a Wolven?"

Sean did not move. Then his hands clenched a little against the table. Finally, he said, "Impossible."

"That's too bad. Then I suppose we should carry on with the rather boring business we already agreed upon." Without any further ado, he threw a heavy wooden box upon the table. Sean's untouched vino sloshed out of the goblet. The table legs creaked with the weight of it. "There you are. A million goldons, as promised."

Sean did not speak for a moment, only stared at the box. Picard still couldn't see his face, but he had a very strong feeling the Wolven had not expected such a large payment.

Picard smiled. "Your turn. As agreed."

Sean turned his head left and right. "Here?"

"You really didn't think I'd go anywhere *alone* with you, did you? Come now, I don't trust you one bit. Now please assure me I haven't brought this money in vain."

"I swear." Sean's voice ripped with obvious strain from his throat. His fists clenched so hard his knuckles turned white. "With Belazar as my witness, I will kill Prince Kyne, and Belazar will feast upon his blood."

Picard sat up a little straighter. The hairs on his arms and legs stood on end. His skin tingled. His heart beat a little faster. What was this strange feeling?

Sean took a dagger from his tunic and nicked his thumb upon its tip. He kissed the ruby red drop as it swelled from his skin. "Kyne Violeni, *krenzi u morde ah Belazar.*"

Picard watched in awe as Sean's entire body grew stiff. His head tilted up and he drew a long, strained, breath. His hood fell back and his red eyes seemed to glow through the shadows.

Then he slumped forward, exhaling with a grunt.

A long silence followed the oath. Picard looked around and suspected that everyone else in the tavern felt the same strange feeling he did. Now Picard understood why Sean had been so reluctant to take the oath in the first place. It felt as if, for a moment, Belazar entered the room and peered through those red eyes of his. After all, legend claimed this was exactly what happened whenever a Wolven swore the oath. Doing so would help him borrow some of Belazar's power, making him almost invincible. But if he did not deliver the blood he promised ... Picard shivered at the thought.

And the shiver felt very, very good.

Sean grabbed the box and stood to go.

Picard reached out and wrapped his hand around Sean's. Sean turned on him angrily, the edge of his face cutting the light momentarily.

"You've done as promised. But there is much more money where that came from. And if you have any interest in my proposition—any at all—then you will take just a moment of your time to meet someone. Someone very special."

"Who?"

"Why, she's another Wolven. Like you." Picard smiled.

\*

Picard worried a little that his safra was wearing off. That or the alcohol didn't help as much as he hoped it would. He would probably need to eat the rest of his safra soon.

In any case, for the time being, he felt on top of the world. Yet again, all the pieces of his plan were falling into place. Now he stood in front of the rented room with Sean at his side. He took a deep breath and then reached to knock on the door. No, not that hand—it throbbed right now. He switched to his left hand, then knocked firmly.

"Richard? Richard, are you in there? We're ready to come in when you are."

A few thumps and bangs resounded from within. Then Richard yelled, "Come in!"

Picard unlocked the door and let Sean in first. Then he followed after, and promptly closed the door behind them.

The scene looked almost exactly as Picard hoped it would, save for a few little details. He had forgotten that after sunset, the room would become very dark. Richard had lit a few candles, though the room remained uncomfortably dim. Never mind: perhaps that added to the mood. And the mood seemed perfect, as far as Picard could tell. There in the middle of the room sat the young woman, her hands bound behind

her, her ankles tied to the legs of the chair. Her clothes and hair were disheveled, her skirt pushed obscenely high up her legs as Richard had no doubt left it. A bruise developed across her cheekbone, caking with blood. Richard stood behind her, a looming black shadow, except for the bright silver blade he held to the woman's throat. But best of all, the victim's gaping eyes gleamed red in the candlelight.

"What the *fuck*?"

Sean leapt backwards. His hood slipped down, baring his face. He looked even more horrified than Picard had expected. He breathed heavily, clenching the wall behind him. He seemed to lose some of the color in his cheeks. Or perhaps that was just the lighting.

"Sean, meet ... one of your relatives. Actually I don't know her name. I rather hoped you'd tell me. Is she your sister?"

"No!"

"Ah. Well isn't that good? This means there might be more Wolvens roaming the world out there than you know about."

"What have you done to her?"

"Oh, not much—yet. We just needed to fight her a bit to restrain her, you understand. Although, for a Wolven, I'm surprised we managed to restrain her at all."

Sean said nothing for a moment, but his hand slipped under his cloak. Picard prayed silently that Richard noticed. His brother may be an imbecile, but at least he possessed skills in combat.

"Now Sean," said Picard, "I wouldn't try anything if I were you. Richard will slit her throat."

"Why the fuck have you brought her here?" Sean's breathed in violent, ragged heaves. A few beads of sweat even glittered on his forehead beneath the shaggy strands of his hair. This pleased Picard very much indeed.

"It's simple, really. I wanted to give you a new assignment, but I knew it would be unusual for you, so I thought I would change the conditions of the assignment, as well." He stepped towards the girl, putting his gloved hand on her shoulder. She jerked under his touch. "While you're in Dearen, I want you do more than just kill. I want you to infiltrate the royal family. I want you to discover how safra is made."

"What? Why?"

"Now that's a silly question," sneered Picard. "Everyone in the world wants to know how safra is made."

"Yes, but ... but ... " Sean truly looked close to a panic. "Why me?"

“Because it makes the most sense. You must kill Prince Kyne: I understand that. I could not change the fact my father would hire you for this purpose. And it will be his decision whether you kill the princess, too; for you see, he wants to see if he can marry her first.”

Sean grunted with disgust.

“So the only thing to do was make sure you worked for me, too. It occurred to me that the prince and princess of Dearen may be the last living souls who know how to make safra. And what if only the prince knows, and not his sister? I don’t believe the people of Dearen hold their women in as much esteem as we do in Vikand.” He ran his gloved fingertip across the woman’s chin. “Therefore, I couldn’t let you kill him immediately, as you Wolvens are prone to do. You must take your time, and learn all you can from him, before you take his life. Only take his life when there is nothing else to learn. Same goes for the princess, if Father tells you to kill her too.”

Sean lunged forward suddenly, his entire body bristling. His teeth flashed in the light as he yelled. “Or *what?*”

“Or I’ll kill this woman. Go on then, Richard—take the scarf from her mouth. Let her tell us her name.”

Richard obeyed, although he had trouble undoing the scarf and holding the knife to her throat at the same time. Picard had to reach in and help him. Finally, the scarf fluttered to the ground. A sob escaped the girl’s mouth before she spoke.

“Teera! My name is Teera! But I’m not a Wolven. I’m not a—”

Picard motioned to Richard, who clamped his free hand over her mouth.

He shook his head with disappointment. “Really, she’s a stupid one, isn’t she? The fact she might be a Wolven was the only thing keeping her alive.” Then he turned to Sean with a grin. He couldn’t help himself. He beamed with pride at a job well done. “Or is it? Tell us, Sean. Will you help her live anyway?”

Sean slumped back a little. By now, trick of the light or no, some of the blood had definitely drained from his face. “I ... I don’t understand,” he said.

“Of course not!” piped Picard. “You said yourself, it’s impossible for a Wolven to hide his identity. Therefore it must be impossible for anyone else to pose as a Wolven. Or is it?”

Very very slowly, Sean turned his red gaze on Picard. If murder did not always linger in those eyes of his, it most certainly did now. “I could kill all of you now,” he snarled, “without breaking a sweat.”

Picard resisted the urge to point out that Sean broke a sweat some time ago. "But you won't, because we're the sons of the khan, and she ... well, she's just an innocent girl!" He laughed and rubbed his hands together. "Some people you just don't *want* to kill, right, Seanie? You wouldn't kill a poor blind man. And you wouldn't want to kill Teera, now would you? Even though she's not a Wolven? Look at how cute she is. Well, she'd be much cuter without the red eyes. But that can be arranged. Stay still, darling."

She obeyed, although she shook like a leaf, as Picard peeled back her eyelids and plucked out the red lenses one by one. When he was finished, her eyes shone a beautiful blue.

"See that?" Picard resisted another laugh of glee. He held up the tiny red disks for Sean's curious gaze. "This is what we can do for you, Sean. We can help disguise you. You can walk in broad daylight. We can give you blue eyes, brown eyes ... whatever color you feel like."

Sean still didn't speak. He glared at Picard with such fury that for just a moment, a jolt of fear churned in Picard's belly. His hand reached instinctively for the pouch of safra in his tunic. All good humor drained from his voice, and he spoke more gravely than he had all night.

"Do this for me," he said, "and I will pay you two million goldons. More, if I can. Friva's mercy, I'd give you just about anything I could afford. The ability to make safra would be priceless. In return, we'll also let this poor woman—er, Teera—walk free. But better than all that, I will get you lenses to wear. I can get you any color you want. You can pretend to be a regular man. I will do everything I can to help you infiltrate the royal family. And in the end—everyone wins! Wouldn't you agree?"

Another long silence.

Picard's hand jerked hard enough to make him wince. He needed more safra, and he needed it soon. "Come on, Sean. Give us your answer."

"I'll do it."

The Wolven spoke so softly that for a moment, Picard feared it was only his imagination. "What was that again?"

"I said I'll fucking do it!"

A rush of exhilaration filled Picard unlike any he had ever known. And the strangest part was that the safra had probably worn off by now.

# Chapter 5

## The List

The visiting nobles lost themselves to revelry during the funeral of her parents' death.

In the Quartz Courtyard, torches blazed next to pillars of marble and stone. Fountains sprayed dancing streams of pure water. The droplets caught the red hues of the torchlight and lit up like little sparks. Peacocks roamed the soft green grass, shedding feathers of purple and blue. A woman wearing nothing but pearls walked around and refilled their goblets with vino and galley juice, her flesh rimmed by moonlight. The liquid she served did not matter, so long as it contained safra.

In the distance, a choir sang a funeral hymn.

"Princess, would you like more vino?"

Fayr looked up at her favorite servant, Jeevu. He was something of a silly fellow, always singing songs or whistling tunes. He had a whimsical nature which seemed to run deeper in him than just the safra, or at least Fayr liked to think so. He was slender and pretty, very effeminate, and his romances tended to be with men rather than women. For some reason this made Fayr feel very comfortable around him, like she could enjoy his beautiful presence for pure aesthetic purposes without feeling threatened by it. Fayr thanked her fortune every day that he had not been killed during the assassin's attack.

"No, thank you, Jeevu," said Princess Fayr. She patted the cushion next to her. "But I would greatly appreciate your company."

"Well certainly." Jeevu sank down into the feathery pillow beside his princess. His warm body leaned against Fayr's. The servant smelled of cocoa and spices; no doubt he had helped in the preparation of tonight's meal. He lay his golden hair against Fayr's shoulder and she reached up to stroke it. "So tell me, Jeevu. What are all these nobles talking about?"

"Oh, you know how they are, my lady." He giggled whole-heartedly. "Talking about how wonderful life is. About the beautiful sky and the dazzling stars. About the delicious food provided by my Majesty."

"Truly? That's all they talk about? How great everything is?"

"Well, I probably shouldn't say, but I heard a few knights talk about how they'd love to marry you. And some of them were quite handsome." His pink lips curled with a mischievous smile.

Her fingers tangled in Jeevu's locks. She was glad he could not see her expression, pinched with restraint. "Do any of them worry about the safety of Dearen, now that King Joyhan is dead?"

"Worry? Safety?" His voice chimed with laughter. "But of course not! The Haze continues to protect Dearen. We still have you and Prince Kyne to reign over us. And life goes on, beautiful and wondrous."

Her fingers pulled too tightly at his hair. He flinched a little.

"Are you well, Princess?"

"Of course, Jeevu. It's just that ... sometimes ... I miss my mother and father."

"Miss ... ?" His soft eyes hazed for a moment, not understanding.

She sighed and tried to think of a different way to phrase it. "I wish I'd had time to ... learn more from them."

"You should pick a man to marry, Princess. Then we'll have a king again."

"Perhaps." She glanced uncomfortably around the courtyard. Who on earth could she ever stand to marry? She did not even want to think about it. "Jeevu, play something on your harp for me, won't you?"

"Certainly, Princess."

His warm presence withdrew as he collected his little harp. Then he angled it against his chin and strummed his fingers over the strings.

As a melody poured out of the instrument, Fayr continued to study the men in her courtyard. Nobles, perhaps, but hardly any different from all the other people in Dearen: fat, lazy, and ... happy. Even tonight, the three-month anniversary of the King and Queen's death, no one remembered the terror of that night. No one thought twice about the fact that only two members of the Violonese bloodline remained. No one understood that the Violonese needed to rule, for they alone could produce safra, and they alone would not succumb to effects.

"Jeevu," she said, "can you make the song minor?"

His fingers paused uncertainly. "You mean change the chords, Majesty?"

"Yes. If you can. I wish to hear the song in a minor key."

"If it pleases you."

Slowly he began to strum again. The strings trembled and sent a new sensation through Fayr's body. The song sounded so much sweeter now. It resonated with her innermost thoughts. The sad melody flowed over the courtyard and added a new perspective to the jovial mood around her. It confirmed what she already sensed, deep down: that these people were happy, even though they shouldn't be.

"It's beautiful, Jeevu," she whispered.

He kept on playing resolutely. "I hear no difference. But I'm glad you like it."

Fascinated, the princess returned her attention to her visitors, wondering if any of them heard what she did.

Near one of the fountains, a man and a woman sat kissing one another. Their lips still glittered with safra as their mouths moved against one another's. The man pushed the woman up against a quartz column as his lust got the better of him. The woman slid her thigh between the legs of his trousers. The man responded by slipping his hand under the collar of her gown.

A shock went through Fayr's body as she remembered the Wolven crouching over her, his hand wrapping around her breast. Warmth spread up her legs and she shifted on her feathery pillow, hoping to dispel it. "Stop playing, Jeevu!"

He complied, a perplexed expression hovering over his smile.

Fayr struggled to regain her breath, which was surprisingly fast. She tried to remember what she and Jeevu had been talking about. "I, uh ... I wonder if I should marry a man from another one of the Three Nations."

Jeevu put away his harp. "You mean Vikand or Yamair? But they are inferior to us!"

Fayr had never heard someone say it so blatantly. "What makes you say so, Jeevu? They are larger than us. They have more natural resources, more people ... "

"But they don't have safra!"

"Safra ... " Fayr's stomach turned suddenly within her. "Jeevu. You mentioned that the stars are dazzling tonight."

"Yes, Princess."

"Isn't that strange? Usually they are much duller. Usually the Haze is too thick for us to see them well."

"Yes, I suppose it is unusual." He settled against her once more, angling his face next to hers as they both looked up. "It is a clear night just for you, Princess!"

Fayr hoped Jeevu could not feel the pounding of her heart through her evening gown. "Yes," she said breathlessly. "The Haze is thinning."

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A large boom reverberated through the Princess's chamber.

She awoke with a start, her body tingling, her heart racing. The ominous sound rescued her from an even worse nightmare. Once again, she had lain in the Garden of Delights. The Wolven's thighs clasped her stomach. His hand moved down her neck ...

For many nights now, whenever Fayr closed her eyes, the face of the Wolven rose out of the darkness. More than once, she had already climbed back to reality to escape him. When she did, her breath came in shallow gasps and her blood tingled in her veins. But it wasn't only from fear.

She hated to admit it, but something about what happened to her that day had been exhilarating. She remembered the red eyes staring down at her, the strong legs pressing her to the earth. She did not think she had ever seen anyone so fit and muscular as that man had been, for who in Dearen bothered to exercise? The assassin could have killed her with a flick of his fingers. And she had never felt more alive in all her life than she did in that moment.

The nightmare always left her feeling the same way: frightened, confused, and yet ... exhilarated.

Weeks had passed since the death of her parents. Sometimes, she felt as if she had lived a lifetime since then. Other times, like tonight, she felt as if they had only died yesterday. She blamed this on the fact that to most of the outside world, barely anything had changed. Sometimes she couldn't believe how little had changed. The kingdom carried on as it had for years: gathering safra from the Haze, consuming it, and selling it. Now people simply sought the Princess's permission for this or that affair, rather than her father's.

Every once in awhile, disputes arose over who had the right to gather safra from certain locations. Sometimes trade issues arose, mostly concerning the haggling of prices. More often than anything, reeves from the four towns and Dearen city would approach her with a list of foreign immigrants who wanted to become citizens of Dearen so they could reap the benefits of its lifestyle. She would deny them, then give the reeves permission to deport them. The reeves would nod and go along their way. She did not know what process the reeves used to evict these wannabe-citizens. She suspected that like most things in Dearen, it posed no challenge, for people would be happy until they left the country and

the Haze far behind. Only then would they remember what they had desired and never obtained.

Thusly safra settled most problems for her. Nobles might seek her attention for permission for one thing or another, but in the end, her response mattered little. As soon as anyone entered the palace, the thickness of the Haze overcame them. Safra fulfilled all their desires for as long as they inhaled it.

And therein lay the problem.

She hastened to throw a cloak of velvet and ermine over her bare shoulders as another boom shook the door to her chambers. What on earth could anyone want at this time of night? She pushed back her purple hair, patted her cheeks, and approached the door.

Before she opened it, she took a deep breath, lifted her chin, and yanked it open with a firm hand. "Who dares awake me from sleep?" She struggled to discern his face through the glare of a torch.

"Princess?"

"Gornum!" The fat guard usually watched over her during the day—not during the night. For this reason alone he had survived the Wolven's attack. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, I think this is what Cayleb used to do."

Fayr gulped. Cayleb had once served as Master of the Royal Guard and was the king's most trusted soldier. The Wolven killed Cayleb the night he killed Fayr's parents. "What did he do? Speak sense, Gornum!"

"When the High Reeve brought the people on the list, Cayleb would come here and get the king. And the king would deal with it."

"What people? What list?"

"You know. The list of people to go to the dungeon? That's what I think, anyway."

Fayr's heart pounded like a hammer in her chest. "I don't know what in high heaven you're talking about." And yet she did know—something. She knew that this might have been her father's biggest secret. She knew it related to the creation of safra. "I ... I ... I don't know what to do!" she burst at last.

Gornum just blinked a few times with his big groggy eyes. "Oh well. They seem happy enough for the time being. But they're eating all the grapes. Oh well. There are other things to eat."

He turned to go, but Fayr reached out and grabbed him. If he had a clear head, he would have seen the panic in her eyes. But if he did see it, he didn't seem to care. "How many people?"

"Thirty, I think."

“Thirty.” In the past, she had glimpsed her father walking to the dungeons only a few times. But it had always been in the dead of night, and there had always been about thirty people trailing after him. People who never came back out.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to crawl back into her bed and pretend that none of this was happening. Keeping herself together required all her will and effort. “Where did the list come from?”

“The High Reeve.”

There was one High Reeve in charge of Dearen City. There were only four reeves beneath him, one for each of the smaller cities of the Dearen kingdom. “Is he still in the palace?”

“He left a few days ago.”

“A few *days* ago?”

Gornum nodded dumbly.

“Have the people been here that long?”

“Yes. I didn’t know what to do with them at first so they’ve been staying in the Garden of Delights. I rather like one of the women. Her name is Dylla. She’s very beautiful. But a lot of the other men like her too. That’s okay. We take turns.” His face turned all red. His eyes wandered. A whimsical smile fell over his face. But he must have seen Fayr’s shocked expression in the corner of his eyes, for then he said, “Eventually I remembered that Cayleb would handle them, but he would never go immediately to the king about them. He would always tell them, ‘wait here until midnight.’ But I only just remembered. You’re not going to take Dylla away, are you?”

Fayr didn’t know. She didn’t know anything. She searched her brain, over and over and over, trying to find a solution. What if she took them down to the dungeon? What then? She had never been there before. What if something inside revealed the solution? What if it didn’t? Or what if something terrible happened, simply after taking someone inside? Did she want to know? Could she bring herself to risk these people’s lives without understanding why or how?

But she had to. The Haze thinned every day. She could see this happening visibly, but she could sense it in other ways, too. She glimpsed it in people’s expressions or subtle mannerisms. Like Gornum, right now. He worried. He worried that Fayr would take Dylla away from him. People in Dearen shouldn’t worry about anything.

“The key,” she said at last. “I suppose we need the key to the dungeon.”

Gornum shrugged. “I suppose so. Do you have it?”

Fayr took a deep, shuddering breath. "I, uh ... I know where it is. Give me a moment."

She retreated into her room and pulled on a dress with trembling hands. The key lay in a drawer in her parents' bedchamber. In the past, King Joyhan wore the key around his neck. After his death, Fayr told the servants to put the key in his desk.

Fayr had not entered the royal bedchamber since she walked in and found her parents dead.

She wrapped her purple hair in a knot on her head and considered pouring herself a glass of vino. If only she could enjoy the benefits of breathing the Haze like everyone else. Instead she remained a prisoner to her terror. She could not depend on a magical drug to whisk her towards happiness. She could only rely on herself.

So be it.

At last she strode down the hallway to the royal bedchamber, Gornum following behind with a torch. The shadows moved across the stones like ghosts. Or perhaps like the Wolven himself, creeping through the darkness to come get her. Again she remembered him on top of her, holding a blade to her throat, even as he caressed her.

*You think I am mad at you?* she had asked the Wolven. *I am not as mad as you think.*

*I despise the Violnese, my own ancestors,* she had said. *I hate them for this curse they've given me. I hate my father for raising me in their shadow, never even giving me the knowledge to choose a fate for myself. I am glad that ... I am glad that he's dead and I want to thank you. I want to thank you for freeing me.*

"Wait here," she told Gornum, and took his torch.

The door to the royal chamber opened with a creak. The blaze of the torch made her cheeks flush with heat. Its red light gleamed off the jeweled decorations on the wall, candlesticks, and weaponry. All of it remained as it had been before. A tiger hide lay across the stones. On top of the soft orange fur, she could see a few drops of blood, dark like little holes into another dimension, gaping into the realm of death.

She pushed her heart down her throat with a swallow and willed herself to keep moving. She walked past the spot King Joyhan had sprawled with a sword sticking out of his back. She kept walking.

She set the torch in a bracket and pulled open the heavy velvet curtains. Moonlight shoved away the darkness. A cold breeze crawled across her neck and arms. Fayr looked up into the bright silver orb hovering in the heavens, remembering how it looked the night of her parent's death. It shone much more brightly now.

The Haze had thinned, indeed.

With new resolve, she walked to the king's desk and pulled open the drawer.

The key wasn't there.

She searched one drawer after another, fumbling through parchment, ribbons, wax seals, and feathered pens. She nicked her finger on a knife and had nothing but a spot of blood to show for her efforts.

For a moment she thought she might faint. She should have been more careful. She should have put the key somewhere safer, somewhere hidden. If she did not have the key she would never open the dungeon. She would never learn the secret of her ancestors. She would never make more safra and the Haze of Dearen would vanish forever.

The spell of safra would dissipate.

People would become more ... like her.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of her confusing, conflicting emotions. She must think rationally now. If the key was not here, where might it be? Who would be next most likely person to know of its whereabouts?

She picked up her torch and turned her feet toward Kyne's room.

\*

"Wake up. Kyne. Kyne! Wake—!"

"Aah!"

The prince thrashed suddenly from his blankets, purple hair askew, chromatic eyes bulging. He stared upon his sister as if upon a monster.

"Kyne? It's all right. It's just me. Are you well?"

"Oh ... oh ... " Kyne rubbed his eyes violently. His breath came in heaving gasps. "I'm ... I'm ... I'm fine."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"I saw ... I saw them ... "

"Who? What? Kyne, what did you see?"

Very slowly, his breath calmed. His eyelids drooped. His shoulders slumped and his voice fell. "Nothing. Nothing at all. What do you want?"

His response surprised her. Never before had Kyne hid his emotions from her. She offered the one shoulder in the kingdom he could cry on. She understood. She knew his pain. So why did he suddenly hide his feelings?

"I, uh ... " She struggled to gather her own composure. "I wondered if you knew what happened to Father's key. The key to the dungeons."

Kyne tensed again, so suddenly that he seemed to flinch.

“Kyne? Kyne, what’s going on with you?”

“I ... I ... I don’t know where the key is. Maybe it’s gone forever. And that’s probably best. No one will go in that dungeon. Ever again!”

Fayr’s fingernails dug into the bedsheets. She didn’t even care that she pinched Kyne’s legs as a result. She remembered how furious she became when she realized their father would have shown his children how to make safra at the same time, despite their age difference. What if Kyne already knew something she didn’t? “What are you not telling me?”

Kyne could not look her in the eye. He gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, trembled with torment. “Nothing. I know nothing. *Nothing!*”

She resisted the urge to slap him across the face. Instead she hissed, “Don’t play games with me. You know something. Did Father say something to you, before he ... ” A surge of emotion choked her momentarily. “Did you see something?”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!”

The pain in his voice shattered the last of her resolve. She withdrew from his bed, her body weak and exhausted. She clutched her own arms, feeling a chill, and shuffled from the room.

Once more she found herself in the hallway with Gornum, despising the glum smile on his face.

“Dylla can stay,” she mumbled at last. “They can all stay, or go home, or do whatever they want to do.”

“That’s wonderful.” He turned to go.

“Gornum! I want you to fetch me the Royal Secretary. Right now.”

“Now? Why?”

Because she couldn’t endure feeling so helpless anymore. She needed to do something, anything, to gain some sort of foothold for the future. And she needed to stop thinking about the Wolven, the only one who had ever caressed her that way, the only one who had ever made her heart pound so fiercely. “I want to send out a summons to all the lords of all Three Nations. I am in search of a suitor, and I intend to marry him by the night of the winter solstice.”

# Chapter 6

## Suitor

"This is fucking uncomfortable," said Sean.

"Never mind. You'll get used to it."

Sean struggled to blink over the lenses in his eyes. They felt so thick and awkward, and worse, they affected his vision. Not very much, and probably not at all for a normal person. But for a Wolven with exceptional eyesight, they made everything look a little distorted. "Who made these, anyway?"

"I did," said the merchant. "But I learned how to make them in Yamair."

"Of course you did," grumbled Sean.

He studied the strange vendor warily. Picard had arranged their meeting, of course, after Sean agreed to Picard's terms. The merchant agreed to supply all of Sean's needs and Picard would pay for them. But Sean did not like depending on people so quickly, especially a man so mysterious as this one. He had dark skin, a soft blue suit, and long white hair. He would not tell Sean his name, and he seemed far too at ease with the entire situation. Sean's activities would affect the fate of the kingdom. This man's help would affect his ability to complete them. But this fellow traded valuable tools as if passing the table salt.

"See for yourself." The merchant held up a piece of glass.

Sean saw his image reflected, and at first he didn't recognize himself. He saw a sharp chiseled face with jagged brown hair to his ears and—most importantly—soft brown eyes, almost copper. "Gods," he muttered aloud.

"You see?" The merchant's teeth glowed past his dark lips as he grinned with pride. "You're a new man."

Sean pushed the glass away. How could this be possible? Picard had proven it clearly enough when he put red lenses on a girl who was not a

Wolven. But the reverse seemed even harder to accept. Wolvens were Wolvens. They could not simply become regular men, ever—much less in one fleeting moment. Or so Sean had believed, for a very long time. “Are you sure this is convincing? I think a little red shows through ...”

The merchant laughed softly. “You’re only imagining it. The lenses work perfectly: I see only two beautiful brown eyes. No one will ever know who you are.”

Sean glared at the fellow, feeling mocked by his laughter. “Except for you. What’s your name again?”

“My name is of no consequence.” The man put away the mirror. “I travel from one place to another, to other kingdoms, even to other continents. You may never see me again. Although ...” His lips spread in a smile once more. “Perhaps you might.”

With every word from this wily fellow’s mouth, Sean grew more certain he had an agenda of his own, despite—or perhaps because of—his implications otherwise. But there was simply nothing to be done about it now. If he got in Sean’s way, Sean would kill him. “Well, Merchant,” he snapped, “our business is concluded.”

“Not quite yet.”

Sean glowered at him.

“Aren’t you forgetting anti-safra?”

“I don’t need it from you.”

“I suppose you must know how to make it, then?”

Sean cocked his head at the Merchant, considering how to dispatch him quickest. He was tall and lean, and appeared very agile. It would be a small challenge. “That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, but it is my business! For you see, I can sell you a new and improved recipe—paid for by our shared employer, of course. So you might as well take it.”

“I said I don’t need it from you!” The Wolven turned to go.

The Merchant reached out and grabbed Sean’s arm. Sean bristled, baring his teeth.

“We both know that it didn’t work for your father—not well enough, anyway. Perhaps because he didn’t consume it properly.”

Sean took hold of a knife on his belt.

The Merchant noticed this, but did not flinch. “You can’t breathe it through a kerchief, if you plan to show your face. You shouldn’t drink it, either, for people will notice that foul stuff on your breath.”

He had a point, annoying though it was. “Everyone in Dearen is too stupefied by safra to notice such a thing.”

“Not the prince or the princess.”

“Hm.” It was rumored that the Violonese possessed innate immunity to the effects of safra. No one had ever proven this, however. If it was true, no Violonese had ever admitted it. And to the public, they always displayed a happy face. Sean’s father often reminded him, however, that the Violonese were a powerful bloodline, and should be treated as such. Belazar probably desired their blood for this very reason. “What do you suggest?” he asked at last.

The Merchant grinned, reached into the folds of his suit, and pulled out a glass tube with a needle on the end. “This is my own invention, though I got the idea for it when I last visited Yamair. It’s a syringe filled with the Discipline potion—that is, anti-safra, I mean.”

Sean eyed it warily.

“Inject this through the vein each morning and it won’t wear off until sunset. May I demonstrate?” He edged the needle towards Sean, but Sean grabbed his wrist and twisted it around.

“You first.”

“Very well.” Without flinching, the Merchant jabbed the needle into his arm and pushed the end of the tube. The blue liquid vanished into his vein. All the while he stared calmly at Sean with eyes of pitch black.

“Enough,” said Sean when half the tube was depleted. “Give me the rest.”

“As you wish. Hold out your arm.”

Sean resisted the urge to fight back as the Merchant injected the needle. Then he tensed as the cold drug flowed into his bloodstream. He had used Discipline a few times in the past, not for its use as anti-safra, but for its ability to dull all emotions. When he was a teenager, his father made him use it for the first climb alone up Wolven mountain. The potion nullified his fear and allowed him to scale the rocks quickly and efficiently. After that, using the drug became less and less necessary. However, he’d occasionally used it to carry out difficult kills.

“I am told,” said the Merchant, “that for some people, Discipline does not manage to cancel out emotion completely. I hear that the emotions simply store up beyond awareness, and when the drug runs out, all of one’s emotions come back to bite him at once. Is that the case with you, Wolven?”

“Who can tell the difference?” Sean took a deep breath as the needle withdrew and the effect of Discipline settled through him. Whether he liked the feeling or not, he could no longer say. Liking and disliking no longer mattered. Only the business at hand. He knew what he needed to

do, so he did it. "You're right about the drug. This is the best method of consumption. I also sense that your mixture is more potent than my own. I'll take several of your needles, and all of the drug you have with you."

The Merchant grinned, and Sean noticed something peculiar. Even though the Merchant had injected himself with the potion, he acted no differently now than he had before. People on Discipline would only grin for appearances. "Excellent. It was nice doing business with you."

\*

The path to Dearen required a steep trek down the cliffs of Vikand, and for the sake of appearing inconspicuous, Sean chose not to climb as he would in different circumstances. A normal man would not climb down the rocks with his bare hands. A normal man would take one of the rope lifts or ride a steed down Krieger's Path to the beautiful Dearen valley below.

Sean wanted to act like a normal man.

As he pondered this, he spent several days walking on foot through the scrub-lands to the outskirts of Vikand. He did not know when he would next have the chance to be alone, nor without some influence of magical dusts or potions in his system. He wished he did not have to take Discipline. With a such a drug in his bloodstream, he could neither enjoy nor dislike anything. And he wondered whether he would enjoy being someone new or not. He might never know, if he used Discipline regularly.

As he walked over rocky paths or slept under a velvet blue sky, he wondered what sort of man he should pretend to be. In the past he had learned to play quick tricks on people, but he had also been able to kill anyone as soon as they discovered the illusion. If he would establish trust with the princess, then he could not kill casually. This was something new: something beyond the scope of his father's lessons. He would have to figure this out on his own.

He wondered how he might establish her trust in the first place. Should he become a palace servant? Or better yet, a palace guard? There seemed to be no alternative.

When he finally reached Yohag, a town on the outskirts of Vikand and near the edge of the great cliffs, he decided he did not want to take the rope-lift down. When he imagined standing in close quarters with many other travelers, swinging and swaying over a tremendous height, staking his life on the durability of a flimsy rope, he realized he might as well sign up for sheer torture. So he began shopping for a proper steed.

First, he scouted the large rams and mountain goats so skilled at traversing rocky slopes. Such beasts were suitable for the Vikand cliff ahead. But they stank, were ill-tempered, and Sean did not trust them in the least. He found himself scowling as he watched a group of them shuffle around in the mud of their pen.

“Where are you traveling then, friend?”

Sean turned to look at the goat-keeper who spoke. He expected the man to stiffen and draw back, as most people did when they noticed his red eyes. But this man did not. Belatedly, Sean remembered his brown lenses made him look to this man like any other customer. He flapped his mouth a moment, finding himself at a loss. Then he finally said, “T-to Dearen.”

“Where in Dearen?”

“To the city of Dearen. To the royal palace itself.”

“To the palace, eh?” The goat-keeper chuckled. “You’re not one of them suitors, are you?”

“Suitors?”

“Sure. Looking to marry the Dearen princess, eh?” His chuckle became an all-out cackle. “I’ve probably seen a hundred of them ever since that princess sent an open invitation to men of all the Three Nations. And I thought I’d seen ‘em all, but you must be the most pathetic one yet! Look at yourself, kid. You don’t stand a chance.”

Shocked, Sean took a moment to look down at himself. He wore a rough wool tunic and leather boots. He chose them because he wanted to look plain and unassuming. He had not shaven recently, so his chin was gruff and shadowed with hair. He rubbed it self-consciously.

“Tell you what,” laughed the goat-keeper. “Take that little goat over there—I’ll sell it for one goldon—and ride your ass back home.”

Sean walked away, his cheeks flushed with shame. The man’s laughter haunted him as it faded in the distance. Suitor? Sean had never considered such a ruse. Most pathetic one yet? Sean couldn’t really blame the goat-keeper for thinking so.

He checked the satchel on his back, which was huge and bulging with supplies. No doubt he looked ridiculous with it, and most men would have sagged by now under its weight. But it carried his Wolven suit, his weaponry, his precious supplies from the Merchant, and—most importantly—gold. He took out a handful of goldons and wondered what to do with them.

A few hours later, he returned to the task of purchasing a steed. This time, he wore soft linen trousers and leather boots laced with golden

thread and rimmed with bear-fur. His shirt was white and frilled in the Yamairan fashion with gold buttons up the middle. His ear-length hair was combed back, held in place by aromatic oils. A short mantle of Draga wool wrapped his shoulders and fastened to one side with a glittering fibula. A sturdy belt beset with jewels strapped a simple dagger and pouch to his hips. And as for his large bag, a young man carried it for him: some poor slave with good enough looks and manners to suit Sean's purposes.

Throwing back his cloak, Sean returned to the rude goat-keeper.

"Er, may I help you, sir ... ?" Whether the man recognized him or not, Sean couldn't say and didn't care.

"That's *Chief*," he said, "and yes you may. Do you have any mountain stock better than this?"

"Well, er, I have one Draga ram, but—"

"I want an animal that's versatile," said Sean. "One suited to both rocks and grass."

The man considered this a moment, then clapped his hands decisively. "I know of a mountain horse. It will climb rocks almost as well as any goat. But it's very expensive—fifty goldons—and—"

"I'll take it," said Sean, "and I'll take your second-best horse as well, for my slave."

"Well." The goat-keeper blinked in a state of ongoing bafflement. "If it pleases you, Chief."

\*

About halfway down Krieger's Path through the cliffs, Sean regretted buying a slave.

What had come over him when he purchased these clothes and goods? Once he sat upon his new horse and led his slave onward, Sean wondered where exactly his head had gone while in Yohag. He didn't really think through his decision to come to Dearen as a suitor: he just acted. It was as if a spell had come over him. And there hadn't even been any drugs in his system!

So now he had this fancy new outfit, a pesky horse, and—worst of all—a mysterious riding companion. Who was this boy and where had he come from? Sean never even bothered to ask. He simply bought a slave because most Chiefs had at least one of those, and he chose the young fellow based on his hygiene and decent looks, for the point was to make a good appearance.

The young man was probably seventeen years old. He had long black hair, soft white skin, and eyes as blue as an ocean. He was very thin,

probably from poverty, but he had a hardness about him, as if his limbs were made of iron. He said not a word, which pleased Sean at first. But after half a day of riding in silence, Sean began to feel the slave's eyes boring into him from behind, like a dagger prodding his skull. Whenever Sean glanced back, the slave looked away, feigning innocence. It grew uncomfortable, to say the least.

Sean had never bought a slave before. He didn't know how to treat one or train one. He didn't even know how much he should talk to it. So he did nothing at all, except focus on controlling his new steed and grumble at himself for acting so hastily.

That night, they chose a mossy escarpment to make their camp. Sean realized belatedly that he should have bought grains for the horses to eat while in Yohag. Too late for that now, so he spent the last hour of sunlight scaling the rocks and gathering scrub for the beasts to eat. He had nearly finished when he realized he did not have to do all the work himself.

"You," he called to the slave. "Gather some greens for your own horse."

The boy glared at him a moment, as if to make a point. Then he stood up and obeyed.

Sean sat on the rocks and ate dried meat as he watched the sun sink beyond the green hills of Dearen. He had looked upon Dearen before, but even so, he could not help but be awed by its beauty. The flowing landscape, ever-covered by the silvery Haze and its glittering safra, seemed like something out of a dream or a painting. It did not seem as if it was real. Sean removed the lenses from his eyes so that he might gaze upon it more clearly, and its dazzling brilliance nearly overwhelmed him. He saw foaming white waterfalls, gardens of fruits and flowers, fields of the most luscious green grass. Far to the north, he glimpsed the Dearen palace itself, shimmering with jewels, glass, and metalwork. One section of the palace differed completely from the next, as if various buildings from all across the world had been thrown into one spot. Very little matched and it should have been ugly, based on any artistic standards. And yet it looked magnificent.

Reluctantly he put the lenses back in his eyes and made his bed for the night. The Merchant had given him several pairs of lenses, but he feared losing any of them. After all, he needed to get used to wearing them all the time. He waited for his slave to return, and then he went to sleep.

He awoke to a blade against his throat.

The slave would have killed him on the spot if he'd gotten his way. But Sean's body had reacted to the boy's presence long before he became conscious of it. He felt the breeze of the boy's movement and the jerk against his side as the slave stole his knife. His arms reached up before his eyes opened. He grabbed the hand holding the knife and twisted.

The slave screamed as his wrist cracked.

Sean grabbed the slave's shirt with one hand and his arm with the other; a firm yank brought the boy flying over him. Sean flung him to the rocks on his back, then climbed on top of him. He pulled the knife from the boy's twitching fingertips and prepared to dispatch him.

The blade had already nicked the skin of the slave's neck by the time Sean stopped himself. He took a deep breath and pulled the knife back slightly.

"What's your name, then?" said Sean.

The slave trembled violently beneath him. His blue eyes were like two gaping holes of fear, and he seemed to have trouble breathing.

Sean gave him another yank. "Your name."

"G-Gregor!" squeaked the slave at last.

"Gregor." Sean looked up at the sad state of their camp. In the dim light of morning, he could already surmise what had happened: the boy woke up at the crack of dawn and decided to run away. Before he went, of course, he rummaged through Sean's bags for goods to steal. When he realized how much money Sean possessed, he must have considered it too risky to just take it all and run away. So he figured he would have to kill Sean first. "Well, Gregor," he said uncertainly. "You shouldn't do things like this. Do you know why, Gregor? Because I might kill you."

