

DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN

Part One

By L.M.M. Naumann



Prologue: Xhindi

The Sun rose over the sea. Slowly, light filled the streets of Vejabhar, and following the rising sun came the bustle of city life. A palace sat in a castle on a hill in the east of the city, completely opposite the ocean where the Sun rose. The Sun's rays pierced the stained glass windows of the castle's tallest tower. Queen Shaahida al-Sahli opened the window, greeting the great light in the sky. Just as every other day, it was the first thing she did after waking up. Just as every other morning, it was the most cherished moment of her day.

I, meanwhile, was being shuffled through the streets four stories below. I was bound in chains. Captured. Like always I'd been caught thieving. Of course, I was a thief, but it wasn't fair! I needed information. I was on a noble quest! I was an adventurer! Why didn't these Makripi knights understand? The King of the city had apparently ordered me imprisoned in the palace and I was in no position to argue. Makrip was dotted with city-states with their own little Emirs and titles and treasuries, but they all swore allegiance to the High Ministry. If they didn't, they would get burned to the ground.

The Royal Guard certainly didn't understand when I tried to steal a scroll from the Holy Library of Vejabhar. I had to infiltrate the great library to get it. Did you know that the High Ministry has the highest literacy rate in the Timescape, and yet they don't let foreigners or travellers into their libraries? I was supposed to petition a priest, and then wait! The notary said it might be months before my request was processed. Months! What is this, Poch? At least in that greatest of all cities they understand the life of a Solitarius². No, I was not in Poch, the former center of the world-spanning Soluntum Republic. The pride of Earth, the city which ever dreams and never sleeps. No, I was in a desert backwater halfway across the world and I was low on both time and patience.

Either way it wasn't going to be *that* dangerous. I'd get in, get the scroll, read the scroll, put it back and then leave. No harm, no foul. I got about halfway into that plan when an Arcane Glyph went off and got me, the scroll, and about five bookshelves covered in a magical web. I cut my way out, sprinted to escape and was met with the tips of twelve Royal Guards' spears poking through the doors. I fought my way through half the city before they finally caught me. Now they were marching me right under that picturesque windowsill which the Queen lovingly gazed out of while the sun rose as if for her alone. The guards and I were still shaded by the walls of the keep. I never got the chance to see the sun before they pushed me inside the palace. They used a side door, with a stone doorframe. Of course, even prisoners important enough to lock in the palace were not worthy of entering by the front door and disgracing what I'm sure was an extremely pretty and eminently thief-alluring welcome mat. I hollered and yowled at them, pleading for freedom.

"I need to get to Alloy, please! I don't mean any harm to you or your kingdom, please. I'll return the scroll. I just had to see it. I'll get on a ship and never come back I swear! Just let me go!" I screamed.

² Soluntum term for a Knight who belongs to no order and serves no House. See also: *Ronin*

The guards didn't listen. The lot of them stayed stone-facedly calm. They reacted as if I wasn't even there. They shoved me down a clean but simple hallway and down a spiral staircase, which led into a dungeon—Trust me, I'm an adventurer—I know a dungeon when I see one. The entire level was made of stone, smoothed with time. The architects who would have built this foundation were centuries old—it still reflected the style of the ancient kingdom of Carazance. I recognized it from the last dungeon I inhabited. A lovely, blighted place swarming with Undead and crawling with man-eating Oozes. I waded through that hellscape for three days searching for the damned scroll and when I finally got to the bottom the blasted thing turned into dust in my hands. I was saved only by being lucky enough to find a scroll of *Speak with Dead* and asking one of the corpses if he knew of other copies of the library Scroll—not the one I used to cast *Speak with Dead*, keep up. He told me the greatest library in Carazance was ten days ride to the north. Black Gods, I was lucky Vejabhar's ancient dusty library still had the damn thing.

It was easy to contemplate my path to the dungeon because being locked in a prison cell is really quite boring. The guard slammed me to the floor, connected my chains to the wall, slammed the iron-barred door and left me to rot. Without trial, might I add!

Really, I shouldn't be so hard on myself. This would be the fifteenth—no sixteenth time I'd escaped from some sort of prison. It'd certainly be difficult, though, here in Vejabhar. They had four guards manhandle me down here, the palace has got to have a full regiment. Based on the size of the city and the Keep...I was getting my good planning thinking on. This is the fun part. I started calculating. The palace was three stories plus the tower...I'd fought twelve guards at the library, plus the four at the forge, plus the eight that blocked the gate. Rough estimating I'd say at least forty actively guarding the palace at any given time, maybe an extra ten guarding the Keep, two men in each crenulated tower, there were five towers total. Plus whoever was watching the grounds. Maybe another ten? Fifteen? Not to mention that I'd seen the barracks on the way in. It, too, was on the inside of the keep's walls. If they kept alternating shifts that could be hundreds of soldiers, even if they didn't it was probably at least twice what I'd estimated for the rest of the keep. Even if I did somehow escape the keep I'd have to leave the city. The city proper was guarded by a twenty foot wall with massive gates and each was protected by a squad of six men, who were necessary to open the gates unless I found a battering ram somewhere. That wasn't even considering getting out of this cell and retrieving my effects. I'd had my scimitar for ten years and I wasn't going to lose it now, especially not to a city as disrespectful as this one.

And even if I got through the dungeon, and all the guards, and all the gates and I didn't trip any other magical security that might be waiting for me, I'd still be in the middle of the goddamn desert! Makrip was not a convenient place to get kidnapped. People were too competent. Everyone knew magic! Very inconvenient. There was nothing I could do but plan and wait.

I didn't want to think about my surroundings because of their grimy nature but I couldn't help but to observe the cell—I had nothing else to look at. It was a dirty, bilgy room in the dungeons. The floor was stone, putrid water and coagulated blood stained the walls, filling the

cracks between bricks. The Iron bars of the door hadn't been cleaned in a year, or maybe a decade. I was alone. I'd shared cells with mates before and most of the time it was easier to escape if there was another person inside with you. If anything, they had more resources to exploit. I was chained to the wall opposite the door so I couldn't even reach it or the barred wall around it. Plan and wait. Those were my options. No thieves' tools to pick the locks, not even free hands to do so. They'd taken my rings, too, stripping them from my fingers on the horse ride to the castle. I didn't have much left on my body to improvise with.

The dungeons were at the bottom of a staircase. At the top, the guards had left the door open and light flooded in from the rising sun. I'd pulled my heist at night, but obviously it hadn't saved me. By the time dawn broke I'd already been in chains in the keep. The light of the sun had yet to touch my skin that day. The light...I thought of Alloy. I thought of my mission. That scroll was important, not as treasure or reward but because it gave me the knowledge I needed to free her. *Her*. The one who mattered most.

Still reminiscing, I let myself rest. I didn't want to touch the grimy stone so I whipped myself around until I could rest on something else. My chains were too tight on the wall for me to use the cot in the corner-I couldn't reach. What I could do however, was rest my feet on the pillow at the head of the cot while letting the chains take the weight of the top half of my body. It was surprisingly comfortable.

I let my natural healing take over. I had taken a wound in the fight less than an hour ago. I could still feel myself bleeding. They'd given me a rag and nothing else, the unhospitable swine. It had been enough to stop the flow and contain my blood. The cut was shallow, and I knew the amount of Souls in me would stop it from killing or debilitating me. The blood eventually stopped flowing as I let the souls in me stitch my body back together. That's one thing they could never take from me. They could take my beautiful, beautiful sword; they could take my scroll, they could take my rings, they could take my boots—oh those boots! I'd bought them in Poch and they were the best thing I ever bought. All the better things were stolen or given. Regardless, they'd never take my Souls. Not unless they killed me, which it seems like they weren't willing to do...Yet. So, even in this decrepit cell, I had power.

I expended most of my healing to fix the rest of the wounds on my body. I wanted to sleep but I couldn't with the metal of the chains poking into my wrists. Makrip's searing deserts and freezing nights had forced me to wear a shawl over my normal open shirt, but it had also been taken and the lack of insulation to my chest was getting on my nerves. I wasn't dressed for a place this gloomy. The general uncomfortableness of the cell didn't help. I wished I could fall asleep. I wanted to not be awake enough to think. On these occasions, I usually got drunk. Unfortunately, the dreary cell did not come with complimentary alcohol. A shame too, Makripi date beer was said to be some of the finest outside of Soluntum.

Someone closed the door and the dungeon was cut off from the sunlight and cast into complete darkness. I was left solemnly alone with my thoughts.

I continued contemplating my escape. Over time, I began to hear more and more of the outside world as my senses adjusted to a lack of sight. The clapping of hooves on cobblestones,

the thumping of feet. The dungeon was under the palace and evidently I was close enough to hear, or at least feel the vibrations of the adjacent street. I heard the stomping of someone clattering down the stairs. The door opened again, but this time the light that followed was clearly of torch rather than of sun. There was an aggressive burst of conversation in one of the Makripi dialects, and then the door slammed shut again. In the brief moment I strained my senses to get any information on the outside. The light illuminated the same dungeon as the last time I saw it, though I tried to memorize the layout in case I needed to sneak around in the dark. No sense alerting the guards by bumping into something and falling over. The conversation filled my ears and I couldn't hear anything over them. Surprisingly, though, my nose could get just a whiff of food. Black Gods was I hungry. I'd barely gotten to eat yesterday and I'd been having Makripi rations for the past two weeks. Say what you will of the High Ministry. It has its benefits, even as a man currently imprisoned by it. They are not kind with their travel rations though. It was ninety percent crackers the whole way. They can be very focused on efficiency sometimes and I suspect many of the traders I bargained with weren't thrilled to be opposite an adventurer. The tribesmen would have given me much better! Then again, they also would have had no value for my gold.

The smell! My nostrils returned to savoring the scraps of it while it lasted. Freshly baked fish, lamb straight off the bone, the sweet sauces of the desert. My favorite restaurant in Poch served Makripi food and I swear I'm going to go back to that place one day and eat the biggest lunch I can. The food of the palace of Vejabhar must be close to that flavorful joy I once tasted. I breathed in, hoping to catch more of the godly scent but nothing came but the wet stench of the dungeon. I couldn't wait to get out of prison.

I concocted a plan to break out of the cell. My hands were manacled and there wasn't much in terms of resources in the cold stone. I thought about taking out the gold piercing in my belly button, and using the tip with my teeth to pick the lock. Getting it out without using my hands meant getting creative. I was lucky I was so nimble. I figured out a method after a few tries, false starts, and slamming my legs into the stone floor. I didn't have that much room on my arms, not enough to get my hands to touch each other, but there was a couple inches of give which was enough to give me time to do a slight run and kick off of the left wall, the one without the cot. If I thrust my arms down and my feet—my poor bootless feet—up I could catch the ceiling and hang upside down. Then, inching my feet across the floor towards the chains I could curve and puff up my stomach to barely get my teeth on the piercing. I was a couple inches from clamping down on the gold and pulling it out when the door slammed open and the sun's rays graced the dungeon. I quickly relaxed my legs and let myself fall, slipping back into my original position. Arms chained, legs on the floor. Luckily, I'd had a lot of training and I was graceful enough to make the maneuver while only brushing one big toe against the cobblestones as my feet fell. I made practically no noise as I did. I let out a breath of deep concentration and shook my head to try and get rid of the sweat covering my face. Perhaps the guards were here to take me to my trial. That would be a perfect opportunity to escape.

Fortunately, it was someone far better. At first I thought she was carrying a torch down the spiral staircase but as she came into view I realized that she'd never need one. The woman

who approached was an Ifrit—a human of fire—if I had ever seen one. I should know, my mother was an Ifrit. Her hair was the dead giveaway. It was wild, not unkempt but large, long and flowing. It didn't just glow like fire. It was made of flowing flames from the roots down to the ends. She wore a bejeweled tiara on her head which was glowing red-hot from the contact with her hair. Whatever fabric her clothes were made of must have resisted the flame. She was fashioned in the traditional Makripi style. A pair of Salwar under a dress with a belt covered in gold and pearls. The dress, which went from her collar to her boots, was embroidered with golden silk in patterns resembling the Makripi script. I'm sure if you read it and observed her for a few minutes you might assemble a poem worthy of monarchal dress from the patterns. I doubt, however, that its meaning would be nearly as beautiful as the woman herself. Under all her garments her skin was dark, a brown typical of Makripi tribesmen. She had a gold nose piercing and a golden necklace dangling with pear-shaped beads. She also wore a set of matching golden earrings in the shape of angular hoops. I glanced at her ungloved hands, checking—sure enough they carried a menagerie of rings in the Ifriti style.

Her eyes were unmistakably Ifrit, too though. Glowing as hot as embers. They were tense. I could tell from one glance that her being here was a risk. She was uncertain. Perhaps even desperate. That would make two of us.

“Are you Xhindi?” She asked. “The one they call Prince of the Road?”

Her words were unexpected, they came from a language I recognized. I didn't speak Makripi and I expected most people to speak Common. Her words were in a different language though, full of sharp clicks and hisses. She was speaking Ignan, the language of the sun. My eyes lit up and I moved as close as I could to her and the door before my chains slacked and clanged, stopping my progress.

“You know my title! You must have heard my *legends*.” I reposed in Ignan and I emphasized the last word. I was hopeful.

