

It was nearly midnight.

She hated doing this. Meeting in the night, like some sort of common thief. She was above this.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. *It's necessary*, she told herself. The fate of a city rested on this meeting. Not to mention herself.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her, trying to keep warm. Why did Valencio insist on meeting in a village so far away, especially without a horse? The city was plenty big enough, they probably could have found a good meeting place in one of the poorer districts without being caught.

"No," he had told her in his letter. "This needs to be discussed somewhere out of the way. The poor will give anything up for a bit of gold, you know that."

And he was right, of course. If someone in the court found out about this-

The sound of a twig snapping startled her, and immediately, she thought of a spy. *No*. No, that couldn't be it. She had been careful, after all. She peered into the forest, trying to get a look at what had made the noise. Perhaps it was just a fox, or maybe deer, she told herself.

Then again, there *were* those rumors about the new hand mirrors being sold on the black market. Supposedly, they were enchanted to allow one to spy on others, as long as there was something living nearby for the mirror's magic to hijack. And Duke Morrigan *was* quite crafty...

She shook her head, banishing the thoughts from her mind. No, as crafty as he was, Morrigan was loyal.

...wasn't he?

She continued toward the village, a little quicker this time, twisting her ring nervously.

After a few feet, another twig snapped. A few seconds later, the leaves rustled, and two men stepped out in front of her. Both were tall and bony, and their mismatched clothing and armor clearly identified them as bandits. Their eyes were hungry, and looked as if they missed nothing. When they smiled, their smiles were predatory. She backed up instinctively.

"So, who do we have here?" One of them said, looking her up and down.

She lifted her chin, trying to appear regal, and simultaneously hide her fear. She had heard enough stories to know that whatever followed wouldn't be pleasant.

The other man eyed her as well, ignoring her change in posture. "Looks rich," he said. "Might be able to get quite a bit off her. What's your name, Sweetheart?"

She briefly debated giving them a fake name, but her mind came up blank on ideas. "Valletta," she breathed. "And you are?"

The second man spoke. "I'm Rook. That's Cram," he answered, jabbing his thumb out to point at his partner. He paused. "You seem fancy. You'd sell real nice at the slave markets in Calvar."

She panicked. She'd thought they just wanted her money, but to make her a *slave*? "You wouldn't want me," she blurted out, desperate. "I haven't done a day's work in my life." That wasn't entirely a lie, either.

The first one, Cram, smiled, and bent down to whisper in her ear. "There's more than one type of slave, my dear." She shivered. Suddenly, he glanced down, noticing the ring on her finger, which she had been twisting absent-mindedly. "Hey, Rook, check it out. Looks like she's got one of them fancy protection rings the nobles wear, the ones with real magic in 'em. Could make us a lot of money. Maybe even more than she will."

She shook her head, forcing out a laugh. "This old thing? It's been in my family for generations. It's ancient. I don't think it even works."

That, however, was apparently the wrong thing to say. They saw through her nerves again, and she could see their curiosity grow. Rook spoke. "Take off your ring, girl. Give it here."

She refused again. They couldn't take her ring. She would gladly give them anything else, even – she shuddered inwardly at the thought – her body, but *not* her ring. If she gave up her ring... No. That couldn't happen.

Her refusal, obviously, did not sit well with Rook. If anything, it made him more determined. He held out his hand. "Give it here. Now."

She shook her head, starting to back away. There was no way she could outrun them, but if she could get into the woods fast enough, she might be able to hide long enough to escape.

This time, Rook growled. "I won't ask again. Give me the ring, or I'll take it off your dead body. Them rings don't protect against *everything*." A ray of moonlight bounced off of something at his side.

His friend, Cram, chimed in. "If you give us the ring, we *might* think about letting you go."

She shook her head again. "No," she said. She paused for a moment, thinking, desperate for a way out of the situation. "My brother is waiting for me in the next village. He's a wizard of the Order of the Crane. He's very rich. If you let me go, I'll convince him to give you whatever you want."

Rook spoke, snarling in anger. "What we *want* is that ring. And if you don't give it to us, we might just kill you and take it anyway. And rob your brother while we're at it.

She backed up some more, maneuvering herself so she'd be ready to run, but she bumped into Cram, who had apparently moved behind her as Rook was speaking. He spoke, finishing his partner's thought. "In fact, I think that's exactly what we'll do." He grabbed her hand and tried to force the ring off her finger while Rook rushed at her. She struggled, but he was so much stronger than her. He forced the ring off her finger, his nails scraping her skin as he did so. Rook had a knife in his hand now, which was pointed at her neck. He started to speak again. "You should've just given us the ring girl. You might've -"

Suddenly, a tidal wave hit her mind. She tried desperately to hold it back, but she couldn't. The panic that had consumed her was replaced by rage. Her mind transformed. Why had she ever been afraid? Why had she ever wanted to be human? What had she gained from that?

As these thoughts passed through her head, she changed. She grew, her skin ripping away to reveal matted brown fur. Her bones grew in grotesque proportions, changing her silhouette into a hulking monstrosity of a creature so large it dwarfed the trees, which had previously seemed so tall. Her head was horrifying, her mouth a jagged slash that took up half her face and was filled with razor-sharp teeth. Soon, a beast towered above them. The two bandits stared at the thing, frozen in horror.

It roared.