The slave whimpered.

"On accident, I mean. I might kill you on accident."

A stream of tears flowed from Gregor's eyes. His body wracked with tremors. Sean finally released him and drew back.

"Are you all right?"

The slave cradled his hand to his chest, jerking with a stifled sob. Sean remembered the cracking sound the wrist had made when he twisted it.

"I'm sorry. Is your wrist broken?"

Gregor tried to move it and cried out again.

"I'm very sorry about that. Really. Just keep it still, and when we get near some trees, I'll make a splint for it. You understand?"

The slave just gritted his teeth and stared forward in a daze.

Not sure what else to do, Sean cleaned up their camp and readied their horses. He glanced down at Dearen and watched how the golden hues of

sunlight made the Haze roll with waves of yellow. He felt as if he could jump from the cliff and into a fluffy cushion of mist. No doubt people had tried such a thing before in their desperation to reach the sweet valley of Dearen. They probably breathed just enough safra on their way down that they died believing it was worth it.

Today, Sean and his companion would probably ride low enough to start breathing the Haze. Sean wondered how it might feel. But he knew better than to risk finding out.

He searched his bag for the Discipline potion, then injected it into his bloodstream. Soon he ceased worrying about why he had made the choices he had, and thought only about how to deal with them. The slave may be troublesome now, but once they rode together into the Haze of Dearen, Gregor would feel better.

Sean helped the slave onto his horse, then they continued together down the long rocky path.

By midday, they had descended into the misty Haze of Dearen. Sean watched Gregor curiously to see how this affected him. The slave grew more and more relaxed; he ceased to wince and clutch his wounded hand, instead letting it rest at his side. Rays of sunshine sliced through the fog and splashed their faces with warmth. Saffra glittered in the dew and a whimsical smile fell on Gregor's face.

Sean decided this was a good time to ask the slave a few more questions. As their horses jumped and plodded over rocks and steep slopes, Sean pulled their steeds close together.

"So," said Sean, "where did you grow up?"

The slave regarded his master with gentle disinterest. Unaffected by the safra himself, Sean could hardly believe what a difference it made to this boy's demeanor. "I don't know. Some town."

"Some town?" Sean clucked to his horse as they made their way over a sharp crag. "You don't even know the name?"

"No, sir." Gregor reached out and stroked his horse's mane idly. "It was far east, on the Outlands of Vikand. We were a tribe. We moved from one patch of gray soil to the next—wherever there was still food to be gathered. But eventually another tribe conquered ours. Chief Hara made me a slave. And so I have been, ever since."

"Ever since?" Sean looked him over again. "You don't look accustomed to hard labor."

Gregor's face drooped slightly, despite the safra he breathed. "I've escaped many times. I was on the run for several years, living as a thief, before authorities caught me again, and took me to Yohag."

"I see." Sean nodded as he considered this. "A thief. This could be useful."

"Eh?"

"What I mean is that you must have skill if you managed to live as a thief for several years. Running from the khan's justice is not easy."

"Yes, I suppose that's true, sir."

The rocks beneath their horses' hooves tapered down to smaller and smaller pieces, the shallow scree slope of rocks transforming into soft red soil. The Shadowed Woods marked the base of the cliffs beneath them, a dark pool of shadows amidst a bright green landscape. They would have to pass through a gate before they entered, but after that, they would officially be in Dearen.

Sean slowed the pace of their horses.

"Gregor," he said after a moment, "you need not run away from me."

The slave said nothing.

"I will protect you, feed you, and clothe you. You must do what I say without question, but I will rarely ask much of you. I will give you what freedom I can, though that is a hard thing to measure. I do command this of you: that you be on your best behavior when we meet other nobles and politicians, which we will. And if you do anything to cross me again, whether in my presence or without my knowing, I will find out and I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Gregor bowed his head.

They reached the gates into Dearen, which were guarded by plump soldiers with tigers on leashes. Sean's horse snorted anxiously in the presence of the jungle cats—some of which roamed freely—but Sean rubbed its neck and shushed it. He watched the majestic felines prowl in and out of the woods, their black stripes merging seamlessly with the shadows and mist. The lazy warriors of Dearen did not deserve such mighty companions, and Sean found it hard to believe that these cats would do their bidding. But their presence served its purpose well enough, for Sean did not care to try his luck against them.

Fortunately, entering the country required little effort. The guards wrote the visitors' names, description, and purpose in a large crinkled book. Then the guards gave them passes which would remain valid within Dearen for thirty days. After this, the pass would expire unless a local reeve granted renewal. If they stayed with an expired pass they would be subject to eviction and they would never be allowed re-entry.

"Thirty days?" Gregor sighed as they passed through the gates into the Shadowed Woods. "I think I want to stay here forever."

“I wouldn’t worry. Did you see how unorganized those guards were? How could they ever keep track of who gets evicted, who can’t come back, or who didn’t leave only yesterday with those big sagging books of theirs?”

Gregor’s voice became grave. “Because bad things happen to those who tempt their fate in Dearen. Don’t you know that?”

Sean had heard such ghost stories before. People who defied the laws of Dearen, even if they weren’t immediately caught, eventually vanished from the face of the earth, and no one knew what became of them.

Nevertheless, Sean shook his head and said, “I still wouldn’t worry.” Even with the anti-safra in his system, Sean appreciated the unusual calmness of this strange and mystical place. His logical thoughts, which were all he could experience at present, took next to no effort at all. “I sense that whatever one desires in this place, it will be easy to obtain.”

He thought of his father and wondered what in Dearen could have possibly led to his downfall.

# Chapter 7

## Eleanor's Ultimatum

When Eleanor first heard that Princess Fayr had sent out a wide summons for suitors, her reaction resembled panic. "Suitor?" Eleanor cried. "The princess wants a suitor? But *I* can't court the princess, so what good does that do us?"

The King-wife stood on a bridge over the Churning Lake with her noble Scholar, Rebeka. She had discovered some time ago that the bridge between her Mansion and the central sub-station provided an ideal place to contemplate difficult problems. The stirring waters of the lake provided a rhythmic sound that was not too blatant to disrupt the steadiness of her inner metronome.

A funny smile played on Rebeka's lips. She had such ripe lips, so very red and swollen, that Eleanor wondered if the Scholar used some unnatural tool to produce that effect. But what bearing did that have on the matters at hand? "Yamair is full of strapping young men," said Rebekah. "I'm sure you could find one to suit your purposes, if you wished to."

"Hm." Eleanor paced back and forth over the planks of the bridge. "Provide a suitor myself ..."

The issue struck more emotions within Eleanor than she cared to acknowledge. It had been several hours since her last sip of Discipline, so she could feel those emotions aching within her. More than anything, this situation reminded her of the frustrating fact that she and King Byron had never managed to produce a child together.

The Earth Mechanic knew that they had tried, again and again and again. To remember their various attempts made Eleanor's loins tingle with warmth even as her blood burned with shame.

In her mind, the purpose of sex was to create children. To accomplish this efficiently, it should only be practiced at certain times of the month

and the act itself should be quick and clean. After years of performing sex this way, however, Byron had not been able to impregnate her. Before he left, he suggested they try a different method. He said they should try taking their time, saturating their bodies with sensation before the final culmination, and perhaps this would make them more fertile.

Eleanor found the theory ridiculous, but for the sake of making an heir, she had been willing to try it a few times. She could not meet Rebeka's eyes as these memories replayed in her mind. She thought of the way Byron would kiss her slowly, for minutes on end, folding his lips around hers, and even slipping his tongue into her mouth. She remembered how he grabbed her breasts and pinched her nipples between his fingertips, rubbing and tweaking incessantly, causing heat and moisture to rush between her legs.

"King-wife?"

Eleanor took a deep breath and tried to dispel such thoughts from her mind. The roar of the wind against the water reminded her of where she was and what she was doing. Byron had been gone for more than three months now, and she missed his touch with a terrible ache. But why? She looked upon their many unions together as a miserable failure. Why would she want to try it again, when she knew nothing would come of it?

"Why provide a suitor?" snapped Eleanor at last. "Why arrange a marriage at all? Yamair should not have to court Dearen. What can we gain from them?"

Rebeka batted her thick lashes rapidly. "They have money, your Majesty. A great deal of money."

"And where did that money come from? It came from other kingdoms paying for safra. Safra is the only produce Dearen has to offer, and we want none of it." The realization seemed to strike her suddenly. "Yamair wants none of it!"

"You make a valid point." Rebeka contemplated this revelation with due graveness. "I think what you are saying is that Dearen ought to court us and not the other way around—in a fair and synchronized world, that is."

"Yes!" Eleanor paced across the bridge with increased fervor. "Yes that's exactly it!"

"Unfortunately," said Rebeka, "this is not a fair and synchronized world, and whether Dearen deserves its wealth and power does not affect whether they have it. Therefore, we must take precautionary

measures against the fact that a union between Dearen and Vikand could endanger our security in the future.”

“A union between Vikand and Dearen.” Eleanor reeled slightly and reached out to balance herself on the railing of the bridge. “Earth Mechanic save us.”

“The Earth Mechanic has placed *you* in a position to save us.” The firmness of the Scholar’s voice made Eleanor look up with surprise. Rebeka’s curvy and pleasant face now had a hardness to it, like the statue of a pagan goddess from Vikand. “The next move is yours to make.”

Eleanor shuddered a little at this blatant realization. More than ever, she wished Byron was here. “Perhaps I should wait for Byron to return. He’ll know what to do ... ”

“I advise against it, King-wife.” Rebeka’s expression softened once more. Her dark eyes caught the sunlight and sparkled. “You can make this decision on your own. You told me yourself that safra has swayed Byron’s decisions too much, already. Perhaps it is best that our kingdom has reached this crossroads while you steer the carriage. Perhaps the Earth Mechanic intended it that way. You can lead our kingdom forward, King-wife, into a new relationship with Dearen. You have come to a powerful conclusion just now. We don’t need Dearen. Dearen needs us. Now we just need to make them realize it, and get them all to beg.”

“I ... I ... I suppose you’re right.” Eleanor’s mouth felt very dry all the sudden. She struggled to push a swallow down her throat. “But Vikand will offer her suitors. And many of our kingdom’s own Synergists will no doubt seek her hand, as well—with or without my permission. How can I rival that, when Byron and I have no heir of our own?” She lurched a little with the pain of that confession.

“You don’t need an heir, King-wife.” Rebeka stepped forward, setting down her parchment and pen, approaching the King-wife with open hands. The wind pulled her black hair from the knot on her head and lashed it against her cheeks. “You have produced so many great things in your lifetime. Almost any two people can create a child. But no one can make the things *you* can.”

The strength of these words stole the breath from Eleanor’s lungs. She looked upon Rebeka as if upon a savior. Her words offered such seductive wisdom, a release from her guilt, a recognition of her own power that tempted her to seek more.

As if to illustrate, Rebeka reached out and pressed her palm to Eleanor’s chest. Eleanor should have flinched with surprise, but she did not.

"The decision is not mine to make," said the Scholar, almost whispering. "It is yours, Eleanor. You alone can figure out what to do now."

Eleanor's heart pounded against Rebeka's hand. The physical contact seemed to create a bridge of energy between them, filling Eleanor with strength. She wondered if Rebeka felt the same way. "Yes," she breathed. "You're right. My inventions are my true legacy, my greatest creation. But how do I get Princess Fayr to understand that?"

Rebeka wilted, her hand slipping from Eleanor's chest.

Eleanor's heart sank. She sensed she had let Rebeka down, somehow, and hurried to correct her mistake. "Perhaps it doesn't matter what the Dearen princess thinks. I must speak reason and see if I can spread my inner drum to any of those poor, muddled souls of Dearen." She stared into Rebeka's eyes and saw her own fears reflected there. "But ... but ... they're not the only challenge. I must figure out how to deal with the other Synergists, too; is that what you're thinking?" Eleanor resumed her furious pacing, now wringing her hands in front of her. "But how? How do I ... ?"

"You pointed out the problem yourself," said Rebeka. "You said that the Synergists may leave to court the princess, with or *without* your approval."

"Yes. And it is not my place to forbid them. In fact, if I did, it would only make me look more desperate." She came to an abrupt stop. "Therefore, I must personally approve at least one of them."

Rebeka's gentle smile sent a thrill through her heart. "That seems wise, King-wife!"

Eleanor nodded emphatically. "Yes. The Synergists maintain their freedom, but only one of them will have the King-wife's own blessing. Oh, Rebeka!"

Her arms wrapped suddenly around the Scholar, gripping her tightly. She did not even think about the action before doing it; she just acted. And that was exactly the sort of behavior she abhorred.

She drew back almost as quickly as she'd lunged forward. Even so, the brief embrace left a powerful mark on her senses. A spicy aroma that the Scholar seemed to exhibit lingered sweetly in her nostrils. The warmth of Rebeka's body had seeped through the fabric of Eleanor's shirt-sleeves and lingered there.

"I, uh ... I thank you, Scholar, for your ... wisdom."

A splash of pink suffused Rebeka's cheeks. "This wisdom was your own, Majesty."

Eleanor patted at her bound hair. A few strands had escaped in her excitement. "Well. Pride leads to negligence. Therefore ... " She didn't know what else to say. "I should get to work."

She straightened her clothes and pushed up her chin. She strode forward, past Rebeka, and then paused once more.

"Well?" said Eleanor. "Are you coming?"

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Men and women sprawled across the royal yards and foyers. Laughter rang throughout the crystalline hallways. The Haze rolled through the air, glittering with safra, burning Eleanor's nose. Fountains sprayed in almost every direction she looked, wasting perfectly good water for almost no purpose at all. The Dearen guards looked at the King-wife's ticking carriage and coated soldiers with dazed expressions on their fat faces. And when Eleanor demanded to see Princess Fayr, they just told her to wait in the Quartz Courtyard with dozens of other suitors. They told her—the King-wife of Yamair herself!—that the princess would summon her when the *princess* was ready: perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps never.

Eleanor did not know what else she expected. A few times, she had even looked forward to making this trip to Dearen. But in those situations, she had let her emotions get the better of her. Now, she saw this place for the pathetic establishment that it was.

"King-wife Eleanor of Yamair," said a guard. "Princess Fayr summons you to the Crystal Dining Hall."

"It's about time!" said Eleanor. But she tried to hide her relief. Based on how long people in this courtyard and other areas of the palace had been waiting—days, at least—Eleanor had begun to worry. Here in the Quartz Courtyard, various suitors claimed to have been waiting to see the princess for *weeks*: Vikand chiefs wearing wool and axes, Dearen knights swollen with fat and jewelry, and even a few Yamairan Synergists who tried to hide their presence from the King-wife behind fountains and women.

The number of women in the courtyard nearly equaled that of men. Eleanor did not understand why, at first, but after a few dreadful hours of observation, she began to comprehend. The women here helped occupy the men during the long days or weeks of waiting ahead of them. In fact, from what Eleanor could tell, they provided much *too* good a distraction. Was it possible to do something too effectively? Perhaps so, if the action pushed towards a different purpose than originally intended. Perhaps these women did not just want to entertain the men: perhaps

they courted the men so that they might grab for themselves whomever the Princess rejected.

Or perhaps they had no objective at all, and that was why Eleanor's head hurt trying to find one. Perhaps they were all simply fools, kissing and groping each other without any concern for the outcome. A few of the Vikand horsewomen made use of the Dearen men as surely as the hordesmen used the Dearen women. They straddled the males or pulled them on top of them, guiding their movements to their hearts' content. Is this what safra did to people?

The most blatant displays of debauchery came from the khan of Vikand's own family. Eleanor identified the khan by the thick metal jewelry he wore about his neck, or so-called Khan Collar. He was a large man draped with furs and Vikand metalwork, whose confidence of presence suggested his political status. He sat surrounded by women who poured him drinks and ran their fingers over the bare flesh of his arms. After the women teased him long enough, he pulled one onto his lap and bounced her there for awhile. Eleanor found it so distasteful that she forced herself to look away.

Looking away did not help matters, unfortunately, for her eyes fell next on the khan's own son—or so she suspected, based on their resemblance. This large man did not even demonstrate the slight decency of his father. He pulled a woman onto his lap who wore a loose satin gown. He kissed her mouth with big motions of his lips and tongue. Then he reached between them and unbuckled his own trousers. His big hands grabbed the woman's hips and pushed her up against him. They clasped each other tight and his lips trailed down her neck. The sharp, jerking motions of his groin against the woman's made it all too clear what was happening.

They were fornicating, out in the open for everyone to see!

"What do you think of my brother?"

Eleanor turned to look a young man standing next to her. She had been so distracted by the wanton display across the courtyard that she had not even noticed his arrival.

"He's a cad, is he not?"

"I, uh ..."

This young man's strange demeanor became another source of puzzlement. He had curly blond hair to his ears, whisking about his face in a hundred directions. He had a face like a baby's, soft and round, with dimples that cut into his cheeks when he smiled. But strangest of all was his right hand, which he extended towards her while she was still trying to think of a reply.

"Archon Picard at your service."

"King-wife Eleanor." She gripped the hand reluctantly, for it was covered by a long leather glove stretching up to his elbow. Straps and buckles weaved in and out of the leather in various spots, as if to connect with metal rods in his flesh. She confirmed this as she felt his joints moving under her grip: they were of a harder make than bone, even though some fingers were still soft with flesh.

After a moment she realized she had been holding the hand longer than etiquette permitted, but now her curiosity had peaked. "Your hand. Was it made in Yamair?"

"That's an interesting question." He lifted his hand from her, curling the fingers inward. They twitched and creaked with the movement. "Where did my hand come from? It came from Dearen, for I was on safra when I strolled into combat and got my arm crushed to pieces." His smile tightened as he continued to move his fingers, in and out, in and out. "It came from Vikand, for where else would you find a man willing to crush the arm of the khan's son in a training exercise? And it came from Yamair, because one of your Yamairan Synergists happened to be visiting the Vikand capital. When he saw the state of my arm and I refused to let him remove it, he offered to try and fix it." His gaze returned to her, glittering like the safra in the air. "So you might say I am a product of all Three Nations."

About this time was when the royal guard approached, summoning King-wife Eleanor to come meet the princess.

"Lucky you," said Picard.

"Has the khan of Vikand been waiting longer than I have?" Eleanor asked in astonishment.

"Well, Father has seen the princess once, at least. However ... she has not invited him back inside."

"I see." At least the princess had *some* sense.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, King-wife Eleanor," said Picard. "Although, in Dearen, I suppose *all* things are a pleasure."

As he drifted away, he left Eleanor with a strange sense of foreboding.

She downed a quick gulp of Discipline, just in case the drug in her system had begun to wear off. Then she tapped Rebeke's arm and rose to follow the palace guard. She also motioned to a third companion, Prime Synergist Deragon. Despite his high rank, which was second only to the King and King-wife, he was a humble fellow who hid most of his body in the traditional robe of Prime Synergist. A hood hung over his face, which he kept bowed in shadow. But at least the robe itself was a sight to

behold: intricate embroidery covered every inch of the fabric, designed to imitate the inner workings of Yamair's finest machinery. The skill and craftsmanship required to weave such a pattern excused the indulgence of visual stimulation.

Together they made their way deep into the Dearen palace.

Her head cleared of her pesky frustrations as the potion coursed through her. She took a deep breath and moved forward, one firm step after another. Trousers were such a useful garb, much more practical than skirts which could be tripped upon or tangled. She wondered why she and Rebeka were the only women wearing them. Then again, they were the only women who weren't baring their legs almost entirely.

With that in mind, the sight around the next corner was so unexpected that even with the Discipline in her system, she stopped mid-stride to stare upon it.

Two women stood leaned against a large marble pillar—that is, one of them leaned and the other one crouched. The woman against the pillar had her head thrown back in the throes of ecstasy, her dress tugged almost completely from her body. The top of her dress had been pulled down to expose her breasts, which the second woman leaned down and licked, one after another, taking turns. The first woman's dress also rode high up her hips, for the second woman's hand had slipped under it, moving rapidly between her legs.

The guard stopped and stared overlong, too, for very different reasons than Eleanor. He wore a sloppy smile on his face and looked of a mind to join them.

"That's some of the most inefficient behavior I have ever seen," Eleanor announced. "The two of them can never even produce a child!" She stared pointedly at the guard. "Are you going to lead us to the princess, or shall I find her on my own?"

The guard blinked a few times, then resumed walking.

They continued on through overly extravagant corridors and spacious foyers until, finally, they entered the Crystal Dining Hall. Eleanor stopped out of necessity to let her eyes adjust to the brilliance of the chamber. Light shone everywhere, reflecting off almost every imaginable surface, and the Haze in the air made it worse. The gray mist caught the light and held it inside, seeming to glow from within. Only after a few breaths did Eleanor adjust enough to see the table in the middle of the room, a glass monstrosity that shimmered like everything else in the chamber. Then she saw the shapes of the prince and princess of Dearen.

She knew them instantly by their lush purple hair. They sat together on one end of the four-sided table, backs straight, faces flat. Their youth was remarkable: Prince Kyne hardly appeared to be thirteen years of age, and the princess less than twenty. Nonetheless, something about the princess demanded immediate respect.

Her hair rolled up over her head where it spread out like a fan, its lavender strands intertwined with pink and yellow flowers. Safra dusted her pale skin, twinkling slightly with the movement of the light around her. A soft white dress covered her body, but only in the way that clouds might be said to cover the sky, gently and freely. Her face and body was without a doubt the most beautiful Eleanor had ever seen in her life, and she needed no emotions to think so. Physically-speaking, the princess represented pure ... perfection.

"May I present Queen Eleanor of Yamair," said the guard, "and, er, her companions."

"My title is King-wife," said Eleanor, although for the briefest of moments, she wondered why. "My companions are the Royal Scholar Rebeka and Prime Synergist Deragon."

"Very well," said Princess Fayr. "Have a seat at my table."

Eleanor found herself obeying, even though she questioned whether she should. She noticed that the princess of Dearen made no effort to introduce herself or brother—it wasn't necessary, of course, but still polite—and invited her guests to sit at her table in the form of a command. Eleanor wondered whether this was pure luck on the princess's part, or whether she calculated her words and tone carefully. If it was the latter, then the princess may be a more challenging opponent than Eleanor expected. But how could that be? She was practically a child. She was not prepared to rule a kingdom, and most notably, she did not have Discipline in her system like Eleanor. Could the rumors be true that safra did not affect the Violeneese bloodline like other people?

She chose a seat directly across from the Dearen royalty. Rebeka and Deragon sat on the sides of the table. Rebeka pulled out her parchment and pen, preparing to write down all that transpired. Servants flocked round the table, however, setting fruits, breads, and cheeses upon the glass surface—all of it glittering with safra dust. Rebeka struggled to find workspace amidst the growing feast.

"Eat and enjoy yourself," said Princess Fayr, leaving them little choice.

"I appreciate the kind gesture," said Eleanor, "but it is not yet time for dinner, and none of us here care to consume safra."

Prime Synergist Deragon withdrew his hand, which had reached halfway across the table towards a bowl of buttery rolls.

"Hm." The princess hesitated. Was she at a loss? Was it part of her diplomatic strategy to loosen her guests with safra? If so she recovered, her eyes settling calmly on the King-wife's. Eleanor realized that Fayr's eyes did not seem to have a specific color: in one moment they seemed blue, next green, the next orange. They were like two pools of water that seemed to dance with the light. "I am afraid you consume safra in Dear-en whether you intend to or not. It floats within the Haze that covers our kingdom. Perhaps you noticed?"

"I have already accounted for that." Eleanor considered smiling, which seemed like something she would do after achieving a minor victory. She refrained in light of exhibiting good manners. "Now let's not waste any more words and get straight down to business. I have come here for two reasons."

"Oh? And what are those?"

The princess flinched as her little brother plucked a grape from the banquet. Instead of eating it, he put it on the table and rolled it back and forth between his hands.

"First of all, I come in response to your call for a suitor. As a gesture of good will I have selected the most worthy candidate in Yamair for your hand in marriage and I have brought him here before you."

"Oh?" Fayr looked curiously at the man in the robe. "Is this him?"

"Yes. His name is Deragon, Prime Synergist of Yamair. That is the highest rank in our society next to that of King and King-wife. He earned his place with hard work and exceptional innovation. Deragon invented a machine that can make carts float through the air using the power of heat. One day it might be used to transport people over long distances, which is especially useful in the hills and mountains of Yamair's landscape."

Deragon stood up and bowed deeply towards the princess. This only caused his hood to fall even further over his face, however.

Fayr tapped her fingers on the table, perhaps in a careless display of frustration. "Have you nothing to say for yourself, Prime Synergist?"

Deragon stiffened, and finally said, "I am honored to meet you, Princess Fayr. Your beauty is ... incomparable."

"If I'm to consider marrying you," she said briskly, "I should like to see your face as well."

"O-of course." With great reluctance, he reached up and pushed back his hood.

Eleanor watched Fayr's reaction closely. The princess's eyes opened wide and she paled by a couple shades or more. To Eleanor, this only confirmed her suspicions that Fayr was a shallow creature who gave too much importance to visual appearance. It did not matter to Fayr that she looked upon one of the smartest men on the continent. She could not see beyond the mauled flesh of his face and neck.

"Synergist Deragon suffered a terrible accident when he was a teenager," Eleanor explained. Deragon, who was more ashamed of his appearance than he should be, dropped the hood back over his face and sat down. "One of his machines malfunctioned and gravely wounded him. However, this incident taught him a valuable lesson. Thanks to his brush with death, Deragon never made a mistake like that again. That is not to say mistakes are innately bad; they are an important part of the learning process, as his story demonstrates. But you might say Deragon is a man who learned so much early in his life that he no longer needs to make mistakes in order to keep learning."

Fayr listened to all this with a very flat expression, which nearly drooped into a frown. She also glared a few times at her brother, who continued to roll a grape across the table, leaving a pink wet smudge across the glass.

"I will take Deragon's courtship into consideration," the princess said at last. "Now what is the second matter you came about?"

Eleanor took a deep breath. She didn't feel nervous, of course. She felt nothing right now. She merely recognized the weight of what she was about to propose. "I wanted to let you know that for the second time in history, Yamair will close its doors to the importation of safra."

The Princess became very still. Even the little Prince stopped and batted his lashes at the King-wife of Yamair.

"Go on," said Fayr, almost breathless.

"It is really that simple," said Eleanor. "When I return to Yamair I will reinstate the law my husband lifted regarding the legality of safra in our kingdom. I will punish anyone caught possessing or dealing it."

"Why did you come and tell me this? Why not simply enforce the law and be done with it?"

"Because I knew how profoundly it would affect you, and I did not wish for my mandate to seem like an act of hostility. I am well aware, Princess, that your kingdom's economy depends upon selling safra to the countries of Yamair and Vikand. Occasionally you sell it to overseas merchants, but I suspect the flow of money from that venue is relatively miniscule. Therefore I also predict how you and the citizens of Dearen

may react to my decree. You might continue to sell safra to my people secretly. You might even rejoice in some respects, because the price of safra will go up for those so desperate to buy it against the law. After all, that's what happened many years ago, is it not? Perhaps you don't remember that. You are so young."

The princess narrowed her diamond-like eyes.

"I came to you about this because I wanted to make something very clear," said Eleanor. "I have shown you my respect, and I expect you to show me respect in return. I expect you to honor my mandate by enforcing it similarly from within your own country. I expect you to punish those who break my law and try to sell safra across the mountains. And if you do not, I will see it as a sign of disrespect."

Princess Fayr leaned forward slightly, entwining her hands before her. "Is that some sort of threat?"

"Interpret it as you will," said Eleanor. "I have said all I need to say."

The princess leaned back again, her fingers releasing. "You need not threaten me, King-wife Eleanor. I will respect this law of yours. In fact, I will applaud it. Once you leave this place, I will strengthen the boundary of Dearen along the Yamairan Mountains. I will make sure that no one can take safra from my country into yours. I will do all this because I no longer wish to sell safra to Yamair, anyway."

Eleanor said nothing for a long time. She did not know how to react. She knew that if not for the drug in her system, she would feel surprise, maybe even shock. Rationally, she simply did not expect this. She expected Fayr to be frightened or at least at a loss. Eleanor had expected to leave this room with a feeling of triumph and superiority. Instead, she found herself grasping for words.

"Well," she said at last. "You said: 'once I leave this place.' Does that mean I am no longer welcome here?"

"Certainly not." A smile played on the edges of Fayr's lips. "Stay in the Dearen palace as long as you'd like. And while you are here, be sure to enjoy yourself."

Once more, the princess's invitation resembled the strong tenor of a command.

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Eleanor woke up in the middle of the night moaning. Rebeka's hands shook her gently.

"Eleanor? Eleanor, are you well?"

"Oh ... oh." Eleanor's eyes fluttered open and her body stopped writhing under her soft linen blankets. She looked around and tried to reorient herself.

Princess Fayr had given her a beautiful room to stay in, complete with a large pillowed bed and a table full of candlesticks. Rebeka must have woken up before her and lit some, for a few golden flames illuminated the Haze in the room. Through the sparkling tendrils of smoke, Eleanor gazed up at Rebeka. Eleanor had allowed Rebeka to sleep in the same bed as herself, for it was big enough to accommodate two people, and therefore why waste space?

Rebeka looked more beautiful than ever. Even though she had just been sleeping, her olive complexion was glowing, her eyes bright, her lips moist. Her black hair slipped in waves down her bare shoulders. The expression on her face was so tender and caring that it enhanced her beauty even more.

"King-wife?" Rebeka's green gaze darted from one of Eleanor's eyes to the other. "Were you dreaming, Eleanor?"

"I ... I ... I suppose I was." What had she been dreaming about? Her entire body thrummed, as if with an energy she had never known before. Her blood pounded. Her skin tingled. Her breath came in quick, heavy bursts. But worst of all, a fire seemed to burn between her legs. Was this how Byron had wanted her to feel when he took a long time performing intercourse, kissing her slowly and exploring every inch of her body with his hands? If so, then he had not succeeded. She had never felt this way before: not with him.

Then she remembered. Her dream had been of the two women she saw in the Dearen hallway. Except one of the women had been Eleanor. And the other was ...

"Was it a good dream?" asked Rebeka. She smiled softly and reached out to touch Eleanor's cheek.

"No!" Eleanor reached up and grabbed Rebeka's wrist, pushing it away from herself. "No it wasn't! My Discipline is wearing off. This damn safra is getting to me. I need more Discipline. *Quickly!*"

Rebeka hesitated. Her smile wavered. Then she got up to obey.

Eleanor drank the Discipline potion and tried to get back to sleep. Unfortunately, she could not. Her thoughts ran rampant. She could not figure out why she had dreamt what she did no matter how hard she tried, nor why her body had reacted so strongly.

# Chapter 8

## The Edge of Pain

Leonard Khan's meeting with Princess Fayr did not go well at all.

When Leonard first saw the princess, his jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. For a long while he did not speak, even when the princess prompted him to. He practically drooled from the mouth by the time he muttered a greeting. Perhaps the safra in his system was partially to blame; the khan was not accustomed to it like Picard, and like most Vikand men he saw its use as a weakness. One way or another, he made a fool of himself.

All three men of the khan family dined together with the princess so that she might meet them. Picard wondered whether the princess saw them each as a potential suitor or not, which had not been his father's intention. Whatever she thought, she gave little away, sitting primly in her seat and rarely touching her own food. She listened to Leonard Khan brag about his exploits in battle and she endured his gruesome descriptions of men he had killed. A Vikand woman would have been impressed by those stories. Princess Fayr, on the other hand, carefully changed the subject.

"So what ever happened to the mother of your sons?" asked the princess.

"Oh, I divorced her many years ago," said the khan.

"Divorce? What's that?"

Richard chuckled through a mouthful of bread.

"It means I canceled our marriage," said Leonard.

"And why did you do that?"

"Because Mother was an arrogant bitch," said Richard.

Leonard frowned at his son, as if to reproach him, then burst out laughing himself. "So true!" he roared.

Picard looked from his father to his brother to the princess herself, who shared none of their laughter. "What my brother means to say," amended Picard, "is that our mother, called Polemarch in her time, had a greedy and conniving nature. It is an unfortunate fact, but true. If Father had not divorced her, she might have drained our country of its own resources. Fortunately, Father broke off the marriage in time and has kept our nation stable ever since. The whole Vikand Horde has grown to ten thousand men and women of the greatest prowess in all the Three Nations. His personal Royal Horde commands one hundred of the most elite warriors."

Princess Fayr regarded Picard for the first time since his arrival. Picard sat calmly, his aching right hand hidden under the table, his left feeding his mouth when the conversation permitted. Strangely enough, now that he was here in Dearen, his consumption of safra had lessened. He wanted to save his personal supply of safra for the time being and survive by breathing in the legendary Dearen Haze. However, this did not add up to the amount he usually imbibed on a daily basis. A hot pain burned up his right wrist, reaching Picard's mind sharply enough to draw out a wince every once in awhile.

But most importantly, Picard did not want to consume too much safra because of what his brother once said to him.

*That fucking safra always makes you lose your nerve. And yet safra's the reason you do everything in the first place, isn't it?*

Picard wanted more safra. The only way to establish a future supply was for the negotiations with Dearen to go well, or else for that Wolven to eliminate the monarchy. Picard knew that in theory, the Vikand Horde should be able to conquer Dearen easily. But the same thing held them back now that always had: the Haze. No army could maintain its will when they came close enough to the palace. They found themselves happy instead of angry, relaxed instead of violent, and they spread out in the fields and looked up at the sky with languid smiles.

This was the only way. Nothing could go wrong. Nothing. And as much as he despised it, the edge of pain creeping into Picard's mind helped to keep him focused.

The Princess's eyes also seemed to probe his mind, her gaze sharp and crisp. Picard noticed that her eyes did not possess a single color, instead blending with a range of different gradients. Interesting.

"Archon Picard—do I have your name right?"

"Yes, Princess."

"You mentioned that your mother held the title of Polemarch. Your father is Khan. What's the difference?"

"Well, Princess, the khan is the military leader of the nation. The Polemarch supervises the more secretarial and legal matters of state. They hold equal power but in different areas. It is customary for Khan and Polemarch to marry each other; often the khan is male and the polemarch female, but sometimes the roles are reversed. We have many great female warriors in Vikand, Highness. In any case, Khan and Polemarch must agree to all decisions, and if they disagree, a Senate of Archons and High Chiefs votes for a solution. Archons like myself are subordinates to the polemarch; chiefs are subordinates of the khan."

"I see." Princess Fayr looked around at them thoughtfully. "Your government is more sophisticated than I suspected."

Picard bowed his head. "You're too kind, Princess."

"But tell me this, Leonard Khan: why are you both Polemarch and Khan? Did you take that title for yourself when you divorced your wife?"

"I sure as hell did!" said the khan, biting into a roasted piece of meat.

Picard could not believe his father's behavior. Leonard Khan had never been especially diplomatic, but he usually performed better than *this*, at least. Did safra really turn everyone into such fools?

"Yet your *wife* was the greedy one?" said Princess Fayr.

Leonard's smile faltered.

"My father took the title out of necessity," Picard hastened. "We could not leave Vikand without a polemarch, and there were no other candidates suitable for marriage. So he assumed both titles, and he has ruled well with them—with the ongoing counsel of Archons and High Chiefs to guide him, of course."

Princess Fayr stared back at Picard pointedly. Though she wore no expression, her gaze seemed to fix the archon to his chair like a spear. "I have one more question for you all," she said, though she looked at none other than Picard, "and then I must take my leave, for I have other duties to attend to. I hear that there is a mountain in Vikand known as Wolven Mountain, and that a family of red-eyed assassins lives there. Is this true?"

Picard gulped. "That is true, Princess, although the khan claims no affiliation to—"

"This matter concerns me greatly," snapped the princess, "as I recently discovered that these Wolvens—whether of their own will or someone else's, I know not—are devoted to killing myself and my brother. I killed

the last assassin myself, and I will kill the next one, if he or she exists. But anyone who supports the efforts of a Wolven is my enemy. Anyone who opposes them is my friend. So if I am to consider your offer of courtship with any real weight, the first thing you must do is arrest every Wolven you know of, since they are citizens of your nation, and bring them to me in chains. Understood?"

Richard and Leonard were at a loss. Picard struggled to pick up the pieces. "What you ask is impossible, Princess. We know little of Wolven affairs, much less who they are or even how many remain alive! Furthermore, the Wolvens are the only ones who can climb to the top of their own mountain; that's the point of it! And—"

"I don't care to hear excuses," said Fayr, standing up. "If what you say about your Royal Horde is true I certainly hope that you're capable. Either do it or don't."

She turned to regard a little boy who had entered the room. Picard was still recovering from the weight of her terms, so it took him a moment to notice the boy's purple hair. It was the young Prince Kyne himself!

Picard looked to his father, whose frown had deepened. The boy's presence was a blatant reminder that the Wolven had not yet killed him.

"Fayr," said the boy. "Chief Darius is looking for you."

"Oh—really?" There was no mistaking the hue of pink that flushed Fayr's cheeks, or the way she reached up and patted the braids of her purple hair. Her smile could be heard in her voice. "He's early, I think! Go tell him I'll be right there."

Kyne cast a wary glance at their guests, then turned and hurried away.

"If you will excuse me," said the princess, "I must take my leave. Please enjoy the food on the table, and when you're finished, any of my servants can show you to your quarters."

Then she all but ran from the room, the hint of a smile pinching her cheeks. The four guards in the room followed her out.

For a moment, none of the three men spoke. They slouched in their chairs, heavy with food and obfuscated by safra. Picard was the most alert of them all. He stretched his aching hand above the table, though this caused a new pain to jolt up his elbow.

"What the hell," said the khan. "She can do whatever she wants. We'll be fine. Eh, boys?"

Picard slammed his hand down, his metallic fingers scratching against the glass of the table. "That's not true, Father! That's the safra talking. Think of how rich you would become if you married the princess of

Dearen. Think of what a mighty nation we would become. No, not a nation—a *kingdom*! Father, you could become a *king*!”

The allure of this prospect cut through the khan’s mental fog. “That’s true. That’s what I want. But we can’t give her the Wolvens. It’s impossible.”

“I know I said that myself. But in truth ... ” His mind raced rapidly. He looked around the room, searching for any eavesdroppers, but all the guards had left with the princess. “It may be possible. What if Sean is the only Wolven left? And even if he’s not, who’s to say otherwise? If we tell her that, she’ll believe us.”

“Hm.” The khan stroked his beard. “We still need the Wolven to kill Kyne. But after he does that, I suppose we could capture him and hand him over to the princess.”

“Smart plan, Father,” offered Richard.

“Perhaps,” said Picard. He needed to tread carefully here. He still wanted Sean to figure out how safra was made. If Leonard could manage to marry the princess, then little else mattered: Picard would have the rest of his life to explore the Dearen palace. But if he didn’t ... “The princess didn’t say she *would* marry you if you brought her the Wolvens in chains. She only said that she *might*. If I remember correctly, she said it was the only way she would consider your courtship with any weight. And who was that Chief her brother mentioned? She looked a little too excited for my comfort. You need to do everything in your power to win her over, Father.”

Leonard took a deep breath of the Hazy air, then exhaled. Saffra fluttered upon his breath. “Perhaps she’s not worth the trouble, then. Maybe I should just settle down with one of those wenches from the courtyard. What do you say, Richard?”

Richard leered agreeably. The two of them had already grown spoiled by the compliance of Dearen women. In Vikand, bedding a woman often involved a spirited struggle, and if the man was not strong enough, the woman might cut his hands off. Sex resembled warfare, just like almost anything in Vikand. Here, the women did whatever Richard and Leonard wanted.