I was called ‘prince of the road’ because I never stayed in one place, always traveling, always on the road. I suppose, also, it might have been a nod to the string of lucrative Highway robberies I'd pulled on the peninsula about five years ago. Either way, a fine legend if you ask me.

She gave a subtle nod. “Yes, I have heard of your exploits. You were once in service to the Lady of bronze in the White Sahel Desert.” It wasn't so much a question as a statement of fact. I nodded. As we spoke, I noticed lines on her face. I recognized the remnants of tears. When she spoke again I spotted the deep anger welling behind her collected expression.

“You're trying to get to Alloy? Hot City? On the world of fire?” She asked.

“Well, I would love to. If a pretty lass like yourself would unlock the door and save me from execution.” I proposed.

“You get me out of the city? I get you out of the cell. Deal?” She insisted.

The smile across my face widened, “Oh, that would be absolutely delightful. Are you? Headed to Hot City I mean?” I used the least grand of the colloquial nicknames for the city. One

that was associated with the tourists and travelers who came to beseech the jinn and spend their gold and souls in bazaars and cafes.

The Ifrit woman nodded in response to me.

Hunger was dripping back into my voice at the prospect of freedom. Of course! Of course! Of course! I prayed to Abhromliha and she gave me her blessing! I kissed one of the golden arm bands on my left arm. The one I devoted to honoring the goddess of luck.

“One more thing,” I requested, “Could you get my effects? I believe the guards took them before they tossed me into this rat-trap.”

“We can grab them on the way up. It should be simple.” She seemed annoyed to consider the question.

“You’re awfully trusting of a thief.” I commented, trying to stir up banter.

“I’m in the mood,” She said with a lopsided smile. She put a hand into her dress and pulled out a keyring, loaded down in keys of different shapes and sizes. Choosing one which clicked into the lock on the door, she turned it and I was free! Wait, no. Still had to wait for the chains. I eagerly stepped forward as the chains pulled me back and I slipped on the ground. I escaped falling to the floor with a near miss and landed on my feet. I slid back up into standing position. As easily as wind she stepped through into the room and with another key on the same keyring went to unlock my chains. There was a small smile on her face after my mishap. I smiled back in my signature ‘I’m about to get away with something I shouldn’t and I’m going to have fun doing it’ way.

“My name is Shaahida al-Kamali,” She unlocked one of my hands, then walked to the other and unlocked it.

“I am Queen of Vejabhar, married to the King.” she continued.

I shook out my hands and flexed them in excitement. Only a few hours in chains felt like eons. I twisted around to be grateful for the fact that I could once again move, but she took me by the shoulder and turned me around to face her. Shaahida looked me right in the eyes and I could see the fire in her soul.

“Get me out of this city.” Her voice was flame, desperate, ferocious, angry. I knew in that moment that she was as sick of her prison as I was of mine.

Prologue: Xhindi II

As always, I came up with a plan. We started by making our way up the staircase that led back to the first floor of the palace. Shaahida's hair and royal dress made her stick out. I exploited that. She would be noticeable, and I could creep behind her unseen. As far as the guards knew, she will have entered the dungeon and left just as quickly. I made sure that anyone listening would only hear one set of footsteps ascending the stone stairs. The Queen barked an order in Makripi at the men guarding the hallway which led to the staircase and they fled. I silently followed her up and into the torchlight.

"I asked them to fetch the head of the guard. He's probably busy with his wife this time of morning, but it'll only buy us a few minutes and they'll get suspicious when I'm not waiting for them." She explained.

"A few minutes is all we need. Where's the stash?" I said.

She nodded to a heavy wooden door to the right, which she unlocked with another key on her burgeoning keyring. She pushed the door open to reveal the most beautiful thing I'd seen all day—of course, I hadn't gotten to see the sun yet today—my magic items. I quickly scooped up my scimitar and scabbard. They were still in my dueling belt and I slipped it on around my waist. I multitasked, pulling on my lovely soluntum boots while I repacked my satchel. I tumbled around the room, grabbing this and that. They had scattered my items, probably because they were planning on taking them for themselves or reselling them. Thieves' tools here, Disguise kit here, Map of Makrip there.

"How do you move like that?" Shaahida asked as she looked on in...awe? Confusion? Mild amusement?

"Move like what?" I asked, one leg on the table cinching my boots with my teeth while one arm was flung to the top of a shelf to grab my whetstone and the other was bent around my back to reach the top of the satchel. I had the strap tied tightly around my chest with the bag itself on my middle back. Doesn't get in the way as much that way.

"You flail like a dying sugarfish and yet somehow it ends up being graceful." Her disbelieving tone continued.

"Thank you," I bowed. I continued to collect my things while Shaahida anxiously checked the hallway over and over again.

"Aha!" I exclaimed as I finally found the last of my effects, a map of Vejabhar. I spread it across the table. I beckoned the queen inside.

"Come here," I pointed to the east side of the map where there was an image of the keep and the palace. "Now, we're going to need to breach this wall somehow. Do you know if the guards will listen to you? Have a horse or something we could use to get out into the desert faster than they can chase us?"

"The desert?" She growled, offended. "I asked you to get me to Alloy!"

"Yes! We get to Alloy by heading east across the Young Mountains to Poch and buying passage on a—"

She cut me off, “Poch? Crossing the Mountains? That’s weeks of travel before we even leave Earth! I can’t...” She calmed as she finished, looking shamefully at the floor. “I can’t stay in this world that long.”

“Well, I’d love to hear your alternative, my queen.” I mock bowed to her.

“Here.” She pointed to the opposite side of the map. The docks.

I looked up to her and smiled my hungry smile. There was a twinkle in my eye. All the way across the city? That plan was audacious, dangerous, and would require an expert’s skill. Just the way I liked it. I leaned over the table, closer to her.

“We’d need to make it all the way across the city, without getting spotted or causing alarm.” I argued against her, though internally I was practically already convinced.

She looked me up and down and raised her eyebrow. Then a small, devious smile crept across her face.

“Not just that, we also need him.” She pointed to a spot on the south side of the city. I recognized the building from my time in the city. The remains of an ancient fort rebuilt into a prison of sandstone and steel. “We’re going to take a ship at the harbor, there’s one docked right now that has a worldbreaking helm. In order to use it we need a high level spellcaster. You aren’t one and neither am I. None of my court mages would agree, and the king certainly wouldn’t. But in the prison there is a Wizard, Rax. We could free him like I freed you and make him do it.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Do you even have a chart?” —For those of you out of the know, Shaahida was suggesting we board a ship that could cross between worlds—Worldbreaking helms were magical items that allowed a vessel to, well, break the barrier between worlds. We would need one to get to Alloy, as the city was on the World of Fire and not on Earth. For complicated mathematical reasons that I thought best left to scholars, sailing between dimensions required a precise chart. If you didn’t translate in the right location you and your ship could be torn apart, sunk, beached, or worse.

The queen smirked as she retrieved a piece of fired clay from her dress. It was about the size of the flat of my hand if I straightened my fingers. Cuneiform writing covered both sides—in small script and tightly packed onto the clay. A paper map might not survive the translation to Alloy. The chart was the real deal. “There are some benefits to ruling in a land of scholars, academics, and wizards.” Shaahida commented.

“Alright, alright. What about the Wizard in your prison? Do you think we can trust him?” I asked. The most fun part of any adventure is the not knowing. If everything you do is planned with no risk then you aren’t adventuring. You’re vacationing. Even if he was a known traitor, breaking him out would be worth it.

“I’m not sure. He’s a demon, which makes me wary. He was imprisoned for speaking out against the King. He argued that the Iron Wizards had no right to civilize the tribes. He said we should return to the old ways.” She contemplated.

“Harsh sentence. Demons with honor don’t come often.”

“Yes. Five years. If I’m being honest, I think it was harsher because he spoke in court. Not that his heritage helped. But...I doubt my- I doubt the King would have even jailed him if

not for the audience. He was too afraid he'd get a reputation for courting with those disloyal to the High Ministry. He was a coward in many ways."

"Was?" I asked.

"I don't plan on seeing him again." She said with clear resentment and bitterness in her voice. I looked up at her and saw that she had turned around and was looking at a portrait mounted on the wall. It was of three Makripi nobles, a child and his two parents. Or, at least that's what I presumed. The top half of the painting was slashed apart and the heads of both parents were almost impossible to piece together. I realized that the child in the painting wore a pendant on his turban with the mark of Vejabhar. This was a portrait of the King.

Shaahida contemplated the piece for a second before magically lighting her finger aflame and burning the child's face out of the painting.

The queen no longer seemed interested in talking and I began planning a route through the city to the prison. I had us stick to alleys and side roads. Insuring she wasn't noticed would be of utmost concern. Then the prison itself. Breaking in would almost guarantee alerting the Royal Guard. I adjusted my route through the western half of the city, I'd probably have to worry less about being seen and more about being shot.

We heard the rattling of armor from another room in the palace and I collected the map. We caught each other's eyes. I whispered "Go!" and she nodded. She led me out of the hallway and put on a veil that did an impressive job covering her hair and reducing its ambient glow.

The Sun had risen and now the entire keep was under its light. Shadows grew smaller as it rose and rose above the desert. We snuck through the Keep, trying to keep a low profile. It was harder here, where everyone would intimately know the queen and most might recognize me from earlier in the morning. We managed to duck through a series of servants quarters to get close to the stables.

"It will be more suspicious if we try to steal something." Shaahida said. "I'll order them to give us horses. Say nothing. In fact, do as much as you can to stay out of notice." She looked down at my clothes. I was still wearing my signature embroidered salwar, open shirt and Makripi shawl. I'd tied the shawl around my head and closed my shirt as a makeshift disguise, but she was right to have caution. I nodded.

Shaahida stood and entered the stables. She calmly approached a stablehand. They had a calm, quiet conversation in Makripi. Seconds later, a flock of stablehands delivered two horses to her. Each wore a fine silken saddle. Shaahida mounted her horse and motioned for me to follow. I did with ease. The horse Shaahida had mounted was white, while mine was brown with a pattern of white spots across her face and neck. The horses had obviously been freshly groomed as their hair was immaculately soft and free of any dirt or straw.

Shaahida yelled a command and the horses galloped forward. We rode out of the stables and down the keep's main road to the gate. This was the most vital part of the plan, if we messed up here it would all become much more complicated. You might imagine most break-ins and infiltrations are focussed on sneaking inside the target location. Not so! Much more important is walking in the front door with confidence, and no one suspecting that you aren't there for a

legitimate reason. We relied on Shaahida's position of power just like in the hallway. She'd command the guards to open the gates and they would let us out, prisoner or no.

We sidled up to the gate. Shaahida commanded the guards. I couldn't understand her words but the meaning was clear. She wanted the gate open and they'd obey because she was their queen. For a terrifying second the guards stood still and I feared they'd ask after me. However, the captain simply turned and the team of six guards lifted the bar and opened the gates for us to ride through.

After our hurried planning it was surprisingly peaceful to ride through the streets of Vejabhar. Cold air wafted up the valley from the sea. The city itself was a sea of sorts, with waves of sandstone, wood, and thatch erupting from the sand. Stands lined the streets and blue, black, and yellow fabric hung from buildings and made up the tarps atop stalls, and over alleys. We weaved through side streets and back alleys. Our horses were barely small enough to fit and we ended up going single file. Shaahida stayed in front, guiding us through the city with her knowledge of the streets.

"So," I struck up conversation in Ignan, "How does a fellow sunspot end up Queen of a Makripi city?"

She brushed me off, "Long story."

On one hand, I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. On the other, I was curious and she wasn't in much of a position to avoid my questions. I decided that if I was trusting her enough to get into significant danger with her, it was a good idea to improve my read on her character.

"A bit young for a queen, aren't you?" I asked. I couldn't see her expression because she was ahead of me.

"You seem a bit old for an adventurer." She japed. I almost laughed. She really must have been young if she thought *I* was old for any career. Then again, maybe she had a point for people in my profession. Most tended to last years, not decades.

A second later, she continued. "No, I'm twenty-one. It is young. But I'm not going to be queen for much longer."

"Ah, I see this whole freeing me business is unsanctioned. Here I was thinking you were getting me out by order of the king." I reposed.

She let out a sound halfway between a scoff and a chuckle, "So how old are you, exactly?"

"Thirty-seven. That's Sixteen more than you and about twenty longer than most of Farangia would like." I kept bantering.

"You piss off a lot of people as an adventurer?"

"It's really part of the job description. After all, every dungeon belongs to someone—or used to. Fighting, stealing, scheming. Even if it's ultimately for good it's not exactly uncontroversial nor is it peaceful."

"Why do you do it then?" She asked.

“Can’t you see?” I replied as we ducked our horses through another narrow corridor. We slid out and cut across a large open street for just a second before Shaahida guided us into an empty riverbed that twisted south across town.

“Freedom,” I explained, “I answer to no one, not even the gods I pray to. It’s dangerous. Every day is a risk, every job another bet you won’t die *this time*. But the reward? Wealth beyond what any peasant could imagine and autonomy the envy of any noble. That’s not to mention the Souls. You do a lot of killing as an adventurer, but if you do kill and you succeed? Then their strength is yours. How many of your guards do you think it took to capture and defeat me earlier?”

She shrugged, then she stopped her horse and side-eyed me. “Fifteen.”

I smiled, “Twenty-three. And that’s not counting the elite guard. They were a lot better at their job.” I remembered the tall soldier who’d cut a slash across my back and winced. “All it took was resting a couple hours and now I’m brand new. I can’t do that again today, but let me rest longer and I could. That’s the number one thing. Power. In nineteen years of adventuring I’ve collected a whole lot of souls. I can do things now that no normal man could dream of. I can be free, I can do what I want because I have the power to tell everyone wanting to control me that they can fuck off and taste my blade if they disagree.”

“He wanted to kill you himself.” Shaahida spoke with a solemn voice, “The King. Bassaam al-Sahli. That’s why they captured you and brought you to the palace. He wanted your Souls. He’d killed before, and he’d collected some as bounty and trophy. Theric, our court wizard, said you had more souls than any Earthen he’d ever seen.”

“Congratulations then!” I said. She looked at me, confused. “By freeing me, you saved your husband’s life.”

“Wakan!” A man yelled forcefully in Khousirian. As we’d stopped, we’d drawn notice. A group of riders in the Royal Guard uniform were storming down the street after us. At their head was a bald man in green robes. He held a scroll in one hand, and green flames danced in the other.

“Theric!” Shaahida warned in Ignan, “Ride, now!” We continued our route. Shaahida ducked into a tight alley, I struggled to follow. A spell went off behind us. I turned and recognized it on sight. A mass of thick webs exploded from a point at the center of the street we were fleeing. The webs caught between the buildings that formed the start of the alleyway, blocking it off. Shaahida was safely on the other side, but I would slam right into it and get stuck if I didn’t act *right now*. I could feel my horse’s legs failing. In a snap decision, I jumped off of the saddle, kicked off the horse’s face—sorry horse—and leapt to the closest roof.

I didn’t make it, lacking enough momentum to achieve any notable distance. Luckily at the same time I leapt, I drew my Scimitar and threw it at the roof. The curved handle caught on the edge of the building’s roof and I had just enough time to grab the blade between my pointer and middle fingers with an outstretched hand. I used the sword for leverage and landed sideways with my boots to the wall, avoiding the web-covered floor. My horse was stuck and the guards were approaching.

My hands went to my boots and I pulled their straps. My fine soluntum boots. As I pulled the straps and whispered ‘aranea ascenditur’ the magic on the boots flared to life. I stuck to the wall as if it was the ground itself. I ran vertically up the wall to the roof and kept running. I grabbed my Scimitar, which its smith had named Aelia’s Tongue. No way I was leaving that beauty behind after all this.



art and design by Dungeon Strugglers

“Go, Shaahida!” I screamed in Ignan, not having time to check where she was or what she was doing. The guards were still on my heels. A couple of arrows whizzed past me but they were aiming for where I used to be—on the horse. I ran with a strange gait, almost stumbling over myself but never falling, tripping or failing. I carried my momentum in every step, only ever getting faster and faster as I barreled away from the wide road.

As I made my way across the roof I got a good fifteen feet of momentum before I leapt. This time I completely aced it, gracefully passing over the alley below. Jumping from roof to roof, I noticed the prison to the south—to my left—rising above the city like a solitary beige island in a storm of brown, and yellow. I adjusted my course and leapt to the left across another alley. The funny thing about my training. I was actually faster on my feet than on a horse. I sheathed Aelia's Tongue and sprinted like my life depended on it. A normal man was about half as fast as a good riding horse. I had undergone intensive training, and more importantly, had fueled my speed with Souls. I could almost catch a horse if I ran in a sprint. I was about three quarters as fast. In order to achieve the feat, I had to rely on Souls to give me more speed than was normally physically possible. I drew on my Souls, and they answered, allowing me to move like the wind. I dashed and dashed again across the rooftops.

On flat terrain I would likely have outran the guards, however I had to keep pausing to jump between buildings, dodge the detritus on the roofs of Vejabhar and improvise around the different types of roofs, stopping myself from sliding down slopes and screeching across domes. My boots helped, centering me on the floor whenever I found it. I could feel the guards gaining on me, their shouts getting louder and the occasional arrow hopelessly flying my way. On the positive side, my place on the roofs made it far harder for them to target me than it would be on a field. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of Shaahida's veil atop her white horse. I could confirm we were both heading to the same place.

The prison was on another wide street—I had absolutely no chance of hopping to its roof. Instead, I dropped twenty feet from the roof of the closest building and landed into a roll. The increased agility and mystical power I'd gained from my Souls allowed me to pull a maneuver like that without breaking my shins or shattering the bones in my feet. The guards were already alerted, no point in stealth now. I sprinted across the street, ducking and dodging out of the way of the city goers. The street was decently busy. On the same side as the prison, a collection of horse-drawn carts carrying hay crowded around a street vendor. I heard a woman scream in panic and turned my head to her without stopping my run. Shaahida was riding towards the prison at full tilt. She grabbed her veil and whipped it off to show her flaming hair. She screamed a command in Makripi and the people obeyed, fleeing the street and allowing her to ride up to the prison unhindered.

"Cart!" I yelled at her and pointed at the collection of carts. Without stopping, I ran straight into the double-doors at the entrance of the prison. I braced myself with my shoulder and prayed to Dahan Marupatha for strength, fingering one of the rings on my left hand while my right arm hit the door.

I cascaded into the door, immediately halting my momentum. My head hit the wood and a millisecond later the rest of me hit the floor. I stood up, dazed by the hit, confused by my failure, and bleeding from the lip. I had completely misjudged the strength of the door, imagining my soul strengthened muscles and momentum would be enough to knock down the hinges. It seemed the door was reinforced somehow, or stronger than it looked from the outside—it's a prison, Xhindi! This is what I get for not surveying my target first. The door to the prison opened

and a woman in a guard's uniform glanced out. Her uniform was accented with a red turban that marked her as a prison guard.

"What?" She asked to the empty air in front of her.

"Hello!" I greeted her eyes with a smile while I greeted her temple with the flat of my blade. She spun with the impact and I grabbed the edge of the door with one hand while my swing embedded Aelia's Tongue into the opposite door. I vaulted into the prison and over the fallen body of the guard. My feet sprung in first and the momentum of my horizontal leap pulled the sword out of the door. There were two more guards in the entryway, both behind a central desk. For a second they were still with shock but soon unsheathed their weapons and headed for me. I could feel this energy coursing through me. It felt like I was at a ballroom, dancing along right in sync with the music every tap of my foot, every thrust of my arms, every slash of my blade. The momentum had started, and now there was no stopping it until I was dead.

There were four exits to the room. Two hallways that led further into the prison, a door to the left and a door to the right. It was at that moment that I realized I hadn't asked Shaahida exactly where Rax was being held. I needed to act before the first guard got the opportunity to stand up. I went with my gut and sprinted down the right hallway. One of the guards leapt in front of me, cutting down with a spear. I parried the attack with Aelia's Tongue and kicked the guard in the stomach with the hard heel of my boot. I put enough force into the hit that he buckled into the side of the desk. I heard the third guard coming behind me, so I twisted around. He was bringing a longsword down onto my leg but my twist had offset his aim. I sent another kick into him. I hit his face and he stumbled back. Not wasting a second I sprinted down the hall, nimbly grabbing the spear the second guard had tried to hit me with.

The hallways were dark, made of the same black stone that the entire prison appeared to be hewn from. I stumbled forward until I reached another door. The third guard chased me down the hallway. He couldn't match my speed but if I couldn't open the lock that didn't matter. Then I got an idea. I dropped the spear, knelt by the door and acted as if I was scrambling for my thieves' tools. He ran up to me, easily traceable by the heavy footsteps he made in his metal boots. When he got to just a pace away, I zipped out of my lethargy, sweeping out with my leg and raising the spear I'd lain on the floor. It tripped him and I flattened myself to the wall while he slammed face first into the door. His weight combined with that of his armor knocked out the hinges and the door collapsed with him. In one fluid motion I put the spear to his throat.

"Where's Rax the wizard? I won't ask twice." My words and actions were cold, but I kept my tone polite.

"He's at the top of the north side tower...In the anti-magic room!" The guard stammered.

"Got a key?" I asked, moving the spear's blade to the other side of his neck.

He nodded, and moved his hand. I moved the blade off his neck an inch and he threw me a keyring. I caught it around the shaft of the spear. "Iron one." he noted. There were three keys on the ring. One iron, one brass, and one bronze.

As quick as I could I performed a bow to the guard and then sprinted to the north side of the building as fast as I could. I heard the first and second guards getting up and following me. I

ducked through hallways, a couple more guards watched me sprinting with confusion. I jangled the keys in an attempt to explain without saying anything. They drew weapons on me and I dodged out of their way, stamming the flat of Aelia's Tongue into one and the butt of the spear into another, and kicking both in the shins for good measure. They crumpled. None of the takedowns I was doing would last long or really debilitate my enemies, but I didn't need to; all I needed was to escape with Rax.

I found a north staircase and ascended halfway before relying on my boots and sprinting directly up the side of the wall. A guard on the second floor saw me and screamed a warning but could do nothing but draw his scimitar and chase after me. I spiraled around the wall before rising to the fourth and final floor of the tower, where I slid out of the staircase into a dropkick on an unsuspecting guard. Luckily for me, or I suppose unluckily for him, The momentum pushed him into a barred window of the tower and his helmet wedged between the bars, denting while he screamed in pain. His partner didn't have time to draw her scimitar before I hit her once on the top of the head with my blade and swept her leg with the spear.

The guards had stood before a single larger cell with an iron barred door much like the one I'd been behind less than an hour ago. I grabbed the iron key off of the spear, tossing it to slam the collapsed female guard in the face in the same movement. I fumbled with the key before plugging it into the lock. The iron fizzled against a magical barrier, but of course, iron was resistant to magic. Magical seal for a spellcaster's prison. It was typical after all, you wouldn't want them teleporting out would you?

"Rax?" I asked. If I had come all this way and he was dead, missing, asleep, or that guard lied to me I swear to Saint Elana I'd gut him. There was no answer.

"Rax?" I asked again, turning the key in the lock. It was jammed.

The female guard stood and charged me with her scimitar.

"Rax, Black Gods answer!" I frantically pulled on the key, begging for it to unlock.

"Rax!"

The guard got close enough to hit me and I frantically swung to the left side. My dodge wasn't good enough to save me and the blade was inches from my nose when I caught it on Aelia's Tongue. I retaliated, using my parry to slide her blade into the wall to my left while I dodged right. I slashed at her with my blade this time, managing to knock away her breath despite her armor. I tried to hit her again, holding the bars with one hand and slamming her with a kick meant to knock her down the stairs. Her armor reflected the kick into a jolt which went up my legs. She seemed unaffected. I used the opportunity to draw close to her and throw her over the side with a hit from my blade. One strike clanged harmlessly against her armor, but my next strike hit right on target slamming her with a wall of force that pushed her over the balcony and tumbling down the stairs. Her armor screeched and rang against the stones as she fell. I heard more guards on the stairs yelling out as she hit them on her way down. I'd bet most of the population of the prison had heard me by now.

Her partner had finally unwedged himself from his helmet. He drew a mace and approached cautiously. I, meanwhile, threw caution to the wind and ran to the door again.

“Rax!” I begged, fumbling with the key. If I could just get it to open!

The guard spoke to me in a rattled voice. He was obviously struggling to maintain composure, but he managed it. I still don’t know Makripi so it had little effect.

“Speak Common!” I yelled at him, turning away from the lock once more and swiping Aelia’s Tongue at him.

That seemed to anger him because he took a dagger from his belt and threw it at me. It whizzed through the air. I had trained for this exact scenario for a long time, and I’d performed my deflect missiles technique many times before. As the dagger flew towards me I caught it by the guard with my left hand and threw it back in his face. It lodged in his chest and he roared. As he charged me with the mace I panicked and threw my weight against the key. It finally budged, letting me into Rax’s cell. The sudden change almost tripped me, but I held onto the door. The guard was almost on me, but I levered the door and slammed him in the face with the bars. He fell to the ground, certainly unconscious by now.

“Ra—” I almost continued yelling before a demon appeared before me. He was about a foot shorter than me, with blue scaled skin. His face was long and reptilian. A forked tail drooped from his pelvis. Gemstones curled from his head like horns, and replaced the scales above his spine. His red eyes were weary, but there was a spirit deep in them. His neck was marred by a gnarly scar which dug deep into his skin. He was wearing a set of red robes and a yellow tunic tied with a tattered green sash. They superficially resembled the robes that Theric had worn. Rax’s were tattered and ruined though, worn for a long time with no cleaning nor maintenance. He slapped me across the face before signing to me Thieves' Cant.

Stop yelling. Who the fuck are you?

Prologue: Xhindi III



“Can you speak?” I asked, grabbing him by the arm. I could hear my heart pumping in my chest and as if on time with the beat, the marching of a large crowd of guards in armor ascending stone staircases.

He began signing but I waved my hand. “Not important. Do you have Dimension Door?” He shook his head.

“What do you mean you don’t have Dimension Door, you’re supposed to be a wizard!” I complained, but he held me by my sleeve and dragged me out of the cell by the hallway. He held

³ Art by [Bruno Machado](#) on Artstation

his hand up to the stone next to the unconscious guard and then licked his fingers. Spellcasters, always so odd.

He nodded, not facing me. The guards had gotten to the stairs and a volley of javelins peppered the ceiling. I pulled Rax back from the open stairwell before he could get slashed.