Picard tried to use this to appeal to his brother. “You like it here in the palace, don’t you, Richard? Wouldn’t you like to stay here permanently? You can only do that if Father marries the princess.”

The high chief considered this, his leer drooping. “Father,” he said, “what if you fuck her and get her pregnant? Then wouldn’t she have to marry you, being a princess and all?”

Leonard stroked his beard again. "Maybe." Then his beard stretched up with a smile. "Maybe not. But I'd certainly enjoy doing it."

Picard's brother and father shared a good laugh together, but Picard watched silently. For the first time, Picard found himself begrudging this damnable safra.

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Picard strolled down the Striped Corridor and considered whether to eat some more safra. He did not want to confess it to himself, but he battled with feelings of disappointment and he did not know how to handle them.

He felt restless. He felt worried. And when he wasn't feeling those things, he felt ... bored.

Something wasn't right. Dearen should be a place of complete bliss and joy. He should not have to eat or smoke safra in large amounts in order to feel happy. Or should he? Did he require a higher amount of safra than others? Was he simply more tolerant to its effects? Did he possess some profound knowledge that others did not?

He paused near a window, needing a visual reprieve from the gaudy orange and black of the hallway, and stared into the moonlit night. He had been to Dearen once as a child and that was all. Perhaps he had exaggerated his own memories over time, combining them with legends and the whimsical accounts of returning travelers. He thought the Haze would be thicker than this, the safra in the air more abundant.

Whatever the reason, Picard could not find the same level of enjoyment as the people around him—not without consuming more safra than they did. In the courtyard, he'd had plenty of chances to watch them smile and laugh and cuddle one another with objective curiosity. No one argued with or lied to anyone else. They simply embraced each other—quite literally. His personal obtainment of happiness no longer distinguished him. Here, everyone was happy, even his foolish brother and father, who forgot they needed to take certain steps in order to remain that way.

He resumed strolling down the hallway and noticed a woman walking towards him. She dressed simply, at least for someone in Dearen, with a soft-flowing gown and flowers in her red hair. Her feet were bare and she smiled softly, floating in that level of utmost contentment which Picard could not seem to obtain.

"Hello there," he said.

Her green eyes flicked to him temporarily. Her ruby lips spread wider and she dipped her head of luscious red hair. Picard did not often come

across such a hair color. Some of it was braided neatly on top her head, while the rest flowed in wavy locks around her shoulders. "Hello, sir." Then she kept moving past.

He reached with his gloved hand and grabbed her arm. The rods of the mechanism locked in tight as she lurched to a stop.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked.

"I don't know. Are you a maid?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Mina."

"Mina." He reached up with his good hand and stroked one of her red locks. "I don't know if you can help me, Mina. You see, I am not feeling as happy as I'd like to feel."

"Oh no! Perhaps you need some more safra."

"You think so?"

She reached for a pouch hanging from the sash on her hip. "Look, I have some!"

"Why thank you." He considered her offer, so freely and innocently given. With great reluctance, he pushed her hand back down. "But I need to keep my desires and goals in my head right now, even if that desire is merely safra itself. Do you understand?"

"I don't think so."

"Of course you don't. But I wonder ... I wonder if more safra is the only solution."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"That's a very good question." He took a deep breath and took what safra from that air that he could. He wondered what made him happy, with or without safra. He opened his eyes and looked upon her calmly. "Did you know my brother calls me impotent?"

"No. Who's your brother?"

Picard's grip on her tightened, even though this caused him new pain. "Do you think I am impotent?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

He had never had intercourse before, this was true. That didn't mean he didn't wish to. The desire simply never seemed to arise at the proper occasion. The first time he ever masturbated had also been the last. It happened not long after his hand had been ruined and he didn't have enough safra in his system. His pain had equaled the intensity of his pleasure. He had not cared to repeat that little experiment—not alone, anyway. "Why don't you help me find out?"

She blinked rapidly as he began pushing her towards the wall. She nearly tripped over her own feet but his firm grip helped to steady her until she leaned against the clay of the corridor. His gloved hand moved up to her shoulder, which he squeezed and pressed to the wall. He studied her face all the while. Her eyes opened wider now, her breath came a little faster, but these changes were slight.

"How do you feel, Mina?"

"I feel ... I feel like I'm not the best girl to help you. But maybe I can help you find the right one."

"No, I think you're the one, Mina." He released her now, but she knew to stay still. He trailed one of his gloved fingers through her flowing hair. "Have you lived in Dearen your whole life, Mina?"

"Yes." She watched curiously as he wrapped a few red strands—just a little tendril—round his finger. Was that a flicker of fear in her eyes?

"Have you ever felt pain?"

"I suppose so ... here and there."

"Not enough to make you unhappy?"

"I suppose not."

He used his good hand to push a rod on the right one. His glove creaked with the movement as he clenched her hair more tightly. "You don't even know what real pain is, do you?"

"I don't know, sir."

He yanked hard on the hair and it ripped from her head.

She flinched. That was all. But he saw a hint of pain in her eyes—just a hint—and his heart beat a little faster. A thrill went through him, a little different than what he felt when he used safra. Nonetheless he considered having some more safra now, thinking it might heighten this exhilaration.

"Mina," he breathed, "I want you to walk me to my bedchamber. I got lost, you see, and can't find my way back."

"Where is it?"

"The Oak Fortress, I believe it's called. I am Archon Picard, the khan's own son. So take me there."

"Very well." She reached up and brushed the sore spot on her head. The she pushed it from her mind and moved off the wall. "This way."

He watched her intently as she led him, looking for any signs of fear or discomfort. She glanced away a few times, as if thinking of running. But she did not. He could hardly believe it. A Vikand woman would have thrown him to the floor and pummeled him by now. Any woman in her right mind would at the very least run away. But people living in the

Haze had no proper sense of safety or danger, it appeared. Picard found this a little disappointing on principle, but in the end, it worked to his favor.

Somewhere amidst his contemplations, Picard could not help but glance at other palace occupants as they passed. It was as if he hoped to find some exception to the safra-induced euphoria so easily attained by everyone but himself. Instead, his observations only corroborated his suspicions. People laughed and sang songs together. They hugged and they kissed and Friva-knew-what-else as they retreated to darkened corners.

Really, he found it quite dull. Perhaps a thin Haze was not entirely to blame. Saffra gave people an intrinsic sense of joy, but it also encouraged them to do things that gave them pleasure, thus multiplying the overall effect. Picard lacked such an activity here in Dearen, it seemed. What did he do in Vikand that made such a difference? Usually it was enough just to watch the people around him, squabbling and swinging swords at one another. He could not observe such activities in Dearen. Perhaps this girl Mina could provide an alternative. He grew more and more excited as he neared his bedchamber, for he felt on the verge of a new discovery. If this was how Mina behaved with saffra in her system, how would she behave without it?

A passing man broke Picard's flow of thought. He couldn't say why at first, only something about this man made him pause and pay attention. The man seemed of Vikand origin, based on his wools and style of dress, though he was of high enough nobility to afford some embroidery for his clothes and nice jewelry for his arms. Something else distinguished him, though—something less visibly obvious. It was the way he walked.

They passed each other and continued their separate ways, but Picard could not stop thinking about him.

"Here's your room, sir."

Picard did not particularly like the chambers he'd been assigned. The section of the palace in which they now stood was made entirely of timber. Wood was a valuable resource in Vikand, where fertile soil was scarce, but Picard had a feeling that in Dearen eyes, this was the cheapest part of the palace. Tightly-woven tapestries broke up the wood's blandness with blocks of color and elegance, but seemed mostly like a desperate afterthought.

"Tell me something," said Picard. "Who else sleeps in this flimsy wooden fortress?"

"Mostly guests and suitors from Vikand, I think."

"Is that so?"

"Princess Fayr tries to keep guests from the same kingdom close together."

"I suppose that's smart of her. She's a smart one, isn't she? Smarter than the average Dearen."

"I suppose. She's the princess."

"Yes, yes." Picard looked nervously about. "Listen. I want to spend some more time with you, but I need to speak to someone first. Someone important. Will you wait for me?"

All hints of a smile on her face vanished. Somehow, the maid managed to reach deep within herself to find a source of rebellion. "Why?" she said. "If you want to sleep with me, let's just go ahead and do it."

The extent of her compliance grew increasingly astounding. "And if I don't?" he asked. "What if I just want to tie you up and watch you?"

"Why ... ?" She blinked in puzzlement, then shook her head, failing to understand. "Will you at least give me safra?"

"Oh." He grinned. "But that would ruin the point."

He grabbed her arm and pushed her into the room. He closed the door and fumbled about in the darkness for something to tie her with. He found a piece of cloth and hoped it would suffice as he bound her hands to a leg of the bed. "There, that's not so bad," he said. "Just wait here and relax. I'll be right back."

Quite proud of himself, Picard secured the door and hurried back down the hallway.

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He retraced his steps as quickly as his feet allowed, breathless by the time he reached the spot where their paths had crossed. Where might he have gone from here?

Picard could only guess, but he kept walking in the direction the man had vanished. Luck must have been on his side, he soon spotted a suspicious fellow standing in a window of the Windy Tower. Picard sensed in his gut that this was his man, so he hurried inside.

It was a cramped stone cylinder with spiraling steps up the innards. Every so many steps, the walls opened with apertures looking outdoors. These openings also let in the wind, earning the name Windy Tower quite rightfully, for the breeze seemed to collect within the stones and snake down the steps with a rushing current.

He climbed all the way to the top without finding anyone. An enclosed platform topped the tower. Windows interspersed the curving stones, letting in enough air to create a whirlwind. Torches on the wall

sputtered and whooshed but somehow continued to burn. It was actually quite beautiful, for the wind of course carried the Haze, and as a result speckles of safra flickered in the light. Picard enjoyed the visual, even though the lashing of his clothes and hair stung his skin rather harshly.

But how was this possible? No one could have hidden in that tiny staircase. Well, no one but a Wolven, of course.

“What do you want, Picard?”

Picard started and turned to see a dark shape nearby. Somehow, the Wolven had crept up behind him. Once Picard’s heart stopped trying to jump from his chest, he couldn’t help but laugh. “Sean! Friva’s mercy. I hardly recognized you.”

As Sean moved into the light, Picard saw once again the man he had passed in the hallway. Indeed, he looked like an entirely different person than the one he’d met in Vikand. His clothes and sleek hair were largely to blame, but the soft copper eyes were most unsettling of all. “You look ... nice.”

Sean took a step forward, his body bristling, his arms curling as if to grab something. Now this looked a little more familiar. “I asked you a question.”

“What do I want, you asked? Well, as you might imagine, I want an update. Tell me how your mission is going.”

“I have nothing to tell you yet.”

“Well that is ... disappointing.” Picard leaned back against the wall, partially so he could cross his arms over his chest and look tough, partially so he find some protection from the lashing breeze. “How close are you to the princess?”

“Not close enough. It will take time to earn her trust, and she is a very busy woman. I am not the only one vying for her time.”

“So I hear. But perhaps I can give you advice. After all, you’re new to this espionage business.” Picard attempted to brush back a blond curl lashing incessantly against his eyes, to no avail. “What is your tactic thus far?”

“I’m a suitor.”

“A suitor?” Picard nearly choked on his own breath. “Gods, whatever gave you that idea? Why not become her bodyguard or something like that? You most certainly won’t succeed that way. There is a chief I heard mentioned today that seems to have won the princess’s affection: Chief Darius. She raced from a meeting with the khan himself to go see this Chief like a fucking bitch in heat. Do you know who he is?”

Sean considered for a moment. “No.”

"Well then figure it out, and when you find him, kill him."

Sean said nothing.

"Must I make it official? To kill him would be to our mutual benefit. Must I give you another assignment?"

"I would refuse it. To kill anyone other than my target right now would compromise my mission."

"Good point. But still." Picard sighed and moved off the wall. The wind had abated somewhat, giving him the leeway to pace around. Away from that girl now, he felt antsy again. And the Wolven was not exactly a calming presence. "How goes it with the prince?"

"I've only met him briefly," said Sean. "But I think he knows something."

"Really?" Picard stopped and looked at him. "More than the princess?"

Sean nodded.

"Damn. I suppose we must keep him alive a little longer, then. But you must act quickly, or Father will be down both our throats." Perhaps this wasn't necessarily true; the khan was too dazed by the safra to focus. Sean didn't need to know that.

Picard took a step closer to the Wolven, studying his fake dark eyes once more. "I wonder how Belazar feels about all of this? Have you any clue?"

Sean said nothing.

"When you're near the boy, do you feel a very strong urge to kill him? I am curious. Please tell me."

Sean remained silent.

"And the lenses. How does Belazar feel about those? Can he still see through your eyes? Can he still lend you his power?"

"We're finished talking," said Sean, and turned to go.

"Not necessarily." The wind struck up again. Picard struggled to lift his voice above its roar. "I want to meet you here, every night, to hear your progress. You understand?"

"When I have something to tell you," said Sean, "I'll tell you."

And then he was gone.

Picard felt a little rattled. He didn't know why—perhaps this damnable wind—but he trembled from head to foot. He gnashed his jaws and stuck his hand into his tunic. He pulled out his own precious safra supply and poured it into his mouth.

After a moment he felt better. Everything would work out for him in the end; it always did. He wondered whether a certain redhead still

waited for him in his chambers—he could take more safra from her, after all—then he left to find out.

# Chapter 9

## Darius

Fayr did not know much about Chief Darius. She knew little of his life, exploits, or value in gold. All she really knew was that she could not stop thinking about him.

When he first knelt before her, one man in a long line of suitors, someone must have introduced him in detail. She hadn't really been paying attention—not until he looked up at her with his soft brown eyes. In that moment, she felt dizzy. Her knees trembled and she nearly fainted. If not for Jeevu nearby, who moved close and clutched her elbow for support, she might have fallen to the floor. She dared to look up at the man again. She felt as if a shock passed between them.

She could only speculate, at first, as to why he had this effect on her. First of all, he was an exceptionally handsome man. He had darkish skin of a tan olive tone, and from what she could see of his body, it was perfectly sculpted with muscle. He had sharp chiseled features, except for his lips, which were soft when he smiled. He also held himself unlike any other person she had ever seen. He moved with confidence, grace, and purpose: not the slow, lethargic motions of most people in Dearen, who had little purpose to anything they did, because safra took that away from them. And finally, he was gentle: so very gentle.

Fayr did not notice this all at once, of course. Perhaps she sensed it when she first saw him, but could not rationalize it all until later. She had been in a daze when she presented her hand for him to kiss and he did so, grasping her fingers with a firm sort of delicacy, then brushing his lips across her skin.

"You are more beautiful than I imagined, Princess," he said. And that concluded their first meeting.

After that moment, Fayr continued to replay it over and over in her mind. Every other face passed by in a blur, but his remained clear to her until long afterward.

She told herself that she was being foolish. Perhaps she merely happened to become faint the moment that man stepped forward. Surely he could not be so different from everyone else, and even if he was, surely she could not determine that by such a brief meeting. And yet every time she replayed the memory, the same feelings rushed back to haunt her.

So finally, she invited him to dinner.

She had dined with so many nobles already that she had ceased to think much of the practice. And yet the night she dined with Darius, her palms sweated. Her breath shallowed. Her appetite vanished completely. She forgot to wonder how he might impress her. All she could think about was how to impress *him*.

When he first came in and joined her at the table, he said nothing at all—only looked at her. He looked at her so long and hard that a blush rushed to her cheeks and she had to turn away. She took a bite to eat, only because she wanted to look busy. He waited a moment longer, then took a bite of food for himself.

“So, Chief Darius ... ” she managed after a deep breath. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my princess.”

Why did his voice send bumps down her skin in such a delightful way? She shuddered and hoped he didn’t notice. “What part of Vikand do you come from, Chief Darius?”

“A distant place, my princess. A place that seems like a dream to me now.” He paused and stared into the crystals surrounding them. “Or a nightmare. It was a place of blood, stones, and metal. It was a place where bones must be crushed to obtain power. It was not like this land in which you live, Princess.”

His words were so simple, their meaning so profound. For a moment, she could do nothing but stare into his deep brown eyes. “Tell me more,” she said at last.

So he did. As they ate, he told her of the vast Vikand landscape, the cruel jugged rocks, the long dry scrub-lands, and the white beaches of the far east coast. He told her of the various tribes that roamed Vikand, most of them held in check by the nation’s Khan, though many still rebelled. One of these, he explained, was once his own tribe. In his youth, they survived by raiding and pillaging peaceful towns.

"I never wanted to do those things," he said softly, "but that excuses nothing. I wish I could take some of it back, but I can't. That was my life, until I gathered enough power in my own tribe, and convinced them to stop their crimes and join the Vikand Khan. It was not easy. In the end I had to ... "

He grew silent.

"What did you have to do?" she asked breathlessly.

He would not look at her. "Forgive me, my princess," he said. "I tire of talking about it."

"Oh. I'm sorry." She wanted to hear more, but she did not wish to press him. Neither of them spoke for a short while. She thought back to how their discussion had begun. "Perhaps this place is the dream," she realized, "and your home the reality."

He looked up with surprise. Then he let out a gentle laugh. "My princess, if this is the dream, then I hope I never wake up."

"Do you really mean that?" She watched him set down a glittery piece of meat. Disappointment crept into her mind, almost purely out of habit. "Or is it only the safra talking?"

"Perhaps it is the safra." But the smile on his face was so genuine, she ceased to doubt him altogether. In fact, she found herself smiling with him. "Nonetheless, I like it here very much."

"What do you like about it?" she pressed.

He thought about his answer before responding. She appreciated that he did not blurt out the first thing that came to his mind, like most of her recent visitors, who chuckled and said they loved the women in the courtyard. Even more importantly, his face became grave as he responded. "I like the freedom of the people," he said. "People here can be whomever they want to be. They do not have to chase after any certain profession, for their income is guaranteed. They can spend their time as they choose, and they can enjoy whatever they must do. I do not think their pleasure is a thing to hold against them, Princess."

She blinked rapidly. "Who said I held it against them?"

His soft smile returned. "Forgive me. I only assumed, based on your questions, that you may tire sometimes of the pleasure around you. I can even see why you might do so. Everyone else obtains it without effort. But someone has to pay the price. Is that person you, my princess?"

She tensed. For the first time since he entered the room, she felt uncomfortable, and not in a pleasant way. "Stop calling me your princess," she snapped.

"I am sorry," he said. "I will call you whatever you'd like."

“Just—just—” Her brief anger dissolved. “Just call me Fayr.”

“Very well,” he said. “And you will call me—”

He went silent quite suddenly.

She leaned forward out of anticipation. “Darius? Shall I just call you Darius?”

“Call me whatever you’d like,” he said, though a strange tone entered his voice, like the slightest hint of regret.

Now she wanted to cheer him up. “We should go on a walk,” she said. “What do you think?”

This caught him by surprise. “Where should we walk to?”

“Anywhere will do.” She stood up decisively. “I am tired of this damn chamber.”

So they walked together, and even though they said nothing to each other, Fayr felt the enigmatic bond between them growing. The silence between them seemed to strengthen it. They walked without aim from one hallway to another, over bridges and through gardens. They watched the sun’s rays change color as they tilted across the landscape, shifting shadows throughout the castle. Crystals cast rainbows, safra glittered, and the gardens glowed with color. Fayr had seen these dream-like visions every day, but on this evening, she watched them as if she had never seen them before. She felt as if she saw them through the eyes of Darius. She wondered how all of it appeared to him, and this made it all the more beautiful.

Darius stopped at a balcony and watched the sunset. Mist rolled across the undulating hills. Tigers prowled in distant pastures and butterflies flitted through the safra. People laughed and sang and created a soft music over the land of Dearen.

“Incredible,” said Darius.

She looked over at his face, and a change had come over it. His eyes opened wider. His jaw hung slightly ajar. And then, ever so slowly, he smiled.

He had already smiled a few times. Fayr saw smiles hundreds of times a day. But this one was different. This one was full of pure, innocent wonder. Fayr could not say how she knew, but she did. She felt as if Darius experienced a joy he had never felt before, and it was all thanks to her.

She put her hand over his on the railing. He grew still underneath her touch. Neither of them spoke for a long while.

“My princess ...” He laughed softly. “Fayr. I should go now. The sun sets, and night approaches.”

"I don't want you to go yet."

He turned to look at her. Something about his eyes startled her—something she couldn't explain, at first. A ripple seemed to come over them. Then an incredible thing happened.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

She almost gasped. Instead, she restrained her surprise, but stopped breathing altogether. She could not believe this was really happening. She had never seen anyone cry but herself and her brother—perhaps her father, many years ago. Nonetheless, they were all Violenese. Whereas this man ...

He must have felt the drop, for he reached up suddenly and brushed it away. Almost as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone. "I ... I ... I shouldn't be here," he said. "Not with you, not when night falls. Something feels ... something feels ... "

"Darius," she whispered. "Whatever you're feeling, I think I understand it."

He stared into her eyes. He moved closer to her. He began to give in, she thought—she hoped.

"Fayr? Fayr!"

Prince Kyne ran onto the balcony, ruining everything. He hopped across the stones and then stopped to stare at Darius. Darius flinched and drew back. The two regarded each other warily.

"Darius, this is my brother, Prince Kyne. Kyne, this is—"

"Chief Darius." His tone was cold and brisk. He looked sharply to the princess and spoke in a detached manner. "Thank you for meeting me, Princess Fayr. I must go now."

"Darius," she gasped, "please stay. You mustn't feel ... ashamed. I want to—"

"I bid you good night, Princess. Prince." His bow to the prince must have been the quickest she'd ever seen. "Good night."

And then he was gone.

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Fayr did not let Darius get away from her so easily. She summoned him for a walk the next day and waited anxiously for him to arrive. For a moment, she actually feared he wouldn't come. It was ridiculous to think that a man who had traveled all this way to court her and now slept as a guest in her palace would not be at her beck and call. But this man differed from most men, and for that reason she let her imagination get the best of her. She imagined that after what had happened last night—after that one, miraculous tear—she might never see him again.

To her great relief, Darius answered her summons. For the most part, he acted as if nothing strange had happened. On the second walk and the many that followed, he was calm and collected, polite and well-mannered. He spoke of trivial matters and asked simple questions, such as the identity of a certain flower, or the origin of a section of architecture. A few times, his behavior became so punctilious that it annoyed her. But she continued to walk and talk with him, enjoying his company altogether, and hoping with every moment that she might catch a glimpse of that emotion she saw during their first walk together.

Sometimes she could not stop thinking Darius, even when she tried. His ability to permeate her thoughts interrupted her during some of her most important tasks. Even when she sat with the khan of Vikand himself or the King-wife of Yamair, Fayr wished that she sat across from Darius instead. She would not describe him as a simple man—in fact, the shroud of mystery around him intrigued her most of all—but at least he did not make her feel like a piece on a game-board being moved by rules she didn't understand.

Chief Darius remained carefully aloof during most of their time together, but occasionally, he revealed just enough of the man who shed a tear to keep her intrigued. Perhaps the second-most significant occasion came from her mention of religion.

She was describing the statues of the Fountain Foyer when it happened. She mentioned several pagan gods, many of them familiar to Vikand culture. And then Darius grew very quiet.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "I hope I said nothing to offend you."

"Of course not." And then he turned and looked at her. "What do you believe?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Her heart jumped; her pulse sped. She felt as if she had his attention for the first time in days. She did not want to lose it.

"Do you believe in the pagan gods? Or a single god, like the people of Yamair? Or any god at all?"

She hesitated a long while before responding. "To be honest," she said at last, "I'm not sure."

"How can that be?" he said. "You're a princess."

She smiled sadly. "That's exactly it. I think of religion as a way to control the common-folk. Does that sound terrible? As you may know, Dear-en embraces all beliefs and religions. The people are kept happy by safra, and in a sense, safra is like our god. But other kingdoms don't have safra, so the common-folk turn to the Earth Mechanic, or pagan entities. And

the people in charge use said entities to control them." She saw the stern look on his face and blushed with shame. "Whom do you worship?"

He did not answer, but instead ran his hand over the sculpture of a pig with two horns on its head. It was a ghastly piece of stone, and she knew not why he would want to caress it. But she enjoyed watching his hand, fluid with grace, rippling with muscles and veins, as he explored the creation. "You say safra is like your god," he said. "That's very interesting."

His detachment annoyed her as ever. "Why does that interest you?"

"I wonder if a god helps you create safra?"

"My father said something like that, before he ..." Fayr took a deep, shuddering breath. Why did she find it so difficult to hold her tongue around this man? "The creation of safra is not something I can discuss," she said tersely. "But you did not answer my question. What do you believe in?"

"I did answer your question," he said. That dark golden gaze of his captured her once more. "I do believe in the gods. But I also believe in humanity. I believe the two intersect, more than most would care to admit."

For some reason, his confession scared her, and she dared not respond. A long silence followed, and they spoke little of gods or safra again.

In such a manner, several weeks passed in a blur for Fayr and her guests. Cold winds stirred the Haze, and the greens of the fields and trees shifted to reds or yellows, and Fayr knew that another full moon was coming. The moon after that would mark the winter solstice—the night on which she would marry—which meant that she only had a little more than a month left to commit to her decision. But before that, she would have to choose which suitors could renew their passes and stay in the palace for another month, and who would have to leave.

She delayed making a decision for as long as she could, but now only a few days remained before most of her guests' passes expired. How would they react when she asked them to leave? In the past, two factors helped keep the country's visitors obedient. The first was the prevailing belief that some magical, unnamed power would punish anyone who stayed in Dearen without welcome. Fayr did not even know if this was true or not. In the past, she dismissed it as the silliness of common-folk. Now she wondered if it had anything to do with the High Reeve's list and the group of people sent down to the dungeons. The presence of safra in the air was the second factor to ensure obedience, or at least general placidity.

Yet the Haze in the air kept thinning, as did the presence of safra within it. Fayr noticed it more clearly than anyone else. She knew that it was only a matter of time—weeks or maybe days—before the Haze ran out altogether. She could not delay any longer. She had to make a decision.

On the night of the full moon, she held a large banquet in the Friva's Hall of Feasts. This was one of her favorite places in all of the palace, though she rarely had occasion to use it. It had been built hundreds of years ago by her own ancestors, the Violenese. The method of its creation was almost as mysterious as safra itself. Columns of spiraling rock lined the left and right sides. Satin curtains draped between them, their fluctuating colors further saturated by parallel lines of blazing torches. The curtains could be opened in the spring or closed in the winter. For tonight's feast, she interchanged them, so that some of the gaps opened out to the Hazy twilight while others remained shut to cast their colors inward.

Glassy sheets of rock comprised the floor of the hall. A circle in the middle remained clear for dancing, while candlelit tables of gold tapered outward. On one end of the hall steps led up to the royal dais, where the Prince and Princess dined with a few chosen guests. Opposite from that was a stage full of harps, violins, and bells.

Despite all the feasts' qualities, Fayr still felt miserable as it began. She dined on the dais with people she loathed, even though she had invited them there. There was Leonard Khan and his two lousy sons. There was King-wife Eleanor with her Scholar and the deformed suitor, Prime Synergist Deragon. There were also a few other suitors Fayr invited to her table for the sake of variety: a rich knight from Dearen, another chief from Vikand, and a handsome Synergist from Yamair. Joining Fayr in her misery, Prince Kyne sat next to her, poking at his food with a dagger. But the seat directly across from the princess—the seat meant for the guest she most anticipated—remained mysteriously empty.

Her blood roared in her ears louder than the band's music, the people's laughter, and the cacophony of dishes chiming throughout the great hall. Her heart pounded and her appetite disappeared. She could focus on nothing but the empty chair across from her. Why wasn't Darius here yet? How on earth could he possibly abandon her now? He had been the only part of this night she looked forward to. She wanted to dance with him, put him at a table with all her other suitors, and make them realize that they could not compete.

"... worship Friva, Princess?"

She looked up with surprise, not sure who had spoken. Eventually, her eyes settled on the khan's pudgy son, Picard. He chewed happily on a pipo melon, the purple juice trickling down his chin. He held it with his gloved and bolted hand, the sight of which made her shiver.

"I'm sorry, what was your question?"

"I asked you why this beautiful hall is named after Friva," said Picard, slurping some more of the fruit. "As you may know, Friva is a goddess we worship in Vikand."

"I thought you worshiped many gods." The discussion of religion made her wary in mixed company, and worse, it made her think of Darius. He was perhaps the only person she didn't mind discussing the matter with.

"That's true," said the archon through a mouthful of food. "But Friva is the goddess of victory and reward, and she tends to be our favorite. Do you worship her, also?"

"My, uh ... my ancestors did. The Violeneese once worshiped Friva and called her the goddess of joy. That is the only reason this hall carries that name."

"Are you pagan, then?" This from King-wife Eleanor, who sat on the other end of the table. "There is only one God, and He is the Earth Mechanic."

"I ... I didn't say I was anything."

Everyone at the table stared at her with puzzled expressions. The pressure was almost too much for the princess to endure. She looked down, hoping to escape their probing eyes. As a result, she looked upon her own hair, falling uncharacteristically down her shoulders.

On this rare occasion, she had released her hair for all the world to see. It flowed in long purple locks down her shoulders and breasts, almost all the way to her hips. Only a few sea shells, placed carefully around her ears and forehead like a crown, broke up the voluminous waves. She had dressed her very best tonight. She wore a flowing gown of lavender silk covered with spiraling patterns of pearls. The dress fit so tightly to her body that it left none of her shape to imagination: the snug fabric exposed every curve and dip of her flesh for all the world to admire. She had wanted Darius to see her wearing this dress, letting her hair down. Now, surrounded by all these cruel and annoying strangers, she felt horribly exposed. How foolish of her to dress this way tonight. She might as well have shown up naked!

"Well then," said Picard, "perhaps we should talk about something else. How about that empty chair across from you, Princess. Do you expect another visitor tonight?"

"I ... I ..." She forced a swallow down her throat. "I suppose he isn't coming."

"And who is 'he'?" pressed Picard. "I wonder if it's that chief you mentioned earlier ... what was his name? Chief Darius?"

Fayr forced a polite smile onto her face. "I did invite him here tonight, that is true."

"How very odd!" said Picard. But there was a terrible smile on his face, and it made Fayr's stomach turn. "Who on earth would refuse such an invitation? I hope something terrible didn't happen to him." He chuckled strangely.

Fayr grew dizzy at the thought. Was it possible? He seemed too graceful a man to fall prey to an accident, like falling from a horse or some great height. The expression on Picard's face put even darker thoughts in her mind. Murder was unheard of in Dearen. But the Haze grew thinner every day, and Picard was not the only man who knew of her fondness for Chief Darius. She hadn't really bothered to keep it secret. When she stopped to think about it, almost every man in this hall probably wanted Chief Darius dead.

The world spun around her.

Picard's smile stretched wider to taunt her. "On that note, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, Princess. I think I speak for most people at this table when I point out that our visitor passes expire tomorrow—the ones allowing us to remain in Dearen? How do we go about getting those renewed?"

Her heart beat rapidly. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She felt as if she was going to be sick. "Tomorrow," she breathed, "I will give a list of names to the High Reeve of whose passes I wish to renew."

"Oh. I see," said Picard.

The rest of the table became very quiet.

The handsome Yamairan Synergist dared to break the silence. "And if our passes aren't renewed?"

"Then ... then ..." Fayr struggled to breathe. "Then I thank you for your visit, and I wish you a good journey home."

"And if you don't leave," piped a new voice, "you don't want to find out what will happen to you."

Everyone turned with surprise to the little boy who had spoken so suddenly and confidently.

"Kyne!" gasped Fayr.

Prince Kyne sat up a little straighter in his chair, a dirk clenched tightly in his little fist. He breathed harshly through pinched nostrils. "It's true. None of you know how true it is as I do. You speak of the gods like you know them, but you don't. The gods are real—very real—and they are watching every move you make. And if you defy them ... *krenzi u morde!*"

"Kyne!" Fayr wanted to strike her brother across the face. For weeks and weeks she had endured his miserable silence, his irritating passivity, his complete apathy towards anything she wanted to accomplish. And now *this?*

"What did he just say?" said Picard.

"*Krenzi u morde!*" screamed Kyne, then he stood and ran off.

"*Kyne!*" This was too much for Fayr. It had been hard enough to entertain her guests without falling apart already. Then Darius disappeared, and she realized he may be in danger. And now, her own brother betrayed her. His refusal to tell her what he knew tortured her enough on its own. The fact he flaunted his superior knowledge to those she wished to impress took his betrayal to a whole new level.

She stood up, trembling, and spent all her effort trying to sound calm as she said, "Please forgive my brother. He has not been ... feeling well. I will return to you shortly."

She rushed towards the steps.

An iron grip around her arm yanked her to a stop. She lurched on the steps, her hair rushing over her face, a sea shell dropping to the floor with a clatter. Fingers clenched the flesh of her bicep fiercely enough to leave a bruise, drawing a wince from her throat. Struggling to keep her composure, she turned and looked at the man who held her.

Leonard Khan stared down at her, his crumb-filled beard only inches from her face, his beady eyes glistening like knives. "Leaving so soon, Princess?"

She wanted to thrash away, to scream with rage and frustration. But now, the entire hall was watching her. She stood on the steps where everyone could see. Even the music had stopped, the musicians taking an extended break between songs to watch this dramatic display.

"I ... I ... " She became all too aware of how loudly sounds bounced off the glassy rocks of this chamber. "I will return shortly, I assure you. I merely wish to check on my brother. Now let go of me."

His thick chest vibrated with a chuckle. His grip on her arm grew even tighter, if such a thing was possible. "Dance with me, Princess," he said. "I insist."

"Let me go." Even as she blinked back tears of pain, a surge of anger lent strength to her voice. "If you let me go now I will dance with you soon as I return. If you do not, you can bet on your life that you'll never touch me again."

He moved back a little. His beard drooped with a frown. And then he let go.

Fayr ran down the steps and away.

\*

For a moment, she considered running forever and never coming back. She hated this palace. She hated this Haze. She hated the people who loved it and spent their entire lives intoxicated with safra. She hated these noblemen and their ability to toy with her. She hated the responsibility of being a Princess and the necessity of playing a game for which she didn't know the rules. She hated her father for not explaining anything before he died. She even hated her own brother, who never acted as he ought to, and yet still managed to know what she didn't.

*I don't want to be like my family, she had said to the Wolven that terrible night. I despise the Violeneese, my own ancestors. I hate them for this curse they've given me. I hate my father for raising me in their shadow, never even giving me the knowledge to choose a fate for myself. I am glad that he's dead and I want to thank you. I want to thank you for freeing me.*

When she said those words to the assassin, she thought she lied to him. The words had burned on her tongue, supposedly from the pain of the lie. Now she realized she had felt the pain of the truth.

Her dress thrashed against her legs as she ran. A few pearls ripped from the thread and scattered to the floor. She hated this dress, too. She hated all of it. She didn't want to find Kyne. She wanted to run to the stables and get on a horse. She would do it. She would grab a pouch of safra to sell later, or just collect it as she rode through Dearen. She would ride as far as she could, and after that, she would sail, or walk, or climb, or do whatever she must to get away. She would stain her hair with dyes and assume a new identity. She would lead a completely new life.

Two dark shapes rounded the corner ahead of her. With great reluctance, she lurched to a stop while she remained in a shadowed section of the hallway. She waited for the figures to pass and used this opportunity to catch her breath.

The two shapes moved closer, into the light of the sunset through a window. Immediately she recognized the smaller shape as Prince Kyne, but he kicked his feet and rammed his fists against a larger shape. The man held her brother by the collar with one hand, seemingly without effort, and twisted the fabric about the prince's neck. Kyne increased his efforts against the man, who then pushed Kyne against the wall. Kyne cried out.

"Darius?"

The man turned and looked at her with surprise. "Fayr!"

She walked closer, still out of breath, for she had held it again while watching the two of them struggle. "What is going on here?"

"Forgive me, Princess, if I used too much force. Your brother was running so fast that he tripped and nearly hurt himself. I caught him and tried to calm him down, but he's been fighting me ever since."

"Oh ... " She didn't know which issue to address first: Darius's mysterious absence from the feast, or her brother's untimely flight from it. She was still trying to sort this all out when a third figure stepped into the light of the window. He was a lean young man with long black hair and bright blue eyes.

"You're the princess?" said the fellow. "The princess of all Dearen?"

"Gregor!" snapped Darius.

"Um, yes, I'm Princess Fayr," she said. "And you are ...?"

"This is my slave, Gregor," growled Darius. "Please forgive his presumption. He has never met a princess before."

"It is an honor!" said Gregor, bringing his fist to his chest. Then he winced, for his wrist was bound tightly to a piece of wood as if injured.

All this while, Kyne thrashed and flailed against Darius. His efforts were so futile that Darius didn't even seem to notice.

"Calm down, Kyne," said Fayr at last.

"He fucking hurt me!" squealed the prince.

"Not enough, it seems to me!" Fayr shook her head with exasperation. "I can't believe your behavior tonight, Kyne. You shamed me in front of everyone. Furthermore, you embarrassed *yourself*."

"Let go of me, you bastard!" yelled Kyne. It was as if he heard nothing Fayr said. "Let go of me or I'll fucking stab you! I will! I'll take you to the dungeons and *kill you!*"

Fayr's blood curdled. Darius, meanwhile, went very still. He stared at the prince with an expression Fayr did not recognize. His eyes took on a very strange appearance, the brown of his irises strangely flat, while a faint glow crept round the edges.

He released Kyne and stepped away.

Kyne took a moment to collect himself, then straightened his tunic and yelled with new vigor. "That's right, fuck with me again and you'll be *sorry!*"

He turned and ran off.

Fayr watched him go in a state of shock. It was a long while before she found the will to speak. She thought her knees would give out from under her. "I ... I don't know what's come over him," she confessed at last. "I don't know how to deal with it. How can I deal with it if I don't even understand ... ?"

Then it happened. She burst into tears.

"Oh my gods," said Gregor. He whispered, but she could hear him clearly. "Do you see that, Chief? She's crying. She's the princess of Dearen and she's—"

"Leave us, Gregor," said Darius. "*Now!*"

The slave reluctantly shuffled away.

It was a good thing he did, for Fayr couldn't hold it in anymore. The floodgates had opened, and now her emotions gushed out of her in an unstoppable deluge. Her muscles weakened, like a puppet with its strings cut, and she collapsed against Darius. She pressed her face to his chest and poured her tears into the soft wool of his mantle.

"Oh Darius," she sobbed, "I am frightened."

His arms wrapped gently around her. He pressed his cheek to her hair and, instantly, she began to feel just a little bit better. His heartbeat thudded against her, steady as a drum. "You need not be afraid," he said. "You are the princess of Dearen. And when you are ready, you'll be Queen."

This thought pushed forth a new stream of tears. "I wasn't ready to be the princess of Dearen," she cried, "and I'm certainly not ready to be Queen! My father never taught me how to run this place. He never taught me anything except how to manipulate people with safra. And soon, I will not even be able to do that!"

Darius tensed. "Why not?"

"Because he never taught me how to *make it!*"

A terrible silence followed her confession. She refilled it with the sound of her weeping.

"The Haze is running out, Darius," she moaned. "Perhaps it is not obvious to you or anyone else, because you have not lived here all your life like I have, watching the Haze from afar, using safra to manipulate everyone around you, yet never able to enjoy it for yourself." A new sob

wracked her frame. "I suppose you know the truth now. There it is. I am completely immune to safra and I have always been, as all Violenese were before me. I suppose it is the cost of being able to make it—though I can't even do that! I can't even find the key to the dungeons. It disappeared after my father died." She shook her head in despair. "That night I saw you shed a tear, I knew you might be able to understand me. Perhaps it was a tear of joy, or perhaps a result of the weakened Haze ... but what does it even matter? Soon it will make no difference."