“What do we do?” I asked him.

He waved noncommittally and then signed, *Need a focus*.

I frantically slid off one of my rings and threw it to him, “Blessed by Akemitsu herself. Now get us out of here!”

Rax slipped on the ring and touched the stone of the wall, making a symbol with his fingers. The wall slid five feet out of the rest of the building, leaving a sizable hole. The guards had reached the fifth floor. I grabbed Rax around the waist and dove out of the window. I manipulated my body so that I’d land on my back and my legs pushed into Rax’s stomach. As we hit the ground, I’d use my technique to avoid damage while simultaneously pushing Rax into the air so his momentum would be reduced when he actually did hit the floor. It wasn’t much but it might make the difference for a squishy wizard like him.

I prepared to hit the ground, and Rax gaped. I thought about worrying, but I figured we were either doomed or we weren’t. Then my back slammed into a bushel of hay. I flung Rax up and he got a good two feet of height before crashing down into the hay with me. I rose and looked around. We were moving, what? Oh, oh, She did it! We had landed in a cart bearing hay, and Shaahida was in the front, driving the horses forward. We barreled down the sandy road to the coast.

“Shaahida!” I yelled in thanks.

“Really glad I made that.” She admitted, smiling back at me. “I see you got Rax. Let’s get out of here.”

I was starting to like this kid.

I turned to see a wave of soldiers running down the street. Some had mounted horses, and many carried bows and arrows. I ducked behind the walls of the cart as a barrage pelted us. The arrows made a strange thumping noise as they impaled themselves on our cart. Some of the arrowheads poked through the cheap wood, which was too much for my liking.

“How far ‘till the docks?” I asked Shaahida.

“It’s going to be a couple of minutes any way we do it. Our best bet is that they haven’t alerted the western wall yet. If that gate is closed by the time we get there there’s nothing we’ll be able to do about it.” She spoke over her shoulder, ducking behind the cart’s wall while simultaneously spurring on the two horses drawing the cart.

“Western wall, huh?” I wonder aloud, mostly to myself.

I glanced back at the oncoming soldiers. We were already outpacing most of the men on foot, but there were half a dozen on horseback who were getting closer, if anything. At the head of the charge were two men. One was Theric, in his green robes. The other was a dark skinned man, even for Makrip. He wore an elegant suit of armor below an elaborate turban, its head embossed with the symbol of Vejabhar in gold. The King.

Theric raised his spellbook in one hand and spoke a word which boomed across the street. Whipping my head to Rax, I ordered.

“Counterspell, now!” please have counterspell, please have counterspell, please-

Rax raised his hands as Theric hurled a ball of green flame towards us. The demon collapsed his hands together and made a pushing down motion. The impending fireball sputtered and disappeared into nothing. He had counterspell!

I whooped for Rax’s victory. However, I was quickly forced down to avoid a volley of arrows, one from the king’s own hand. Rax followed me and I looked to him.

“What can you do?” I asked, then after a second I considered his situation. “Wait, aren't you a wizard? What about your spellbook? How did you just cast? You’re not one of those people with photographic memory are you?”

He gave me a strange look, then smirked. He tossed off his robes to reveal his bare chest. Covering every inch of scales were markings, writing in Draconic. He had tattooed his entire spellbook onto his scales! His smirk spread to my face.

No voice, so I am limited. But I have an idea. He signed

He conjured a misty ball of ice in his palm. Then, he hurled it like a javelin at Theric. In response, Theric threw up his hands and the air around him flickered. The ice spike shattered against the invisible shield Theric had conjured. Theric’s eyes widened as he realized exactly which spell Rax had cast. The ice splintered across the street, sinking into the armor of Theric, the King, and their soldiers. Worse, though, it serrated the flesh of their horses. Two horses panicked, throwing their riders from their saddles. The King’s horse was hit in the knee and buckled to the floor, pinning its master to the street below. I heard his armor crunch and he spat blood.

Theric and two more riders remained when Shaahida swerved the cart right along a curve in the street, clearing us from line of sight.

Rax stood pointed to the bend where the horses would follow in seconds and cast another spell. A bolt flew from his fingers. When the spell landed, the area around it was filled with wildly flashing colors, writhing and changing. We could see the horses arrive, vague shapes distorted through the mess of color. Theric halted their movement before any horse could enter the flashing area.

We have time. They’ll go around. Rax signed.

The street continued into the main thoroughfare, which led to the western gate and the docks. To the left, closer to the docks, was the bustling covered market. To the right were a series of small houses, built close together with cheap adobe and stucco. I glanced at the city, and made a realization. “The market goes right up to the wall and the docks. Leave the cart and I’ll pull them off course while you escape.”

I leaned over the front of the cart to reach Shaahida.

“You think you can take them all on your own?” She asked

“See the results for yourself.” I said.

She seemed to give up on changing my mind and took my apparent death wish as fact. “How are you going to find us?”

“You’ll need me for the gate.” I smiled. “Now go, come on.”

She and Rax met eyes and he shrugged and pointed to the market. I drew one of my daggers and tossed it to her as I hopped over the wall to the front. I took her place at the reigns as Shaahida jumped out of the cart and ducked inside the market. Shaahida smoothed down her hair to avoid burning anything. Rax followed her, simply nodding to me and sliding out of the cart. I was already far past it, adjusting my path towards the center of the street to avoid my pursuers figuring out the stunt with Shaahida and Rax.

I tore down the main road, holding both reigns with one hand and unsheathing Aelia’s Tongue with the other. For about a minute, I was in a strange, tense peace. I was still going far too fast on this road, with people clearing out of the way of my rampage and screaming at me but no soldiers came in my way. Until the bells of the temple began ringing. I turned to face the sound, east in the center of the city. The alarm had officially been sounded. Behind me, I saw an explosion of flame in the sky close to where I’d left Shaahida. Theric throwing a Fireball as a warning, I thought.

It wasn’t long before the horses returned. Theric and the two remaining soldiers, as well as the two whose horses had spooked slightly farther back. I sprung a board from the cart and nailed the reins to the front wall. Four arrows flew towards me as I rose from my seat and got into the back of the cart. Two completely missed. One arrow flew towards me, aimed straight at my chest. They couldn’t have given me a better opportunity if they tried. I parried the arrow mid-flight, brushing the shaft with my fingers and spinning to redirect its trajectory back into the Soldier who shot it. The arrow pierced his eye and he screamed. I could tell that he’d consumed at least some souls. That kind of thing killed normal Earthens.

The last bolt proved my point. The arrow was a perfect hit, slamming into my unarmored chest. The arrow buried itself in me to the fletching and I spat blood. Any normal Earthen would have died. I would have died, if this had been 20 years ago. I stared at Theric in defiance, blood leaking from my chest.

“Anything else you have for me?” I boasted.

He fell for my bait, deciding to go for the classic. He waved his spellbook toward me and a bolt flew into the air beside me. Behind me it exploded into a Fireball, but I was one step ahead of him, throwing myself over the opposite side of the cart and completely evading the flames. The explosion scattered dust through the street, obscuring our views of each other. Now it was my turn.

I ran toward where I’d last seen Theric’s horse and held Aelia’s Tongue. It sped past me and I thrust upward into the thigh of the man on the saddle. Sure enough, it was the wizard himself. He wailed with my strike, but I wasted no time. I got behind him in the saddle and slit his throat. One, twice, thrice. Blood spilled across his robes, and matted the perfectly cleaned hair of his horse. I whipped around, positioning myself in front of him on the saddle.

His pained eyes looked down at me, confused for a second before arrows came flying out of the dust cloud. I used Theric as a shield, and three arrows impaled his already bleeding body.

“How do you feel about surrender?” I offered. He gurgled blood in response and let go of the reins, slipping off of his horse and onto the sandy ground. I saw his deep brown eyes glaring at me as he gripped his throat in pain. He wouldn’t die, either.

I leapt from Theric’s horse and landed atop another rider, bashing him with Aelia’s Tongue with enough force that he fell from his saddle. I jumped off of that horse and tried a similar trick with the next soldier, kicking him off of his saddle sideways. The fourth leveled an arrow at me, but before he could strike I whipped a dagger through the air. Not targeting him, but snapping the string on his bow. He faltered and I leapt on him with my sword this time. I impaled him in the chest and swung my feet around his horse’s neck.

“I offered surrender to your wizard. How about you?” I grinned.

He swore in Makripi, drew a dagger and swatted my face. It took all the strength I had to dodge out of the way while not falling off of the horse, but I managed it. After he made a couple of wild swings with the blade, I saw an opportunity and smacked him upside the head with the flat of Aelia’s Tongue.

The horse went wild with no rider and I struggled to remount the thing while it sped through the dusty streets. Eventually I managed it, just in time to pull the reins and halt the horse before it slammed right into the western gate of Vejabhar.

It was enormous, larger than any of the city’s other gates. It must have been fifty feet tall, with intricately detailed arches and the flag of Vejabhar flying on either side. The iron-gridded gate itself was falling, and fully shut by the time I was within thirty feet of it.

As I came to a complete and total stop the guards at the gate leveled spears at me. I turned around, hopeful that I could find my way around them, and saw the full might of the Royal Guard emerging from the city, cutting off all escape. Pinned.

In a set of four ranks, Vejabhar’s army descended on me. They swarmed out of every open road, thundering in their heavy boots. Their armor glimmered in the sunlight. The soldiers formed a rough semicircle, closing around me and not allowing any gaps. At their head, on a new horse, was the King. He was no longer wearing armor, and instead magical force glimmered around his body. Mage Armor. His turban had come undone and he had simply tied the mark of Vejabhar to one of his necklaces. The soldiers all took a step forward.

I glanced around for anything I could use to escape. Steel spear tips, steel armor, steel gate, Shaahida, steel chains.

Shaahida! I saw her in one of the streets leading to the thoroughfare. She had found another fire-resistant cloth to cover her hair with and was cautiously leaning out from behind a building. Rax was leaning too, his head above hers. She eyed me and nodded to the gate as if to say, “what’s the plan? Aren’t you going to try and escape?”

Everything had happened so quickly. That was my style, but I needed calm right now. I took a deep breath, brandishing Aelia’s Tongue at the soldiers. Keeping them at bay like a pack of tigers with a flaming stick. What could I do? There was no way I could take on the whole

guard. Not even I could do that. I was already injured and there were too many of them. Beat the six between me and the gate? Tempting, but there was no exit strategy. The gate was closed and I had no way of opening it. I could scale it with my boots? I'd be wide open to arrow fire, and there were enough of them that Deflect Missiles wasn't going to save me. Even if I could make it out, where would that lead Shaahida and Rax? I stole a glance at them again, hiding it by looking wildly around at the crowd first.

Rax was signing in Thieves' Cant. He had a plan? If he did, how in the world was I supposed to read it without revealing their position? I focused, looking up at the King at an angle that would let me read Rax's signs out of the corner of my eye.

Don't worry about us. We have a plan. Talk and then stay still. Perfectly still.
Understand? Rax signed.

I blinked, hoping he'd get the message in Thieves' Cant, *Understood*.

"Zaniy Ijatazaw?" The King bellowed, finally responding to my gaze.

I sighed "How many times do I have to tell people I don't speak—"

"Then answer in Common, fool!" He commanded. "Where is my wife?"

"I have no idea." I answered. For a second it almost looked like he bought it.

"Silence. Why did I expect an ignorant thief to give me an honest answer? Men, put him to the blade!" He ordered.

"You really shouldn't." I said, and pulled the arrow from my chest for dramatic effect. The soldiers surged forward, but at my words they stopped.

"I thought you wanted to take my Souls all for yourself my liege," I bowed to the King. "Are you going to let one of these men of the people kill me, and become the most powerful warrior in this little city? At least give me the pleasure of a royal death."

The King grunted, but put up his hand. "Halt, Men. Apprehend the thief, without killing him. Bring him to me and I shall cut off his head!" He unsheathed an absolute beauty of a scimitar. It was nothing compared to mine, of course, but it was still worth noting. It would be a good sword to die to at least.

The men moved to surge forward but at the same moment an ear-shattering noise filled the street. It was like the clap of thunder or soluntum cannonfire but a thousand times more intense. A sound that could only be generated by magic. Rax! He had a plan. I took it to heart and stood perfectly still. The soldiers instinctively turned to the noise, even the King was startled. In the brief second their heads were all focused elsewhere, I saw a film of magic cover my body. I blinked, hoping Rax would notice.

Then, the air in front of me started spelling words.

Illusion magic, I'm making you disappear. Inch away from the gate slowly and I can keep it up. I can only cover five feet at a time, never bigger. Stay hunched, and stay quiet. Can't generate or stop noise.

My face lit up in a smile no one would see.

The King ordered a group of soldiers to investigate the sound, and rode with them. Among the Makripi he yelled was Shaahida's name. In the commotion, the soldiers returned to

look for me and stood with bulging eyes and shocked faces. They began whispering. One man alerted the King. They barked back and forth in Makripi while I slowly and carefully walked backwards to pass through the group of six gate guards and onto the wall. One of the guards approached and waved his spear through the air, I narrowly dodged it while staying completely quiet. I was playing limbo with the air and struggling not to touch the floor lest I make noise.

Then I realized a gaping problem with the plan. I was bleeding. While the guard stumbled around and tried to find me, some grouped off to search the surrounding area, while the rest meticulously searched the ‘clearing’ they’d created in the road to box me in. My dodging had been good enough for one clumsy inspection but I wasn’t going to take my chances. I got a cloth for my effects and bandaged both ends of my gaping arrow wound while I artfully evaded the spears of the searching soldiers. At one point I got an inch away from backing into one of them, only avoided because his armor clinked at just the right time. Eventually, I was able to slink past the back line of gate guards and curled beside the great metal thing.

I waved in front of my chest, trying to signal Rax while simultaneously not extending any part of my body more than five feet from any other so he could still cover me.

What? The illustory writing appeared again.

Where are you? Where do I go? I signed in Thieves' Cant.

Shaahida told me you have Boots of Spider Climbing. Use them to scale the wall and then come back down about thirty feet from where you are, behind the hovel with the red cloth outside the door.

Sure enough, I could see the hovel. It would take more than a minute of slow, precarious climbing to reach the spot. I glanced back at the soldiers. They finished their search and shouted at each other in Makripi. Eventually, one man came to the clearing and cast a spell, complete with a booming loud magic word. He opened his eyes and they were glowing blue. He took a quick look around and then looked right at me. Wizards!

I abandoned my tactic and ran like the wind down the wall. The Soldiers frantically threw spears and drew their bows. Three soldiers fired magic, one hitting me square in the jaw with a blast of flame. Two arrows impaled me, one in my chest and another in my leg. A spear grazed my forearm and tore a light gash. I stumbled and dove off the wall onto the floor. Once again, my mystic training saved me and the fall didn’t hurt. I sprinted.

Rax appeared from nowhere, grabbing my hand and pulling me through the wall. What? Through the wall? When we appeared on the other side I realized what he’d done. Or I should say, what they’d done. Shaahida was holding concentration on an illusion to show an intact wall, meanwhile a circular section of the actual wall had been ripped from the rest, just like in the prison. The queen had shed her fancy clothes and was now in a very Hot City blue top which revealed most of her stomach and back. The salwar she was wearing under her dress was still there, but it was noticeably dusty and dirt-stained.

“You can cast?” I asked Shaahida, “Why did we need Rax then?”

“It’s only a cantrip,” She responded, “Minor Illusion. I can also do first level stuff, but to translate between Manifolds you need more power—there’s not enough tenser strength for the connection to hold otherwise. Besides, I’d already burnt all my slots in the morning.”

Rax clapped his hands and pointed to the docks urgently. Without further ado, he began sprinting away from the walls. Shaahida and I followed. As soon as we got more than thirty paces from the wall the illusion dissolved. I immediately outpaced Rax and Shaahida, pushing myself to bolt down the beach to the pier.

“Where is the ship?” I yelled.

“Yellow Sails, flying the flag of Demost. Icon of a scroll on a white and blue backdrop.” She hollered louder to reach me as I ran like the wind. I saw it as she pointed it out. The ship was in the middle of the pier, small enough for a potential crew of three-large enough that any sane sailor would want at least fifteen. She was a clipper, with a hull made of polished white metal. It was a hellbreaker, a ship designed to sail the lava rivers and flaming seas of Hell. That meant it was also ship-shape for worldbreaking to Alloy. Emblazoned on the hull was the name *The Rapier’s Point*. The gangplank was down and I raced up it, still brandishing Aelia’s Tongue.

“You lot, scoundrels and scallywags we’re taking...the...ship.” My voice faltered as I did not see a single person on the deck. Not looking a gift horse in the mouth, I ran to the anchor and began to raise it. Shaahida and Rax made it aboard. Both ran to join me and Shaahida exclaimed,

“We’ve got company!” as she did, nodding towards the dock. “Stop ‘em!”

I could tell she was nearly out of breath but she kept pushing herself. She went right to the anchor lift and put her back into it. I could see her muscles flexing and tensing. Rax went right along beside her, seeming more and more exhausted every second. He snapped his fingers as he ran and the words *Three spells left, Maximum!* appeared in the air. I vaulted over the anchor lift to the gangplank. A Swarm of Vejabhari soldiers crowded the docks, hoisting spears and bows. The King stood behind the main contingent. He screamed, a plea that included Shaahida’s name once again.

He repeated himself in Common, “Shaahida! Return my treasure to me! I will slay this demon and save your life! Can you hear me? Shaahida? My wife?”

I took a breath, and I prepared for what was to come. The troops surged onto the gangplank. It was useful as a bottleneck—I’d only have to fight one soldier at a time. I opened my eyes and waded into the flurry. I fought in a trance, kicking, swinging, slashing and dodging in a thousand different directions. Cuts accumulated on my arms and chest, I knocked men off the plank, more followed. I danced up and down the plank, never letting the enemy have a solid foothold. I pounded and pounded away at the collective defense of the army, gaining foot by foot until in a rush of strength I pushed the wave of soldiers down to the bottom of the gangplank. Seizing the moment, I wedged Aelia’s Tongue between the plank and the dock and shoved upward. The ship budged the smallest bit and the plank fell into the sea.

I yelled “Now, Rax! Noooooooooow!”

Not waiting for an answer, I took action. I kicked a soldier in the face and simultaneously dove into the water before the ship. The soldiers on the dock rippled backward from the

collective impact, a few falling over the other side and joining me in the water. Thrown spears followed me into the water, but none had enough momentum to touch me. With all the speed I had I pushed myself to the side of the ship. I gripped the wood with whatever strength I had left in my body and managed to climb the few feet I needed and flop myself on the deck.

The anchor was lifted and Rax had come through. The Dock was flooded with the same writhing, undulating lights that filled the street earlier. Half of the soldiers were unaffected. The rest were completely stunned, entranced by the majesty of the light. It made it impossible to get anything done and without the gangplank the group would have to coordinate enough to launch boarding hooks. It was never going to happen. The King was one of the group that had been compelled by the spell, staring aimlessly at the light while his bride sailed away. I watched, laying on the deck, back pressed against the mast. Bleeding from half my body and bruised in the other.

Shaahida came up beside me and pointed a sword at my neck. *My sword.* She looked down at me, intently with those burning ifrit eyes. She had let her hair down and it was flowing on the ocean wind.

“You know, originally I was going to kill you. I saw you as a criminal. A means to an end. I thought you’d distract the guards, we’d escape, and then I’d finish you off and take your precious horde of Souls for my own. No loose ends. But you aren’t awful at heart. You’re just like me.” She looked up to the Sun. It was almost Noon now.

“We burn bright, too bright for some. We’re meant to be up there. In the open water, in the open sky.” She flipped my sword around, holding out the handle to me.

“You were a better friend to me than anyone in that land.” She said.

I looked up at her, and I couldn’t help but smile. I took the hilt and returned my beauty to her sheath.

Vejabhar got smaller and smaller in the distance. A small battalion of ships chased the Rapier’s Point, but they had all needed at least a couple minutes to begin sailing after we had left port and they didn’t have worldbreakers. I noted the ships from the back of the poop deck. The windows to the captain’s cabin below were shattered, the entire left and back side of the ship was peppered with arrows and marks from spells the soldiers slung at it.

Rax sat in the spelljamming helm, an enormous chair made of interwoven crystals and inscribed with arcane runes that were glowing blue.

He signed, *I had to Counterspell a Fireball. A Wizard was going to burn our sails out from under us. This is my last spell for today. I can see that we all ran down to the line today. Thank you for freeing me.*

I would have quipped back at him if I could think of any, but there was a buzzing pain in my head. Shaahida bowed, as if in mutual thanks. We all nodded to each other, and Shaahida and I tied ourselves to the railing before the wheel while Rax made a circle with his finger, and magical bands sprang from the worldbreaking helm around his waist.

Rax raised his arm.

“In!” Shaahida yelled.

Rax slammed his fist down on one of the helm’s armrests.

“Through!” I followed, knowing the tradition for translation between worlds.

Rax released his fist and spread his fingers like he was throwing a stone.

“Beyond!” We bellowed together and at that moment the ship rocked, it felt like a storm was shaking the hull. Force racked across us. Shaahida, I, and everything not nailed down began floating in the air. We hung there suspended by our ropes for a second and my gut fluttered inside my abdomen. The force suddenly reversed, slamming us back on our feet. The Rapier’s Point sank beneath the waves of the Great Sea, moving as fast as a comet. Magical force enveloped the deck and the world turned to ivory.

Instead of being flooded and drowned, the ship nauseatingly *rose* out of another sea. Gravity returned to a version of normal. Fog surrounded us and light poured through it-but the fog refracted and warped it. There were no shadows, light poured in from every angle. Far above the deck, Stars dotted the sky. We were no longer in the world of Earth, so hated by Shaahida. We were sailors on the Sea of Stars.



Chapter 1: Shaahida al-Kamali

The voyage to Alloy was painfully long. I'd finally escaped my husband and his dusty city of sand and sorcery. I'd left his whole world behind. I didn't want to wait for another month, a month of sailing trapped on a ship the size of my childhood quarters in the Charcoal Palace. I was no longer Queen Shaahida of Vejabhar. Why did I have to wait even longer to become Shaahida al-Kamali once again?

The thief Xhindi was right, though. If we sailed continuously it would take weeks to reach Alloy, we'd need supplies first. Rations, sailors, water. He was an odd one. His skin was far lighter than mine, but it was far more tan than the few Farangians or Qaraqns I'd spoken to. When he smiled or screamed in shock his eyes sparkled and his black hair had a red undertone that was visible in the light of the Sun. He was part ifrit, I was sure. He dressed in fine, though sloppy, Hot City fashion complete with arm bands and rings. His sword was obviously of ifrit make. When I'd heard his legends the storyteller had said it was a gift from the Lady of bronze. When I'd pointed it at his throat after we launched away from Vejabhar I noticed a silver band around his left arm. Was he married? Did he have a lover somewhere? Why was he headed to Alloy anyway? And considering what I'd seen him do to Vejabhar, was it really safe taking him to my home? I kept my questions to myself as we sailed for a day in the Sea of Stars.

Rax, Xhindi, and I sat around a large desk in the captain's quarters—which I'd claimed. Rax asked how we would pay for the supplies we needed and the two men got into a silent bickering contest in Thieves' Cant which I couldn't read. In response, I placed a finely polished black leather bag on the table and opened the drawstring. Gold piled out of it and onto the table. The two gaped.

"Did you really think I'd come unprepared?" I asked.

⁴ Art by [donieindo](#) on shutterstock

Both smiled, Xhindi in his strange greedy way, while Rax looked more like a sage who was pleased his student had figured out an algebraic equation.

Xhindi had combined my charts with a collection which had been left on The Rapier's Point to try and find a suitable port. Makripi⁵ ports on Earth would want us for theft so we couldn't return—not that I'd want to. Unfortunately, this region of the Sea of Stars was mostly empty of traffic. A time raider port was about three days southeast, but Xhindi decided it would be faster to translate into Arcadia. The Rapier's Point had recently traded with a fey port city called Aithguitte and it should be only a day away. We all rested, Xhindi's wounds healed, Rax recovered his magic, and I struggled to let the tension out of my body from the day before.

There was no wind on the Sea of Stars and the ship had no oars. We were left to the traditional method of travel—thought. I had performed the task once before, on my farewell voyage from Alloy. That didn't make it any less bizarre. We all stood on the deck of the Rapier's point, closed our eyes, and concentrated on the idea of the ship moving forward. *Forward!*

Nothing.

Forward! I thought while I tensed my hands. I could feel my own sweat and the grit that had made its way beneath my fingernails. I heard Rax take a deep breath behind me.

Forward!

The ship, somehow, answered. I'd never heard a compelling explanation from the sages as to how the Sea of Stars functioned or why the power of thought worked as it did there—but I didn't need one that day. All I needed was distance between myself and Makrip. The Sea gave me my wish.

The Sea had no waves, and the ship made little sound as we crossed, but something else filled my ears. It was subtle, completely overpowered by the sound of conversation, or the knock of boots on wood. The Sea hummed. It was an odd ethereal droning noise, which rang through the sea as if echoing off an enormous cave. It was as if a singer with completely alien vocal chords was holding a single note which endlessly reverberated off itself. The note was magnified but simultaneously thinned, more reminiscent of the roar of a far-off wave against the beach than of a person's voice. At first I was utterly transfixed by the noise but as hours passed it faded into the background of my thoughts.

I found myself leaning over the railing and staring down into the sea. It was completely still save for the waves that followed the Rapier's Point which created small ripples arcing into the horizon. The water itself was pale, almost silver and hazy as if it was just another part of the mist. It was reflective, but in a deeper way than normal water. A deep part of me wanted to touch it, but I knew better. Every worldbreaker is taught on their first voyage never to swim in the Sea of stars. Its water acts like a riptide. As soon as you step foot off of your ship you sink like a rock. All I could do was gaze into the sea.

Beyond the water's surface was a perfect reflection—even sharper than one found in a mirror. My face stared back up at me. I hadn't realized how much the journey had ruined the

⁵ Shaahida uses the native Makripi spelling of the word, as opposed to Xhindi who spells it in its direct Caelean translation, Makrip.

perfect chaos I had styled it into in the morning. My hair was wild, almost none of my makeup had survived, and my eyes glimmered with a light I hadn't seen since my last voyage across this sea. Stars glimmered from beneath the sea and it was difficult to tell whether they were reflections of the stars above, or if there really were more of them shining below the surface.