"Fayr. I do understand." He reached up and brushed her cheek with his fingertips. His body closed against hers, filling her with warmth. The warmth seemed to come from within her body as much as from without. His touch calmed her deluge of sorrow and filled her with a new sensation. "Perhaps I am not completely immune to the safra like you are. But I have lived almost my whole life in darkness, and as a result, I have kept my emotions at a distance."

She pulled back enough to look up at him. His hand cradled her cheek, brushing softly against her hair.

"You might say that I have lived most of my life feeling nothing," he said, "or at least trying not to. But that changed when I came here. It did not necessarily change as soon as I came to Dearen, so I don't think safra is to blame. No; it changed when I met you, Fayr."

Her heart pounded against her ribs. Her head spun. But this time, it was not from fear or bewilderment. This time, a heat flooded her body like nothing she had felt before. She wondered if this was what safra felt like to everyone else. Her skin tingled with sensation, especially where it touched Darius. As their bodies pressed together, an ache spread out from her belly and into her thighs, but it was the most pleasant ache she had ever experienced.

She wondered if Darius felt something similar. One of his hands tightened against the small of her back. The other slid deeper into the waves of her hair, his fingers tangling in her purple locks. He leaned closer to her, his breath hot against her lips.

The light from the window waned slightly. As the shadows shifted around them, Fayr knew that the sun sank below the horizon, pulling night over the landscape.

Darius stiffened against her, his hand clenching in her hair. "I must go," he said.

"Why?" Her repressed anger flickered against the surface of her feelings. "Why must you always run away at sunset? Why did you not come to my feast tonight? Is there something you're hiding from me?"

"I ... " His grip on her wavered. "I must go."

"No," she said, and pulled him towards her. "I forbid it."

Then she kissed him.

She had kissed many boys in her lifetime, and even a few girls. No one thought much of the gesture in Dearen, where people sometimes copulated as casually as shaking hands. She remained a virgin, as a princess should, but she had never hesitated to play along the boundaries. Despite all that, nothing she had ever done compared to the kiss she shared with Darius.

A fire seemed to erupt in her loins and spread through all the veins of her body. As her lips closed against his, she tasted the sweetest drink in the entire world. Her mouth became dry and an unquenchable thirst arose from her throat. She grew dizzy with intoxication as she tasted him, and the more of him she drank, the more of him she desired. Her hands wrapped round the rippling muscles of his back and pushed him closer to her.

She hardly needed to push him, however, for he pulled her with an equal fierceness. His tongue lashed into her mouth as he kissed her. His fingers tugged her hair with a sweet pain. His other hand wrapped round her buttocks and gripped hard enough to leave a bruise. He pushed her against the wall and pressed her there with the weight of his body.

All rationality seemed to escape them as they kissed each other. No matter how tightly they embraced, it wasn't enough. His tongue seared the roof of her mouth as he drank her. His hand in her hair moved down to her neck, squeezing almost painfully. His hips pushed against her, so hard she felt the strength of his desire, stiff against her thigh. She gasped with ecstasy, breaking their kiss for the first time since it began.

She regretted it immediately, for as soon as Darius tasted the absence of her, he pulled away completely. He put a hand over his mouth, as if to prevent himself from kissing her again with his own physical force. He breathed raggedly as he stared at her with bulging eyes.

"Darius ... " She did not think she would ever breathe normally again. "Darius, please ... "

He turned and ran away, and she did not have the strength to follow him. Even if she tried, she did not think she would succeed, for her limbs seemed to have melted, and he ran faster than anyone she had ever seen.

\*

Fayr could not find the will to return to the feast. She knew Leonard Khan would be angry. She didn't care. She didn't plan to renew his pass tomorrow, anyway. She hoped to never see him again.

Nothing mattered anymore but the kiss she shared with Darius.

She retreated to her bedchamber and closed the door behind her. She no longer needed a band tonight to hear music; she no longer needed Friva's Hall to feel like dancing; she no longer needed a dress of pearls to feel beautiful. She closed her eyes, humming softly to herself, and twirled over the floor of her own room.

She imagined dancing with Darius in front of everyone. She imagined announcing to the world that she wished to marry him. She wondered how that grubby fellow, Picard, would react to such news. She laughed at the thought.

She sprawled across the sheets of her bed, laughing and running her hands over her body, pulling up the fabric of her dress and slipping her fingers across her bare thighs. All of those fools would be gone soon. All that mattered now was that she evict them before the Haze ran out. And she would evict them tomorrow.

She thought of Darius's hands gripping her, his mouth crushing hers, and her hands moved further up her thighs. Her body already ached from the touch of him. She felt as if a hole had opened inside her, a hole that only he could fill. Moisture rushed into her loins and she brushed it with her finger. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything. She wanted him to embrace her completely, to envelop her body with his own, to slide through this sticky wetness, and to strike the source of her desire, over and over again.

Until that could happen her finger must suffice, so she slid it up, further and further ...

Night had long since fallen. Darkness filled her chamber, stayed only by a few fluttering candles and the silver glow of a full moon. A rumble shook the room, and she realized this was the sound of thunder, its growl resounding through the earth. A strong wind howled against the palace, fluttering the curtains and thrashing the flames of her candles. Then the soft purr of rainfall echoed from the outdoors.

A knock shook the stones of her chamber.

She stiffened, her fantasy paused, her finger wavering. The knock brought her back to reality in a way that the storm did not. The knock reminded her of the feast she had fled, the people she had abandoned, and the Haze that kept thinning. She listened to the roar of the storm beyond

her window and her pulse quickened, for reasons less pleasant than before.

"The Haze ... " she whispered. It had been thin enough to begin with. How might a storm affect it? If she had made no more Haze since her father's death, and all that remained was washed away ...

The knock returned, even louder than before. "Princess? PRINCESS!"

Fayr struggled to compose herself, pulling her dress back down her legs, arranging her hair back over her shoulders. She still wondered if she must answer the door at all. If she pretended not to be here, perhaps this rude visitor would give up and go away. But what if it was important? One way another he kept pounding against the door, causing a boom that filled her with dread.

"Open the fucking door!"

At last she complied, opening the door and then staring into the face of none other than Leonard Khan of Vikand.

She had forgotten him completely. Now she remembered his fingers bruising her arms, his beady eyes glaring down at her. Perhaps she should have known her disappearance would anger him. Then again, his food had also been overladen with safra. Surely he would have indulged himself on some palace maid before wandering all this way?

"Leonard Khan," she murmured at last. "What can I do for you?"

"You know what you can do for me." He stepped forward, pushing her back with the girth of his chest, gripping the door and then slamming it behind him. The wood cracked as it bounced against the door frame. "You promised me a fucking dance!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did not feel well. I decided to come in here and ... "

"I don't care, you cock-tease." He grabbed her wrist and twisted it upward. "You *owe* me."

Outside, a flash of thunder lit the room. The rumble of thunder followed after. "I'll dance with you, if you insist." She made a meager attempt to free herself, to no avail. He kept pushing her towards the bed. "Shall I call for some music? We can still—"

"It's too late for that, Princess." He pushed her down onto the bed. His hands moved from her shoulders, to her breasts, and then squeezed. She gasped aloud from the shock of it. Her body was already sensitive from the other events of the evening. Now, a man far removed from her fantasies pulled and pinched at her nipples. He leered down at her, his eyes glistening with glee. "And we both know that's not what I came for."

“Please ... ” Her thighs writhed against his. He stepped forward and pushed her knees apart with his own. He used one hand to yank down the top of her dress. Pearls scattered to the floor as his hand found her bare breast and gripped it. Meanwhile, his other hand moved towards his trousers, grabbing at the knot that held them in place. “Please, you don’t have to do this ... ”

He was too far-gone to hear her. He leaned down and pressed his hips to hers while he wrapped his mouth around her nipple. She gasped from the sensation, her back arching up of its own will. It was her own damn fault, but she ached for someone to fill her. Her body betrayed her mind as it reacted to the khan’s cruel touch. He licked her breast as he stroked his own desire. He readied himself against her and chuckled against her flesh.

“Get ready,” he said. “Here I come.”

Not sure what else to do, the princess screamed.

# Chapter 10

## Desire

A strange feeling was coming over Eleanor.

She couldn't say when it struck her, exactly. It must have been some time during the feast in Friva's Hall. But when the feast began, she felt in full control of her logic. Even when the princess ran off and Leonard Khan returned to the table with a terrible gleam in his eyes, Eleanor handled herself quite fastidiously. The greatest challenge came in the form of Archon Picard, who engaged her in conversation despite her attempts to ignore him. He even took a seat next to her when Prime Synergist Deragon arose from it, having finished his dinner and feeling inclined to dance.

Eleanor looked to Rebeka, who sat to her left, and tried to think of something to say to her. She didn't speak quickly enough, however, for Picard beat her to it.

"I say, King-wife Eleanor," drawled the fellow, "you truly are an exceptional woman."

"I beg your pardon?" She reluctantly turned to regard him. "What do you mean?"

His blond curls bounced against his dimpled cheeks as he smiled. "I mean you are such a calm and resourceful woman, always behaving, never indulging yourself like the rest of us. It is really quite remarkable."

"Well ... thank you." But Eleanor did not feel very grateful. She picked at her food, tasting the sweetness of the safra on her tongue. It had been many hours since she last drank some Discipline. She probably needed more soon. But Discipline tasted so bad, and this safra-covered food tasted so delicious. Somehow, it tasted better with every bite.

"I'd love to know how you do it," pressed the wily politician. "It is almost as if the safra does not affect you. Do you think that is the case?"

Eleanor sighed and considered how to respond. She might as well tell him the truth in the hopes of getting him to stop pestering her. After all, it was no great secret. Rumor had it that Fayr suspected the khan of being more closely related to the Wolven assassin than Eleanor, and rightly so. She had nothing to fear from the truth. "You are correct," said Eleanor. "I use a potion called Discipline to keep my head clear of safra. My country has used it for years."

Picard cried out with delight. He covered his mouth, as if to stifle laughter, but could hardly restrain his glee nonetheless. "Forgive me," he said. "I am not as immune to the safra as you, in that case. And the truth is, I had already suspected your use of the anti-safra. I simply did not expect you to admit it."

"Anti-safra?" Already, he made her regret her candidness. "I did not call it that."

"Forgive me again. But it does serve that purpose, clearly. It makes one immune to pleasure. Does it also numb one to pain?"

"Of course. It numbs all emotions entirely, leaving one free to think without the distortion of feelings."

"Oh."

Picard sank back a little. His smile drooped and even his shoulders slumped. Why would this disappoint him so much? People usually objected to the numbing of pleasure more than that of pain. He was a strange man, indeed.

All too soon, unfortunately, he recovered. "This drug fascinates me, nonetheless," he said. "I would like to learn how to make it."

"Making this drug requires extreme diligence," she explained. "One might say that discipline itself is the primary ingredient. It is a long and complicated process. Somehow, I doubt you have the necessary fortitude."

Picard was quiet a moment, then burst into laughter. "You're absolutely right about that. Besides, with this hand of mine ... " He lifted the glove and flipped a switch on it with his other hand. The fingers curled together, snapping into a fist. "I could not make it, no. Fortunately for me, I'm an archon, and I can get other people to do it for me. So I wonder if you'll tell me how it's made, anyway?"

His tone had changed. He did not seem like a violent man, yet something in her brain alerted her to danger. "You are free to purchase some of the drug, if you wish," she said. "I am afraid I can't help you any more than that."

"Aren't you the one who *created* the formula?"

Her heart skipped a beat. It had been too long since she drank Discipline, indeed. But she did not have any on her, and so she kept eating the safra-laden food. She did not like how this man made her feel. If he knew she invented Discipline all along, then why did he toy with her so? She took a deep breath, feeling better as the safra slid down her throat. "Yes," she said at last. "I did invent Discipline. As such, I own the patent on the formula. And I do not wish to give it to you—for business reasons, you understand."

"Patent? What the fuck is that?"

Eleanor blinked back at him in surprise.

"Listen." Picard's tone sharpened further, even though he plastered a smile on his face. "I don't think you realize that I can offer you something in return. The two of us can help each other, you see."

"I don't need any help from you."

"And what if I told you I knew how to make safra?"

"That's ... " Eleanor looked down at the glitter on her fingertips. "That is hard for me to believe."

"And you are right to doubt me. For I *don't* know how yet." He chuckled. "Nonetheless, I think I'm close to finding out. And when I do, I may be willing to share some of my knowledge with you. That is, if you do the same for me first."

Eleanor's stomach churned. How did this man continue to torment her? She simply couldn't figure him out. "I'm not interested in making safra," she hissed at last.

"Oh? That is a surprise. I thought Yamairans were interested in making anything. I understand why you might dislike the general purpose of safra, but it can still be a useful tool, can it not?"

Eleanor didn't want to admit it, but he had a point. The formula for safra would be valuable information, at the very least, and perhaps she was wrong to disregard its worth based on her own dislike of the substance. In that case, she was letting her emotions get the better of her, after all.

And so what if she was? Her thoughts kept spinning and they seemed to make less and less sense with every passing moment. Right now she wanted to eat this delicious food, enjoy the jovial music, and cease to question every aspect of its origin. But Picard had a remarkable ability to keep her from enjoying anything. "What are you really after, Picard?" she asked.

"Well ... " He drew back a little. "That's a very fine question."

"If you're not looking for joy, if you're not looking for reason, then *what* are you looking for?"

A strange look came over the archon's face. Eleanor felt as if in one moment, his eyes had been like flat blue canvas. Now they opened up into a bottomless sky. "What, indeed," he said.

Rebeka leaned forward and struck Picard with her fierce green glare. "The King-wife has made herself clear," said the Scholar. "If you want nothing else, then leave her alone."

"Not alone, it would seem," sneered Picard. "In any case, it's true, we have nothing else to discuss until you change your mind, Eleanor. Until then, ladies."

Then he got up and wandered away.

Eleanor let out a breath of relief. Then, to her surprise, Rebeka erupted with giggles. "We showed him, didn't we, eh Eleanor?"

Rebeka prodded Eleanor with her elbow. For whatever reason, Eleanor found herself laughing as well. It felt so very good to laugh after what she had just endured. "I suppose we did."

" 'Until then, *ladies.*' "

"You sounded just like him there!"

"Oh my, is that an insult?"

"I don't know; maybe so!"

And the two of them just kept laughing. "You scared him away," said Eleanor. She watched him push his awkward body through the crowd. "Look, he's leaving!"

"What an odd one."

"Careful now, you wouldn't want his father to hear you."

"I think he'd agree with me."

Eleanor's sides hurt she was laughing so hard. She didn't even care who heard her. It didn't matter anyway—she realized that only a few people remained at the royal table besides Rebeka and herself. "Where did they all go?"

"I guess some of them are dancing."

"Oh." Eleanor's smile waned.

Rebeka leaned against her. "I'm sorry. You must miss Byron."

"Do I?" Eleanor pondered this a moment. "I suppose that depends on how you define 'miss.'"

This got Rebeka laughing again. "Perhaps I was wrong, then."

"No, seriously," said Eleanor. "I'm not sure how much I miss him. Do you think that's strange?"

"Not really, considering that potion you keep drinking."

The King-wife almost reprimanded her for saying such a thing. She also might have mentioned that she had not drunk any for several hours, so the effects were probably gone by now. Instead she let out another chuckle. "God help me! However you look at it, I just don't miss him as much as I expected to. At least now that I've realized I can do things on my own."

"Listen to yourself!" cheered Rebeka. "You're like a whole new woman."

"And you brought her out of me."

They both became silent. Suddenly they couldn't look at each other. The thrumming of distant harp strings shook Eleanor's eardrums.

"Well, whether you miss him or not," said Rebeka, "it's a shame that you don't have a dance partner."

"Perhaps." Eleanor watched the men and women writhing against each other on the dance floor. "But I'm not sure it's for me, anyway."

"Nonsense."

"I don't care to dance with any of them."

"Then what about me?"

Eleanor looked at Rebeka and her body flushed with warmth. She had subconsciously known that Rebeka would ask this, and she hoped for it as much as she feared it. If there was any sanity left within her, she would make the obvious choice.

"No. That's ridiculous."

The words left her mouth in a hurry. She backed away from Rebeka while she still possessed the willpower. She dared not stare into those beautiful green eyes as she pushed away her plate, sipped the last of her safra-laden vino, and shuffled away from the table.

"I must go now. There's no reason to stay here. I must ... go now."

So she did, but she knew that Rebeka watched her go with a smile on her face, and this set her heart pounding all the more furiously.

\*

Eleanor lay on her bed with all her clothes on: the elaborately buttoned jacket, the belt with an assortment of straps, the boots with a variety of pouches. She unbound her hair, only so that she could press her head to the sheets without discomfort, and did not bother to move after that.

A gentle knock.

An inevitable response. "Come in."

She did not turn to look as Rebeka entered the room. Instead she stared out the window, watching the amber rays of twilight, inhaling the musky scent of a fall breeze. It never got very cold in Dearen, she knew:

only cool to send shivers down one's skin, or to pinch one's cheeks with redness.

"Eleanor." The soft hands fell upon her jacket. The touch was light, but its weight was heavy. Eleanor sighed and turned to look upon the Scholar. She had looked at Rebeka many times, but not in the way she did now. Now she focused on the ruby redness of her lips, the elegant sharpness of her chin, contrasted by the beautiful slope of her neck. Rebeka's dewy chest rose and fell with the strength of her breath. Eleanor reached up and put her hand against it, feeling the heart leap against the ribcage.

"Rebeka," she whispered. "Your inner drum. It's ... "

"I don't care."

Rebeka grabbed her hand, moved it, and placed it upon her breast. Then she gasped with pleasure, pushing her chest to fill Eleanor's palm. Eleanor felt the nipple tighten under the fabric while the heartbeat quickened. Rebeka threw back her head as she breathed deeply, a little moan escaping her lips with the exhale.

Eleanor could even comprehend what was happening. "I ... I ... "

Rebeka brushed Eleanor's lips with one hand, as if to wipe away the words building behind them. Then she moved forward, one leg sliding onto the bed, straddling her hips over Eleanor's. Her hand continued moving back into the yellow tangles of Eleanor's hair, free and flowing about her shoulders. Rebeka gripped a knot and held her still, staring straight into the eyes of the King-wife.

"Eleanor," she said, "the world will bow its head to you. Don't you feel it? I felt it the first time I ever saw you. You can have anything you ever dreamed of. Don't you know that? Don't you feel it?"

Then she pressed her hand to Eleanor's chest, as Eleanor had done to her not so long ago. Except this time, Rebeka's hand slipped under her jacket. She reached beneath the folds of the clothing and grasped Eleanor's breast in her hand. The sensation jolted Eleanor's body, like a current of fire from her chest to her belly, fanning heat through her limbs.

A button popped and rolled away as Rebeka forced her hand lower.

"Eleanor," she breathed, "tell me you feel it."

"I ... I ... "

Perhaps she would not say whatever Rebeka wanted to hear, and Rebeka knew it. Whatever the case, the Scholar rushed forward and closed Eleanor's lips with her own. As her soft mouth poured into Eleanor's, the King-wife knew all resistance was futile. This was what she wanted.

"Rebeka ... "

At long last she reached out to embrace her lover. Rebeka's black hair spilled across her face and they kissed amidst its strands. They fell back onto the bed, the heat of Rebeka's body pouring across her skin. Suddenly she wanted to be free of all her clothes, every stitch and fragment. She pulled and yanked the linen, popping buttons, breaking straps. Rebeka helped her, then reached for her own clothes, the removal of which Eleanor desired even more so.

As her impatience took over, Eleanor pushed Rebeka to the bed and got on top of her. She pulled down the last of the clinging fabric and gazed down upon the bare, blushing flesh. Then she leaned down and tasted Rebeka's nipple. It was even sweeter than safra.

Rebeka cried out and arched up. She pushed her hips into Eleanor's, spreading the slickness of her thighs against Eleanor's skin. A tart aroma brushed Eleanor's nose, and she realized the sweetest dish of all waited elsewhere, so she trailed her lips down Rebeka's stomach.

Far beyond them night fell, a moon arose, and a storm grumbled in the distance. Eleanor paid no heed to the crack of thunder, the rush of rain, the flash of lightning. Nothing mattered anymore, but this.

Pure bliss.

# Chapter 11

## Storm

Sean blamed it all on the Discipline drug, at first.

After all, how could he not? How else could he explain his new and strange behavior? When he acted as Chief Darius, another person seemed to take control. Whenever he left Fayr's presence, he felt as if he came up out of a trance. When he was around her, he knew how he needed to act, and he acted accordingly. Discipline was the easiest explanation.

Why, then, did he not have to *think* about how his behavior? Could Discipline account for instinct? Or did it simply allow this instinct to arise? And if that was the case, then where did Darius come from? For he felt almost real to Sean, like a person who had stepped in from elsewhere, or—even more disturbingly—who had been buried inside him already.

It did not seem rational. But if Sean couldn't blame the Discipline for such behavior, then how else could he explain it?

On the night of the feast, Sean almost waltzed into the hall as Darius without a second thought in his mind. A few seconds more and he would have walked up to the royal table and taken his place across from the princess. Fortunately he never got that far. If she had turned her head at the right moment, she might have seen him approaching. The lucky fact that she did not, combined with a motion from Archon Picard that caught Sean's attention, saved him from making a grave mistake. The sight of Picard came like a slap in the face, knocking out the persona of Darius and bringing back Sean to replace it.

Immediately he retreated and slipped back through the crowd.

Once in the quietude of the hallway, Sean wondered how he could have been so foolish as to sit with the khan, the prince, and the princess all at once—all while playing the role of Darius. Perhaps, in a sense, the

Discipline drug worked *too* well when it came to hiding his identity. While Darius, he ceased to think as Sean should. Then again, maybe that was another indication that Discipline was not fully to blame.

Sean grimaced and rubbed at the bruise on his arm where he injected the drug every morning. The drug was supposed to keep him calm and focused. But sometimes, especially at night when it began to wear off, he found himself more confused than ever. Perhaps the Merchant had been right when he said that emotions stored up while on the drug and arose to haunt him later. At night he would grow restless, sensing a range of feelings from cheerfulness to depression, and he would exercise in his room until he passed out from exhaustion. Then he would dream, vivid elaborate dreams—some of them terrible, but most of them wonderful. Perhaps that was the *safra* taking over.

Who even knew anymore? How could he focus on two goals if they conflicted? How could he trust his instincts when he didn't know if they were drug-induced? And who the hell was he, anyway?

He walked further and further from the dining hall, his brain storming within him. A jolt of energy spread through his limbs and his fingers curled into fists. This was all that fucking Picard's fault. If Picard was dead the world would be simpler. He could kill Kyne and complete his oath to Belazar.

Then nothing would stop Leonard Khan from asking him to kill Princess Fayr.

The sound of feet slapping the floor resounded nearby. Sean turned to an adjacent corridor, attuned to the noise. Whoever this was, he was panicked and upset. Which made him atypical, for a Dearen.

Sean walked to apprehend the subject, his fingers flexing at his sides. It was as if he already knew, before he saw Prince Kyne, that he approached his prime target.

The two stopped in the hallway and stared at each other.

"You," said Prince Kyne.

Sean took a deep breath. His blood tingled. His skin itched. This was why he did not like the oath to Belazar. He did not know if any of it was his own imagination. But he felt, indeed, as if a greater power consumed him. Even if it made him stronger, it also filled him with an aching hunger. He wanted to kill. Almost anyone would do. But no one would do as well as this one.

Watching him, Kyne flinched slightly. Then he took off running.

It wasn't hard. It required next to no effort. Sean moved, his muscles shoved against the ground, and he ran to the prince. His fingers dug into

Kyne's shirt. He twisted and yanked. The prince fell towards him, thrashing.

Sean shook the boy hard enough to rattle his teeth. He wore a dirk and a few throwing stars under his tunic, but any of those items would make his cause of death too obvious. How best to dispatch him?

"You can't do this," gasped Kyne. "I can do whatever I want. Let me go."

Sean sensed the guilt in the boy's voice. Curiosity got the best of him. "What did you do? What are you running from?"

"Let me go, Darius!"

Sean blinked a few times. When Kyne used that name ... something changed inside him.

"I said *let me go!*"

"Now now, Kyne. What would your sister think of this behavior? Shouldn't you be at the feast?"

"I can do whatever I please, bastard!"

"I don't think so." Sean began dragging him.

"Hey. *Hey!*"

Prince Kyne put up a fight the whole way. His irritating resistance almost cracked Sean's temper. Eventually he thrust the boy against the wall, hoping to jar some sense into his skull.

At that moment, he also felt the piece of metal under the boy's shirt. A tighter squeeze confirmed that it was shaped like a key.

In such a state, they came across Princess Fayr in the hallway.

\*

Sean's kiss with Fayr left him dizzy and hot-blooded. But the thoughts of her flesh fought against the memory of the key-necklace under Kyne's shirt. He did not know how to deal with his feelings towards Fayr. But he knew what to do about the key.

Night seeped into the hills of Dearen. A heavy moon sagged under swollen clouds. The sky grumbled, and misty winds stirred. Sean smelled the sweetness of safra in the air and knew that the Discipline had worn off. But he didn't care this time.

He checked Friva's Hall first. Picard wasn't there: the hall had now been reduced to the pure revelers, rolling about the floor and indulging in pleasure. Next he checked the Windy Tower. Picard wasn't there, either.

Clouds sifted the moonlight and a bitter smell drifted in the breeze, like that of rain.

He made his way to the Oak Fortress.

He already knew the location of Picard's room. He had followed the archon there the night after their meeting in the Windy Tower and watched him go in, just so he knew where to find him. Sean had not bothered to return until now, however, and made a deliberate effort to avoid him. After all, he'd had nothing he wanted to disclose.

Until now.

He knocked and no one answered. Then he opened the door with no resistance.

Darkness filled most of the room. Light glowed faintly around the shape of the window. Sean closed the door and moved towards it. A bitter smell stung his nostrils—the smell of an unwashed human, and something else. The smell of fear. His blood surged with the recognition. His mouth watered. He walked to the window and pushed back the curtain.

Chilled air rushed over his clothes. Silver moonlight sank into his skin and he breathed deeply of his essence. He couldn't explain it, but there was something about the moon that fed him power. It was one reason he never bothered taking more Discipline at night, because he sensed that it wouldn't work, anyway. His eyes burned and itched as he looked up at the glowing orb. If Belazar existed, then perhaps his power had some connection to the moon. And if Sean's brown lenses hindered his own connection to Belazar, then perhaps, through the moonlight ...

He flung the curtain shut again.

"Please," gasped a voice.

Sean jolted and shrank back. His senses were on high alert, and perhaps he had smelled her, but she had been so quiet, so very quiet, that he had managed to forget her.

"Please ... open the window."

With great reluctance, he pushed back the curtain, just enough to let in a beam of silver. The light glittered with a faint cloud of safra.

He saw the woman tied to the bed, ragged and barefoot. She inhaled with a soft moan, as if drinking the last drop of water in a desert.

"Who are you?" said Sean.

"Please. Give me more safra."

"I asked you a question."

Something in his tone made her blink and pay attention. "My name is Mina."

He stepped closer and studied her. His eyes adjusted to see most details of her appearance, though she could probably see nothing of him but a shape in the moonlight. She had long red hair and pale freckled

skin. Her pupils were wide and dilated. Her health seemed intact, though a few bruises darkened the skin of her arms, and in one area, she had a deep cut.

Belatedly, Sean recognized her. He had seen her about the palace before, sometimes serving Princess Fayr. She was just a poor palace maid.

"Why are you here?" said Sean. "Where's Picard?"

"How the hell should I know? More safra, please. That's not enough ..."

Sean bent further to examine her bonds. "Should I free you?"

"Sure, if you want. Or you could give me more safra."

Finally he just looked her in the eyes awhile, unable to comprehend the situation at all. "You let him do this to you?"

"I ... I ... " Panic flickered in her eyes. "I don't know. Did I?"

"What was his aim?" asked Sean. "Would he try to use you against me?" His heart jumped against his ribs as if to bruise them. His breath became ragged. His blood roared in his eardrums. His skin crawled. His senses were so alert that they grew overloaded. He knew what this was. This was the power of Belazar filling him up, consuming him. And if it didn't find someone to destroy ...

He poured his energy into slicing her bonds. It was better than nothing. "He won't use anything against me," growled Sean. "I won't give him the chance. I will slit that bastard's throat first. Where is he?"

"I ... I ... I think he's here."

"Hello, Seanie."

Sean whirled.

The archon's soft, chubby shape filled the doorway. A smug grin cut his dimpled cheeks as he stepped through. "What's this about slitting someone's throat? I hope it's a certain teenage boy you're envisioning."

A second later and Sean would have lunged forward. He would have grabbed Picard's neck and crushed the windpipe between his fingers. Instead he thought of Kyne. Then his stomach flipped within him.

Sean doubled over, grimacing. Kyne was the one who should be dead. Sean remembered the satisfaction of holding the boy in his grip: the weak thrashing arms, the flapping purple hair. How easy it would have been to kill him then. Why hadn't he? *Darius*, Kyne had said. *Darius* ...

"I see I have your attention now," said Picard. "That's good. Let's talk somewhere private."

\*

They made their way into the hallway and beyond it. Sean followed Picard's lead, for he had trouble seeing straight. He wanted to rip the

lenses out of his eyes. He wanted to tear off these foolish clothes and don his Wolven suit. Then he wanted to kill anyone and everyone who got in his way.

Only one thing kept him from doing so. For underneath the rage, underneath the flow of destructive power flowing through him, he desired something different than killing. He wanted Princess Fayr. And if he killed Prince Kyne, or Picard, without planning carefully enough ...

"Here we are." Picard had brought them to the Fountain Foyer, full of spraying water and ridiculous statues. But more importantly, no people lurked in earshot. Picard stopped and turned to face him. "Now Sean. Are you well?"

Sean didn't respond.

"You don't look so good."

Sean glared at him, breathing raggedly through clenched teeth.

"Your lenses are wearing a bit thin, I think. A little red's showing through. Or perhaps it's my imagination. You want to kill Prince Kyne, don't you?" The name alone made Sean flinch. "I understand. I am sorry about that. But you have to understand, I can't let you do that until you give me something useful."

"You fucking worm," snarled Sean. "This wouldn't be an issue if you hadn't made me swear an oath. Do you aim to torture me?"

Picard made a strange expression, twisted with mock sadness and unrestrained glee. "Well, I assure you that wasn't my direct goal, at least."

"Are you torturing that girl in your room?"

"I don't like the word torture," said Picard. "It's more like an experiment."

"Are you raping her? What?"

"No." Picard sighed. "Even if I wanted to ... she just doesn't interest me enough, I suppose."

Sean grabbed Picard's tunic and shook him hard. An uncanny strength filled his limbs. He could have lifted the archon from the earth and not broken a sweat. He leaned close and hissed, "When this is over ..."

The archon trembled in his grip, but the gleam never left his eyes. "You'd be wise not to threaten me, Sean. Not when the princess herself asked the khan to bring you to her in chains."

"What?"

"Fayr knows a Wolven is probably out to get her. She knows my father might be able to catch him. And so she asked him to do so. He is considering."

Sean drew back completely. He didn't like things to get this complicated. Why couldn't it just stay simple? "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to remember I am the mediator here. I am your friend so long as you remain mine. And I do like being your friend, Sean. Did you take care of that Chief Darius like I asked you to? I am very, very pleased."

"What?" Sean's head hurt. "Do you think I killed him?"

Picard's face fell. "Didn't you?"

Sean growled with rage and shoved the archon away from him. "That has nothing to do with this!"

"Oh, well, I would disagree. But in any case, I can see you're overwhelmed. Let's get back to the basics. *Kyne*."

Sean grabbed a statue and scraped his nails against the stone.

"Have you learned anything from him or not?"

"Yes." Sean took a deep, rattling breath. "Yes. He wears a key around his neck."

"A key?"

"I think it's the key to the dungeon."

"Oh. Oh yes, I see." Picard's cheeks bulged as he restrained his delight. He turned and started pacing. "Oh this is very good. Very good news, Sean. I think he may know how to do it, after all."

"Do what?"

"MAKE SAFRA!" Picard's grin vanished almost as quickly as it came. He turned to face the Wolven and a new tone entered his voice: anger. "You fucking fool, do you even remember why I hired you? What the fuck is wrong with you? Is it the safra? Are you taking your Discipline?" He reached up with his gloved hand and jabbed Sean in the forehead. "Don't tell me the safra gets to you, too!"

Sean stared back at him. And something in his eyes made Picard retreat.

"Or perhaps it's Belazar?" Picard's soft throat rippled with a gulp. "Yes, that is my fault. Well then, let's not keep him waiting for any longer than necessary. We have two very big pieces of the puzzle, Sean. You know—or suspect, quite rightfully—that *Kyne* wears the key to the dungeons around his neck. I hear that his father did the same thing. It's hardly even a mystery that the Haze comes from the dungeons; it's obvious enough to anyone with two eyes, at least. So we know where to go. And as for what to do, I suspect *Kyne* holds the key for that as well—in the figurative sense, of course. I heard him say something tonight, something very interesting. He said something bad would happen to us

if we stayed in Dearen against the princess's wishes. Then he said: *Krenzi u morde.*"

Sean went very still.

"You said the same thing, didn't you, Sean? You said it in your oath to Belazar. I will never forget it. What language was that? What does it mean?"

Sean shrugged helplessly. "I think the language is called Norsidian."

"Then where is ... Norsidia?"

"Who the hell knows? I saw the name on a book of my father's. The whole book was in that language. We didn't understand most of it. We only knew what parts we needed to say, and when."

"Damn it, Sean, you don't know the meaning of the words?"

Sean was quiet for a moment. He considered carefully. "I can guess, though I can't explain why. When I swear the oath they make a certain sense to me, even though I've never heard them translated."

"Then *what do they mean?*"

Sean closed his eyes and concentrated. He couldn't translate the words using reason. Only through feeling. "Cross the line into death."

"'Cross the line'?" Picard sighed heavily. "I'm not sure I understand, but even if I did, I'm not sure it would help us."

"It's important," said Sean. "I'm not sure why, but it is. *Krenzi* ... crossing the line ... I think it means crossing a very important boundary. It's something that shouldn't be crossed. The death is not ... normal. The word death doesn't quite cover it. It is ... nonexistence. It is ... " A cold feeling churned in his belly, and he opened his eyes immediately. "It is oblivion."

"Well, while that is all very fascinating—and I say that sincerely—I don't think it helps us, as I suspected. No matter. What matters is that Kyne knows the words, and like you, he got them from somewhere. Now we just need to figure out what else he knows."

Thunder grumbled in the distance. Sean's skin tickled. He looked at his hand and saw sprinkles of rain across his knuckles, which he had rested near an aperture.

"Damn it," said Picard. "I hate rain."

Sean closed his fist tight and gnashed his teeth.

"How shall we do this?" said Picard. "Whatever we do, it must be tonight. There's a chance Princess Fayr will ship us all out tomorrow. Perhaps we'll go get Prince Kyne together? We'll have a little chat, the three of us."

"No," said Sean, trembling. He didn't know how to do this, but he knew that Picard's plan led to a very bad ending. "I'm going to talk to someone else, first."

"Who?"

"His sister."

Picard sputtered with laughter. "The princess! Good luck with that, Sean the suitor. She won't even pay attention to my father, you know. In fact she even snubbed him when ..."

Sean didn't hear the rest, for he was already on his way.

\*

He heard the scream from a distance.

Normally, hearing such a noise would make him hesitate. He had no idea what sort of situation lay ahead of him. If it was dangerous, then he would need to plan his attack.

But then he realized the scream could only be Fayr's. It came from the right direction. It had the right tenor. And most importantly, who else in Dearen would scream?

He should have slowed down. Instead he ran faster.

A few guards were stationed before the entrance to Royal Chambers. Like fools, they stood around debating what to do. They looked confused and frightened. The tapestries in the hallway rippled against the walls as stormy winds battered them from without. Torches and candles sputtered against misty waves of rain. Past the Dearen guards, a few dark shapes loomed near the princess's chamber.

"Oh good," said one of the Dearen guards. "It's Chief Darius!"

Sean had already been reaching under his tunic for a weapon. Now he pulled his hand back out. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "I heard a scream."

Another cry echoed down the hall, making Sean's skin crawl. If he doubted Princess Fayr's voice before, he no longer could.

"We don't know what to do!" said the guard. "That's the Vikand Khan and his men in there. We figured we could let them through. But why would the princess be screaming?"

Sean considered killing all these fools at once. Then he thought of something faster. "Where's the Master of the Royal Guard? Sir Gornum?"

"Oh, uh ... I think he's at the feast."

"Why don't you all split up and go find him? Perhaps he'll know what to do."

"Great idea!"

And as easily as that, they were all gone.

Sean rushed forward. As he proceeded, the hall darkened. A few torches had been doused by the storm, or perhaps just neglect. Sean sank into their shadows. A strip of light marked Fayr's chamber ahead, for it shone through her open doorway. Around the doorway stood four Viking and hordesfolk, watching through the crack with leers on their faces.

The sounds of a struggle within Fayr's chamber grew louder. There was a thump and a clatter. Then a sound like a smack.

One of the hordesfolk chuckled. "She puts up a good fight."

"Maybe he'll let us try her when he's done with her."

Then they laughed some more. But two chuckles cut short.

Sean stood behind them, each of his arms wrapped around a throat. As he pulled back, he drew the throwing stars across the skin of their necks. Blood sprayed from their throats like the water in the Fountain Foyer. The sounds from their mouths became gurgles. Then they slipped to the ground in a pool of their own blood.

"What the ... ?"

As the remaining two guards to look, they saw nothing but shadows. Then two flashes of light as Sean's throwing stars spun towards them. They saw nothing after this, for they fell to the floor with stars protruding from their foreheads.

He wiped his hands through their blood as he moved forward. Then he flung the drops out the window. "*A Belazar, afithi fenturus zentaya.*"

He proceeded into Fayr's chamber.

The khan stood over the princess and her bed, but its blankets, flung about the room, marked the path of their struggle. He bore scratch marks across his arms and thighs. His trousers slid down his legs as he climbed onto the princess, twisting her arms over her head. He finally had her pinned, it seemed, and he watched her struggle beneath him with a grin on his face. He'd managed to pull almost all the clothes from her body, though a few threads remained dangling across her bare skin.

The sight of her naked body was truly a sight to behold, and for a moment, he paused.

The groan from the khan's throat as he pushed his hips forward sprang Sean into action.

A black line flew from his hand and wrapped round Leonard Khan's collar. The metal jewelry managed to protect the khan's flesh, but Sean's whip snagged round the metal. He yanked the whip back and pulled the khan with it. His bulk smacked the ground as he fell, then Sean pulled

pinned him to the floor with a boot on his chest. The damn Khan Collar continued to protect the khan's neck.

Sean reached down and grabbed the collar's latch. It was a small gap in the metal near the back. As he searched for it, Leonard Khan looked up at him and blanched with recognition.

"Wol—!"

Sean struck him across the mouth with his elbow.

Someone else was yelling at him—Fayr—but he could not spare her any attention. Belazar's power flowed through him now. Sean's blood roared and his body reacted to every small movement of Leonard beneath him, keeping the large body pinned. Uncanny strength poured through his limbs. No ordinary human would have been able to pull off the Khan Collar without a key. But Sean wrested it with his hands and snapped the latch apart. With a pathetic *chink*, the grandiose jewelry fell to the floor.

The khan spat through his blood. "You—ack!"

This time Sean used the whip again, securing it tight round the khan's naked throat. Then he stood up and pulled. He had not used the whip very much before tonight, but he relished the feeling of the taut leather in his fingertips. He felt the khan's gurgles vibrate up the fabric. With each jerk of the whip, Sean felt the khan's response on the other end. Another tight pull made him feel Leonard's pulse thud through the leather.

Leonard seemed intent on trying to speak, so Sean stepped forward and placed his boot on the khan's nose. He looked down into the khan's face while crushing his mouth and strangling him. Leonard Khan looked up into the eyes of his killer and recognized him, just before Sean gave one last yank on the whip.

The snap of Leonard Khan's neck pronounced his death.

"Darius!"

Fayr's voice struck Sean like a slap in the face. She had been shouting his name—or Darius's name—for some time. But he hadn't heard until now. He blinked at her and dropped the whip.

"Darius ... oh Darius ... is he dead?"

"I, uh ... " He wondered how obvious it was to her. How much had she seen of their struggle? Had she seen Sean wrest off the Khan's Collar with his bare hands? Had she seen how deliberately he broke Leonard's spine? Whatever the case, what point was there in hiding the outcome? "I think so."

"Oh gods." She pressed her hand to her clammy forehead. Her cheeks were pale and bloodless. "He is your khan. You shouldn't have killed him ... I mean, I'm glad he's dead." Her hands clenched in the bed sheets. "I wanted to kill him myself, but I ... "

"I don't care." He stared in a daze at her bare naked body. She had perfect breasts and sharp, perked nipples. Her thighs wrapped in curves around the shadowed folds between them. He couldn't help himself. He wanted to devour her, almost as surely as the khan had. But only if she wished to devour him, too. "He didn't command me any longer. Only you do."

Fayr pulled up her knees and hugged herself tightly, torment twisting her face.

Sean gulped. "Did he ... ?"

"No. But ... does it even matter? Nothing is the same after this. Nothing ..."

Lightning flashed beyond the palace. White light rimmed the shape of the princess in perfect silhouette, sending another jolt of desire through Sean's body. The boom of thunder followed.

"Darius. Hold me ... "

He sat next to her on the bed and stroked her purple hair. Blood smeared onto the strands. She didn't care, but looked into his eyes, breathing raggedly.

Another flash of lightning. Her face faltered with uncertainty as she looked at him. Her swimming gaze roved his. "Your eyes ... " she whispered. "You look ... "

He closed them, then rushed forward to kiss her.

The heat in his blood overwhelmed him. He melted against her, kissing, grabbing, pulling. She fell back onto the sheets, her body spreading open, embracing him, pulling him in. His mouth trailed down her neck. Her pulse thudded against his lips.

He pushed his hips against hers, and she arched up to meet him.

"Darius," she gasped.

*Darius ...*

# Chapter 12

## Haze

As the storm raged outside, Picard sensed the Haze in the air fading.

"No ... " He ran to a window and stared out into the swirling torrent. Little could be seen through the thrashing drops and rolling mist. But beams of moonlight pierced the clouds, creating stark contrasts of light and shadow. Light should never cut sharply in Dearen. Everything should glow and gleam and glitter. Everything should blur in the Haze.

"NO!"

He forgot briefly about Sean, Kyne, Fayr, and his own father. All he could think about was the sharp pain in his right arm, clenching his nerves, splintering up his shoulder.

"Friva help me," he gasped, and ran for his room.

What he found there—or did not find—only helped to increase his panic. Severed ribbons streamed loose from his bed frame.

"Mina?" he cried. "MINA!"

She was gone.

He collapsed on the floor and ran his hands through his hair. She couldn't be gone. She just couldn't. He had enjoyed his many days with her—or at least he had nearly done so. He had not yet discovered what pleased him, but he had been closer to that discovery than ever, he felt. He had watched her react to his touch, or his mere conversation, as her safra ran out day after day. He blocked the windows so she could not breathe it, and he consumed it in front of her, so that she desired it but could not have any of her own. He watched the pain flicker slowly into her awareness, just as his own was doing now. And it had been a sight to behold.

But he had not yet found what he searched for. And now ... now ...

Thunder boomed outside and sent vibrations through his bones. He clutched his aching arm and gnashed his teeth. The wind through the

open curtain lashed his curls and he knew this wasn't over. Not yet—and far from it. This was only the beginning.

He remembered the safra supply he kept under the bed. He'd started it not long ago, perhaps when he'd subconsciously sensed that not everything happened as he wished it to. He had begun to fear that his plans would go awry: that the khan would make a fool of himself, and that Sean would not complete his mission. He'd realized that he might as well collect what safra he could from the ground, or the corners, or even from the air in Dearen while he had the chance. So a few pouches of the glittery dust waited under his bed frame.

He dashed under there now and stuffed his mouth with the sparkly powder.

A few moments later, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. He collapsed against his sheets and breathed the piquant smell of the storm. He would survive this. He was smarter than all the fools of Dearen. He would discover the formula, and he would either get the princess killed, or bind her to Vikand in marriage. Safra would not be lost.

Mina should not be lost, either.

He got up and decided to find her. Safra glittered from his nostrils as he huffed for breath. Perhaps he felt better, but his time with Mina was not resolved. That was all there was to it.

He wandered through the halls looking for her.

"Mina? Mina! Come out, darling. I'll give you safra this time. I'll give you whatever you want. Just come back ..."

He could not find her. Instead he only walked past lashing rain and annoying revelry. His arm throbbed and his body trembled. He found a neglected goblet of safra juice and glutted his thirst with its remains.

With a sigh, he slowed down and found a smile on his face. His pain ebbed and he relaxed his arm at his side. Everything would be fine. Sean would do ... whatever exactly he planned to do. Then Sean would return and they would take Kyne's key and everything else he knew about safra. Finally, Picard would find Mina again and everything with her would be even more interesting before, because now he knew the pain of losing her.

He told himself this several more times, over and over again, as he made his way back to his room. Then he blocked out the sound of the storm to the best of his ability and managed to fall asleep.

\*

Picard awoke to two large hands shaking him.

"Father's gone! Father's gone!" Richard roared.

Picard thrashed against his brother, who had hold of his tunic and shook him like a rag-doll. Agony spread up his shoulder like wildfire. "Get off me!" he cried, trying to scratch Richard with his metallic fingers. But this just upset Richard further, who yanked Picard completely from the bed and then threw him to the floor.

The ground slammed against Picard's chest and thrust all the breath from his lungs. He remained there a moment, not moving.

"Now will you fucking listen to me?" yelled Richard. "Father's missing!"

Picard groaned and pushed himself up to his hands and knees. He wiped some blood from his nose. His head was still spinning. "Richard," he said hoarsely, "I'm listening."

He reached under the bed, wincing. His gloved hand groped around until it hooked a pouch of safra. Then he yanked it out and poured the dust into his mouth.

"He told me he had a plan," said Richard. "He said he would take care of our passes so we could stay here. But we're not on the list, and the guards say we have to leave today. And I can't find Father anywhere."

"Where have you looked?" Picard sat up and leaned against the bed. He stared groggily out the window.

"Around," grumbled the high chief.

"You know," said Picard, "Father's probably just passed out with a maiden somewhere, dreaming of more naked women." Something about this made Picard blink curiously. "As you should be, also. So why aren't you? Instead, you're all ... agitated."

Richard frowned back at him. "So?"

"So ... " Picard climbed up to his feet. "Something's not right." With great reluctance, he looked out the window.

Outside, a sun of bright orange rays cut through the morning frost. The rooftops of Dearen city, which alternated between thatch and stonework, gleamed as if they had just sprouted from the ground. Everything shone with a newborn dewiness unlike anything Picard had observed in Dearen. Most importantly, the sky radiated several hues of mixing colors, all of them bright and vibrant, none of them dulled.

"Well," said Picard. "I do believe the Haze is gone."

"The Haze? It's gone?" Richard moved up and looked out the window next to him. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're fucked." Picard brushed some leftover safra into his nose, then turned to his brother with a smile. "Or we've just stricken

gold. That all depends on what we do next. Are you listening to *me* now, brother?"

Richard gulped. "I'm listening," he said.

\*

Picard and Richard approached the Royal Chambers with ten hordesfolk.

It only made sense that their father had made his way to Fayr's chamber. After all, Leonard had seemed fond enough of Richard's suggestion to fuck the princess and then marry her—who wouldn't be? Such action could also take care of the khan family's passes and allow them to stay in Dearen for as long as they wished. Therefore, it was the most likely place to find the khan himself.

Moreover, Picard hoped to find Sean here, as well.

The Wolven said he would go and speak to the princess in order to learn more about the dungeons. Then he disappeared. Now where, oh where, had he gone?

"Let us pass," growled Richard.

Standing before him, six Dearen guards trembled in their boots. Their chubby leader, Sir Gornum, struggled to endure Richard's glaring gaze.

"Th-the princess says no one gets through," burst Sir Gornum. "And I do believe your passes expired. Reeve Lyndor has the list of people who can stay. If you're not on it, then you must leave the palace immediately."

Richard responded by drawing his sword. The scrape of the broad steel against its scabbard rang through the hall like a rusty church bell. Gornum's eyes doubled in size.

"This is unheard of!" cried the Master of the Royal Guard. "You can't attack the guards of Dearen!"

"Fuck yes I can," said Richard, and swung his sword.

Sir Gornum was fortunate in his ability to dodge quickly, or perhaps just the response of his limbs to his own surfeit of fear. In any case he scrambled away before Richard's blade could nick him. Instead, the steel sank into the neck of a guard standing just next to him. The less fortunate fellow let out a stubbed cry before he lost the strength to speak, and fell to the ground leaking blood.

Richard lifted his sword to swing again.

The remaining Dearen guards squealed and ran in terror.

"Don't let them get away," said Picard. And the hordesfolk obeyed.

Picard watched in fascination as the Vikand warriors sprang to action. Their leather fittings creaked and stretched to the strain of their heaving

muscles. Sun beams splintered off their waving weapons. They far outnumbered the Dearen soldiers, but they pursued the pathetic souls with all their might and fervor. Picard had not witnessed such excitement since leaving Vikand.

How drastically things could change overnight.

Two of the Dearen guards fell quickly to Vikand weapons. The hordesfolk continued thrusting and stabbing long after their victims fell vanquished. Crimson blood streamed out and tarnished the perfect silver stones of Dearen palace. Still the Vikand soldiers hacked at the bodies. Blood-lust gleamed in their eyes. All their feelings of anger and hatred, which had slept within them since entering Dearen, now fully reawakened.

Picard and Richard stood and watched the show with sheer wonder on their faces.

“Over there!” Picard pointed excitedly. “One of them is hiding behind that column!”

The hordesfolk ran at the Dearen and attacked him from every direction. He didn’t even have time to scream.

Soon, five corpses littered the hallway and its adjacent gardens. It appeared that Sir Gornum had escaped for the time being. No matter: the hordesfolk returned with dripping swords and leering smiles. They panted for breath—not from exertion, but from the strength of their own excitement.

“Well done, men.” Richard’s eyes glittered with the same realization as Picard. “Now let’s find Father.”

They continued into the Royal Chambers.

Now that their appetite for a fight had been whetted, however, they found little to oppose them. The Royal Chambers were vacant—completely so. Hordesmen barged through doors and into bedrooms. But no one was inside. Richard himself tried to kick down the princess’s door. He found that someone had already damaged the door frame.

“Look.” Picard pointed to the floor. “Blood.”

Everyone stepped back to search the ground beneath their feet. The streaks and drops of blood had been smeared by wet rags, and in some places covered with carpets. But the evidence remained, dark and crusting.

Some of the hordesfolk drew circles with their fingers and muttered a quick prayer to Friva. Now that they were looking for it, they found

signs of blood everywhere, starting in the princess's bedroom and streaking far down the hall.

"What the fuck?" said Richard.

Picard stepped into the princess's bedroom and looked every which way. The bed was strewn apart, sheets pouring onto the floor, pillows ripped open. Fallen candlesticks and vases suggested quite a struggle.

"I think Father was here," said Picard. He regarded his brother warily. "How many men do you think he brought with him?"

"I don't know." Richard scratched his raggedy hair. "Four, maybe? Five? I know Reinar and Gully went with him, at least."

"Hm." Picard's hand twitched restlessly. "Could that be their blood?"

"But how?" Richard's hand squeezed the pommel of his sword. "Who here would kill them? Who here would dare oppose Father?"

Picard knew that Princess Fayr would dare to oppose the khan; she had made that clear enough in Friva's Hall. But she could not have killed the khan and four men—if that's what had happened. And if it did ...

A little shiver went through Picard's body as his eyes settled on a piece of metal on the floor. Without a word, he went to pick it up. Then he stared down at it in a daze. The jewel-laden metal caught the light from the window and cast rainbow shards throughout the chamber.

Richard's face turned white. "That ... that ... !"

"It's the Khan's Collar." Picard turned it between his good and broken hand, feeling little pricks of pain creep up his wrist. "It appears to have been ... ripped off."

"How ... ?" Richard's muscles rippled up and down his arms as he mimed wringing someone's neck. "Who ... !"

"Easy now," said Picard. He reached for a pouch of safra in his tunic and ate a little pinch. "We don't know what happened to Father yet—only that his collar was torn off. Which does suggest an unusual amount of aggression, as well as ... strength. I can think of only one person with the strength to do this, and I happen to know he passed this way last night."

"WHO?!"

"Our Wolven friend, of course." He tapped a gloved finger against his chin, then smiled at the wonder of it all. "Although I'm not so sure he's our friend anymore."

Richard yelled and kicked a chair across the room. It cracked and spat splinters. "I'll rip his eyes out!"

"A word of advice, brother: don't attempt that until we know exactly what happened."

"Where is he?" Richard had not heard Picard's advice. Instead, he lunged forward and grabbed Picard by the tunic. For the second time that day, he shook his brother about. "*Where is he?*"

As Picard's teeth clattered in his skull, he wondered for a moment what he could do about it. At least with safra in the air, Picard had not had to put up with this treatment from his brother. Richard's anger needed to vent somewhere, and physically. Picard just needed to channel that anger away from himself.

He was still pondering this conundrum and getting shaken about when a yell in the hallway stopped Richard cold. He dropped his brother and returned his hand to his sword. Everyone turned to the doorway of the princess's chamber, where sounds of a struggle grew louder. Three hordesfolk heaved through the opening with a struggling young man caught between them.

The victim was of the Dearen variety, slender but soft from lack of muscle. Fear distorted the effeminate features of his face as he thrashed against his captors.

"Please, please!" The fellow's voice screeched unpleasantly in Picard's eardrums. "Please don't hurt me!"

Picard straightened his tunic, recalling that he'd escaped a similar predicament just seconds ago. "So long as you do as we say, we won't hurt you—much."

A hordeswoman demonstrated by sliding a knife through the Dearen's hair. He had long silky locks, which he clearly cared for dearly. "No, please! I'll do as you say!"

"Who are you?" asked Picard.

"M-my name is Jeevu. I'm ... I'm just a harpist!"

"A harpist who roams freely into the Royal Chambers?" mused Picard.

"I play for the princess sometimes! That's all!" A hordesman jabbed him and he squealed with terror. Tears streamed from his eyes. As he felt them on his cheeks, his fear seemed to multiply. "Oh Friva, what is going on? What are you doing to me? Please, please ... make it stop!"

Picard's smile stretched so wide his cheeks ached. This was very interesting, indeed. He walked closer to the weeping Dearen and reached out to collect the tear on his glove. Jeevu thrashed and goggled at the distorted hand in terror. "What you feel is called fear," said Picard. "You feel it because for the first time in your life, you're not breathing safra. The Haze has vanished."

"Oh gods ... " Something like a moan escaped Jeevu's throat.

"How does it feel?" Picard leaned closer, breathing deeply of the fellow's scent, as if he might smell the fear. Alas, his senses were not so sharp. "Tell me how it feels."

"Tell us where Father is," said Richard, and kicked the fellow in the stomach.

The harpist coughed and gagged and took some time to recover. "I don't know!"

"Perhaps we should clarify." Picard leaned back, seeing that his brother would allow no time for leisure. "Our father is the khan of Vikand."

"Friva help me, I don't know where he is! I swear it!"

Richard prepared to kick him again, but Picard stayed him with an upraised hand. "Perhaps you didn't see our father," he verified. "We can accept that. But have you seen anything else around here since last night? Anything that might be of interest?"

"Um ... um ... "

Picard motioned to one of the hordesfolk. "Incite him, why don't you."

Jeevu yelped as a blade tickled his chin. "I saw ... I saw Prince Kyne!"

"Oh!" Picard swayed forward. "This is good. When? Where? And why?"

"He, uh ... " Jeevu gulped, his throat bobbing against the knife. "He walked away from here around dawn, with a man. I didn't see who ... he was hunched over, carrying something large. I didn't really pay much attention. I only came here this morning because when I awoke, I felt, I felt ... "

"Sad? Worried? In pain?" Picard leaned closer.

Richard reached out and grabbed Jeevu's hand. He pushed back the wrist until the harpist yelled for mercy. "Tell us everything you saw, or I'll break your fucking bones."

"They ... they argued, before that. I could hear their voices carry from the princess's chamber. I think it was Kyne, and Fayr, and the man." Jeevu trembled from head to foot. "I didn't want to interrupt them. I felt ... I felt afraid, I suppose, and I didn't know why. I knew that something terrible was happening. I think they argued about ... a key ... "

"Go on." Picard's breath stopped.

"And then Prince Kyne left with the man I mentioned, and the princess went elsewhere. And I stayed here, hiding, because ... because I didn't know what else to do."

"I see." Picard pulled back, shivering with glee. "Never fear, Jeevu; you did very well, indeed."

# Chapter 13

## Key

A whirlwind of pleasure seemed to whisk Fayr away as she kissed Chief Darius. Her head spun and her body grew light as if floating into the heavens. The gale stole her breath and teased her with bursts of fleeing air. Behind her she left all reason, logic, or sense of orientation. She flew in ecstasy and could not escape it, even if she wanted to. Indeed, she felt she should, for across the room the khan's corpse lay fresh on the floor. She had nearly been raped and certainly she shouldn't ... be feeling ... like this ...

Darius's hot hands pressed her shoulders to the bed, and for a moment she envisioned that Darius was a furnace and herself a wind gushing against him. They fed from each other in a violent give and take: a flame and the air that nourished it. And they could lose themselves in each other if they were not careful.

"Darius," she gasped.

"Don't." He pressed his hips to hers. She groaned with the desire to wrap herself around him and envelop him completely.

"Don't what?" She ran her nails across his jaw. She felt his desire pulsing against her. She felt his breath against her skin, his muscles clenching against her flesh.

"Don't call me that." He kissed her again, smothering all words with his tongue. He gripped her with the strength of a hundred men. He held her writhing body in place and lashed her neck with his lips. His mouth closed over the tender skin of her throat.

"Oh gods ... " She didn't care what he wanted her to call him. She just wanted him to take her. She wrapped her thighs around him and arched her back, scraping her sensitive nipples against his chest. "Fuck me, please ... "

With a jolt that made stars explode in her eyelids, he obeyed.

She yelled from the torrent of pleasure and pain that rushed through her. He filled her so completely she thought she might burst. Her skin burned and tingled as if it could not contain the intense stimulation. He groaned and sagged against her, as if experiencing a similar strain. It was as if he tried to hold himself back, then failed. He locked both knees against hers, adjusting their angle on the bed. He strengthened his hold on her hips then thrust into her hard and fast.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, Fayr's ecstasy must have climaxed, but she hardly distinguished that moment from the ones before and after. She only knew that she struggled to maintain her sanity while her body blazed with sensation. Darius stifled her moans with his mouth against hers, stealing her breath as he quickened his pace. Finally he erupted inside of her, a satisfied growl rumbling from his throat even as the last jab of his hips pushed her over the edge. He exhausted himself with a low exhale and released her to gravity.

Fayr fell back on her pillows and out of the dizzying whirlwind. Reality returned as she breathed deeply of the rain-sodden air. Her body struggled to relax, feeling cold and warm all over, still throbbing from the stimulation. Chief Darius collapsed next to her, his breath ragged, his clothes half-off. Fayr turned to look at him, and every glimpse of his skin sent a new ripple of desire through her aching nerves. In her attempts quell it, she found herself trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Earlier tonight, she had touched herself in anticipation of a moment like this one. Then there followed Leonard Khan's violent entry, his painful struggle with her, and finally Darius's unprecedented response. How had this humble chief killed the khan of all Vikand so easily? How could a man so gentle also be so strong and violent? The dichotomy excited her, even as it frightened her.

Rain hissed outside, blanketing the silence of the dead and the heaving of her own breath.

She reached out to Darius but he did not respond. His flesh was like stone under her fingertips, his eyes distant. A cold shock went through her; her lingering feelings of joy transformed into doubt and she curled in on herself, shivering. Soreness plagued her all over, and she knew she would show bruises in the days to come. She didn't even know how many had been caused by the khan, or Chief Darius.

Darius sat up suddenly and blinked at her. In an instant, his face softened. "Fayr. I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No. Well ... yes." She laughed nervously. "But I didn't mind, at the time."

He looked around the room as if realizing where he was for the first time since entering. "Gods. What just happened?"

"I think it's pretty clear." She smirked at him. "You killed the khan, then you fucked me."

His eyes glazed over again. His mouth enveloped hers and his hands pressed the slope of her stomach. He grabbed her hips and held her in place, even though she made a faint attempt to push him away.

"Darius. Darius!"

He withdrew again, clutching his head, then shaking it as if to fling off a spell. "Damn it, this wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't my plan at all. This ruins everything. If Picard finds out ... "

"You know Picard?"

He went very still.

"Well of course you do," she amended. "He's the khan's own son, after all."

Darius jumped off the bed and roared up into the ceiling. "FUCK!"

Fayr's heart pounded within her. She wasn't sure if she could handle Darius panicking right now. Her own state of mind was too fragile.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Only the hiss of rain and the flutter of curtains filled the silence. Flickering candles fought off the darkness of night. Then Darius bowed his head and starting pacing. "We have to get rid of the body," he said, "or hide it."

She nodded. "Yes, uh ... I suppose you're right." Right now, however, it took all her strength just to collect her clothes and pull them back on her body.

"Meanwhile we need to seal off this hallway," he said. "We let no one through."

She said nothing to that. She didn't want to point out the futility of such an effort. How useful had her guards been against Leonard Khan? Had they been deaf to her cries for help? Truly, the fact that she'd needed Darius to save her from this predicament was an embarrassment. She had wanted the whole world—including Darius—to perceive her as a more powerful princess than she really was. But that illusion was crumbling.

"I'll talk to them now," she said, rising.

"No." He put a gentle hand on her shoulder, pushing her back onto the bed. Her legs were so wobbly that she folded easily. "You need to recover your strength. They shouldn't see you like this."

“Yes, you’re right.” The realization only mortified her further. She shook her head at herself and let out a snide laugh. “Look at me: one of the last two remaining Violenese in all the world, the princess of the richest kingdom of the three nations, bruised and tattered, without a clue as to what to do next. I thought ... I thought that if ... ” A tremor wracked her suddenly. A sob squeezed her throat. “I thought that if I pretended to know what I was doing, everyone else would play along. But that won’t work anymore, will it? After this storm ... everyone will see the truth.” She glared at the khan’s cold body. “If only I had killed him myself ... but I couldn’t get to my baselard. I’m not completely helpless, you know. I killed the Wolven who attacked my family. Did you know that? I stabbed him myself.”

Darius did not move for a moment. His voice was gruff when at last he spoke. “Get dressed. Stay here until I return.”

She complied, and in truth she was grateful for a brief time alone—even if she must share the room with the khan’s body. As she dressed, she heard thumps and scrapes outside her door. It sounded as if Darius was pushing something heavy through the hallway. Next, the echoes of his voice vibrated through the wood, and its tone reassured her, for she sensed that he had found her own guards and was giving them instructions.

What would have happened if not for Chief Darius? Leonard Khan would have taken her. Then he probably would have forced her hand in marriage. She would have done everything in her power to stop him, of course, but to what end? After all, a union with Vikand could have been to everyone’s benefit. She shuddered to imagine such a fate, and yet she realized with some shame that she had never given the thought enough weight. Perhaps for the good of her kingdom, she would have to make personal sacrifices.

Now dressed and groomed, Fayr leaned over Leonard Khan’s body and spat upon it. She had dodged one poor fate, at least, and it was thanks to Chief Darius. Perhaps if Chief Darius could save her from this scenario, he could be of use to her in others, as well. That would all depend on whether they could survive this disaster in the first place. But if they did, then perhaps her fate would require no personal sacrifice whatsoever.

As she looked down at Leonard Khan, Fayr noticed something for the first time. The Khan’s Collar was gone, his bare throat blue from the pull of Darius’s whip. But how could that be? He had worn the collar when

he attacked her, she remembered that all too well. He wore it always, so far as she knew. So where was it now?

Her searching eyes found the piece of metal gleaming nearby. She moved closer to examine it.

The creak of the door interrupted her thoughts. She turned to see Prince Kyne coming through. A man loomed behind him, silhouetted by the hallway torches.

"Fayr!" Kyne ran to his sister and embraced her. Fayr had been so mad at him of late, but as his little arms wrapped around her, her anger dissipated. He wasn't so little anymore, really. He was growing all too quickly. He wore a soft silken cape that settled over them both.

"Oh Fayr," cried Kyne. "This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

He drew back to look at her, his fingers digging into her arms. "This happened because of what I said at dinner."

"What do you mean, Kyne?"

"This wasn't your fault," said Chief Darius. He stepped out from the darkness of the hallway, having been there all along. "This happened because the khan attacked the princess, and he paid for that crime with death."

"You don't know anything, fool!" Kyne swirled on the chief, his little cape billowing. "And don't speak unless you're spoken to!"

"Kyne!" Princess Fayr stood up, all her anger returning to her. "This man just saved my ... " She almost said chastity, then realized he had taken that right after preserving it. "This man saved me. He deserves your respect and your gratitude."

"Like hell he does. He's the one who has thrown us in the shit hole."

"Just a moment ago," snapped Fayr, "you blamed this all on yourself. So which is it? What were those words you said at dinner, anyway? What is their significance? *Krenz ... u ... ?*"

"You should be careful." Prince Kyne jutted his chin up. "The words hold magical power, and clearly, I should use them sparingly."

"Don't test my temper, brother!" Her fists clenched at her sides. She'd had enough of this attitude. "You're going to tell me everything you know, or—"

Darius reached out and grabbed Prince Kyne by the front of his shirt. He moved so quickly that Fayr did not know what was happening until Kyne thrashed against him and Darius's fingers crept round Kyne's neck.

"Darius—!"

Darius jerked upward with his hand, then pulled something off Prince Kyne's head.

"Hey—!" Kyne flailed again, his hand smacking Darius's wrist. But it was too late now. Darius held a necklace with a key dangling on the end, and he lifted it high for the princess to see. Kyne grew pale with defeat.

"The key to the dungeons!" gasped Fayr.

"I suspected as much," said Darius, and placed it securely in her palm. "It appears your brother has been hiding it from you."

Fayr closed her fingers around the jagged metal, her grip tightening with fury. She did not speak for a long while. She had never felt so betrayed in all her life.

"You're right," she said at last, her voice barely a whisper. "This *was* your fault." She could feel her own eyes blazing as she pointed them at her brother.

"Fayr ... Fayr, you don't understand," gasped the prince. "You don't want to go down there. No one should have to go down there. Father said so. That's why he gave me the key, the night before he died. He said I needed to protect you from the truth. He said he planned to take us both to the dungeons the next day. He said he would show us some of the ancient rites for making safra. But he said the full truth was too terrible for you to know about. He said ... he said ..." A little sob burst out of his lips. "He said I had to carry that burden myself."

"Father misjudged me," snarled Fayr. She squeezed the key so tightly that pain spiked up her wrist, but she didn't care. "And he misjudged you. You clearly couldn't carry the burden, Kyne. But I could have. Truly, you both gave me no choice. I had to carry the burden: the burden of your own ineptitude. While I've been scrambling to keep this country afloat, you've hidden away your knowledge and the whole kingdom has suffered for your selfishness."

"Fayr ... !" Kyne's chin quivered with despair. But she felt no mercy for him at all.

"It's true, Kyne. You have been selfish, cowardly, and altogether useless ever since Mother and Father's death. I don't really give a shit about ancient rites or even how safra is made, anyway. Not anymore. Because this isn't my problem. It's yours."

She grabbed Kyne's hand and thrust the key back into it.

"You're going to fix this, Kyne. After today, I don't care if you ever make safra again. But today you're going into the dungeon, and you're taking the khan's body with you, and you're going to do ... whatever Father taught you to do. You're going to make safra."

Kyne looked in terror from the body, to Darius, and back to Fayr again.

She gnashed her teeth until her head hurt. "You *do* know how, don't you?"

"I ... I ... " He gulped. "I'm not completely sure."

"How can you not be sure?"

"Father, he ... he gave me a scroll. He called it the Safra Script. He said I should try reading it on my own; that if I was blessed, the gods would speak to me through the words and he would never have to explain them to me. But I've read the words over and over, and I don't understand them. I ... I ... I don't know if I'm blessed or not."

Kyne's confession frightened her, but she couldn't let that show right now. The storm outside was fading. The soft yellow light of dawn crept through the window curtains. "Don't be silly," she snapped. "You're a *Violeni*. You have the words. Just say them. And do it now."

"You're not coming?"

His words stung her to the quick. How dare he ask that now, after all these weeks of not sharing anything with her? "I can't. I must attend to our guests. I need to renew some of their passes, and reject quite a few others."

"I'll go with him," said Darius.

"What?" screeched Kyne. "You'll do no such thing!"

"Yes he will." Fayr took a deep breath. Darius's offer surprised her, as well. But it made perfect sense. "You'll need help to carry down the body, Kyne. And right now, I trust Darius more than anyone else in the world."

Darius bowed his head, surprised by this acknowledgment. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so blunt, but it was true.

Fayr turned back to her brother. "And you may need protection. If the khan's sons find out about any of this ... "

"Protection?" Kyne batted his purple lashes. "But the Haze ... "

"Is probably gone by now." Fayr walked up and put her hand against Kyne's cheek, not so much to comfort him as to force his gaze onto hers. "I'm depending on you, Kyne. Make enough *safra* to see us through this."

Kyne nodded reluctantly. "I'll ... I'll do my best."

He turned to go, and Darius made to follow. Fayr reached out and gripped the chief's hand. For some reason, she had not noticed until now how coarse it was, as rough and firm as rocks. "Please, keep him safe."

Darius didn't answer, but turned to collect the khan's corpse.



# Chapter 14

## Merchant's Message

When Eleanor awoke to crystal clear sunlight, she felt ...

"Happy," she whispered.

Rebeka stirred next to her, her bare body bumping Eleanor's. Every point of contact sent ripples of pleasure through Eleanor's skin. She smiled sadly to herself as she stared into the cruel glare of sunrise. "Is this what it means to be happy?" asked the King-wife.

She waited curiously for Rebeka's response, but instead, the Scholar sat up and moved away.

"Rebeka?"

Rebeka bent down to gather her clothes from the floor. Her black hair spilled over her bare shoulders in voluptuous waves. Eleanor didn't want such beauty to be covered.

"Rebeka!" She reached out and grabbed the Scholar's arm. "Where are you going?" She moved closer, pressing herself to Rebeka's back. Then she reached around and pinched Rebeka's nipple, feeling it tighten between her fingertips. "Must I command you to stay?"

Rebeka's body grew limp against hers. The Scholar's breath heaved against her hand. "You don't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that, King-wife. But let us not deceive ourselves. The safra allowed us one night together. I accepted that, even knowing the consequences. When you are free of this beautiful Haze, you will reject me and what we have done together. That will be difficult for me to endure, so I say it now, while we still have the safra to protect us from pain. I'm not sure I can endure the sorrow your disdain will cause me later."

Eleanor considered this a moment. Then she grabbed Rebeka's shoulders, fiercely now, and turned her around. Anxiety shadowed the Scholar's crisp green eyes. "How could it be safra making me feel this

way, if *you* are starting to worry?" She pointed out the strangeness of this as much for herself as for Rebeka.

"Who knows?" Rebeka sighed. "I only know that I must leave you now, while I have the strength to do so."

"Rebeka—wait!" Eleanor grabbed the Scholar's wrist even as she stood to go. "It might not be the safra. Look out the window. Have you ever seen a day in Dearen so clear as this one?"

Rebeka followed her gaze to the blazing sunshine. Her face twisted with uncertainty. "You're right. It is strange ... "

"Nothing lasts forever, Rebeka, but for the Earth Mechanic himself. The Haze must have blown away with the storm." She squeezed the Scholar's hand, desperately now. "Don't you see, Rebeka? My feelings right now have nothing to do with safra or magic. Perhaps without so much safra last night, I never would have admitted it, but ... I have found what makes me happy, Rebeka. And it is not safra. It is you."

Rebeka did not move a moment, afraid to believe, afraid to accept. Then she laughed suddenly with glee, fell back into the bed, and wrapped the King-wife in her arms. They melted in a tangle of limbs and hot breath.

"Oh, Eleanor!"

"Rebeka ... "

"Eleanor? King-wife Eleanor?"

The women froze in place. It took Eleanor a moment to recognize the voice that had spoken. Belatedly, she looked over Rebeka's shoulder and saw the door opening just as Prime Synergist Deragon peered through it.

Eleanor screeched and scrambled to pull blankets over their naked bodies, even as Deragon retreated in a panic. The door slammed shut about the same time Eleanor covered them up.

"God help us," gasped Eleanor, looking up at Rebeka through the glow of the sheets. "That was Prime Synergist Deragon!"

"Don't worry, dearest." Rebeka leaned down and brushed her lips against Eleanor's. "I saw him dancing with a girl last night, and I think he had the time of his life. She was quite a young one, too."

"I had better go and talk to him," said Eleanor, though she struggled to pull herself from Rebeka's kiss.

She hastened to roll out of bed and dress herself. Her clothes were slightly tattered from their impatience the night before; straps were uneven, buttons missing. But these clothes were closest at hand, so Eleanor donned them as quickly as possible.

"I'm coming, Synergist!"

She hurried out the door and found him halfway down the hallway. She struggled to regain her composure as he turned around to face her.

"How can I help you, Prime Synergist Deragon?"

"I, uh ... " He cleared his throat. The glaring sunshine cut through the shadows of his hood and onto the rippling flesh of his scars. "I only came to tell you something."

"Yes? What did you wish to tell me?"

"It is ... good news, I suppose." Deragon looked up and met her gaze. He had big blue eyes. She had never noticed that until now, for he always tried to hide himself. Perhaps his night of fun had done him good, after all. "Princess Fayr has renewed all our passes—all the Yamairans who arrived with your carriage, that is. We can stay until the next full moon."

"Oh!" Eleanor had not expected this at all. "Do you wish to stay, Deragon?"

"I do, King-wife." He bowed his hooded head once more. "I, er, realize that Fayr is not likely to pick me as the next king. But I appreciate the chance to stay here a little longer. I have—dare I say it—rather enjoyed myself."

"You may dare, Deragon." Eleanor smiled despite herself. "This is great news indeed. Let us all stay, then, for as long as it pleases us."

"Very well, King-wife."

The Synergist bowed low, then drew away again.

Eleanor smiled, and this smile felt purer and stronger than any smile she had ever worn before.

\*

Eleanor strolled through the Gardens of Delight and marveled at every flower and vine in sight. How had she not noticed the beauty of this place before? How had she not appreciated any of the wonders of Dear-en? She felt on the verge of a tremendous discovery.

In the past she had disregarded safra for its tendency to stop work flow and cease the production of physical goods. But what if the production of happiness was just as important as those physical items? Archon Picard had suggested as much, which gave her a shiver of discomfort, but she had to confess now that he'd made a good point.

This discovery had profound repercussions if it was true. It meant that for a long time, the ideals she had supported in Yamair had been misguided. It meant that she might have to renege on her agreement with Princess Fayr to stop the importation of safra into Yamair. It meant that

King Byron had been right to search for a source of safra beyond the Three Nations. And it meant that Eleanor had been wrong all along.

She stopped and clutched her head at the confusion of it all. She didn't want to contemplate all these things right now. The consequences of all she had done in the past, combined with all she had done last night, caused her too much anxiety to consider at once. She wanted to enjoy her happiness here just a little while longer.

She seemed to be one of very few people who still felt happy, anyway, on this strange and new morning. When she strolled the gardens in the past, she saw lovers or friends sharing food, conversation, or sex. This time, she passed only a few people lingering the gardens, and most of them wore frowns on their faces, or argued with their neighbors, or glared at her suspiciously as she passed. She saw two men who even yelled and shoved at one another.

Eleanor avoided these people as well as she could, preferring to keep the illusion of tranquility in her mind intact. She could stay in Dearen for as long as she wished, but how long would she stay now? The air was clear of the Haze. While there was still safra to be found dusting the ground and plants, she doubted it would stay there for long. As if to prove her own point, she dipped her finger into a flower and collected some safra from its petals. She licked the glittery dust from her skin, smiling with delight.

"What are you doing?"

Eleanor started, then turned to see a very strange man standing before her. It took her a moment to recognize him, and once she did, she found herself even more unsettled than before. "You ... ?"

"We meet again, King-wife Eleanor." The Merchant bowed low, pulling his feathered cap from his head. His long white hair poured over the soft blue velvet of his suit. Then he straightened and fixed her with his eyes of pitch black. "And I ask you again: what are you doing?"

She shouldn't have felt intimidated. She was the King-wife of Yamair and he was a mere merchant from some unknown land. Yet for some reason she quaked in her boots, and struggled to keep her posture straight. "I'm enjoying my time in Dearen," said Eleanor. "However, I don't see why that's any concern of yours, Merchant. I don't believe I ever learned your full name ... ?"

"And you never shall."

His tone made her knees wobble. He had such a deep and steady voice, firm yet resonant. "Then I have no reason to endure your lack of manners," she said, and turned to walk away from him.

"Eleanor. I have news for you."

She stopped cold. How dare he address her by her first name? And yet she believed him, so she waited for him to go on.

"Your husband, King Byron, will return soon from his travels."

She turned to look at him, even as the blood drained from her face. "What ... !"

"You can doubt me as it pleases you, which I'm sure you will," he said. "But my knowledge is sound."

"How could you possibly ... ?"

"Suffice it to say that I have eyes and ears beyond the northern shores, and I know that your husband's ship reapproaches this continent. Rest assured, Byron rides safely on board."

Eleanor trembled at the implications. She wanted to believe that this man toyed with her, but as she studied the firm expression on his dark brown skin, she failed to convince herself of his trickery. "Why are you telling me this? Why are you even here? Did you come all this way just to—"

"I see that you want to detach yourself from your own feelings of insecurity and place them on me as a form of displacement." He took a deep breath and released it slowly. "At least, that is the best I can do to understand your turbid state of emotion. Once I thought you stronger against emotions than the average human. But now I see that you are more vulnerable than most."

"What? No. How could you—?"

"Do not question what you dare not understand, unless you desire an exercise in futility. Most desires are such."

He turned to go.

Eleanor felt the urgent need to know more about this man, to learn why he came here and what he wanted from her. In one sense she wanted him to leave so he would cease to disturb her; but she also sensed that this meeting would haunt her if it ended now, like an opportunity lost. "Wait—please! What am I *supposed to do*?"

He paused and regarded her carefully. "Do you really want to know the answer to that question, or do you only wish to think you do?"

Her mouth went dry, and she couldn't find the strength to answer.

"I will tell you the answer, Eleanor, but it will make you responsible for whatever comes next. If you seek the way of the balance, you must cast away all deviations immediately. You must leave your mistakes in Dearen and cross into Yamair before the end of today. You must prepare for your husband's return. Then you must attend to him and see that he

does nothing to stray from the balance. If you continue to stray from this moment forth, then so will he. Do you understand what I say to you, Eleanor? I am the Merchant, not the Timekeeper. I cannot see the future. But I cannot bargain with you on this particular matter. If you do not return to the balance immediately, then the price you pay for your transgressions will be very, very high. Goodbye, Eleanor."

He left her thus, and a tear rolled down her cheek, for all she had done, and all she might never do again.