Stars were mysterious and odd. Glimmering motes in the sky and the Sea of a world that was no world at all. A quirk of an empty, endless sea. There were no stars in the sky nor sea of any other world, and certainly none visible from Alloy. Perhaps they came here like the rest of the detritus floating on the sea of stars. Travellers from other worlds who no longer needed them.

It should have been freeing to explore a new city in an entirely new plane of existence but I found no joy in Arcadia. As the Rapier's point emerged from a glassy lake, I looked to the Sky of the faerie realm and saw two suns. One was similar in color to mine but the other glowed blue. I felt farther from home here than ever.. We were about half a mile from the nearest coast, which was burgeoned with a fey port town.

Even in my stupor I was not so pessimistic that I did not see the beauty in their architecture. Aithguitte was less like a normal city and more like a large camp in a glade. Trees were shapen into houses and stores, while wild plants ever-so-subtly curved out of the way of the desire paths tamped into the grass. Cloth flew on wires tied between branches and campfires burned smoke into the morning sky. The only thing in the area that resembled a building was a multi-story white tower which watched over the beach. It looked like several massive white-barked trees had been knitted together into a braid which stuck straight into the air. Lone branches grew from the tower's walls here and there. It had long windows filled with stained glass in green, pink, and red. Below it was the town's dock. It was similarly crafted of twisted wood, but it was straighter and featured planks of brown wood. Those appeared to be the only wood in the area that had been worked with an axe.

Docked at the port were two other ships. One looked obviously elvish, in line with the aesthetic of the rest of Aithguitte. The other had a cylindrical wooden hull with a small deck at the top and featured a lone sail, a large fin-like thing that stuck vertically out of the end of the ship. It had two glass windows at its front. The Assemblage came together to make the vessel resemble an Eel.



⁶ This was on reddit dnd maps

Our arrival flew past me. I bargained with a fat pale elf with pitch-black eyes to buy enough food for our journey. I internally sent a prayer to the bronze Ring that the elf understood common. Xhindi parlayed with the Eel ship's crew—a contingent of time raiders. The rations I acquired consisted mostly of elven flatbread with a couple of spirits that I figured Xhindi would enjoy. I also bought a book, pen and quill which Rax could hopefully use for his spells. After some consideration I also purchased a set of tomes on swordfighting and magic. The way my life was twisting, I might need them. I thought of my satchel and the lamp that I hid at its bottom. I still hadn't decided whether or not to use it.

Six of the Eel Ship's crew agreed to jump ship and sail with the Rapier's Point after a complicated agreement involving buying out their contracts with the captain. He was an old, snarly, gith and I was glad that Xhindi seemed eager to speak on our behalf so that I did not need to interact with him directly. Nevertheless, the ragtag group of gith boarded our ship. I had seen their species before—they were common on the docks of Alloy—, at least for species who did not possess fire resistance.

Unnaturally tall and slender, the gith had skin ranging from yellow to dark green. Most wore odd crystal masks that covered their eye sockets, but left the rest of their face bare. Each sailor wore their hair differently, but all in odd ways. Each was dyed in a different wild color. Four wore mohawks, while another was bald except for his sideburns and mutton-chops. The last wove her hair together in locks banded with silver. Somehow, I doubted the metal had the same significance to the gith as it did to the Alloy—where it represented devotion to love. Marriage bands were always silver. Imagining a fellow gith proposing with an enormous briefcase full of silver rings made me chuckle internally. I struggled to hide it resulting in an odd noise and the gith sailor eying me.

“Apologies.” I managed.

She shrugged and went to continue her work.

It was decided that we should disembark as fast as possible. The Hull was full of food and we didn't want even a possibility of being caught in Aithguitte. We'd been able to steal the Rapier's Point because I'd paid off the crew for a voyage in two days time and given them a room in the best tavern in the city to convince them to stay aground. If Bassaam of Vejabhar interrogated them, they might reveal that they sailed from Aithguitte and then we'd be in trouble. It would be expensive to hire a worldbreaker from Demost to track us down but the idiot might do it. No, we had to leave.

Rax ordered us to wait. He argued that the worldbreaking helm might malfunction if we push it too hard and make too many translations too close to one another. I agreed, on the condition that during the night he and I would keep watch on the poop deck, prepared for translation if we got any sign of another worldbreaker appearing on the lake. Rax fell asleep halfway through the night. I thought about waking him, but the scene was as peacefully tranquil as it had been since we came to Arcadia. I kept myself awake all night, using my anger at Bassaam as fuel for my body.

Eventually, the twin suns dawned on Arcadia. I woke Rax and ordered him to translate us back into the Sea of Stars. As the crew awoke and prepared the ship I walked in the opposite direction. I opened the door to the captain's quarters and slammed it shut behind me. I sighed as I slumped down onto the captain's bed.

When I awoke the eerie light of the sea of stars shone through the windows of the cabin. I groggily stood up and stretched my arms. I would be on this ship, seeing what might as well have been the same view, for the next couple of weeks at the least. I might as well give myself time to relax.

I finally unpacked the two bags of holding I had smuggled out of Vejabhar. One held most of my personal items. Clothes, my makeup kit, hygiene kit, perfumes, bags, journals, scrolls, letters. I'd stashed a sword there from the palace dungeon and with it I had stored the dagger Xhindi gave me. I cleared out what the previous captain had left in the room, piling it in a basket, and replaced it with my gear. I hung a cloth across the ceiling. I had bought it from a merchant in Alloy who told me I could wear it as a scarf, a dress, a robe, or use it as a blanket. I placed my own pillows on the bed and replaced its sheets. Once I had unpacked the first bag, the room felt like mine.

The second bag was worse. There was really only one item worth unpacking.

The reason that I'd needed Xhindi and Rax, rather than simply paying off the crew of the Rapier's Point, was what I'd done in the early morning. My plan had come together at the last minute when Xhindi was captured. My hus—I stopped that thought. We were married no more. *Bassaam* was going to kill the adventurer if I didn't save him. I couldn't let that happen. I had ordered the treasury of Vejabhar emptied, and when I'd been denied I broke in. I filled this bag with all the gold it could hold. That wasn't what I thought of when I reached into the bag. I thought of an elaborate golden oil lamp, with a spout on one end and a delicate handle on the other. It was emblazoned with stylized writing in Ignan and the complex geometric patterns which dominated the art of Makrip and Alloy. I lifted the lamp out of the bag as if it weighed a ton.

I set the lamp down on the floor of the ship's deck. I thought about opening the lid. I reached out my hand, but flinched back before I touched it. Was this really right? Of course it was, I thought, after all I'd seen Xhindi fight those soldiers in Vejabhar. I remembered leaving Alloy in defeat five years ago. I remember looking up to see the Charcoal Palace beneath her floating fortress and feeling so helpless. I remember panicking with Rax trying to think of a way to escape the army closing in on us. I realized that I was going to need Xhindi, so we went back for him instead of fleeing as soon as Rax tore his hole through the city wall. Powerless. Weak. Scrambling for a solution. Desperate. I hated feeling that way.

Before I could have a second thought I grabbed the lip and tore it from the lamp. Light flashed and blue smoke flared from the lamp's open top. In an instant, I was gone from the captain's cabin. I appeared *inside* the lamp. From my new perspective the lid was twenty feet in the air, and from one side of the lamp's interior to the other spanned about twenty feet. The spout

was adorned like a princess's bed, hanging drapes and pillows. Tables, chairs, and other furniture sat right where I left them, pushed to the edges of the lamp to make way for the real treasure. In the center of the lamp was a pile, almost eight feet high at its peak and ten feet in diameter, of Souls. They were circular and a few inches across, glowing magically and spewing a fog as if they weren't fully solid. Before the pile was a simple scroll. A Makripi sage's explanation of using Souls.

This is what Xhindi had done to achieve greatness. His path involved directly gathering the Souls from the living. I had been able to skip that step—offloading the work onto the past Kings of Vejabhar who had saved a stash of them, unless they were sorely needed. After all, they were far more valuable than gold and weighed far less. I was exploiting their failures, I argued to myself. I could take this power and do something better for the Timescape than they did. I could use them better than Bassaam would have. I would finally be powerful enough to never feel weak again.

I stepped forward into the pile and willed the Souls into myself. They were pulled towards me as if by a magnetic force and I accepted them. I felt a heat—no, more like a physical push or jolt—in my core as I ate. I could feel the raw power flowing into my body. I followed the instructions I had learned from the scroll.

The little magic I did possess came from a ritual I had followed long ago. I'd never killed anyone before, but I had collected Souls back in court. The al-Kamalis were a wealthy noble family in Alloy. My father Yxmic had been a chief advisor to the Sultana. I followed the tradition of my city and I gathered with the women of the court of Alloy on my sixteenth birthday. We stood in the eloquent chamber which housed the "Breath of the Sultan." Gold embossed the walls and elaborate geometric patterns spiraled from the high domed roof down to the pillars that opened the room to the air. The chamber was at the top of the palace. There were large open air windows, framed in grand archways. The Breath of the Sultan was an altar roaring with fire. It was almost twenty feet wide and the flames leapt ten or fifteen feet tall. The flame was so enormous and the windows so large that you could see it burning from practically anywhere in the city. We bowed before the eternal flame at the center of the Charcoal Palace. My mother took the role of shaman for the ceremony. She raised me from my kneeling position, guiding my eyes to the flame. In a chant, she told me the significance of the flame.

"This flame has burned for a thousand generations. When it was lit for the first time by the Sun Elves, our city was born. This is the flame that keeps us safe against the heat of the Sun. Without it, even we would burn. This is the flame that feeds the hearths of every house in our city. Without it, we could not cook. This is the flame that keeps the Sea of Fire from swallowing up our city. Without it, we would drown."

As I was instructed, I bowed to the Breath of the Sultan and a brazier of the purest fire was presented to me. I drank it down, and power flared inside me. The women slipped a pair of Tin bands onto my arms, to symbolize my devotion to Alloy. Later that day, I summoned my lamp for the first time.

All these years later, I focussed on that memory and fanned the flame inside me with the Souls I swallowed. It grew. I felt my body become stronger, more durable as Xhindi's was. I felt magic flowing within me, the ability to cast more and more powerful spells as Rax was able to. I exploded in fire and heat as the last of the Souls coursed into my body. The bottom of my lamp turned black with soot.

I could feel it in every motion I made. I flexed my fingers, stretched my arms and legs. I took a breath. Power. I had all the power I needed. I pushed the power into my muscles, commanding the souls to fuel my strength and again to make myself quicker and more graceful.

I strode across the lamp to a simple obsidian desk I had stored inside. Atop it were the Tin bands I had been given on my sixteenth birthday. Seven years ago. I had forsaken my devotion to Alloy when the Sultana, the Lady of bronze, the Queen of Fire, Aelia had slain my mother and burned our mansion to the ground. That day I'd embraced my marriage with Bassaam and fled to somewhere I thought would be safe, a million miles from my home.

Five years later, Aelia was gone. She'd been away from Alloy, waging war on Earth, and was defeated in battle by Soluntum's army. Her ash fortress had crashed in a backwater duchy and she'd been on the defensive ever since. Her forces desperately holding the line with what army remained while Soluntum took more and more territory every day. Yxmic, her most trusted advisor, had rebelled against her rule and taken the Sultanate for himself. He'd reformed the government into a democracy ruled by a council of elected ministers, with the role of Sultan acting merely as to advise and organize the council. Thus began a new age of freedom, and prosperity. I received a beautiful tablet from my half-sister, Yxmic's child with another of his wives. The letter detailed the whole affair along with a full pardon from the Sultanate and an invitation to return with the tablet's courier to Alloy.

I scrambled to return to my life, but Bassaam stopped me. He told me I had responsibilities to him, to Vejabhar, to the High Ministry. We fought and he ordered that I be sequestered in the palace. The courier was forced to leave without me, and I was stranded trying to think of an escape plan until Xhindi had crashed into my life.

Without a second thought, I slipped the Tin bands back onto my arms. It had been five years since I last put them on, but they fit as if I had never taken them off.



7

Chapter 2: The Voyagers

I was now Tenth level, which means a lot considering I'd started the day at Second. Just because I had the power didn't mean I knew how to use it though. I tried some of my new powers before deciding that setting fires on a ship with even a small amount of flammable objects on it was a bad idea. After some consideration I decided to ask Xhindi about it. He was certainly the most well-versed in combat. I suspected Rax was rusty from five years in prison and I couldn't communicate with him without a translator which meant getting Xhindi anyway. That made me think though, wasn't there magic that could translate languages? Perhaps Rax would know enough that I could learn it. I certainly had the souls for it.

I found Xhindi on the sails, working on the ropes while delicately balanced on the topsail yard above the odd reflective water. He greeted me before I got sight of him. He'd probably seen me climbing the mast or calling his name.

⁷ Art by [Ducky B.](#)

“Hello, my liege.” He spoke in a casual tone. Hearing such a tone in this circumstance reminded me how he kept it even in the heat of battle when we spoke on the cart. Desperation and exhaustion had crept into his voice, but he never lost that cool. Like fleeing Vejabhar and facing an army was an average day for him. For all I knew it was.