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News of bloodshed spread from one section of the palace to the next. People panicked. Screams echoed through the halls. No one knew how much of the panic was well-founded or how much arose from the sheer lack of safra. But Vikand chiefs gathered in groups while the Dearen guards scattered, and blood gleamed from some of their swords.

The princess refused to speak to anyone directly. She sent messages through Sir Gornum that anyone who stayed uninvited in her palace would pay dearly for their crimes. This threat frightened some Vikandese away, but not all of them.

"I understand why you might wish to leave," said Rebeka. "This is not how I wanted to spend my time in Dearen, either. But think of what good we might do here. If we support Princess Fayr against the Vikandese, then perhaps we could—"

"Don't fool yourself." Eleanor scrambled about the room gathering clothes and belongings. "We have no troops here, no weapons, no means of combative support."

"We have our wit, and our reason!"

"Do we?" Eleanor dared look at Rebeka, if only for a moment. "I'm not so sure anymore."

Rebeka fell into a terrible silence. Eleanor continued packing. Rebeka did not move or speak at all. Eleanor tried to ignore her altogether. But somehow, the silence itself grew unbearable.

She stopped and lurched over her bags with choking breath. "Rebeka ... the truth is that I received news of King Byron. He will return to Yamair very soon."

"What? How soon?"

"I don't know exactly ... but soon enough that I must leave today. I must prepare for his return."

"Oh." Another long silence. "I see. I see, indeed." The look on Rebeka's face said it all. She feared the worst.

Eleanor couldn't endure it. She reached for Rebeka and dared grip her hand. "Please, Rebeka. Don't give up on me. I am very confused and ... and ... I still need you."

"Yes, King-wife." Rebeka squeezed her hand in return, but her gaze stayed downcast.

# Chapter 15

## Dungeons

As Sean and Kyne made their way to the dungeons, Sean replayed the events of the evening in his mind, over and over again. He had hardly stopped to think about his actions and their repercussions until now. When he pressed Fayr to the bed and took her, he had hardly thought at all except about how wonderful her flesh felt against his. His desire for her had left room for little else. He could only compare the intensity of it, most disturbingly, to the desire Belazar sometimes gave him to kill someone. Did Belazar have anything to do with how he had felt towards Fayr? The possibility made him shudder.

After leaving the princess in her room to get dressed, Sean had continued to delay thinking about such things by engaging in the duties at hand. First, he needed to deal with the bodies of the dead hordesfolk, and then communicate with her incompetent guards as to what had happened.

So in the hallway, Sean had dragged the four dead hordesfolk to a dark corner. He retrieved his throwing stars from their wounds and wiped the blood on the wool of their clothes. Next he pulled a tapestry from the wall and wrapped them up in it. Fayr did not need to know he had killed all of them, along with the khan.

As for Fayr's guards, they had not been back long from Sean's wild errand when he confronted them. They had managed to find Sir Gornum, but to little consequence, as they all just stood around talking.

"Sir Gornum," said Sean. "A word in private."

The chubby Master of the Royal Guard complied. Sean guided him back towards the princess's bedchamber, then grabbed a torch from the wall and brought it closer to the floor. The guard had no choice but to stare upon the spatters of blood.

Holding the light thus, Sean also noticed that Gornum's mouth and tunic glittered with safra. Haze or no Haze, this man had consumed a great deal recently. At the worst, he was a little glum. But after a moment he smiled and said, "I'm so glad you were here to help, Chief Darius."

Sean ground his teeth with frustration. "Did you even check on the princess when you returned?"

"Yes, I did. I saw her in there with you. She seemed to be enjoying herself."

Heat rushed to Sean's cheeks. How could he have not noticed such an intrusion? The princess had a way of overwhelming his senses. Just remembering it made him want her again.

"There were also four bodies here," Gornum pointed out. "Were they the Khan's men?"

"Yes. Don't worry about them. I will dispose of the corpses." He had already been thinking about this and had an idea. If it worked, then it would solve more than one of his problems. "Have you seen Prince Kyne?"

"Last I knew, he was in his chambers."

Sean looked reluctantly at the prince's door, which was shut. He hoped the prince was a very deep sleeper. "I will tell him what happened. As for you, Sir Gornum, you and your men will let no one into this hall. You will tell no one what happened last night. As far as you know, the Violeni royalty sleep soundly in their beds. You will also have one of your men clean up this blood as best as he can. But most importantly, no one enters this hallway. If they try, you must stop them by force. These are Princess Fayr's orders. Do you understand?"

Gornum nodded.

"You must also refrain from safra," said Sean, more harshly now. "Is it your custom to eat it while on duty?"

"No, but it was a party ... and besides, I usually don't have to work nights!"

"Your duty to the princess never stops," hissed Sean. "And if anything happens to her while I'm gone, I will hold you personally responsible."

Gornum just blinked at him in a daze. Then Sean left to check on the prince.

The prince's door was bolted shut. Sean pushed against the wood, testing its durability, and sensing that he could break it down with a well-placed shove. His body already seemed to know that his prey awaited him on the other side. His muscles itched with power.

Restraining himself, he knocked. "Kyne? Prince Kyne, are you in there?"

No one answered, but Sean heard something inside. No average man could have heard it; the sound was no more than a faint shuffle of movement. But to Sean, the sound roared in his ears like thunder. He put his hands against the door and pushed.

The bolt strained under his strength, then snapped. Splinters spewed as the door swung open. Then Sean stepped inside. There was no one in sight. He stopped in the middle of the room, closed his eyes, and listened.

He could hear Kyne's heartbeat pounding rapidly, his breath pumping through his nostrils in little bursts. Tight confines—perhaps wooden—muffled the sound. Sean opened his eyes and turned to a large oak chest against the wall. Without a doubt, the prince hid within it.

Sean walked up to the chest and stood over it. The prince appeared to have locked himself inside, perhaps on accident, for the latch of the lid had closed over the knob upon shutting. Sean felt a surge of disappointment from his belly, and his strength faltered briefly. He wondered if the disappointment was his own, or Belazar's. Either way, he wished that Prince Kyne would have been more of a challenge. Killing him would just be too easy.

Sean lifted the latch and threw open the lid.

Immediately the boy sprang out, thrusting a little dagger. Sean grabbed his wrist and twisted it until Kyne yelped and dropped the knife.

"D-Darius?" Sweat drenched Kyne's face, which was completely devoid of color. His body shook like a leaf in Sean's grip. "W-what's going on? I thought there was an assassin. I thought—"

"You thought there was an assassin," snarled Sean, "so you *hid* here all night?"

"I ... I ... I didn't know what else to do! I heard Fayr scream and ... and I panicked! I didn't mean to lock myself in here, but ... but ... what else could I have done? Is she all right?"

"The 'assassin' was Leonard Khan, and I took care of him. As for your sister ... " He flung the prince from the chest none too gently. "Go see for yourself."

\*

Thus Sean and Kyne had spoken to Princess Fayr, who agreed to let Sean—or "Darius"—accompany Kyne to the dungeons. *I trust Darius more than anyone else in the world*, she had said. *Please, keep Kyne safe*. Sean

could not maintain her gaze when the significance of her words struck him fully.

So Sean had carried Leonard Khan's body from her bedchamber, then told Kyne about the dead hordesmen. Kyne did not react well to this detail.

*"Four more?"* cried the prince.

Sean showed him the pile of bodies he had carried to an adjacent hallway and covered with a tapestry. A horrible stench wafted from within—although the men had already stunk of sheep and sweat, now they reeked of death. Their leaking blood stained the precious craftsmanship of the drapery.

*"Friva save us!"* Kyne covered his mouth and turned green in the face. Sean lowered Leonard Khan's body to the pile, then covered it back up. *"Does Fayr know about them?"*

*"Regardless, we must dispose of them all,"* said Sean.

*"How are we going to carry them to the dungeons? This is too much. This is—"*

Sean wrapped up the tapestry, grabbed the knotted end, and pulled. With one arm, he could drag the entire bundle. *"I'll carry them,"* he said. *"Now let's go."*

As they passed back through the line of Dearen guards, a man there was already creating a fuss. Sean stepped through to deal with it, for the fellow was none other than his own slave, Gregor.

*"Chief! Chief, I've been looking all over for you! What's going on? What—"* His eyes spotted the bloody bundle Sean dragged behind him and doubled in size. *"What is that?"*

*"Make way,"* said Sean, and the guards moved aside. He continued moving down the hallway with his heap, then sent a glance to Kyne. *"Keep moving. I'll follow."*

The prince glared at the slave, then reluctantly obeyed. He walked ahead while Sean and Gregor followed behind, Sean's sack scraping the floor all the while.

*"Chief ... "* Gregor wrung his hands nervously. His wrist had healed well over time, though he still restrained its use. *"Chief, what happened? People in the palace are uneasy. People are panicking. It seems like there's no safra in the air. And they're anxious for the princess to release her list."* He looked back at the bloody bundle. *"What the hell is going on?"*

*"Leonard Khan is dead,"* said Sean. *"I killed him to protect the princess."*

“Lokke’s luck!” gasped Gregor, who worshiped the god of guile. “So the princess is safe?”

“For now. We must take care of the bodies first, and then ... ” Sean’s step faltered a moment, his breath catching. Then he leaned forward and pushed onward. “Then there is something I must do. After I do it, I am not sure whether I can return to the palace or not.”

“What on earth do you have to do that’s more important than staying here? Everyone knows that your Princess Fayr’s favorite suitor. And now, if you’ve saved her life ... ”

“I need not explain myself to you,” said Sean. “You must simply obey. I have not asked much of you since I bought you, Gregor. Now, it is time for you to do as I say.”

“What must I do?”

“Prepare my horse and my belongings. Do not look through my things, or touch my gold, or I will cut off your fingers. Wait for me at the eastern gate. I will probably come to you from the rooftops. Wait for me until high noon. If I am not there by then, go to the tree in the Shadowed Woods where we first put a splint on your wrist. Do you remember the tree?”

“I ... I think so ... ”

“Bury my things there. Set my horse free. Then you can do as you please.”

“Chief!”

“Go now, Gregor.”

“Chief.” Gregor put a hand on his shoulder. Sean turned his head but did not look at him. “Good luck to you, master.”

Sean nodded, then forged onward.

\*

As he followed the rippling light of Kyne’s cloak, Sean continued contemplating all that had happened and all that might happen next. He had to kill Prince Kyne. He had no choice. He had delayed as long as possible, but he could feel Belazar’s power starting to drain him even as it strengthened him. It fed him energy while depleting his own physical resources. Eventually it would feed off Sean’s own body if Sean did not deliver the life he’d promised. Or, if it came to that, Sean suspected he might lose the will to control his body first. Belazar might use his body as an instrument to take the prince for himself. Sean was not sure which would happen, but he knew that Belazar—if Belazar was truly a conscious entity—would not stay patient much longer.

"This is it," said Prince Kyne. He stood at the door of the dungeons, the key in his hand, trembling.

Sean released the bundle and stared curiously at the face of the door. It was made of stone, yet carved and smoothed with incredible skill. The shapes of serpents and vines flowed in and out of the stone, like living bodies that had been frozen in time. One large tiger roamed amongst them, as did a wolf. The tiger's roaring mouth opened into the gap of the keyhole.

Then Sean noticed a mask hanging from the wall next to the door. He flinched and drew back, for the mask was in the gaudy shape of a wolf. At some point, the ceramic had been broken into several pieces, then pasted back together.

Prince Kyne followed his gaze. "That's the mask of the Wolven who tried to kill me," said the prince. "Fayr killed him, put his mask back together, and hung it here so we'd never forget about him."

Sean's fingers dug fiercely into the fabric of the tapestry. He had wondered once what could have defeated his father in a place like this. Now he understood. Princess Fayr had been his father's undoing, and she would be Sean's, if he was not careful.

"Unlock the fucking door," said Sean.

Kyne flinched at his tone, but finally moved. He stuck the key in the hole and twisted.

The door clicked. Kyne pushed and the door swung inward with a tremendous groan.

Kyne and Sean stared down into a long, dark passage. Kyne turned his finger in a circle and whispered a prayer to Friva.

Sean took a torch from the wall and handed it to Kyne. Then he grabbed one for himself. "Go on," said Sean. "Move your feet."

Gulping, Kyne moved forward.

As soon as the light of the torch struck the dark passage, the walls came alive with sparkling light. The material here seemed to be the same smooth, glassy stonework found in the Violenese construction of Friva's Hall of Feasts. Furthermore, it seemed covered with a permanent layer of safra, twinkling all around them with radiance. If not for the floor under their feet, Sean would have thought they walked through a midnight sky, thick with glowing stars.

"Wow ... " Kyne had come to a stop again.

"Keep moving!" Sean's voice boomed through the passage followed by a hundred echoes. Kyne had little choice but to obey.

They kept walking downward for an imperceptible amount of time. Sean felt that his breath was ragged, his muscles weary, though he couldn't explain why. He felt parched from his mouth to his throat. His eyes burned and he wished desperately to pull out his lenses. Perhaps he would soon. Soon, it wouldn't matter anyway.

"Look," said Kyne, pointing further downward. "There's light. Do you see it?"

Sean nodded. Indeed, far down the spiraling blackness of the passage, a soft white light glowed below. They kept moving towards it, though Sean's feelings of dread increased. Whatever strange power lurked below, it seemed a far cry from any with which he was familiar.

Kyne walked into the light first, gasping with awe as he entered an open chamber. The torches were entirely unnecessary here. Stone columns thrust from the floor ending with white, glowing crystals. The crystals grew organically from the stone, their inward light rippling like veins through the columns themselves. Within the pillars was a round platform, etched with intricate designs of snakes, tigers, and wolves like the door to the dungeons. Around all this, the chamber opened up and outward in a dome-like shape. A hole at the top led up into the earth, and probably eventually to the heavens above.

All around the platform, piles of safra dust glittered in the light.

"I didn't expect it to be so beautiful," breathed Kyne.

Ignoring the prince, Sean moved past, dragging the bundle onto the open platform. It seemed like the most obvious place to put it. Next he unwrapped the tapestry and pushed the bodies onto the stone.

"Wait—I didn't tell you to do that yet!"

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

Kyne scowled at him. "Finish up, then."

Sean finished, then threw the tapestry aside. As quickly as he could, he got off the platform. Something about standing on it made him uncomfortable. He stood fidgeting, finding it impossible to stay still. His muscles twitched and his stomach growled. "What next?" he snapped.

Kyne set down his torch and unrolled the Safra Script with trembling fingers. "I know we have to burn the bodies. But I'm not sure if I say the words before or after."

"Burn them?" said Sean. After all the mystery, this seemed like such a simple solution. He couldn't believe that was all there was to it. "Try saying the words first, just in case."

"Yeah ... I guess you're right." Kyne held the script up to the light and proceeded with a tremulous voice. His tongue stumbled over the strange

and unknown syllables. *"Tula trein devoro dil Bargind margis, ganza devrein di Friva kisten regla scritept dil Violinese bloodor, Kyne Violeni."*

Sean felt as if a shock went through him. He stumbled back to the wall and remained there, clutching it. He watched as the light of the crystals brightened, then splintered into differing shades of color. Illumination poured through the columns and lit the platform with divine light. The blood of the bodies sizzled and smoked against the phosphorescence.

Sean didn't know how, but he had understood every word from Kyne's mouth. *As the three gods of the Bargain have agreed, let the power of Friva pay heed to the words of the Violenese progeny, Kyne Violeni.*

Unaware of Sean's discomfort, Kyne continued with his awkward speech. *"Unz, ganza ignickun di Belazar yollee frem u devorgan."*

White flames erupted from the platform and crept over the bodies.

Sean groaned and curled inward. His muscles twitched and his eyes felt as if they were on fire. Something wasn't right. Something wasn't right ... *First may the flames of Belazar rise forth to consume you, Kyne had said.*

*"Krenzi u morde ... "*

Sean yelled and clawed at his eyes. He ripped the brown lenses off, one by one, then flung them to the floor.

"D-Darius? What's wrong?" Kyne turned to look at him, his teeth chattering with fear. On the platform, the white hot flames crept on the dead bodies, searing their clothes and flesh. Sean could almost feel what the flames did, as if their hot touch sent a signal through his own fingers. The flesh they consumed was supposed to be warm and full of sensation, not cold and dead.

Sean groaned and fell to his knees. He clawed at his hair, as if that would make the terrible feeling in his fingers go away. "They're supposed to be alive," he growled at last. "They're supposed to be *alive!*"

"I ... I ... " Kyne seemed on the verge of hyperventilating, himself. "I don't know what else to do! I should finish, at least." He licked his lips and turned back to the script. *"Krenzi u morde, solu dil hapya, eedor copa shaporinz dil frivol koren donu."* *Cross the line into oblivion, souls of the hapless, while your bodies take the shape of the joy stolen from you.*

"You ... fucking ... *idiot!*" Sean rushed forth, grabbed Prince Kyne, and flung him to the stony floor. Billows of loose safra flew from their struggling shapes. The heat of the hungry flames singed their skin with its intensity.

Sean pinned Kyne and looked down at him. He knew his eyes blazed as red as ever, for he could now see with the full strength of a

Wolven—and perhaps Belazar himself. He could see the veins flowing under Kyne's skin. He could feel the hastening beat of his heart. He could smell the wave of fear rushing from him as he stared into the eyes of his killer.

Kyne started to scream. Sean clamped his mouth easily with one hand. With the other, he pulled a throwing star from his tunic. The prince thrashed and tried to bite Sean's hand with his teeth, to no avail.

Sean closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Now, at last, he would get the relief he desired. "*Tula margis,*" he said, "*afithi fenturus zentaya.*"

He swept the blade across Kyne's throat. He held the prince down through his most desperate writhing to the moment he went still. He dipped his fingers in the blood, then licked the sweet redness away. "*Kyne Violeni, krenzi u morde ah Belazar.*"

Prickling heat spread through Sean's limbs. At the same time, the white flames of the platform snuffed out. Darkness filled the chamber but for the faint red light of the torches. Sean breathed raggedly as Belazar moved through him, taking what Sean had promised him.

Sean closed his eyes and saw a wall of golden flames lick the blackness of his eyelids. A wolf with fur like tar walked through the blaze, its eyes glowing red. The wolf looked at Sean, and Sean knew he had a choice.

Belazar was pleased with him. No words were needed for Sean to understand this. He could see it in the wolf's gaze, though the wolf made no sound. *I feared you would disappoint me,* the wolf seemed to say. *But you gave me what I most desired. Now only one remains. Promise her to me, Sean Wolven, and I will give you the whole of my power.*

Sean blinked away the vision. He shook his head, swallowed the blood, and felt as if a bucket of cold water dashed over him. The sight of the wolf went away, and the cold black of the chamber rushed in to replace it.

Sean stood up with Kyne's dead body in his arms. The weight of it surprised him; while he still possessed unusual strength, it was not the power to rip off metal with his bare hands, or drag five dead bodies without feeling any strain. He felt the weariness of all he had done since last night, combined with the exhaustion of having no sleep or food. He tossed Kyne's body onto the platform with the others. He pulled the key from Kyne's neck and stuffed it into his tunic. Then he picked up the torch and set the bodies ablaze.

There was nothing divine about the flames now consuming the corpses. Thick black smoke arose from their curling clothes and bubbling

flesh. A terrible stench rolled out of the conflagration. No Haze would come out of this fire: only the stink of rotting flesh.

Sean picked up the Safra Script, considering what to do with it. By keeping it, he could help save Dearen. Fayr could learn her ancestor's secret and maintain the precious Haze. But was that what she really wanted to do? Fayr despised safra to begin with, and if not, she would despise it even more when she realized how to make it. The decision would be painful no matter what she chose. Sean could spare her from that anguish.

The Wolven smashed the script into a ball and flung it into the fire. Then he turned and walked out of the dungeons, hoping never to return.

\*

Sean had not walked far from the dungeons when he came face to face with Picard.

They stood on the Bridge of Roses, connecting the central stone fortress of the palace to a section of domed towers. Sean planned to climb them to reach the eastern gate and thus get to his horse. As of now, they stood only two stories above ground, for Sean had climbed one stairway from the door to the dungeons. The bridge was wide open, lined only with low railing that bristled with thorny rose bushes. Picard stood with a group of about ten hordesfolk behind him, blocking the bridge completely.

Sean considered jumping.

"Where are you off to, Seanie?" said Picard. "Actually, you should be glad you came this way. If you'd gone through the other hallway, you would have run into Richard. Now, you and I have a chance to speak reason with one another."

Sean groaned and grabbed the railway. A thorn nicked his finger. He didn't have time for this. It was almost high noon, and he needed to get out of here. He looked out at the city of Dearen, amazed by how dirty it looked without the Haze to cover it with mist. Some of its filth was disguised by soft layers of safra, coating everything with sparkles. The sky, also, shone with exceptional beauty. Shades of deep blue contrasted sharply with wispy white clouds and rays of white sunlight striking through them. It was as if a god from heaven brushed the landscape with fingers of light.

Sean realized belatedly that he'd been standing there awhile, staring at the sky and catching his breath. A cruel glimmer entered Picard's blue eyes.

"Why, Seanie, you look tired. I also see that you've misplaced your brown lenses. Is everything all right?"

"I killed Prince Kyne," said Sean hoarsely. "My assignment is over. You can pay me later. Right now, I must go."

"Oh?" The smile on Picard's face faltered. "Is that all you have to tell me?"

"I was unable to complete the other assignment," said Sean. He stiffened and turned slightly. He heard the jangle of several men coming up the steps behind him, though it would be a little while before they arrived. To cover for his motion, he pointed to a pathetic cloud of black smoke lifting over the palace. "That was our attempt to create safra. It didn't work. Kyne thought he might know how but he didn't. So I killed him, and it's over."

"That is very unfortunate." Picard wrung his hands in front of him, grimacing a little at the discomfort of his bad arm. "Aren't you still forgetting something?"

"Perhaps I am." The sound of approaching soldiers grew louder. Sean turned back to Picard with a sneer. "Go to hell, Picard."

He jumped from the bridge.

He heard the angry yells of Richard and his hordesfolk. He felt a moment of victory as he sailed through the air.

Then he landed, and a jolt of pain shot up his leg.

He growled with anger as much as agony as he pushed himself onward. Every step sent a hot sting through his calf. He had to run anyway, which only increased his pain. He heard arrows whistle through the air around him before he turned out of sight between buildings.

He had never wanted to escape like this. It wasn't just Sean fleeing the palace, but also Chief Darius. He thanked the fact that he'd avoided the public eye while he stayed in the castle. Even the Khan's family had no idea that he was also Princess Fayr's favored suitor. But people knew his name, and some might yet recognize him. His tunic was covered with blood and his eyes were bright red. He did not expect to ever return to this place, but for some reason, he could not bear the idea of Fayr knowing that the man who killed her brother was Chief Darius. He wanted her memory of him to stay intact that way.

Caught suddenly with an idea, he pulled the Wolven mask from his tunic and placed it over his face. He had stolen it from the wall on his way out.

The mask gave him a new surge of confidence, if nothing else. People screamed and ran as he passed. His leg still ached, but he managed to ignore it. He would reach his horse soon. He would get out of here.

He climbed when he got the chance, scaling a small building so he could spot the eastern gate ahead. The problem with wearing the mask now was that he did not want Gregor to see him with it. He used his whip to catch a bridge above him and swing to the next rooftop. Then he saw two brown horses. Gregor sat on one of them; the other was Sean's mountain horse, complete with his saddlebags.

Sean pulled a shingle from the rooftop, aimed, and threw. The shingle struck Gregor soundly in the head, who groaned and fell to the ground.

Sean stood and whistled to his horse. The pesky creature made no response, but just left him standing there, looking like a fool.

An arrow sank deep into his thigh.

Crying out with rage, Sean pulled a throwing star from his tunic and flung it in the direction of the shooter. To his brief satisfaction, the star found its target and the Bowman fell to his death. But this did nothing to ease the pain spreading up each of his legs—now *both* were injured—nor the blood flowing freely down his knee. He made one last jump to the ground, though the agony nearly made him crack his teeth from gnashing them, and then hobbled the rest of the distance to his horse. Gregor was just coming to when Sean jumped onto his steed, slapped its flank, and sped away.

As he rode through the streets of Dearen, Sean pulled out his whip and cracked it from side to side. The sound was effective in scaring people away, as well as driving his horse to run faster. In little time at all, they had bounded out of the city and flew over the hillsides.

A glance backward showed him that a group of Vikand hordesfolk rode hot on his heels. Most of them sat astride rams and goats that would never out-run a horse on flat land. But what would happen when Sean reached the cliffs of Vikand? Sean's horse was good at climbing rocks, but it would never out-climb a goat. Sean would not be able to, either, with both his legs injured.

He gripped the horse's reins and leaned over its heaving shoulders. He could do nothing but trust his horse. He had never depended so much on another living creature to help him as he did right now. He put one hand against its neck and felt the strength of its muscles thrusting forward. This horse would lead him to safety, or nothing would.

Eventually, the darkness of the Shadowed Woods fell over them. The quietude of the dense forest blanketed his ears. For a brief while he

heard nothing but the heaving breath of his horse and the rhythmic thunder of its hooves.

Then a snarl grated his ears—from where, he knew not—and the horse slid to a stop, rearing up and neighing with terror.

Sean barely managed to stay on the back of the beast. He twisted the reins tight and searched the shadows in a frenzy for the source of the panic. After first he thought he only saw the ripple of sunlight and shadows moving over the red soil. Then he realized that in fact he stared upon a living creature—not just one, but several.

The tigers of Dearen.

One of the tigers strolled into a shaft of sunlight, which alighted its fur as if with fire, and fixed Sean with golden eyes. The cat hissed and swiped its paw through the air.

Sean's horse turned and bolted back the way it had come.

Despite himself, Sean's heart pounded with fear. He had little doubt that if he'd proceeded any further into the forest, the tigers would have ripped him to shreds. But why? In the past, the tigers had seemed like no more than decoration to the landscape of Dearen. What had changed?

His horse carried him back out of the woods and into an open valley. Sean knew better than to try turning it back around. As much as he hated to admit it, he would rather face Richard than a pack of angry tigers.

He had little choice. An arrow sank into his shoulder. The pain overwhelmed him. His horse bolted again, crazed with fear, and Sean fell helplessly to the ground. The crunch of his body against the earth assured him that now, almost every part of his body was injured in some way or another.

Richard's men fell upon him, wrapping his hands behind him with rope, then dragging him away to the happy cheers of their brethren.

# Chapter 16

## Prisoner

Picard wanted some time alone time with their precious prisoner. Richard just wouldn't give him the chance.

They camped in the valley and kept the prisoner in the khan's carriage. This seemed like a fitting place, somehow, to punish Sean for killing the khan. Richard, unfortunately, would have killed Sean with his rage if Picard did not keep constant vigil. He would let his brother visit Sean in little bursts, at which point Richard would kick and punch the prisoner as it pleased him. Then Picard would worry about Sean's health and talk his brother back out of the carriage.

"Now Richard," he would say, "we have a very important prisoner here, and we mustn't kill him yet. We must make an example of him in front of all Vikand. We must give him a public execution, and demonstrate for everyone what happens to traitors of the khan. This will frighten them, brother, and best of all, it will make them afraid of *you*. They will have to choose another khan, after all. And who could they respect more than a man capable of killing a Wolven?"

Richard would finally agree to leave Sean alone. He would drink a lot of ale, pace about in the grass, and maybe spend some time with one of the Dearen maidens he had brought with him from the palace. Then, he would resolve to go back inside and give Sean another beating. This pattern cycled over and over and over again, until the night fell and the moon sagged low in the sky, and Richard fell asleep by the fire.

Sighing with relief, Picard took a candle and paid a private visit to Sean's carriage.

The prisoner lay in a heap on a large cushion the khan once reclined upon. Picard shivered a little to see the all-powerful Wolven reduced to a bloody bundle. Blood rolled from his nose down his chin and neck. His tunic spread open to reveal a bruised chest. Chains bound his hands

behind him—Picard reminded the hordesfolk that this man had torn open the Khan-Collar, and ropes simply wouldn't do. Ropes seemed sufficient for his legs, however, both of which were wounded in one way or another.

Picard brought the candle to the arrow in Sean's thigh and studied it with a frown. "Hm, I suppose we should have someone take a look at that. It might kill you before anything else. Sean? Sean, are you listening to me?"

The Wolven did not move. He pretended to be asleep, but Picard doubted it. Just in case, he grabbed the arrow and twisted it.

Sean jolted, releasing a guttural groan of pain.

"There we go," said Picard. "Now that I have your attention, I want you to listen carefully. I could torture you until you tell me what I want to know. Or we could begin this conversation with a much more pleasant arrangement—for you, anyway. After all, Richard has already done more damage to you than I ever intended. I wonder if you will ever be a true Wolven again, even in your current state? I suspect your arm broke when Richard kicked you across the carriage—isn't that so? Well, you certainly won't be a Wolven anymore if Richard takes your eyes out, which he has eagerly talked about doing."

Sean's eyes finally opened, glaring at the archon with two discs of red.

Picard smiled back at him. "Here is what I propose. You tell me how safra is made, and I will let you go."

Sean did not speak.

Picard laughed, a little nervously. "I know that you know, Sean. At the very least, you know more than you've told me."

"Kyne and I tried to make safra," grunted Sean. He spat some blood from his mouth. "We tried, and we failed, so I killed him. There is no more to know."

"I don't *believe you!*" Picard reached over and grabbed the arrow again, pushing it deep. Sean thrashed feebly. Picard leaned close to his gnashing teeth. "He must have known enough to attempt it. So what did he attempt? What did he say? What did he do?"

"It doesn't matter, Picard." Sean struggled to speak through his groans of agony. "Even if you knew how, only a Violeni can make it. The only place you could ever make safra is in that dungeon. And the script for the ceremony burned with Kyne's body. You ... will *never* ... make safra."

Picard ripped out the arrow in sudden burst of rage. It was not a very smart thing to do. By pulling out the arrow, he opened the wound in

Sean's leg to bleed and fester freely. Plus, Sean screamed, no doubt waking up several people in the camp, which meant possibly Richard.

Picard's hand throbbed as he held the arrow in it. The movement had caused him a great amount of agony, as well. To his own surprise, tears of pain and despair filled his eyes. In a panic, he groped in his tunic for safra. He still had some, and he had sent men to gather more from the fields while they camped here. He nearly choked on his own sob as he threw the safra into his mouth. He grabbed a flask of ale from his belt to wash it down with. Then, at last, he swallowed.

A few moments later, he shook with laughter.

"Oh Sean," he said with a deep breath of relief. "You may be right. I may never understand how to make safra. So until then, I will steal what pleasure I can from the likes of you."

He lifted his good hand, holding the tip of the arrow out like a knife. Then he grabbed Sean's head with his glove, clamping it tight, and held it still.

"I will take out your eyes myself," said Picard. "After all, if I can't have what makes me whole, then neither shall you."

Picard prepared to jab, but he paused to relish the fear gaping in Sean's pupils one last time.

Then a loud *thud* reverberated through his eardrums, and belatedly, Picard felt the pain spreading from one side of his head to another. He realized he had been stricken by a very heavy object. Then he fell to the side, closed his eyes, and ceased to think at all.

\*

Picard awoke to the familiar pull of his brother's hands against his tunic, shaking him every which way.

"Where is he?" roared Richard. The sound of his voice made the ache in Picard's head multiply and spread out in various directions. "WHERE IS THE WOLVEN?"

Picard blinked and looked about in a daze. It was morning. Sharp yellow sunlight illuminated the interior of the carriage. Within it, there was no Wolven to be found: only severed rope, unlocked chains, and ugly blood stains.

"I ... I ... I don't know, Richard! I really don't know. I was here last night, talking to him, and then ... then someone knocked me out! Someone must have come in here and freed him!"

"Not possible! The one who freed him is *you!*"

"No ... no, Richard, I swear! It wasn't me!"

"Shut up!" Richard struck him over the mouth, then flung him to the floor. He pressed his knee between Picard's shoulder-blades, pinning him there, then took the remains of the rope and bound Picard's hands behind him. Picard cried out, for he felt as if his very bones were being tied into knots. Tears filled his eyes and overflowed. In this position, the pain in his gloved arm was unbearable.

"Please, Richard. Please, you're not seeing reason. I didn't do this. I would never let Sean go."

"You would do anything you wanted for the sake of that fucking safra. What other deals did you make with the Wolven that Father didn't know about? How do I know you didn't tell the Wolven to kill Father yourself!"

"No—I would never! Richard! Richard *please!*"

Richard lifted him back up and pushed him against the wall of the carriage. He grabbed the chains that once held the Wolven and started wrapping them around Picard's feet.

"You said I should make an example of someone, eh? Now that the Wolven's gone, who could I possibly make an example of? Who but *you?*"

Picard sobbed freely. "Richard. You wouldn't. I'm your brother."

"You're a big fucking baby, is what you are."

"I've always helped you, Richard. You may not have realized it, but I did. We work as a team, you and I. I'm the brains. You're the brawn. Don't you see? You need me, Richard. If you're going to rule as Khan, you need a Polemarch. You need me at your side."

Richard recoiled. "You don't mean like ... ?"

"No, don't be silly. Father changed the old customs. The khan and Polemarch don't have to be married, anymore, right? So I could—"

"So if Father was both," barked Richard, "who says I can't be?"

"Richard, please ... " Picard didn't know what else to say. He could hardly see beyond the tears in his eyes. He could barely speak or breathe through the sobs in his throat. "Please, don't do this to me. I didn't free the Wolven. But even if I did, you shouldn't do this to me. I'm your brother. Your flesh and blood. I love you Richard, and ... "

Richard slapped him over the mouth again, more lightly this time. He looked a little calmer now. "Shut up. You're making me sick."

"Because you know I'm right," groaned Picard. "You know you shouldn't—"

"I don't give a fuck what I should or shouldn't do." Then Richard sighed. "But you are my brother. And you're right. I can't kill you."

Picard dared to open his eyes again, searching through ripply curtain of water for his brother's face.

"I'll lock you away for awhile," said Richard. "Until I decide what to do with you."

Richard shoved him back into the bloody cushion that, only last night, had held the Wolven in its clutches. The cushion was ripped open now, of course, and the feathers inside it only served to prick and poke Picard's skin.

The carriage rocked violently as Richard jumped out of it, making Picard fall to the ground in a miserable heap. How had this happened? Where had he possibly gone wrong? So many things had gone according to plan: Sean's attempts to discover the secret of safra, then the fulfillment of his assignment, and after all that, Picard had even managed to capture him, which he once would have considered impossible. He'd had the Wolven right where he wanted him, and then ...

A shaft of sunlight illuminated something on the floor of the carriage. Picard only saw it because he lay just inches from it, and his heaving breath rocked it about. It was a strand of hair, and it shone a brilliant hue of red.

"Mina ... " gasped Picard.

# Chapter 17

## The Logical Decision

To prepare for King Byron's return, Eleanor planned for a great feast and called for all the top Synergists to showcase their best inventions since Byron's departure.

Eleanor worried that Prime Synergist Deragon would not return from Dearen in time for King Byron's arrival. However, there was little she could do about that. Even after Eleanor had explained to Deragon that they must cancel their plans in Dearen and return to Yamair immediately, the Prime Synergist bowed his head and said he wanted to stay just a little while longer. That had been many weeks ago, and Eleanor had not heard from him since. Eleanor sent a message that if Deragon did not return in another week's time, she would hold an election for a new Prime Synergist. Yet she continued to hear nothing.

Despite all her worrying, Eleanor tried to enjoy what time she had left with Rebeka. She delayed making a decision about their relationship for as long as she could. She ate the safra she had brought with her from Dearen whenever her anxiety reached its peak, and then she sought comfort in the Scholar's warm, sturdy arms. She even began to look upon Deragon's absence as a good thing. After all, he was the only person who knew about her intimacy with Rebeka. Perhaps his absence would be for the best.

The cold breath of winter spread over the landscape, making machines creak with frost and slowing the flow of the rivers. People stored their harvests in cellars and prepared jams or salted meats to last them until spring. Eleanor knew that food was scarcer this year than last year, and she could only pray that Byron would not see this as a reflection of her own worthiness as metronome.

One morning, she sat on Rebeka's bed while the Scholar brushed her long yellow hair. They usually restrained their lovemaking to Rebeka's

chamber, although once they had been wild and spontaneous enough to sleep on the king's own bed. Eleanor sat half-dressed, most of her laces and straps hanging open, enjoying the occasional brush of Rebeka's skin against her own.

"Eleanor," said Rebeka softly. "Do you think your inner drum has steadied since our union together, or deviated?"

Eleanor stiffened. She tried to avoid thinking about this question, but now that Rebeka voiced it, she had no choice but to ponder its profundity. "I know that it has ... changed," said Eleanor at last. "Even so, I wonder if this is such a terrible thing as I first imagined. After all, the rhythm of the earth itself is subject to earthquakes, storms, floods, and so forth. I wonder if I did not account in the past for the value of fluctuation in our own human hearts? I wonder if the balance should not always be a steady rhythm, but an even exchange of slow beats and fast beats, a careful juxtaposition of sounds to create harmony? If this is the case, Rebeka, then indeed my inner rhythm has deviated of late. But perhaps it is not such a bad thing."

Rebeka embraced her tight, pressing her lips to Eleanor's ear, whispering, "You are wiser and more incredible than my wildest dreams, King-wife."

Eleanor giggled from the tickle of Rebeka's breath, then tore herself away. "I want to show you something."

She ran from the room to retrieve something, but she was not gone for long. She returned holding a large canvas, still moist with paint.

"What is that?"

"A new creation." Eleanor could not help but feel a little nervous as she turned and set the canvas for Rebeka to gaze upon. "Something new and different from anything I have ever invented before."

Rebeka stared at it a long while without speaking. Her eyes roved the rippling paint, the coarse fabric, the gradient colors. "Is it ... a bird?"

"I am not sure, to be honest." Eleanor leaned back and tried to stare upon the painting with the same objective eyes as the Scholar. She saw a beast made of metal and fabric, fire and steam, soaring the sky like one of the Earth Mechanic's own creations. "I am not sure if it could or should become real. I am not sure what purpose it would serve, if any. I only know that I dream of it, and I desire it, and for once, I appreciate it for no other reason than that."

"Then you have truly lost your mind!" laughed Rebeka, and grabbed her from behind.

Eleanor turned to kiss her, and together they tumbled back into the bed.

"It has been many weeks now," breathed Eleanor as she sprawled upon the bed sheets. Rebeka got on top of her and trailed kisses down the King-wife's neck. "Many weeks and still no sign of Byron. I wonder sometimes if my encounter with that Merchant man was no more than a bad dream. Perhaps Byron will never return. I wonder if it will just remain you and I, working together, in perfect harmony."

She moaned with joy as Rebeka's mouth closed round her breast.

A bell clanged in the distance. After a moment, a second bell echoed it.

Suddenly, the entire landscape erupted with the booms of drums and bells. They joined together in a rhythm, forming a single, unmistakable rhythm.

"No," gasped Eleanor. "No, please."

"King Byron returns," said Rebeka.

\*

Nothing went according to plan.

Worms infested the biggest batch of apples gathered for the feast, while several more bundles of food were found rotting. Eleanor could not explain why this had happened, and neither could anyone else. Meanwhile, several of the Synergists' latest inventions had been found responsible for grave errors throughout the kingdom. Eleanor had approved the use of most of these inventions before she had ever left for Dearen. Therefore, the ultimate responsibility for these mistakes fell on her shoulders.

"No ... no no no no no!" She closed herself up in her personal quarters that afternoon, pacing in circles while bells of celebration kept clanging in the distance. No matter how tight she closed her shutters, she could still hear them. Eleanor had sent messengers ahead to greet Byron at the port which had sounded the first alarm bell. She expected him to arrive by tomorrow night.

To add to her stresses, she received word that Prime Synergist Deragon had returned and wanted to meet with her as soon as possible.