“Hello, thief.” I was unsure what to call him and landed awkwardly on the word. I instantly regretted it, believing I might've offended him, but he didn't seem to pay it any mind.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you.” He chirped, his eyes and hands focussed on tying a knot. His scimitar was slung along his back and he'd abandoned his fancy shirt and decidedly less fancy shawl. It was easier to see the bands and bracers that lined his arms. Most were gold, for worship, but there was one pair of Tin, for an oath, and an iron bracelet on his right wrist, for mourning. The lone silver band on his left arm seemed to shine brighter than the rest. Whatever I thought of him, he dressed as a man from my city. If he was as devoted to the gods as his jewelry suggested perhaps I was not an idiot to trust him.

“You are an accomplished fighter,” I started before Xhindi cut me off.

“Actually, I'm a monk.” He didn't look up from the knot.

I continued, not dignifying his comment with a response. “You're an accomplished fighter and you know your way around a sword. Can you teach me?”

That lit his eyes and he perked up. “You want to play with blades? You asked the right man.” Faster than I expected he shot into a standing position and drew his red-bladed scimitar. My nose filled with smoke as it wafted out of the blade as if were a raging wildfire. I snorted.

He backed further down the topsail yard as I climbed onto it. The ship slowed and we lurched on the yard. Xhindi barely moved but I flailed for a couple seconds before I could stabilize myself. I clocked that he was wearing the same boots, boots I knew were enchanted enough to let him walk on walls. Below us, the gith crew were looking up in a mixture of amazement, confusion and concern.

“You alright up there?” The woman with the silver rings in her hair called.

“Perfectly fine.” He responded.

“I'm alright.” I assured her. “Back to work.”

The gith shrugged and returned to their places, sitting on pillows and mats on the deck. Their concentration was restored and the ship lurched forward.

“How about we make this interesting?” Xhindi offered. “Your first lesson.”

I smirked and drew my own sword from where it lay on my hip. “How about it?”

There was a good foot between the tips of our swords, but Xhindi stepped forward and lightly tapped mine with his.

“Alright, here's the game. First, both of us have to concentrate on moving the ship.” As he said it he closed his eyes. I felt the ship's speed increase beneath me as he gave it his mental focus. He opened his eyes and I nodded.

I followed him, closing my eyes. I tried to let go of any other thoughts lingering in my head. Bassaam, the souls, fear of capture, bubbling excitement at seeing the gates of Alloy, concern about the fact that I was going to get into a swordfight thirty feet in the air. I took in a

breath, and held it. I was able to tamp it down. I replaced the chaotic thoughts with the image of the Rapier's Point floating through the sea-gliding forward towards my home. I released my breath and opened my eyes.

I caught Xhindi's gaze and his lip twisted upward in a smile. He stretched into a dueling stance, one arm holding his sword towards me while the other was curled behind his back. I answered with my stance, holding my sword with both hands while balancing my feet on the yard. I kept my focus on commanding the ship forward and quickly beckoned Xhindi with one hand before snapping it back onto my sword's handle.

He winked and stepped forward, slashing into my space at the same time. I parried with my sword, bracing against the yard with my feet. His blade screeched down to my hilt, making the awful noise of steel scraping against steel. He ducked forward and unexpectedly swung at me with his other hand. He held a dagger! He must have had it in his belt the whole time, that was why he put his hand behind his back, not courtesy. A second before the dagger's point would have stabbed into my clavicle I took one hand off my sword and grabbed for Xhindi's wrist. I caught him!

I felt new strength and speed surge into my body, I'd never have been able to make that catch before. Xhindi struggled against my grip, he tried to get his sword untangled from mine, but I pushed my blade down and twisted the hilt to catch his own blade. It was stuck. He smiled and pushed against me, trying to overpower me and force me back. I strained my newly empowered muscles to fight back. For seconds we wrestled back and forth, I gained an inch, he gained back two, I pushed him back four, before finally he kicked his boot into the yard and thrust his whole body forward. He broke my defense and sent me careening into the mast. The impact knocked the wind out of me yet it barely hurt; I'd become almost infinitely more resilient.

My hair was splayed across the mast, but I could control when it lit objects aflame and I commanded that it not touch anything on the ship.

Xhindi didn't let up just because he'd made progress. He charged me. Instead of parrying again I dodged with supernatural speed, dropping to my knees. Crouching on the yard I thrust my sword into the path of Xhindi's oncoming boot. His scimitar slash hit the air where my head used to be while he stepped right onto my blade. He looked down in confusion and kicked his other boot into my face.

The boot's pointed toe slammed right into my eye. For a split second I could see that the brown leather was almost reflective with polish—evidence of Xhindi's obsessive care for the pair. Then all I could think of was pain. I writhed backward and covered my damaged eye with a hand, but I was careful to keep concentrating on the image of the ship moving through the waves. I would not bow to this. I wasn't done yet.

"Sorry!" Xhindi called. In the heat of the moment it was clear whether he meant it or not.

Looking up, he was split halfway between concern and anticipation. He stepped forward and began crouching down, probably to pin me against the mast. I was still in this fight, black gods! I kicked, but my aim wasn't at Xhindi himself. Instead I aimed for the hilt of my shortsword, still beneath his boot. As he lifted his foot he craned his neck to the boot in

confusion. The sword stuck to the sole! I was right about its enchantment. My kick landed, and the impact on his foot shook him off course. His left foot, the one with the sword attached to it, flung out at a wide angle. His right foot shuddered from suddenly holding his entire weight. Xhindi flailed. In that millisecond, he seemed on the brink of falling. I took my hand off of my face and charged, pushing the unbalanced man off of his feet and onto the yard. It still hurt like hell but I fought through it. We clattered to the wood, barely managing to stay on top of the wooden pole. I tore my shortsword off of Xhindi's boot and swung in an arc, lifting the blade across my head. I slammed the blade into Xhindi's right arm and I saw the mix of fear, respect, and pride in his eyes as it came down.

He let out a grunt of pain and the ship lurched, slowing. His hand went to the cut, already seeping blood. He gasped in pain as he first let out the words.

"Good job. Don't do that to people who aren't as full of souls as I am, eh? It's a lot more dangerous for them."

"Lost concentration, huh?" I lorded over him.

A toothy smile broke across his face. "I suppose I did."

"Your eye alright?" He asked.

"I don't even feel it." I shrugged.

I made my way down the mast, got some gauze, and wrapped his wound. He assured me that for someone like him it would be of little consequence, and I believed him. It had only been a couple of minutes and my eye was starting to feel better. Apparently my eye was concerningly red with blood, but we both knew that it would heal. As I sat on the topsail yard in silence I thought about the pain. Xhindi hit like a raging dragon and his aim was perfect. I'm sure if he wanted to he could have permanently crippled me there. I was also sure that if I had taken that hit when I was sixteen I would have been spasming on the floor for hours. There was an unnatural feeling to gaining souls. Even the relatively small amount I'd swallowed in Alloy made me twice as resilient as I'd been before, and now I'd had thousands more. I thought of Xhindi, standing before the army of guards at the gate, ripping an arrow from his chest. We weren't undead, but there was something disturbing about just sitting with what should be grievous wounds.

We ate up there on the topsail, watching the infinite mist of the Sea of Stars. Every once in a while, a shape would loom somewhere on the horizon. We never got a good enough look to see exactly what they were, but the shapes were never the same. I could have sworn one was a shipwreck. Some floated above the sea itself but were still shrouded in mist. The floating shapes were usually larger. By the time lunch was finished, our wounds had recovered. A blink and my eye returned to function. Xhindi nodded to me.

"You're strong, and...full... You weren't yesterday. Where did you get the souls? I didn't see you kill anything." He looked at me intently.

"Figured me out already?" I asked. "I took them from the treasury. Wasn't sure whether to use them. Today I was." I was expecting him to comment on that, maybe disparage me for following on the path of a soul-stealer; maybe try to kill me for the power, damn the consequences; maybe even congratulate me. Instead he completely changed the subject.

“Another round?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow, “Next time, let's do this on the deck, please?”

We continued sparring like that for the rest of the voyage, usually meeting at least once every twenty-four hours. We were both interested in keeping something approximating our sleep schedules from the Mundane World. We always kept concentration on the ship while we fought, training our focus while we trained our bodies. I got used to most of the physical aspects of the power I'd gained. I was fast and I hit hard, like Xhindi. When I got into my rhythm I felt like I could swing my blade twice as fast as normal and possibly get a strike or two with my free hand or feet while I was at it. I focussed my souls into recreating Xhindi technique—copying his abilities. We practiced jumping off the sails and I was able to pick up his trick to avoid injury from a fall. The days passed, still too slowly for my liking.

The first day of our voyage I'd gone to Rax with the book I got him from Aithgutte, but it took me three or four more days to approach him again. Of course, he was quiet and he never demanded the attention of others. We ate together, but he never made conversation aside from occasionally signing to Xhindi, who'd translate. It was usually a correction to something Xhindi said, or a Makripi proverb. Over five dinners I'd learned that Rax was short for “Bythherax,” the name of a powerful demon whose essence was used to create Rax. The gemstones embedded in his body were part of the process. He was created using magic, not born to any family. He was at least one-hundred years old and after leaving hell for reasons he refused to speak on, had lived in Makrip for most of that time, even spending a significant amount of time in the capital, Demost. While there he had grown a distaste for the High Ministry and the Iron Wizards, though he never elaborated or said why.

Once, I'd gotten a nugget of information about who he was. We'd eaten below decks and a set of candles burned to illuminate the small dining room. I'd hung an incense burner from one of the supports that jutted out of the wall and through the room, and it hung ominously over Rax's head as he responded. He'd never had the chance to properly clean his ruined robes and he'd taken to wearing a set of cheap clothes he'd scavenged from the original crew of the Rapier's Point. He wore a robe several sizes too big for him wrapped tightly around his forearms. He signed slower than usual when we sat together, because one hand was occupied eating.

The silver-ring-bearing gith delivered our food and nodded before leaving to sit on her own. We were making discussion and I'd commented that I was thankful to be out of the dry Makripi desert.

Rax had said, *Perhaps. But when it rains in the desert it is a thousand times worse. Be grateful neither of you were alive for the Zephyr-Storm.*

After Xhindi translated his words to spoken Common I'd asked, “The Zephyr-Storm? What are you talking about?”

It's something the High Ministry would rather the people not remember. Not many survived where the rain fell. Old history. Perhaps...better forgotten. Lots of history in the sands most of it ill-recorded and misremembered. The scholars in Demost strive to understand the

world, but I think they spent too much time on coffee and mathematics, theoreticals. Immaterial things to be written on boards or in books. Not enough in the dirt and sand. Don't want to leave their dens and step into the real world.

He seemed, if not haunted, certainly conflicted about his past. I didn't want to push him and he never elaborated.

Now though, I needed to see him. He knew more about magic than anyone on the crew and I wanted to know as much as I could so I'd be ready to use my power when I returned to Alloy. Internally, I was hoping that I'd never have to get in a fight again but knew I was too stubborn to run away like I had five years ago. I needed to wring the souls I'd gained for everything they had.

I walked through the below decks. There was enough room on the Rapier's Point for four individual quarters at the back of the ship next to the crew's quarters, which meant two of the gith got their own rooms and the other four shared the rest of the space. I knew Rax was supposed to be waking up soon so I went to him with breakfast.

The silver-ringed gith, whose name I learned was Sestra, had made something resembling oatmeal. I snuck into the tiny hallway which she was using as a makeshift kitchen, combining our ration ingredients into something more edible. The space felt even more confined because of the spices hanging from the ceiling and cabinets left open. It struck me in such close quarters how much larger she was than me. She towered over me in height, and despite her signature slender gith build she knew how to throw her weight around. When I asked for Rax's plate, she had given a little more to him than the others—and then filled my plate with a heaping helping. She practically pushed the trays into my hands and shoved me out of the tiny space with a hip bump.

As I knocked on Rax's door there was no answer. I had to carefully balance both of our plates on one arm while I rapped the door with the other. I didn't like the thought of having to hold that position for any longer than I wanted to and impatiently rapped the door with my knuckles again. This time I heard shuffling. After an agonizing couple of seconds the door opened to the demon. Compared to Sesta he was quite short. He looked tired. There was a beleaguered aura surrounding the old man, and even at the best of times I could see how imprisonment had worn upon him. At least I'd spent my five stolen years safe and entrenched in silks, delicacies and gold. Comparing his bondage to my exile was like comparing the Sun to the bottom of the ocean. I was foolish.

I tried a smile as I handed Rax his breakfast. He looked at it with his signature tired sadness and peacefully began eating. He seemed surprised that I continued to be in his presence. After his third spoonful of Sesta's gruel he glanced up at me, raising a brow ridge as if to ask why I was here.

"I want to learn about magic. You know more than anyone I met on Earth." As I answered him I crept into the room. It was even more cramped than Sesta's 'kitchen.' A bunk bed was squeezed into the back and there was just enough room for a tiny desk and chair in the corner. The place was completely bare except for the book I'd given him, which was propped

open. The open page was halfway covered in text. The only light in the room was a single weak candle in a lamp. As soon as I entered the fire of my hair became the brightest light in the room.

Rax swept his hand as if to invite me to sit on the bottom bunk bed while he took the chair. He did not stop eating to wave his hand in the air and make a message appear with minor illusion. I realized why he chose sign, even one handed sign, at the dinner table. He could make illusory text in the air faster than he could spell with his hands, so it wasn't a matter of efficiency. What was the difference then? That *Xhindi* would have to spend time translating it and speaking it to me? Then it clicked. *Xhindi* would have to waste time on translation, which meant that he'd talk less and focus on Rax more. Was he really that annoyed by the thief's constant 'witty' chattering? If I was right, the idea in and of itself was funny.