"Very well," Eleanor reluctantly told the messenger. "I will see him."

She met him in the dimness of nightfall, her mansion lit by soft glowing lanterns and a crackling fire in the brick hearth. The depths of Deragon's hood were even blacker than usual, though an occasional flicker of firelight etched his face with red lines.

"You have returned too late, Deragon," said the king-wife. "I have already begun the search for your replacement. I will elect him or her tomorrow morning, in time for King Byron's arrival."

"I doubt that would be wise." Deragon settled himself in a chair across the fire, casting his robes across the arm cushions. Then he grew silent.

Eleanor struggled to rein in her temper. "You're in no place to judge me," she snapped.

"On the contrary," he said. "I'm in a very good place to judge."

Her muscles turned to mush within her. She sank into a chair across from him, though the heat of the fire struck her with searing intensity. "I'm not sure what power you think you have over me. But if you think you can—"

"I'd like your blessing to stay in Dearen indefinitely." Deragon leaned back and folded his hands together in front of him. "I think you will see my reasons are not entirely selfish. Indeed, the Haze is gone, and my time there will be far from leisurely. The kingdom may crumble without proper support. I intend to provide some of that support, for the good of both Dearen and Yamair."

Eleanor forced a swallow down her throat. She realized that Deragon had probably been in Dearen more recently than any of her messengers. "How is Dearen faring now?"

"The people are very confused," said Deragon. "They upset easily, staging protests and discovering some new sort of violence amongst themselves every day. They are much like the lost sheep roaming the slopes of our Yamairan hills. They follow easily; they scatter easily. They will shape according to the hand that grasps them. So you see, this is Yamair's chance to make a permanent mark on Dearen. Using me, you can make Yamair an integral piece of Dearen's ministration. But more importantly, you can spread the rhythm of the Earth Mechanic to the pagans."

His points seemed valid enough, his intentions sound. Eleanor could not say why she doubted him. Perhaps she could never trust him, only because ... she blushed and looked into the blinding light of the fire. "I told you. I have already arranged an election for your replacement. Tomorrow morning ... "

"Cancel it." Deragon's voice remained calm and even. "I would have left sooner if possible. But I sensed that Dearen needed me, and I was right. Princess Fayr came to me for counsel after the disruption of the Vikand hordesfolk. Fortunately, the heathens are gone for now—they seemed plagued by disagreement and lack of leadership after the

disappearance of Leonard Khan. In that we were all fortunate. But I counseled the princess, nonetheless, and even when the Vikand threat lifted, she continued to come to me for advice. I am the one for this duty, King-wife, and I will take it with your blessing, or without it."

Eleanor's heart thudded against the bones of her ribs. Whether she imagined it or not, she sensed Deragon smirking at her through the shadows of his hood. He thought he had outsmarted her in some way. He thought he could do whatever he wanted, just because he saw her with ...

Eleanor stood suddenly, planting her boots against the floorboards. "I will not stand for insubordination. You did not obey me when I asked you to come back to Yamair. You confess now that you will remain in Dearen, whether I will it or not. Such recklessness has no place in the machinations of Yamair. You will do my will or none at all. My will is this: your name will be added to the list of candidates tomorrow morning. But you will not be guaranteed your place as Prime Synergist. You will be subject to a vote."

Deragon put his hands down. He looked up at her, bringing the mauled folds of his face into light. "I am sorry that the election of the Prime Synergist is so ... trivial to you."

"Trivial?" Eleanor shook her head helplessly. "Of course it's not trivial. The vote is a traditional method of selection!"

"The vote should happen once every five years, after a great deal of preparation and campaigning. Not in a matter of *weeks*. You might as well spin a wheel and pick a candidate at random. I might expect this behavior of lesser Synergists, but not of you—you, who does not even have an heir of her own to replace the kingship, and probably never will."

"I will not debate this with you." Eleanor shook from head to foot. "You are dismissed, Deragon."

He stood calmly, coldly. "I used to wonder why you couldn't produce a child. I used to feel sorry for you."

Eleanor's mouth fell open in shock. How dare he mention such a thing?

"Now I understand," Deragon continued relentlessly. "The Earth Mechanic sees all things, and he rewards sexual deviancy as it ought to be rewarded."

"Deviancy ... !" Eleanor rocked on her feet. The tiniest nudge would have knocked her to the floor. Deragon bowed his head, turning to go. But she couldn't let it end like this. She had to find some way to justify

herself, both to him and herself. "I ... I saw who you spent your time with in Dearen," she gasped. "She was little more than a child."

"But she is old enough to impregnate, as we have already received indication. That is the purpose of copulation, is it not? Moreover, our union betrays no prior ... commitments, especially of a nature so important as yours."

Eleanor could barely speak or think. She clutched the chair for support once more. Why was this happening to her? She had never thought Deragon to be a cruel or conniving man. Was he? Or did he merely say what any Synergist should? Deragon brought her deepest and darkest thoughts to light, thoughts she had buried since the night she gave in to safra.

"King-wife Eleanor." Deragon stared at her levelly. "We all make mistakes, as I know better than anyone. You have already made a big mistake. All I ask is that you do not make another."

He left her thus, drowning in her own inner torment.

Was it a threat? Was it blackmail? Or did Deragon serve as little more than a confirmation of the terrible truth?

She lost track of how long she sat in her own living room, listening to the deafening roar of her own whirling thoughts, failing to make sense of them, unable to see right from wrong.

She thought of the strange Merchant and his haunting words to her. *If you seek the way of the balance, you must cast away all deviations immediately.* How could he know such a thing? Who was he? What was his motive? Whatever the case, she feared he was right. He had known that King Byron would return soon to Yamair. He had known that Eleanor strayed from "the balance." Was it too late now to correct her path?

*You must leave your mistakes in Dearen and cross into Yamair before the end of today, he had said. If you do not return to the balance immediately, then the price you pay for your transgressions will be very, very high.*

She listened to the ticks of the clocks around her, noting how drastically their rhythms varied, how every clock clashed in a meaningless cacophony of sounds. She had not tuned them of late. She had not served as metronome to her kingdom.

Her emotions had taken control of her over the last few weeks. Her feelings distorted rational thought, making it entirely illogical. She could not decide how to move forward in her current state of mind—not when so much of her future, as well as Yamair's, depended on what she did next.

The time had come to drink some Discipline.

She gagged after the first gulp. The sweetness of safra had made her quickly forget the bitter taste of Discipline. She barely managed to keep it down, then she waited on her hands and knees for the drug to take effect.

The potion worked more slowly than in the past, perhaps because it faced more opposition within her than usual. Gradually, like a weight easing from her shoulders one pound at a time, the pressure of her emotions lifted off. Her anxiety dissipated. Her doubts melted away. Like the sun rising over a hillside, light fell suddenly upon the path of the balance.

Eleanor's deviations revolved around safra and Rebeka. The wise Merchant had told her to leave those behind in Dearen. But Eleanor had brought them both into Yamair.

The source of all her problems was Rebeka. Rebeka led her down a path of chaos. Rebeka engaged in fruitless activities, including consumption of safra. Rebeka caused her to betray her husband. Because of Rebeka, Eleanor could be subject to blackmail. Because of Rebeka, Eleanor had ceased to see clearly what she should or shouldn't do.

Rebeka must be eliminated.

\*

By the next afternoon, Eleanor had tied up all loose ends.

She sat in the square of Yamair City surrounded by solemn gatherers, awaiting King Byron's appearance. Drums beat steadily in the distance, matching the ticks and tocks of the clock-towers. Thousands of people filled the streets of Yamair, but they stood unmoving, awaiting the moment of action. Tables of food lined the square, though not with the extravagance originally planned. Eleanor had realized that such excess was far from wise. She should demonstrate to her husband that the kingdom still produced adequate victuals, but not more than salubrity demanded. Her original ideas of a grand feast had—like so many other things—been misguided. Once she accepted this, fixing the celebration had been easy.

As she listened to the drone of the clocks, her fingers fidgeted. She realized her patience wore thin. Hastily, she pulled out more Discipline and swallowed it down. Logical people did not feel impatience. Rational thinkers did not feel regret for decisions they knew to be right.

And yet when the silence grew too heavy, or the pause between drum beats too long, she could still hear the echoes of Rebeka's screaming.

*Why are you doing this, Eleanor? We can still fix everything. We can do it together, you and I, in perfect harmony! You don't have to do this! Please, King-wife. Have mercy on me. Don't do this to me. Please, Eleanor. ELEANOR!*

The bitter taste of Discipline slid smoothly down her tongue now. She knew she had made the reasonable decision. And thus she regretted nothing.

*Send her far from Yamair, Eleanor had told the guardsmen. She poses a dire threat to this kingdom's stability. If she resists or if she ever tries to return, dispose of her permanently.*

"Congratulations on your new Prime Synergist, King-wife."

Eleanor turned to see a man walk into the open area of the courtyard. People moved out of his way though he walked slowly and unobtrusively. His appearance managed to startle her, if only for a moment, for Deragon had pulled back the hood of his robe, revealing his half-burned face to all. The skin drooped grotesquely around his blue eye, and his lip seemed to curl with a permanent scowl.

Eleanor felt the trembling of the newly elected Prime Synergist, a young man named Ronald, just next to her. He was the only one sitting with her at the royal table, as the king had not yet arrived, and the Scholar and not yet been replaced.

"Congratulations, that is, if you made the right decision." Deragon stopped in front of her, looming cruelly over the table, sneering down at their untouched food.

"I know that I did," said Eleanor. Discipline assured her of as much. It allayed her anxiety and confirmed to her that Deragon should not remain Prime Synergist at all: not after he had defied her by staying overlong in Dearen, and especially not after implying a threat of blackmail. For that reason, Eleanor had not even allowed his name to be among the candidates this morning. She had made an executive decision that his days as a Prime Synergist—as a Synergist at all—were over. She had demoted him to cogman, which was little more than an honored citizen. The only lower statuses were the pinions and scraps of society.

"It must be nice," said Deragon, "believing without any sense of doubt that what you've done is the right thing. Although I wonder, King-wife, if doubt is as precious a gift to us from the Earth Mechanic as logic itself. For you see, I happen to know that your hasty replacement of me is going to come at a very high price: a price much higher than if you had let me remain in my post, which in fact would have been to your benefit."

"Your perspective is appreciated," said Eleanor, "though no longer of consequence, Cogman Deragon."

"My perspective will have consequence, King-wife." He bowed low, but his eyes held no humility as he fixed her with them. "Of that, I can assure you."

The roar of applause exploded from the edge of the city and rolled inward. The drums boomed. The bells chimed. Gears shifted and wheels turned on their spokes as ropes pulled the king's trolley into the city. The claps of the people shifted to match the beating of drums and create a complex, but perfectly synchronized, rhythm.

King Byron returned to Yamair.

# Chapter 18

## Engagement

By the time Fayr reached the smoldering bodies in the dungeon, little remained of them but their stink, smoke, and ashes. Golden embers still glowed in the midst of the crumbling bones.

"Princess, you must get out of here!" coughed Sir Gornum.

The heat and soot drew tears from her eyes. She didn't care who saw them anymore. She fell to her knees in the piles of safra and reached out to the platform. In the debris, she recognized Kyne's ring glittering through the smoke.

She had heard rumors of the Wolven running through the city. She didn't believe them at first. She couldn't bear to. Then she saw the black smoke rising over the palace, and she knew she had to see for herself. Now she was here, and the truth lay bare in front of her.

"There were several bodies burned here," gasped Fayr. "Kyne must have come down here with Darius, and the khan's body ... that means there are three bodies, at least. And one of them must be ... "

She choked, not just on the smoke, but on her own rising sobs.

"DARIUS!"

She flung herself towards the embers, screaming with agony. Someone grabbed her and pulled her back. The chubby Gornum, who had never done anything worthy of his post as Master of the Royal Guard until now, saved her from self-destruction.

"Princess," he wheezed. "Let's go."

Together, they dragged themselves from the dungeon depths, not knowing to what they returned.

\*

Sir Gornum encouraged Fayr to stay in her chamber, and for once, she complied to his wishes. Something had changed in Gornum since that

morning, perhaps when the last of the safra in his system wore off. He moved with a sense of purpose, even though his body was bulky and awkward, his gait imbalanced. He reacted to every situation that arose with a sort of focus, even though he usually didn't know a solution. Rather than giving up immediately or turning to Fayr for help, he actually paused to think about it.

Was this what it meant for people to live without the Haze?

She could not dare remain so optimistic. Gornum seemed like an exception to most others, perhaps because of the responsibility placed upon his shoulders. After coming out of his safra state, he'd already witnessed most of his inferior guards die on the blades of the hordesfolk. He'd seen chaos spread throughout the palace as the Vikandese gained a foothold. Then he'd heard that the Wolven had been spotted leaping over rooftops and even running between buildings. The Wolven's appearance had worked somewhat to Gornum's benefit, as the Vikandese withdrew from the palace in pursuit of the assassin. Fayr attributed this reaction to the request she'd made of the khan family, albeit obsolete, that they capture all Wolvens in order to win her favor. Whatever Picard's and Richard's reasons, they had left Dearen city for now. But just as Sir Gornum had begun to feel like he might be able to breathe a sigh of relief, he and Fayr had discovered Kyne's remains within the dungeon.

Fayr was grateful that she could place some hope and trust in Gornum at a time when everything else in her world seemed to flip over and crumble apart. But Gornum wasn't enough. Her brother was dead. The Haze was gone. Her small kingdom roiled with confusion. And she might have had the strength to endure all this if Darius had been here to hold and comfort her, to help her through this.

Darius was dead. Darius would never hold her again.

She stayed in her room for long many hours, even as the sounds of chaos reverberated from beyond, even as Gornum appeared periodically to update her on palace security or ask her for advice. The day passed beyond her awareness, for she could think nothing, feel nothing: to feel anything at all would be too painful. To Gornum she could offer no advice, no wisdom, no hope. She stared at him in a daze, and by late the next night, when his eyes sagged and his limbs shook with exhaustion—because, like her, he had gotten no sleep the night before—Fayr was tempted to tell him to gather his things and run away. As he gave her his dreadful report of riots and arguments in the streets, she nearly interrupted him and said, *Let's give up. It's useless. Dearen is done for. Let's*

*get our things and run away. Leave this palace to this wolves. There's nothing left for us here but misery and hardship.*

The words lay on her tongue when Gornum said, "But the tigers ... they seem to be helping us."

Fayr blinked a few times. She swallowed her dreadful thoughts. She ran his words through her head a second time, but still failed to makes sense of them. "Tigers? Helping us? How?"

"No one's really sure." Gornum shrugged helplessly. "But it's almost like what the legends say: that bad things happen to those who stay in Dearen unwelcome."

"But what are they *doing*? Where are they doing it from?"

"From the edges of Dearen, I think, where the tigers tend to be: along the mountains of Yamair. beside the cliffs of Vikand, and near the shores to the north and south. I hear that when some people approach the tigers, the tigers chase them back into Dearen. Others, the tigers chase *out* of Dearen."

"Do you think it's random?" Fayr scratched her purple hair helplessly. "Or do you think ... ?"

"I think Friva protects you, Princess. At least I hope so. I hope Friva protects all of us."

Fayr gulped. She had never given the gods much thought before. To do so made her uncomfortable. After all, her family had claimed the power of the gods. She lived her life expecting to be worshiped like a divine being, herself. And yet without the Haze to protect her, she was nothing—lesser, even, than most people. Today she had not even garnered the strength to leave her room since discovering Kyne's death.

For once, she hoped that Friva was as real and powerful as people believed, and if so, that she did in fact protect Dearen.

Fayr got up and paced around the room. Her dirty dress dragged along the stones beneath her feet. Her purple hair, long and tangled, flowed wildly about her shoulders. She felt the stir of the night air through her window: crisp, clean, Haze-less air. She took a deep breath of it and knew she could not sleep until she had made a decision.

"If Darius is—" Her throat caught. She could not bring herself to say it. "If I cannot marry Darius," she tried again, "I must find someone else to marry. And I must do it soon, before I announce to the kingdom what happened to Kyne." She covered her mouth a moment, stifling a groan of dismay. She managed to swallow it back down long enough to continue. "I must choose another suitor."

"That seems like a good idea, Princess," said Gornum, although regret weighed his voice nearly as heavily as hers. "Do you have someone in mind yet?"

"I ... I don't know." From the moment she'd met Darius, she'd never truly considered anyone else. Darius should be the next king. Her heart had been sure of it, even if she had never confessed as much to herself, or said so aloud. How could she even begin to consider anyone else?

Her mind raced desperately through her memories of the past few weeks. She could hardly even remember the other men's faces. But she had to pick one.

"Abrax," she said at last. "Wasn't there a Vikand chief named Abrax?"

Gornum nodded. "Yes. You seemed to like him."

All Gornum really meant that Fayr had liked him enough to invite him during the royal table during the feast in Friva's Hall. His purpose there, of course, had only been as placeholder. "If I remember correctly," said Fayr, "he was a high chief. His personal army was only smaller in size than Richard's, and he has commanded a large number of successful battles in the past, so he probably has the loyalty of much of the Royal Horde."

"I suppose so," said Gornum desperately.

"Bring him here first thing tomorrow morning," the princess relinquished. "I will discuss with him the possibility of moving forward in marriage."

Neither of them spoke for awhile. Then the Master of the Royal Guard suddenly sniffled and wiped his eye.

"Gornum?"

"I'm sorry, Princess." But he could not hide the despair in his voice. "It has been a long day, and I ... I've never felt like this before."

Fayr bowed her head in acknowledgment. "You should get some rest, Gornum."

"But I wouldn't forgive myself, Princess, if something else happened to you while under my watch."

The princess smiled sadly. "Then get someone else to guard me, tonight, Gornum. You're of no use to me in your current state."

He looked at her in horror at first, misinterpreting her comment as a reprimand. Then he saw the the gentle twinkle in her eyes, and he nodded with relief. "Yes, Highness."

He left to obey her. Fayr finally collapsed in her bed, knowing she had done the only thing she could gather the strength to do.

Then her tears unleashed, and she cried herself to sleep.

In the morning, she met with High Chief Abrax.

The princess's summons astonished him—a fact he did not try to hide as he sat with her in the Crystal Dining Hall. His long blond braids swished about his shoulders as he turned his head every which way, as he if he might find some cosmic explanation in his crystalline surroundings.

Fayr found little reason to explain herself. He had come here seeking her hand in marriage; now she offered a chance for him to take it. What else was there to say?

When at last he spoke, Abrax's humble tone surprised her. Coming from such a burly man with a jaw like a chisel, his voice was surprisingly soft. "I am honored, Princess. Of course I will marry you."

"Very good," she said, then leaned back and clasped her hands before her. "Now how soon can you bring in your army?"

The princess and high chief could not yet plan far ahead. Perhaps both were too overwhelmed by the suddenness of their engagement. Abrax understood why she wanted his troops as quickly as possible. He explained with regret that it would take many weeks to gather them. If he called all the men loyal to him, he suspected to collect at least a thousand. Fayr would also need to figure out how to accommodate them in Dearen, and how their ranks would affect her own hierarchy of reeves and knights.

"I have many decisions to make," said the high chief. "I will need to talk to Leonard Khan—er ... " He scratched his braids, remembering that the situation was even more complex than he first suspected.

"You understand, I imagine, that a marriage with me will increase your chances to become the next khan of Vikand," she said. "How is such a thing decided, anyway?"

"The man or woman who summons the most troops to his banner is Khan," explained Abrax. "Or—if the match seems too close—then the two sides may fight until one side is vanquished. If there is already a Polemarch, however, that could sway the conclusion." He shrugged his big shoulders. "There are no strict rules to this," he admitted. "When the time comes for a new khan, it is like war in Vikand. But it may be that the Royal Horde readily accepts Richard as Khan. And if they do ... "

"Then you must act more quickly than Richard," said Fayr, "and gather your troops immediately. Gather a thousand hordesfolk and bring them here by the winter solstice. If you do this, then I will marry you."

Abrax nodded, and thus they separated.

After he left, Fayr paced the palace hallways in anguish. She could not think of anything better she might have done. Her kingdom would tear itself apart if she did not find some way to pull it back together.

Later that day, Gornum ran to her in a panic. He explained that the riots throughout Dearen had worsened. People murdered and stole from each other to gather what precious safra still sprinkled the landscape. Tigers killed some of the outsiders who yet remained in Dearen. Even if they protected the princess's interests by doing so, their sudden brutality increased the fearful hysteria spreading through the kingdom.

"Summon the high reeve of Dearen city," said Princess Fayr, "and the Reeves of the four towns of Dearen. Tell them to come here as quickly as possible. Also spread word to all the people of Dearen that three days from now, I will speak to them from the Royal Square at noon. I have much to announce. There is a great deal to celebrate, and a great deal to mourn."

Gornum bowed his head and left to do her bidding.

Fayr agonized over what she would say to her people. She drafted many speeches and scrapped them all in a fit of frustration. She wished she had someone to turn to for advice. A few times, she had consulted the Yamairan suitor, Prime Synergist Deragon. Although his appearance filled her with dread, she recognized his wisdom and intelligence. He also seemed accepting of the fact she would not choose him as husband, but he might yet have a place in her court. Who she really yearned for advice from, of course, was Darius. She suspected Darius would have some laconic words of wisdom that summed up the truth in a single sentence. But Darius was gone.

To her surprise, it was the harpist, Jeevu, who helped her find the words she needed. Ever since the storm that blew out the Haze, he had roamed the palace halls in a state of shock and misery. He cried often, and she saw him a few times sitting and staring at his harp, unwilling to pick it up again. Fayr passed him by each time, for she did not have the fortitude to offer words of comfort. Until one day, she heard him playing his harp again in the Gardens of Delight.

The most extraordinary fact was not only that he played his harp again; it was the fact he played a tune in a minor key.

She walked towards him slowly, picking her way through wilted violets and ferns. He sat on a gilded bench, tears running down his cheeks as his fingers stroked the strings. The melody from his harp seemed to pluck the emotions within her own heart, and she repressed the urge to

weep with him. As painful as the sounds were, they were also comforting: a sweet reflection of the agony within.

When he saw her, he stopped and looked up with surprise. Then, most strangely, he offered her a smile through his tears.

"I hear the difference now, Princess," he said. "The minor key ... it has a special beauty to it."

His comment broke Fayr's resolve. She sobbed and fell down beside him, wrapping him in her arms. Together they wept, and at last, Fayr understood what she must say to her people.

On a golden noon, Fayr stood above the Royal Square of Dearen City. The palace glittered behind her in all its crystalline glory. Silver clouds swept in tufts across a cerulean sky. The wind stroked Fayr's long satin dress in rippling colors around her body. A crown of jewels, softened with tiger fur around the rim, sat upon her head. The purple tendrils of her hair lashed the sky. Below her, more people filled Dearen city than she had ever seen at once. There were hundreds—maybe thousands—of desperate men and women filling the square, streets, and alleys.

"People of Dearen," said the princess. Her voice rang like a bell through the wind. Every person in sight waited in breathless silence to hear her words. "For the first time in our recorded history, Dearen faces a great challenge. We live without the Haze."

A soft sound, like a unanimous groan, passed through the multitude.

"I come here today to tell you something, people of Dearen. It is a great secret, protected by the Violenses for countless generations. It is the truth behind safra. The truth is that for centuries, the Haze has protected Dearen from harm. But by doing so, it weakened us. We grew dependent on its presence. We took it for granted. But worse than that, we ceased to understand pain or danger. We let ourselves believe they did not exist. We lived in a dream, Dearens. And now it is time we woke up."

A murmur of discontent rippled through the crowds. Fayr held up her hand, and they fell silent. A cloud passed over the sun, sending a shadow through the city, as if upon the princess's command.

"Now that you are awake, I have good news and bad news to share with you." Fayr took a moment to catch her breath. "Some of you heard rumors that a Wolven was spotted fleeing from the palace several days ago. The rumors were true. A Wolven infiltrated our defenses and killed my brother, Prince Kyne."

The congregation moaned with dismay. Fayr struggled not to let a sob escape her throat.

"I survived, however," she said hoarsely. "All of you here survived that day with me: the day the Haze disappeared. We are still alive. For the moment, our enemies have fled. Perhaps Friva still blesses us, despite the absence of the Haze. But we must not take our fortune for granted, as we took safra for granted. We must learn from what has happened and move forward. For that reason, I am proud to announce—" Here she choked, and it took her even longer to recover. "I am proud to announce my engagement to a Vikand chief. We have not yet sealed the arrangement, but if all goes as planned, we will marry less than a fortnight from now, on the day of the winter solstice."

She did not know how it started, but somehow, the name of Darius spread through the masses. She first heard it murmured not too far away; then she heard echoes of his name echo across the square. People's voice came together in a chant. "Chief Darius," they said. "Chief Darius. Chief Darius. Chief Darius!"

She wanted to faint with horror. How did they even know about him? Most had certainly never seen him, for Darius seemed to like his privacy. But Fayr must not have paid enough attention to the rumors spreading during their courtship together. His absence at the feast of Friva's Hall, it seemed, had not lessened him in the eyes of the population; in fact, it had increased their fascination with him.

"Stop ... STOP!" A sob must have escaped her throat, loud enough to silence the chanting. She struggled to breathe at all. "I ... I did not say it was Darius," she groaned. "I believe that Chief Darius died defending my brother against the Wolven."

A silence more terrible than any yet fell over the mob.

"I am in pain, as you are," said Fayr. "But this leads me to a new confession, for pain is not new to me." Tears ran down her cheeks. She could no longer hide them. "My confession is this: unlike all of you, I have never been able to feel the effects of safra. Neither could my brother, nor my father, nor any of us with the Violnese blood in our veins. This was one condition of a pact my ancestors made with the gods centuries ago that enabled us to make safra in the first place." She remembered the words of her father, and her heart skipped a beat. "We made safra to control people. Do you understand that, Dearens? My ancestors did. People will do anything to obtain happiness. And if they are happy, they will not oppose the will of those who wish to control them. This is how safra has protected Dearen. But it is also how it has harmed you. It has blinded you from understanding when you are in danger, or when you must protect yourself from harm. It has led you to believe in a perfect world

which does not exist. It has also kept you from fully appreciating your blessings. How can you appreciate anything if you do not know what it means to live without it?"

The silence continued to hang over her people. The shadow passed and sun rays poked back through the clouds, making the city glow golden.

"We still have some safra left. Do not waste it by consuming it immediately. Collect it and give it to Dearen guards and reeves. I will collect all the safra left and use it to rebuild this kingdom. I promise you this. For our kingdom needs rebuilding, and it needs a new form of protection than what it knew before. We must build ourselves an army."

At this, a few people started shouting. They were too far away for Fayr to hear them. But their defiance must have given others courage, for soon more voices arose in anger.

"You can't take our safra!"

"You'll leave us with nothing!"

The people yelled and shook their fists, growing louder and louder. Fayr's blood roared in her ears. She had bared her heart to them, and she didn't know what else to say. She had to do this. It was the only plan she could think of. She had to collect what safra she could and sell it to outsiders, or Dearen would have no source of revenue. She would do it for their own good. She would try to ensure that they had enough food and shelter, but just as importantly, that they worked for these things by equipping themselves for combat.

The fury of the crowd built and multiplied from one group to the next, spreading across the landscape. Fayr didn't know how to stop it.

Then there came a scream.

The scream was so shrill that it cut through the shouts of anger. Then more cries of panic waved from the same direction. One section of the mob roiled about, as if trying to escape something. People tripped and fell over each other in an attempt to gain refuge. Then the crowd split apart.

A tiger walked amongst them.

As the great beast walked through the Royal Square, the panic subsided into a reverent silence. They saw now that the tiger did not attack them. Instead, it walked steadily towards the princess.

Fayr held her breath as the beautiful cat approached. Its shoulders rolled with tremendous muscle. Its golden coat undulated with its black stripes, shifting like the sunlight over the city as the clouds passed across it. Its slitted eyes fixed her from afar and, just for a moment, she

wondered if it came to kill her, as the tigers had killed many people in the last few days.

It jumped up to the platform on which she stood, and it took all of her willpower not to scream and run away. The effortlessness of its leap was but a small testament to the strength of its body. She had no desire to witness the relative power of its claws, which could probably rip her to tatters like so many knives. But she could not run away: she would have to stand and accept whatever fate it intended for her.

The tiger stopped just a few feet away, staring at her. Fayr noticed something strange about its eyes. She had always thought tigers possessed golden eyes; she knew for a fact that she had seen some with such eyes in the past. But the gaze of this tiger was different. Its irises shifted with many colors, like a pool reflecting the spectrum of the rainbow. Not unlike her own.

The beast walked a few steps closer, then rubbed its head against her leg. It was a miracle Fayr remained standing, considering that her legs felt like jelly.

Then the tiger turned towards the people and roared.

The sound rattled the marrow of her bones. Its volume carried across the horizon and shook the earth beneath her feet. Horses and small beasts on the distant hills bolted in fear, scattering all directions. Fayr wondered if the nations on both sides of Dearen heard her sound; for the moment she believed that they did.

When the incredible roar faded, Fayr no longer felt afraid. She put her hand on the tiger's head and wrapped her fingers in the thickness of its fur. A rumble of approval vibrated from the cat's throat.

"If you defy me," said Princess Fayr, "it is not my wrath you will face, but the might of your enemies. Do as I say, Dearens, so that we might face this hardship together, and overcome those who wish to harm us. Are you with me, Dearens? Are you willing to face a life without safra? Are you willing to fight our enemies if they dare test our strength?"

At last, a cheer burst out of the crowd. It began small, but eventually, more people yelled and clapped in agreement. When the tiger roared once more, the people erupted with applause.

Fayr took a deep and shuddering breath. A good cheer would not be enough to protect them for long. But it was a very good start.

\*

Days and weeks passed as Fayr prepared for her marriage. The wedding plans required great care and planning, for she understood now that her treasury and resources were limited. She would hold another

great feast. She would share her remaining wealth of food throughout all of Dearen city. She would even distribute a few small shares of safra, with the hope that every citizen might enjoy a small pinch on that night. She desperately needed everyone to celebrate this union. If she could not be happy, then the people must be happy for her.

A few times, she received word from Chief Abrax that his preparations were going well, also. As promised, he expected to deliver a thousand troops by the day of the winter solstice.

*Vikand is in as much chaos as your own kingdom, High Chief Abrax wrote to her. High Chief Richard wants to claim the office of Khan and Polemarch as his father did before him. He has already led the Royal Horde against a few smaller towns who oppose him. He has also imprisoned his own brother, Picard, calling him a traitor. I have little doubt that if I take you as my Polemarch, my place as Khan is assured—or perhaps I should say King. I look forward to the day, Princess.*

Princess Fayr put away the letter with trembling hands. Even though she harbored some hope for her upcoming union with the Vikand chief, a feeling of dread overcame her every time she thought of the wedding. Preparations were underway, but she could not get excited. High Chief Abrax seemed like a decent and powerful man. Marriage with him would surely be better, she hoped, than marriage with Leonard Khan would have been. But he remained a pale comparison to the man she wished to marry.

The tickle of tears on her cheeks alerted her to the fact she was crying again. She seemed to do that quite too easily as of late. She would have to relearn old habits soon, such as the ability to hide her own sorrow. Although the absence of the Haze now allowed her to cry without alienating her people, she still needed to stay strong for them. She needed to make certain sacrifices.

If she and her nation could survive the future ahead of them, she must dry her tears and find joy in a world without safra, for the sake of them all.

# Chapter 19

## Wounds

In the refuge of the forest, Sean faded in and out of sleep. Whenever he awoke, he became all too aware that his body felt like a horse had trampled it a hundred times over, then dragged him for miles. Perhaps Richard's pummeling of Sean followed by Mina whisking him away made a near-exact comparison.

Mina's rescue had come as quite a surprise, to say the least. Sitting chained and battered in the khan's carriage, Sean had felt ready to die. He did not know what else was left for him. He did not want to serve Belazar any longer. Belazar wanted to take Fayr's life, and for a short while, Sean had even experienced the god's hunger for her. He never wanted to feel that again. But he could never escape Belazar. The power of Belazar swam in his blood, oath or no oath. His body was severely wounded; even if he escaped fever and infection, he would never move, leap, and climb as he once did. Facing that tragedy was one of the worst fates he could ever imagine.

When Picard prepared to stab his eyes out with an arrow, he knew he would fight it. His instincts—or perhaps Belazar—would never let him submit to such mutilation. Despite all that, as the archon had loomed over him with the metal tip posed to strike, Sean thought this might be an appropriate enough way to die.

All this had run through his mind, then the red-headed maid rose suddenly from the shadows, striking Picard from behind. She truly possessed stealth if not even Sean had noticed her invasion. But there she was, and after she knocked out Picard with a rock, she fumbled through his clothes for a key, then unlocked Sean's chains. He did not recognize her immediately. When he first saw her, she had been tied to Picard's bed and dazed. Her red hair had been long, past her shoulders. Now, it looked as if she had roughly sawed it off with a knife. But the way she

glared at Picard, then spat on his unconscious body as she passed, sparked his memory.

Mina had helped him up and half-dragged, half-carried him out of the carriage. In the light of a camp-fire, Sean saw most of Richard's men slumped over, asleep, with smiles on their faces and glitter on their lips. The maid must have used safra to subdue them.

Mina grunted under Sean's weight as he sagged against her. She pushed him to a line of horses and reached to untie one.

"No," groaned Sean. "That one. It's my horse."

The beast nodded its head in acknowledgment. Despite himself, Sean was relieved to see the horse alive and well. Sean's bags still hung from the saddle, although they appeared to be much lighter now. Mina helped push him up, and after much heaving and awkward shuffling, he finally fell over the beast's back. Mina led the horse away.

Sean became unconscious for awhile. He was losing a lot of blood. He felt the occasional sting of Mina pressing and dressing his wounds. A few times he thrashed and shoved against her. She would draw back until he fell asleep again. Then she would resume her ministrations.

Eventually he woke up and felt as if his stomach gnawed through his flesh. "Food," he rasped. So she gave him bread and ale, and he ate to his heart's content. He felt her staring at him, but he ignored her. She wandered away. He huddled closer to the fire she had built and studied his surroundings. They were on the edges of the Shadowed Woods, not too far from the cliffs of Vikand. He shivered at the memory of the tigers he saw prowling before, but could only hope they remained elsewhere for now. A cold wind rolled through the trees and rattled the branches. Dead leaves scraped the earth and shriveled in the heat of the fire. Sean drew closer to the flames and fell back asleep.

The next time he awoke, Mina sat across from him, studying him over the red glow of the embers. Night was heavy upon them, the earth stiff with frost. Sparks jumped and alighted in her gaze.

He stared back at her, realizing for the first time that he wore no lenses to cover his eyes. In the light of the fire, they probably blazed redder than the flames themselves.

"Who are you?" she asked at last.

He looked away. How much did she remember?

"I saw you back in the palace," she said. "You took walks with the princess. Your name was Chief Darius. Wasn't it?"

He met her gaze again, glaring. What good would it do to lie? She knew his darkest secret. The only thing he could do about it was kill her. And in his current state, he wasn't even sure he could do that.

She paled with fear, as if sensing his thoughts. "Listen," she said. "Any enemy of Picard's is my friend. Besides, you were the one who saved me from him. Weren't you?"

He bowed his head in acknowledgment. He had almost forgotten about that. It had been so very easy to set her free: just the slice of a rope. He had merely been disgusted by what Picard seemed to be doing to her, and saw no reason to leave her trapped there. What she did for him had been much more difficult. But he saw no reason to point that out right now.

"Talk to me," she said. Even though she crouched close to the fire, she shivered from the chill of the night, or perhaps some other sensation. A desperation cracked the solidity of her gaze. "Please."

Sean took a deep breath, feeling the ache of his ribs and shoulders. He thought of how much he wanted to kill Richard right now. In one sense that would make him feel better. In another, the effort alone would hurt very much. The only thing he could do about his anger was clench and grind his teeth. "What would you have me say?"

"I want you to tell me the truth. I have spent most my life under the spell of safra. When I first awoke from it, the first thing I knew was pain and fear beyond my wildest dreams. I am confused and frightened by the world I see clearly now. I can't go back to the life I knew before. But I don't know what else to do. I need someone to advise me. Or someone, at least, to talk to. So tell me the truth. I just saved your life. Perhaps you could say we are even, but could we at least try to be friends, too?"

Her plea moved him more than he expected. For someone who had grown up in the Haze, she seemed unusually aware of her situation. He could only imagine how strange this new world must feel to her. He had learned to protect himself from emotions a long time ago. She, on the other hand, awoke in this terrible world with the heart of a baby in the body of twenty-year old. "My name is Sean," he said. "I am a Woven. Do you know what that is?"

She shrank back a little further. She seemed to understand well enough.

"I am an assassin," he said.

"But you ... and the princess ..." Mina shook her head helplessly.

"I was Chief Darius, and I wasn't," he confessed. "It was a role I played while on a mission."

"A role?" Her sharp eyes narrowed on him. "I saw you on your walks with the princess. I may have been in the Haze at the time, but I know what I saw. You didn't fake all that. Did you?" Her red lashes batted violently, as if the thought of this deception was too awful for her to accept.

Sean grunted with frustration. Again, she seemed wise beyond her experiences. "Not exactly. I ... I don't know, really. Chief Darius began as a deception. But while I was him, I felt ..." He grimaced, clutching his aching leg. Was there any part of his body not mauled and hurting? "Damn it. I felt like I really was him!"

"Here." Mina gave him some more ale. She watched curiously as he emptied the flask, then threw it aside. "Who did you kill?" she asked after a brief silence.

He looked at her sharply.

"Your mission. Who were you there to assassinate?"

"I'd ... rather not say."

Mina sat up with a start. "Please tell me it wasn't Princess Fayr!"

"It wasn't." It was the next worst thing, however. He looked away from her, gnashing his teeth. "More ale, please."

"I don't have any more."

They sat together for another long silence.

"What are you going to do now that your mission is over?" asked Mina at last.

"I don't know." Sean felt tired now. He wanted to go back to sleep. But he sensed that Mina's questions were far from over.

"You can't go back to Vikand. I saw how Richard and Picard treated you."

"Fucking *bastards!*" Sean kicked the fire, throwing a slew of sparks into the sky. The movement caused him pain, but he didn't even care.

"You could stay here in Dearen," said Mina. "The tigers haven't come after you yet. That's a good sign."

"The tigers?" Sean snorted. "When I tried to flee through the forest, they chased me back."

Mina smiled. "That means they want you to stay."

She sounded ridiculous. What did the tigers have to do with anything? But he could not find the strength to argue with her.

"You could go back to Princess Fayr," Mina pressed. "You could try to live as Chief Darius."

Sean's head was spinning. "I'm going back to sleep now," he said. And so he did.

Days and nights passed in a blur. Mina came and went, sometimes for longer and longer stretches of time. Sean fell once into a fever, and all of time seemed to tangle together. The memories of all he had ever done played back in his mind with a garish visage. The only memories he did not hate were those of Fayr and Chief Darius. Mina's words came back to haunt him. Darius had been more than just a role he played. Darius had been a part of himself, a part he had buried most of his life. Darius arose to the surface only because of Fayr.

The fever passed, and his wounds began healing. It would be a long time before they healed completely, if ever. He did not think he would ever return to the full prowess he possessed before. But perhaps he would regain the strength of a normal man.

Several times, he saw Mina practicing with a knife in the woods. She looked as if she wanted to teach herself the arts of combat. Sean watched her in silence from afar, kicking, punching, and swiping. Then one day he burst out laughing.

She turned to him with a face red as beets, her eyes blinking with anger.

"If you plan to hurt anyone with that blade other than yourself," he said, "you'd better learn to hold it right."

"Then fucking tell me how!"

He tried his best to tell her, although it was difficult without being able to show her. It was the least he could do in return for the food she brought him and the care she gave him. When he had the strength, he shared some of his knowledge with her about holding and swinging a knife. He showed her his whip and his throwing stars. She could not do much with the stars; they took years of practice to throw properly, and extraordinary strength to do any damage. But she enjoyed cracking the whip all around her.

Despite all this, Sean sensed that Mina grew restless, and he knew their time together drew to a close. One day as he dozed, he awoke suddenly to a tremendous sound in the air. It reminded him of the grumble of the Great Volcano in Vikand. But this was no volcano. Sean realized belatedly that it might have been a tiger, but if so it seemed to transcend the state of beast as it roared with fury into the heavens. The sound eventually faded and Sean tried to cast the incident from his mind, dismissing it as beyond his conception. Nonetheless, it awoke the feeling in him that he needed to make a decision, and soon.

When Mina next returned to their camp, Sean broke the long silence between them. He managed to stand up on both his feet, though it

caused him pain, and walk a few steps towards her. Then he grabbed a tree trunk for support and sagged against it. She just watched him and waited in awed silence.

"You have done enough for me," he said. "Your debt to me is repaid."

"Perhaps it is." She looked at him uncertainly. "But what should I do now?"

How the hell should he know? Nevertheless, he racked his brain for a response. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to make Picard suffer," snarled Mina.

Sean chuckled softly, though in response to her scowl, he stopped and became grave. "Then that's what you should do."

"How much would it cost," said Mina, "if I wanted you to kill him?"

Sean smirked. "I would kill that bastard for free."

She considered this a moment. "I appreciate that. But I'm not sure if his death would make me feel better."

"Then what would?"

"I don't know. I want to make him suffer. But I also want to understand." She gave Sean a desperate, helpless expression. "Why did he do that to me?"

Sean stared back at her levelly. "Some things are better off not knowing."

She shuddered. "Maybe. But I still have to know."

"Then I suppose you should pursue him."

Mina nodded gravely. "And what about you?"

"I don't know."

Mina blushed suddenly and looked away.

"What's wrong?"

"The princess gave a speech recently. Perhaps you heard the roar of the tigers? She thinks you're dead, Sean—or Darius, I should say. She thinks you died protecting her brother from the Wolven."

Sean groaned and sagged further against the tree. He very much wanted to sit down again. But he could not bear to lose face in front of Mina more than he had already. He felt her green gaze boring into him.

"So you killed Prince Kyne?"

His silence was answer enough.

"You're right," she said. "I should go. What you do now is your own business."

She returned his horse and saddlebags, for what remained in them now was of no use to her. He possessed only his Wolven suit, mask, a few brown lenses, and many vials of Discipline potion. The Vikands had

pillaged the sacks for gold. Mina and Sean had used up all the food and drinks between the two of them. So Mina collected her own belongings, then turned to bid him farewell.

"Thank you, Sean." She seemed to have a hard time saying it, for she could not look him in the eyes.

"You don't need to—"

"Yes I do." She lunged forward and embraced him unexpectedly. He grunted from the impact, but reached to grip her in return. "I hope Darius is alive," she gasped. "I hope it very much."

Then she left on her way.

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Sean lingered by the campfire long after Mina's departure. He did not know what to do next, and even if he did, he would not have the strength to do it. It took all his strength just to gather some bramble from the forest and light another fire. Then he leaned against a tree, staring into the flames and feeling his eyelids sag with exhaustion. At last, a peaceful sleep washed over him.

He jerked awake at the sound of a twig snapping in the forest.

The fire was low now, barely strong enough to cast a ring of orange light past his feet. He squinted and tried to adjust his eyes to the blackness. He heard a body moving closer, but only barely. It moved so with incredible stealth, like a breeze stirring through the leaves.

The person took shape in the dim light of the fire, slowly and softly, as if the figure grew out of the flames themselves. Standing there was a woman, her body lean and muscular, wrapped tightly with a leather suit. When she moved, the suit glittered with a hundred shards of metal. She leaned down to the fire and blew into it. The flames grew and multiplied, blazing up to the canopy. The heat washed over him like a furnace. The woman turned and smiled at him, her eyes gleaming red.

"Shora!" he gasped. "It can't be!"

The Wolven grinned back at him, her teeth glinting in the light. "Hello, little brother."

"Where have you ... ? How are you ... ?"

"Hush." She walked closer to him and put her wiry hands against his face. Her nails scratched his grizzled chin as she studied him. "I can see that you have little strength."

"Yes. But ... but ... !"

"Hush, I said." She leaned close and embraced him. She smelled like soot and ashes. He wanted to embrace her back, but he couldn't find the strength—or perhaps the will—to do so.

She seemed to forgive him as she drew back and smiled at him once more. "Sean. I have traveled the world far and wide. I have seen so many things ... wondrous things. The world is so much bigger than we ever imagined it to be. Did you know that the Three Nations form one of the smallest continents on the planet?"

He just shook his head helplessly.

"I have seen Norsidia, Sean. The place in Father's book? I saw it with my own eyes. There are many races there, many people who communicate with the gods. And there are so many gods. I never even imagined there were so many! Oh Sean, I don't know how to begin explaining it all. All I can say is that leaving Wolven Mountain was the best decision I ever made. I have learned so much—more than most people learn in many lifetimes. I have communicated with the gods, and they have blessed me with their wisdom."

Sean did not know what to say to her. He preferred thinking she had gone crazy to thinking that her words held any truth.

Her face became grave. "There's an important reason I returned to the Three Nations, however. There are not many Wolvens left, brother—a few dozens, perhaps, spread over various continents. We are feared and hunted wherever we go. But that is not even the most important thing. Father may not have known much about the outside world, but he was right about one thing: there is only one Violene left in all the world. And she is Princess Fayr."

Sean gulped thickly.

"You understand, of course, what this means? The Wolvens and Violene are sworn enemies. Fayr is the spawn of Friva. We are the children of Belazar. It is up to you and I, the only Wolvens left in the Three Nations, to finish what our ancestors started. We must kill Fayr, so that Friva may never reawaken. I would have left the task to you, brother. But Belazar told me that you lost your way, so I came here to help you."

Sean could not stand any more of her nonsense. He shoved her away from him, even though the movement made him grunt with pain. "I don't need your help! You've lost your mind, Shora. Belazar *told* you? You sound like a fucking lunatic."

Shora grew very still. Then a hellish light flared into her eyes. She snarled, bearing teeth that looked razor sharp. Her fingers wrapped round his throat, pinching his skin, poking it with nails like knives.

"*You're the one who lost your way, Sean.*" Her voice had changed drastically. What a moment ago had been the soft, feminine voice of his sister now resembled the growl of a beast. It grated like two stones scraping

together, all breath and guttural chafing, no recognizable voice remaining. *"Look at you, Wolven! You are nothing without me. Your body is broken, and it will remain so if you do not come to your senses. You spurned my offer, and see how the balance rewards you for it?"*

Shora let go of him, though that hardly mattered anymore. Sean had never known such fear as what gripped him now. He melted back into the tree in absolute terror.

*"You could still have my power, Sean. If you ask my forgiveness, and swear to me the life that is already mine, I will give you the strength of ten thousand men. I will give you more than that, Wolven. No arrow will ever harm you again. You can scale the tallest towers in a single leap. You can bend fire and lightning to your will. You will command the night: as it belongs now to the moon, so shall it belong to you."*

Sweat beaded across Sean's forehead. He tried to wipe it away, but his arm trembled violently. "You ... you already have Shora," he gasped. "Why do you want me?"

*"Because I want what I want."* Shora's lips curled with a sneer. She reached out and brushed Sean's cheek with her nails. *"And I want your hands to be the ones that squeeze Fayr's blood from her heart."*

"I ... I won't do it." Sean's teeth chattered now as if Shora thrust him under icy water, even as his forehead continued to drip sweat. "I won't do it!"

Shora hissed and reached out to grab his neck again. She pushed him against the tree until he feared his spine would break. His head spun, and then darkness swept over the glare of fire. He fell scrambling into oblivion.

When he awoke, a soft dawn lit the frost of the morning. The fire had burned itself out, leaving nothing but ashes. A cold wind snaked through his clothes. His horse grazed nearby, biting through the frost and snorting with frustration.

Sean pushed himself up with a groan. His head ached as if a hammer struck his temples with every beat of his pulse. He had grown accustomed to discomfort, but the fearful sensation in his gut was worse than any of his pain.

He looked around his camp in a panic. He found no signs of a visitor in the night. Had Shora really come to visit him? Had it been a dream? Or did it even matter? Either way, Belazar had spoken to him. And the message was clear.

Sean dragged himself to his horse and rummaged through the saddlebag. He found a vial of Discipline and studied it in the light of the sun.

He did not like taking drugs, but this would at least get rid of his pain for a little while, or make him oblivious to it. And he needed to ignore his pain long enough to do what he had to do.

Belazar wanted Fayr's life, and he would stop at nothing to obtain it; Sean knew that now. He may have failed her brother, but he would not fail her the same way. He would do what he could to protect her.

He drank the foul potion, gagging as it went down. Next he searched his bag for the brown lenses and slipped them over his eyes, one by one.

Then he climbed onto his horse and rode for the palace.

# Chapter 20

## Punishment

The dungeons of Vikand were carved deep within the Great Volcano, about ten miles from the Khan's Tower. Picard had always admired the large, cone-shaped mountain from afar: its sharp, spear-like peak and its jagged base, sliced with gray and silver tephra. It stood by as a symbol of the khan's own strength and dominion. Picard had appreciated its ominous visage many times while sitting at his window in the Khan Tower and smoking a roll of safra.

Once he walked up the stone steps of its base into its ashy flank, his love for the Great Volcano dissipated. A gaseous smoke drifted from its peak, casting shadows on a red sunset. The smoke seemed to mock Picard, reminding him of the Dearen Haze he had breathed only days ago. Instead of filling him with pleasure, this haze of gas would poison him over time, making his lungs burn, searing his eyes with heat. Here he had been damned to live his life indefinitely.

"You can't do this," he yelled, not for the first time. He had yelled it so often that his throat ached from the effort. For the last two days of traveling, he had almost abjured the effort, as it did him more harm than good. Now he couldn't resist the urge to try again. "You can't do this! I am Archon Picard! I've done nothing wrong!"

Such efforts were useless. The hordeswoman twisted his bad arm and turned his protests into screams of pain. She led him down rocky halls and ashy fissures, past chained prisoners and filthy cells. He even passed a few dead bodies which had not yet been carried away.

"No ... *please!*"

The hordeswoman resisted his cries with a heart of stone. Picard marveled at her ability to do so. Could she not see how much agony he was in? Could she take no pity on his miserable condition? Judging by the gleam in her eyes, she actually enjoyed causing him pain.

The realization made his body lurch with guilt. He knew what it was like to appreciate people's fear, to enjoy making them squirm. But this was different. No matter what he did to other people, their pain surely never got so great as his. Surely.

"I've done nothing!" he cried. "I am innocent!"

These words rang in his head, over and over again, even as he was thrown into his stone cell and the door locked behind him. He threw himself against the wood repeatedly, forgetting to care how sorely his arm ached from the effort. "*I am innocent!*"

The statement seemed true enough. He had not done what Richard accused him of, which was somehow bringing about Leonard Khan's death. Although, if Sean had not gone to see Kyne and learn more about making safra in the first place ...

Hot tears streamed from Picard's eyes and salted his lips. Perhaps he was not wholly innocent. But he did not deserve this. No one did. He slid down against the door and collapsed against the floor, sobbing into the ash. He could smell the filth of whomever occupied this cell before him.

He was innocent.

He was innocent ...

\*

Hours, days, weeks passed and merged into one. They all seemed the same to Picard. They were filled with darkness, putrescence, and pain—neverending pain.

Sometimes, he discovered, his mood changed. This provided a slight variation from one hour, or day, or week to the next. Every once in awhile, he would awake from a nap and feel certain that a guard would soon waltz through the door and announce to him that Richard had made a mistake. Richard wanted him back. Richard needed his help. Richard missed him.

On such days—or mornings, or nights ... he could no longer tell the difference—he sat by his door and waited for his morning meal with a smile on his face. Yes, his arm throbbed. Yes, his head ached because he had clenched his teeth while he slept, in an effort to deal with the pain. But he felt hope, because he knew that eventually, Richard would realize his mistake and release him. When the guard came, the guard would swing open the door and pronounce, "You're free, Picard!"

Instead, no such thing happened. The guard threw in a slopping bowl of sour pottage. Then he walked away, without even saying, "Hello, Archon Picard, the man who used to be the khan's son."

After this, a fit of rage sometimes seized Picard. He would fling himself against the door and bang it with his aching fist. "Hey!" he would scream through a sore throat. "Show some respect, filth! When I'm out of here I'll see you punished for your impudence! I'll tie you down and whip you myself! *Hey!*"

As a response, he sometimes received hoots and yells from neighboring prisoners. Others told him to shut up. Yet more sometimes remarked, "That arrogant archon can go fuck himself."

In his state of anger, Picard would yell back at them. What he said was of no consequence, of course. No one listened to him. He was just another shrill voice ringing within the stinking depths of the volcano. But Picard valued the feeling of anger. It was a feeling to which he was unaccustomed, but while in its clasp, Picard felt powerful and confident. He knew without a doubt that the world was against him, and that one day—someday—he would obtain his revenge. He enjoyed imagining his revenge sometimes, as bloody or horrifying as it might turn out to be.

Eventually, however, the anger faded away. A new mood arose to replace it. The next time a guard brought him food, Picard would beg the guard for help. He would offer a great reward for the guard's compliance. And when the guard turned a deaf ear, Picard would collapse against the dank walls of his prison and mutter a prayer to the gods.

"Friva, Belazar, Lokke, Earth Mechanic, Thorin, Delix ... whoever is up there, whoever is listening, please help me out of here. I don't care who you are: if you have power, I will worship you. If you release me, I will fall to your will. I will do anything you wish. And I can do a great deal, truly. I may still have some influence over my people, if you give me a chance to use it. I may still have a chance to influence my brother, even. I know how he is. He has a hot temper. Then he tends to forget whatever he did while in one of his fits. By now he probably misses me, he just hasn't gone around to setting me free, or else he's too proud to. Anyway, if he saw me again, he would probably have mercy. Please help me, all you gods—any of you! Or, if you don't wish to free me, send me safra. At least do that, please. Send me something to make this place bearable. Something to take away the pain ... the terrible, neverending pain. Please, gods. Anything. Anything!"

And so he prayed, listening to his own voice bounce back against the sharp stones, sounding strident and altogether irritating. When he tired of the sound of his own voice, he would try to sleep, for sleep offered the only relief from his constant pain. If that didn't work, he would keep muttering prayers, or else fall into a deep depression.

The depression was the worst mood of all. He would weep, yell, and moan. His mental anguish matched the throbbing of his arm. He could not escape it; all he could do was cry, and cry, and cry. The other prisoners would mock him for it. This only made him cry harder.

Next he would fall into a state of denial, certain that this was all a mistake, and it would be corrected any moment. Thus the cycle started anew.

He sobbed, he groaned, he bashed his head against the stone wall. He would rather die than experience this pain any longer. He had done many terrible things in his life. Perhaps he deserved this. Or at least he deserved to die. But he could not bear to live like this for much longer. If he did not have safra to snuff out his pain, perhaps he would snuff out his own life. Perhaps it was the only obtainable escape.

In his darkest moments, when the pain reached its peak, Picard sometimes would burst out with laughter. A state of euphoria would strike him unlike any he'd known before.

"This is what it feels like, fools!" he would screech amidst cackles. "This is what it means to feel it all! I feel it all. MAGGOTS! You will never understand what it means to feel as I do. You will die a meaningless existence! *You will never understand as I do!*"

Eventually he stopped coming to the door to accept his meals. He left them on the floor to rot. When he had the energy, he would return to bashing his head against the wall, hoping to knock himself into oblivion, or else kill himself.

He must have come close to success, for one day he fell into a deep dark sleep, free of nightmares and sensation; free, even of pain.

Perhaps he had escaped at last.

\*

He awoke to a cold, wet rag wiping over his skin.

He blinked and saw the white glow of moonlight. Was there actually a window in this room? When he inhaled, he only smelled the usual stink of the dungeons. But he tried to imagine a fresh breeze in there somewhere. The cool rag felt so good on his burning skin. He sensed that he wore new linens, only because they did not cling to his body like the clothes he'd worn for the last few weeks, and despite the scorched stench of the volcano, he no longer smelled his own body's malodor.

"Hello?" he said weakly, in response to the god-like hand stroking his feet with the rag. If he lifted his head, perhaps he would be able to see his savior. But he did not yet possess the strength. His head felt like a bag of rocks. "Are you the answer to my prayers?"

"That depends on what you prayed for." The voice was soft, feminine. "How do you feel?"

"I feel ..." He wanted so much to look at her, but when he tried to lift his head again, a spell of dizziness forced it back down. The joints of his right arm twitched. "Like a bowl of roses. How the fuck do you think I feel?"

"I thought you might feel a little better now, at least. Better enough to feel a small bit of joy again. Perhaps a little bit of hope?"

"Hope ..." His voice rasped upon the word. "I suppose I dare to feel hope, at the present. But who ...?"

"Drink this." Something smooth touched his lips. She tilted the goblet and precious liquid poured into Picard's throat.

Then he gagged, lurched up, and spewed the liquid from his mouth, gasping for breath. Only then did his startled eyes settle upon his new captor.

"What's wrong, Picard?" The woman's plump red lips spread with a smile. "Don't you like vinegar?"

"Mina!" Surely it was a dream. Surely it wasn't possible. But there before stood him the beautiful maid of Dearen. Freckles sprinkled her rosy cheeks. Her red hair fell haphazardly about her face; she appeared to have cut it, for no stray lock fell much further than her ears, but there was no mistaking that crimson color and wild texture. The cut on her arm he remembered giving her still wrinkled with a scab. There was something quite different about her than the Mina he knew—or tried to know—in Dearen. Mischief sparked in her green eyes. There was a brightness—and cruelty—to her gaze which had certainly not been there before. "Can it be?"

"Of course it can." She reached out, grabbed his golden curls, and wrenched his head forward. "Now drink some more."

He surrendered at first, letting her slosh more of the foul stuff past his lips. Then he kicked and thrashed to fight the terrible taste. She held him firmly, then clamped her hand over his mouth until he swallowed. His eyes bulged with terror as he saw the satisfaction on her face.

He remembered doing something similar to her while in Dearen. While he held her captive in his room, which he tried his best to drain of the Haze, he often brought her food and drink. But all she wanted was safra. He would toy with her and tell her that the drink he brought for her had safra in it. She would drink all of it, even if it was old juice or sour milk, in hope of tasting some safra. But he lied to her every time, and gave her none.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She twisted his hair in her grip, making him yelp. “Perhaps you wanted safra? That’s too bad. I won’t lie to you, Picard, as you did to me. No, I won’t even give you the leisure of hope. I will tell you right now that you’ll never taste safra again.”

“Mina ...!” The reminder sent unbidden tears to his eyes. This was all too much. “You may be wrong about that, Mina. There might still be a way. Perhaps if you free me—”

“Never, ever, *ever!*” She struck him suddenly across the face. The blow was not very hard—it did not need to be. He was already so bruised and battered that his skull nearly exploded from the impact. “You fucking son of a bitch. I will *never* help you. I am going to make sure you stay here until the day that you die, which I hope is far, far away from now. I am going to—”

In a burst of panic, Picard pushed against her and rolled off the table on which she had washed and dressed him. Though the table had appeared clean, for she covered it with a blanket, he quickly understood its usual purpose. He saw chains hanging from the walls next to hooks, lashes, and knives. Blood stained the rocks forming pools of black in the torchlight. She had brought him to a torture chamber.

He lunged for the door, but she fell upon him from behind. She pushed him to the ground and he fell in a heap.

“You *bastard!*”

For a moment he couldn’t breathe. Jolts of pain jerked up his gloved arm. His head spun. Mina climbed on top of him and pummeled his back with her fists.

“You ruined me. You introduced me to a life without safra, and you made it more horrible than I ever could have dreamed. You have taken more joy from me than a life without safra could have ever done. You son of a bitch ... ”

She kept hitting him, slapping him hysterically with her bare hands. The contact left hot stinging spots along his back, tingling with her touch, sending ripples through his entire body. And all the while she sat on top of him, rocking, grinding his groin into the floor.

“Bastard ...”

And now she was crying. One hot, boiling tear hit the back of his neck, then slid down onto the floor.

Picard took a deep breath.

She grabbed his shoulder with her hand, digging in her long, prickling nails. She flipped him over, and he did not fight her. He could not say why, at first. The most obvious explanation was that he was in pain. But

there was more to it than that. In truth, he felt something new right now. His heart thundered in his chest. His blood churned with warmth, but despite that, his body shivered. The shiver was a pleasant one.

"What the ... ?" She stared at his crotch. Then she cried out and pulled back from him.

He noticed the truth about the same time she did. He did not have time to hide it, and at first, he did not want to. Pride mingled with shame. Because suddenly, for the first time in many years, he sported an erection.

His pride did not last very long. As soon as he recovered, he pulled in his knees and shuffled backward. He moved back against the wall and remained there, hiding himself with his knees. He breathed deeply and raggedly.

"I ... I don't understand," gasped Mina at last. "All that time, while you held me captive, you never ... "

He could not help himself. His eyes roved her body as if he had never seen it before. She dressed very simply, in plain trousers and a threadbare tunic. Most would probably say she looked uglier now than she did when he captured her, plain and dirty, her hair sawed off around her neck, her eyes blazing with hatred. And yet to Picard, she now looked as beautiful as a goddess.

"Stop looking at me like that. *Stop!*"

A burst of pain spread suddenly from his torso. As he reeled, slipping sideways and curling even deeper into himself, he realized she had kicked him. *Thump*; her boot struck him again, this time near the ribs. He groaned with pain. But pain was not the only emotion in his voice. There was also satisfaction.

"*Stop that!*"

She grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him up. She dragged him to the table and flung him back over it, face-down. Then she took his bad arm and twisted it upwards.

He screamed with agony.

She leaned closer to him, increasing pressure on the intertwined rods of flesh and metal. He moaned through gritted teeth and tears poured from his eyes. Mina leaned even further, hissing in his ear. "You don't like *that*, do you?"

She reached around his body with her free hand, searching his trousers. Her fingers found the bulge and twisted cruelly. Picard groaned again, a wave of pleasure riding his pain.

She let go of him and drew back again, her face pale with shock. "You ... you pervert! I don't understand!"

Picard sighed and fell back on the table, supporting himself with his good hand. He looked up through his frizzy curls at the maid, watching her breasts heave with breath. Her lungs pumped as violently as his did. He wondered if she felt any of the same excitement. He didn't know how to explain this. It was terrible. And it was wonderful.

"I suppose we both failed to understand each other," he said at last. Then he pushed off the table and swaggered closer. His body ached everywhere, his head swam, his arm was on fire; and yet somehow his gut took all the pain, all the displeasure, and turned it into something ... else. His loins stirred and his skin itched to touch her, even if he hurt himself doing so.

She shrank away from him until she was up against the wall, unable to retreat further. She watched in horror as he approached. Only when he stood inches away did she pull a knife from her belt and flash it before her. "Don't come any closer, or I'll—"

"Yes?" He pushed himself against her, even though the point of her blade dug into his stomach. "What will you do to me?" He leaned so close he could feel her panting breath against his face. He could smell her, and once he did, he wanted to smell more. Compared to the stench of the dungeons, her scent was like a bundle of flowers—even the tartness of her body odor. She trembled against him as he leaned closer and closer, close enough for his breath to hit the skin of her collarbone, for the crimson edges of her hair to tickle his nose. His lips brushed her neck.

She jerked, her blade slicing his side.

He drew back, wincing. A trickle of blood wet his white clothes. He looked down at it in awe.

She lunged forward and grabbed him again, pushing him down against the stone floor. He fell on his back as she straddled him. He did not fight as she grabbed his bad arm and twisted.

He did not know what came over him. The pain was excruciating. He wanted to faint from it. For so many years, he had gorged himself on safra so he did not have to feel it. And yet with Mina doing this to him, her green eyes blazing with fury, the agony transformed. It was as if total pain and total pleasure existed side by side with a faint line between them, and his pain was so great it transformed into bliss.

He cried out as his pleasure poured out from him, for he could contain it no longer.

Mina remained holding him for awhile, her eyes glazed over with a satisfaction not unlike his own. Then she realized what had happened and recoiled. She stared at him in shock, then got up and ran from the room.

The guards came to collect him a few moments later. They found him limp and compliant in their grasp, even as they led him back to his cell. Even when they locked him in, Picard still wore a strange smile on his face.

For a long while he stared into the shadows, remembering, marveling at it all. Pain continued to course through his body, but for the first time, he felt as if he could endure it without safra.

“Thank you, gods,” he said. Then he burst out with laughter. “Thank you! I know it was one of you. I asked you to set me free, or else give me safra to help me survive here. You did not give me either of those things, but you gave me something ... something new. Which one of you was it, I wonder? I hope you’ll let me know, soon enough. I imagine you’ll want something in return. Is that how it works? I don’t even know. Right now I don’t even care. I just thank you!”

He cackled into the darkness. Then, when he fell asleep, he saw an owl flying through the night. As it flapped its great wings, feathers scattered across the stars. Silver hair flowed in the moonlight. Then two black eyes, like gaping holes, fixed him with their stare.

*Nothing is free, Picard, someone told him. And when the time comes, I will collect my side of the bargain.*

*You do that,* Picard replied. Then he fell into a dreamless slumber.

# Chapter 21

## Wedding Day

Tomorrow night marked the winter solstice. The wedding plans neared fruition. The ceremony was practiced, the script written. Tomorrow morning, Chief Abrax would ride into Dearen with his one thousand hordesfolk. He would take Fayr's hand in marriage and thus the two nations would unite.

Fayr's maids tried to hold a celebration for her on the night of her wedding. But no matter how hard she tried, Fayr could not throw her heart into the festivities. She bathed in milk and drank spiced vino. The maids braided her hair and traded naughty tales of their adventures with men. Princess Fayr had told no one of her own experience with Darius, as strange and forbidden as it had been. She most certainly would not do so now.

Eventually, she felt she would not be able to hold in her tears, so she asked them all to leave. Only Jeevu, who Fayr had allowed to partake in some of the games, stayed behind. He stayed with her by the window and played a melody for her as she gazed upon the stars.

"Princess," he said suddenly, stopping in the middle of a song. "Perhaps you should not marry Chief Abrax."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jeevu!" she snapped. "It's what I must do. You must not weaken my resolve right now. I am too fragile as it is without the poison of your sentiments!"

"But Princess, all the kingdom looks to you now for happiness. If you are not happy, then what are we?"

Fayr scoffed at the irony of it all.

"Majesty." Jeevu bowed down before her, wrapping her cold hand with his slender fingers. His copper hair flowed in waves along his arms. He looked up at her with eyes that would melt an iceberg. "Beautiful princess. Did you know I've made a new friend of late?" He drew back

slightly with a blush. "I'd like us to be more than friends, actually, but I'm not sure if he feels the same as I do. Anyway, can you guess who he is?"

Fayr tossed her shoulders with a violent shrug. She couldn't care less right now about Jeevu's romantic adventures.

"He is Gregor. Chief Darius's slave?"

She froze with surprise.

"Even though he was Darius's slave, he is nearly as destroyed by his master's disappearance as you are. Well, maybe not *as* much, but the fact remains: he had grown rather attached to Darius as a master. He also seems somewhat obsessed with the events of the day your brother ... er, the day so many people died. He says he's determined to get to the bottom of it all, for he's certain there's more to it than meets the eye. The strangest part is that he talks as if he knows Chief Darius is still alive."

Fayr could not help herself. Her heart fluttered with hope. Her hands gripped Jeevu's a little more tightly. "But the bodies in the dungeon ... "

"Gregor says he saw Darius bring more bodies than Leonard Khan's into the dungeon. He has gone over the details with me many times. He is obsessed, you see! And I listen to him ramble, just to be nice." He smiled shyly at this, but he could see that Fayr was not amused, so he pushed on gravely. "Well, he says Darius spoke as if he was preparing to leave the palace. As if he knew he might never return!"

"I don't understand." Fayr's nails dug into Jeevu's skin.

He winced a little, but continued. "Darius told Gregor to collect his things and meet him at one of the gates. So Gregor went there and waited with Darius's horse. He says that out of nowhere, someone knocked him out and rode off on Darius's horse. He doesn't remember much other than that. But he suspects it was Darius. He says that Darius's steed was quite picky, you see, and kicked almost anyone off other than the chief himself!"

"*Stop!*" Fayr threw Jeevu's hands from hers and rose to her feet. She turned away from him in a whirl of white silk. Then she clawed at her ears with her fingers. "I won't listen to any more of this! It is *foolishness!* The whole palace was in an uproar that day! Who knows who it might have been?"

"But Princess, don't you think it's possible that—"

"*GET OUT!*" The slap of her hand against his cheek sent a resounding *crack* through the chamber. She had never stricken an inferior like that, especially someone she loved as much as Jeevu. But tonight, her heart was one of stone. What good was it to love anyone right now? She

snarled through her teeth to repeat herself once more, for the minstrel had gone stiff with shock. "Get out."

He picked up his harp, clutched it to himself like a shield, and finally obeyed.

Fayr sat down on her bed and remained there unmoving. She no longer even felt the need to cry. She felt almost nothing at all. If this was how she must remain to survive, so be it.

She did not know how long she sat there. She did not want to sleep; she did not want to dream. Instead she watched as gray clouds crawled across the moon and stars. The night thickened and cold frost crept over the stones of her window. Candles melted to their sticks and flames drowned in the churning wax. Fayr sensed the dawn soon upon her. She could feel it crawling into Dearen like a rat scratching at the walls. Not long from now, she would receive word of Abrax's army. It was only a matter of time.

At last, knuckles rapped against her door.

"Come in," she said without emotion.

She had expected Sir Gornum, and there he was. But to her surprise, Jeevu stood next to him, as did the fellow he had talked so much about: Gregor. The slave wore a strange expression on his face, stern and resolute, as one who has just found proof in his convictions.

"It's true, Princess!" cried Jeevu. "Gregor was right!"

"My master lives," said the slave.

Fayr turned desperately to the Master of the Royal Guard, whose face was white as a sheet. "Gornum?"

"It's true," rasped Gornum. "Chief Darius ... he has returned."

\*

Fayr stood petrified in front of Darius's room for a long time, searching for the courage to enter.

A few weeks ago she would have run into the room and thrown herself onto Darius without hesitation. How long had she dreamt of a moment like this one! Worse, how many times had she fantasized reliving their single, frenzied night together? Now, the memory made her cheeks burn with shame. She had been so very foolish at the time, even though it was not so long ago. Her foolishness may have cost her brother's life. Who could say what might have happened had she not been so seized by passion that fateful night?

Her hand trembled, lifting towards the door, then pausing again. Perhaps she should refuse to see him again. After all, the light of dawn trickled through the windows. Tonight she would marry High Chief

Abrax. It was too late to change the inevitable. Why torture herself in the meantime?

With an inward groan like the creak of the door itself, she entered the room.

At first, she did not recognize him. She thought perhaps she entered the wrong chamber. A man lay slumped in a couch not far from the window. He wore a simple tunic, leather boots, and meager jewelry. His shoulders sagged over his stomach as if holding in a terrible pain. His brown hair fell over his nose, distorting part of his face.

"Darius?"

With a grimace he sat up. His hand trembled as he fumbled for something under his woolen mantle. At last he grabbed a small vial, popped off the cork, and drank it. She watched his movements in a state of horror. The grace of the man who had walked—almost glided—with her through the halls of Dearen could not be found in the clumsy groping of the figure before her. But after a moment he exhaled, sat up a little straighter, and thrust his gaze up to meet hers.

Here was the man she knew and loved, his chiseled face casting sharp shadows in the sunlight. His eyes gleamed amber gold in the dawn's fire. "My princess," he said.

"Darius ... "

Feeling faint, she pulled up a wooden chair and sank down across from him. For a moment, she could not bear to look at him. Despite everything, even his gravely wounded body, she could not deny that she felt as strongly about him now as the day he disappeared—if not more so. "What ... what happened?" A hint of anger edged her voice.

"I failed you, my princess."

She looked back up with surprise. His voice was calm, his gaze unwavering, though something like an ongoing wince pinched his lips.

"I could not save your brother from the assassin, as much as I may have wished to. I could not dispose of Picard or Richard, either: which I certainly wished to do, also." He cringed as he motioned to a bloody bandage on his thigh. "They bested me, Princess. They knew I killed Leonard Khan. They began to punish me as any Vikandese would."

"Oh, Darius ... " She leaned forward, tempting to embrace him as she so desired. Something in his gaze stopped her cold.

"I escaped," he said gruffly. "I live on, and though I am wounded, I will heal." He reached out and grabbed her hand, so suddenly she flinched. "I will never fail you again, Princess. With Belazar as my witness, I will never let you meet the same fate as your brother."

A chill scraped over Fayr's skin. The curtains fluttered and a cold breeze snaked through her gown. She shuddered and drew closer to Darius involuntarily. "Why on earth would you say such a thing in the name of Belazar?"

"I have my reasons," he said. His lips curled with a strange smile.

She drew back from him, sniffing the foulness of his breath. "What was that awful thing you drank?"

"Apologies, Princess. It is medicine. I might need it to get me through today, if I'm to marry you."

"Marry me!" The words hit her like a shock. She pulled away from him, stood up, and turned the other direction. "Darius, much has happened since you left. I thought you were dead. I had to make plans. Today I will marry High Chief Abrax."

"Abrax? Hm." Darius grunted as he stood. She turned to stop him, to tell him to rest, but his hands caught her from behind and gripped her shoulders tightly. Some of his former strength seemed to pour through his fingers as he pulled her back against him. "I know Abrax."

"Oh?"

"Yes, somewhat." He moved away from her, sagging once more. He leaned against the frame of the window for support. The glow of the sunrise lit one side of his body. "I never told you everything about my past, Princess. I am no longer proud of it. I did things I did not wish to do in order to serve the khan and gain his favor. I did what was expected of one with my ... capabilities. I betrayed and killed people—a great many people. I have no wish to explain more than that. I said as much on the day I first met you. When I met you, I realized life could be different than what I had lived until then. Do you remember?"

Warmth stirred back into her blood. "I remember."

"Do you still accept me, knowing this?"

She closed her eyes, shuddering a little. She remembered the strength with which he held her the night they made love, with Leonard Khan's corpse still warm behind them. She had glimpsed the darkness in him then. But she had not fled from it. "I accept it."

His arms closed around her. She had not even heard him approach. She buried her face in his chest, inhaling the musky scent of his cloak. "Then accept that my past, unfortunate as it is, brings certain benefits. I can take care of Abrax."

She stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean ... he respects me. He fears me. They are one and the same thing. If I send him a message, he will heed it. He will call off the wedding, without repercussion."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

A tremor, ever so slight, rocked his frame. "If I'm wrong, I will pay the price, and I alone. I will take that risk. But you must trust me, Princess. Do not read the message I send him. Do not ask me of its contents. It will either work or ... it won't."

"Darius ... " She dared to hold him, to press herself against him. She rubbed her cheek against the sandy texture of his neck. His tart scent intoxicated her. "Friva help me, but I trust you."

His hands squeezed tight against her hips. "So you will marry me?"

"I will," she said. Then she kissed him. "King Darius."

She drew him close, embracing all of him, drinking his taste, even the bitterness of his medicine. Gods help her, but she would marry Darius, even if her decision cast the kingdom to ruin.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayden Woods is the pen name for Jenny Gibbons. She grew up on a farm in rural Tennessee, then pursued her dreams of film-making in Los Angeles. After receiving a BFA in Screenwriting from the University of Southern California and working on a primetime TV show, she decided to return to her original passion of writing novels. Since then she has lived in St. Louis with her wonderful husband and three beautiful pets, throwing all her will and energy into becoming a successful writer.

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**Ashes of Dearen: Book 2**  
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why his father died and avenge him to the fullest. But will King Canute's death be enough to fulfill him?

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## From the same author on Feedbacks

The First Lost Tale of Mercia: Golde the Mother (2010)

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age, releasing every other Tuesday. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time. Read the stories in any order; though interconnected, they do not follow each other chronologically, and each tale stands alone.

The First Lost Tale, “Golde the Mother,” is about the mother of Eadric Streona. It sheds light on Eadric’s strange childhood, and raises the question of who fathered the boy who would become notorious as one of the most treacherous men in England.

The Second Lost Tale of Mercia: Ethelred the King (2010)

This haunting short story illustrates the scandalous circumstances surrounding King Ethelred's rise to power at the age of eleven, and reveals why the entire reign of so-called "Ethelred the Unready" seems to have been cursed.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are a series of ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time.

The Third Lost Tale of Mercia: Aydith the Aetheling (2010)

Aydith's story is that of a young aetheling who, despite her royal blood, can get no one to listen to her willful opinions. With the encouragement of a kind hearth companion named Hastings, perhaps she will find another way to help her ill-fated country.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon

Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

*The Fourth Lost Tale of Mercia: Athelward the Historian (2010)*

Lord Athelward, an ealdorman who also wants to write history, finds his peace of mind disturbed when a strange woman named Golde and her young son Eadric show up on his doorstep with a ridiculous proposal.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

*The Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia: Algifu the Orphan (2010)*

In the wildest Lost Tale yet, we jump to the year 1014. Algifu of Northampton joins forces with Canute, the new and young king of the Vikings. Algifu believes that her father was murdered in cold blood by Ealdorman Eadric Streona. How far will she go to obtain her revenge?

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*The Sixth Lost Tale of Mercia: Hastings the Hearth Companion (2010)*

A royal hearth companion named Hastings fights on the front lines of battle for duty and the Golden Cross, but he entertains unrealistic notions of how his mistress, Aetheling Aydith, might reward him.

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The Seventh Lost Tale of Mercia: Hildred the Maid (2010)

In 1005 A.D., a terrible famine strikes Engla-lond. When a poor young woman named Hildred grows desperate enough to break the law for her survival, a rising thegn named Eadric takes her fate in his hands.

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The Eighth Lost Tale of Mercia: Canute the Viking (2010)

As a teenager, Canute struggles to find his place among a fortress of Jomsvikings and the differing religions surrounding them. An unexpected relationship with another Jomsviking, forbidden by the Christians, may force him to choose a side.

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The Ninth Lost Tale of Mercia: Runa the Wife (2010)

Runa expects to live her entire life isolated in the woods until she meets Thorkell the Tall. She tries to conform to society through a traditional marriage, but at a very high cost to them both.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Tenth Lost Tale of Mercia: Edmund the Aetheling (2010)

In the tenth and final Lost Tale, young prince Edmund suspects a plot against his father's life. He turns to his siblings, Aydith and

Aethelstan, for help, but King Ethelred heeds none of them. Will they ever find someone they can trust?

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

*Last Tales of Mercia 1: Emma the Queen (2012)*

Queen Emma's own son, King Edward, has been turned against her by Goodwin of Wessex and Archbishop Robert from Normandy. Edward accuses his mother of treachery and adultery with an English bishop. To prove her innocence, Emma must walk barefoot over nine scalding ploughshares and come out unscathed.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

*Lost Tales of Mercia (2012)*

All ten Lost Tales of Mercia set in Anglo-Saxon England can now be read in a single ebook.

A mother defies an ealdorman for the sake of her son. A boy becomes king at eleven years of age through the scandalous death of his brother. A young girl takes desperate measures to manipulate the king's court. An eccentric noble gives a young swineherd a priceless gift in the form of education. An orphaned woman joins the Viking prince to pursue her revenge...

These are only the first five stories of the ten Lost Tales of Mercia. They introduce the characters who will fight, love, and betray each other until the rightful king takes the throne of Engla-lond. These stories serve as a complement to the novel, "Eadric the Grasper."



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