Rax finally finished the spell, spelling the words *The most important thing to know about magic, is that it is at war*. In the air.

"At war?" I asked

Rax nodded, *The Arcane and Divine traditions are more than academic quarrels or differences in technique. All magic stems from one of two fundamental forces and those forces seek to destroy each other. Do not let them. Consume enough souls, spellcaster or no, and you will be swallowed by them. When you cast spells, know that you are touching only a piece of an incomprehensible whole.*

"How does this help me cast magic?"

Rax gave me an incredulous look. *Do you think a professor begins her curriculum on geology by handing her students a shovel? No! You start by learning the fundamentals and work your way towards practical work.*

"But I can already cast spells!" I argued. I opened my hand and it erupted in fire. It was simple really, every ifrit could do it.

Rax scrambled for the wall and made desperate pushing motions with his hands.

"What?" I asked.

He looked straight at me, curled his fist, then flattened his hand and made a cutting motion as if imitating someone who had been injured and was shaking away the pain.

I got the message and put out the fire.

Are you insane? What if you lit the ship aflame?

"I've been doing this since I was five years old. Do you think me a child?" My voice rose in genuine anger. I hated not being taken seriously and more importantly Rax knew enough about me that he should respect my intelligence.

You lived in a palace while I sat in chains. You sent that mercenary to free me because you needed someone to pilot this ship to get you back home to Alloy. You did not do so out of any care for me nor passion for freedom for the enslaved and shackled. How many others are still in that prison in Vejabhar for crimes of offense to the High Ministry? Or for petty theft because they cannot make enough gold to pay tax? Or for prostitution because they have no other way to survive? How many were silenced, as I was? He pointed to the deep, visceral scar on his neck. *I have seen you misuse power, Shaahida al-Kamali.*

I let out a shaky breath after he finished. He was right in a sense...but I wasn't aware of any of that. I did not command the guards, I didn't write Vejabhar's laws or levy their taxes, I didn't send Rax to prison for profaning against the Iron Wizards...

My husband did, and I didn't stop him. I looked up to Rax, desperate for some kind of answer, but all I saw in his dark, tired eyes was how little he wanted to see me. I began a sentence three or four times, but I never made it through. An uneasiness filtered its way into my bones, a quivering horror and fear that rose like an itch. Guilt. Eventually I stood up, turned from Rax and stumbled to the doorway. I slammed open the door, letting some of the astral light into the room.

"I'm sorry." I managed, not being able to look at Rax. I heard the floorboard creak as he stood up from his chair but I ran to my cabin before he could make any more words appear in the air. He was right. Not only had I wasted my years but I'd spent them benefitting from a city of people I'd only ever seen as beneath me. Foreigners I was forced to accept as the price for my life. I never cared for them. I never helped them, I never helped anyone. All I'd ever accomplished was keeping my miserable life going. Wasn't this supposed to be the end of all this? Free from Bassaam, Free from the mistakes of my past, free from the horror I suffered at the hands of Aelia. What kind of freedom did I deserve if I denied it to others? Why did I deserve to run home to hot city and return to my perfect life while Rax lost everything he had? The ship lurched as I stopped concentrating on pushing it forward.

I tried to ignore what he said. There was nothing useful I could do with the information. What was I going to do, return to Vejabhar and beg Bassaam to free some of its prisoners? Sail to Demost and convince the Iron Wizards to please, please rethink some of their decisions? I never asked to be the Queen of a corrupt city-state. I just wanted to survive. Was I so heartbroken at losing my home that I ignored the suffering going on right below me?

It didn't matter, I reminded myself while the anger building in my chest boiled over. I didn't belong in that world. I'd burned my last bridge in Vejabhar and there would never be anything left in Earth for me. I held my arms around myself and gripped the Tin bracers. I would soldier on to Alloy and reunite with my family and find someone else to fill my broken heart and I'd never think about that desert or its lonely palace ever again.

That's what I told myself. The shaking and the guilt didn't leave. Not while I stormed across the ship, not while I slammed the door to the Captain's cabin shut. Not when I opened the lid to my lamp and retreated into its safe little world. Not when I fell into the bed and buried my face in a pillow to try and forget the tears that were running down my face.

It was about thirty minutes before I heard a knocking at the door to the Captain's cabin. It was in a familiar pattern knock, knock, knock knock, knock, knock knock knock. Sesta. I raised my head out of my pillow but I couldn't pick myself up enough to greet her. My tears had definitely ruined my makeup by now and it would be unbecoming for my reputation. What was I kidding? As if running from my husband, breaking a criminal from prison and stealing a

worldbreaker hadn't already done irreparable damage to my reputation. I'm sure as soon as the news came to Alloy my father would be furious. Or would he?

I'd always remembered Yxmic as being quiet and calm. He never drew attention to himself, and if you saw our family at dinner it would be easier to assume the boisterous Uncle Gumah or the sly, silver-eyed Bibi Azure, or even my Mother was the one in control. No, Yxmic was. Stoic and brave but always with kindness in his eyes. Kindness I'd never deserve. He'd see that. He would see right through me with those blazing eyes.

Knock, knock, knock. Sesta was still there. Didn't she know it was rude to interrupt someone else's breakdown?

I doubted she'd hear me if I shouted, through the lamp and then the cabin door. I cast Message, knowing she was in range, and sent her a psychic whisper. See Rax, I could do magic!

"I'm not here." I said. I realized too late that she'd hear the weeping in my voice.

She responded through the spell. "Only if you say so, sailor."

I thought she'd walked away and felt a mix between relief and sadness. I didn't want her here, I didn't want to bother her, I didn't want anyone to see me like this, see how easily that Wizard had stripped down my defenses and reminded me of how little I knew. Simultaneously, I wished she was here, in the lamp, in this bed. I wanted to hold her and I wanted her to tell me it was going to be ok because I wanted someone, someone to love me. I wanted anyone to be there for me, anyone at all. But I was alone, and so far from home.

I waited precious seconds too long and tried to cast Message again. In the tiny sliver of time it took for the magic to reach Sesta's ear I pleaded she was still in range.

"Stay. Please? Thanks for the breakfast. It was good, I promise." I croaked in my tear-struck voice.

"Alright." She said it as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

She knocked again and I messaged her that the door was unlocked, which it was. I slammed it shut in my angry haze without locking it. I heard Sesta's footsteps as she entered the room.

"Ah!" A grunt of pain as part of her body knocked against the wood of the ship. Did she hit her head? I was about to ask after her when she spoke, "Hey, where are you?"

"I'm in the lamp." I mumbled.

"What?"

"In the lamp! It's on the table, just open it." I shouted, overcorrecting for my silence.

There were a couple seconds of stumbling noises from the Cabin and I heard something light hit the floorboards. Then a clink of metal and a whooshing noise, like wind whipping through a metal gate. Sesta appeared in the center of the lamp in a poof of smoke.

"Oh...Ha! I haven't seen a treasure such as this since the Conquest of Fel-Uyyiath." A jaunty pride came into her voice. I didn't know where Fel-Uyyiath was but I suspected that taking part in its conquest was an achievement of great import to Sesta.

She surveyed the lamp with a glint in her eye that reminded me of Xhindi. She slowly turned about the room, taking in every elegant detail before she finally saw me in the spout. Her

face fell and she rushed to my side. “Are you alright? Sick? Were you poisoned?” She put a hand to my forehead. “Hot.” Then she took a look at the rest of me and reconsidered. “But that’s probably normal for you.”

“I’m not sick,” I dragged the words out of my throat. “I’m...I’m just. I’m alone...and I’m scared, and I’ve done so much that I regret, and I’m not sure who I am anymore. I’m sorry. I barely know you and...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

Sesta looked sympathetic, but just as unsure what to say.

“Hey, what are the rings on your hair, the silver?” I decided to ask, because I didn’t know what else to say and this day couldn’t get any worse.

She looked deep into my eyes for just a second. Whatever she saw told her to answer. Her bombast returned and she launched into a tale.

“Each of these pieces represents something to the growth of a Githyanki. A kill! A first sword forged! The taming of a dragon! When a Githyanki first matures they are given the first ring, and then they earn more until their mane is as full as mine.” She tossed her hair, showing off her pieces. There must have been at least fifty woven into her hair somewhere.

“The silver is important. Mind silver is one of the few things of worth you can find in the Sea of Stars that wash up here from somewhere else in the Timescape. We use it in armor, weapons, tools, saddles, jewelry, chains...” she kept rattling off uses for the metal and I grew a small smile.

“What, what about the others? None of the other Gith...yanki wear rings like yours.” I asked, sniffing and rubbing the tears from my face. As I leaned up from the bed Sesta gave me my answer.

“Oh, city slickers. They’re all from Dorminus. They don’t care so much for silver there. I guess they have enough trade to get other stuff sometimes. All too busy trying to look like the princess, that’s what I think. She’s got nice hair but it’s not nicer than glory!” She shook her fist as if cursing the gith princess in jest.

“I think your hair looks a lot better.”

“Thank you.” It was barely a whisper but Sesta nodded anyway.

We continued talking. I told her more about Alloy, which she’d visited once in the years before Yxmic’s Sultanate. She’d wanted to explore the city but been denied entry. The Lady of bronze had gotten more and more strict in her laws in the years leading up to the coup. We talked about the fashions of Dorminus and Poch. Apparently the Githyanki city was built atop the corpse of a dead god floating in the Sea of Stars. How was that even possible? She said it like it was no big deal. I told her about the Palace and the grounds, and the festivals that lit up the world. I told her about Scilla al-Kamali, my sister, who I missed more than anything. She told me about her parents who lived in a small trade outpost which translated to northern Kiptos on Earth. She explained how most Gith made their living trading or working the Sea as sailors or pirates because it was hard to do anything else. No soil to farm, very little to mine. The Sea provides though. The reason they could build a city atop the god corpse was because nothing ever decayed in the Sea. Bodies laid to rest would be just as fresh as they were upon death, even

the body of a god. The gith never aged so long as they stayed on the Sea, and Sesta explained she was very old. Just barely older than the Shattering, a thousand years ago. She only ever aged when she was on other Manifolds, which made up a shockingly small amount of the life of a time raider. By the time she'd gotten mature enough to even start wearing silver she was three times my age. People who stayed on the Sea didn't need to eat because their bodies didn't decay. She admitted whenever she translated into another manifold she got unbearably hungry and made a habit of cooking occasionally even while on the Sea in order to avoid such problems.

"Wait, do we even need to be eating this food then?" I asked. What had I done all that bargaining for? Surely Xhindi, Rax, or any of the gith crew would have corrected me by now.

"Technically no. Buuuut. If the journey is short enough it's recommended you do so you don't get used to it. That's why all my meals are so bare-bones! You haven't even noticed you aren't getting hungry!" She poked me in the stomach, which my shirt exposed to show the golden piercing on my navel.

"Besides," she continued, "it helps me focus on propelling the ship!"

That made me feel...odd. When Sesta left though, she had thoroughly distracted me from my woes. I felt happy. For the first time in a while. My stomach twinged. She wasn't a bad woman and she wasn't bad company, but she reminded me how lonely I was. How little I could tell her. How much I needed Scilla and my siblings-in-Alloy. I slept poorly that night.

The days passed even slower as I made a point of avoiding Rax and his dispassionate glare. The creaking of the ship's wooden planks, the odd ambient noise of the sea itself, and the muttering of the githyanki carried me from yesterday into today and into tomorrow. I practiced with Xhindi every day. I was getting better but our record was about eighteen to ten with him in the lead. I tried my best to practice my magic without a teacher. It had gone decently well, all things considered.

One day, I'd accidentally started a fire while practicing on the deck and the crew scrambled to fill buckets with the Sea's translucent water and managed to put it out before anything important burned. A nasty black mark was left on the boards of the deck. I wasn't too proud to clean my mess. I'd spent the rest of the day cleaning the boards and attempting to remove as much ash from the deck as possible.

I'd come to the dinner table more tired than ever. I was equally grateful that Sesta was still cooking—no matter how necessary or unnecessary. It smelled decent and it was something to keep my energy up. I gobbled it down. The drafty below-decks of the Rapier's Point slowly filled with the scent of the food wafting up through the ship. Sesta was either getting very creative in the kitchen or she'd found spices somewhere in the last couple of days.

One of the githyanki, a red-haired man they called Niche, entered. He took a seat at one of the tables and unfurled the charts we'd been using. After he joined the crew he'd taken up position as navigator and often stood on the quarterdeck watching Xhindi and I duel. Sesta gave him his portion and he smiled. He ate with one hand while measuring something on his chart with another. I watched as his face lit up with satisfaction and he shouted.

“Port, 30 degrees!” He commanded, and we obeyed. I closed my eyes and mentally adjusted my picture of the Rapier’s Point, imagining the ship banking to the right. Slowly reality obeyed.

Sesta put a plate down beside mine and I looked up to her. I raised an eyebrow as if to ask ‘why’? My mouth was too full of food to speak. She simply smiled, silded over to the chair beside me, and sat down.

“You feast like a gibbering mouther.” She commented. I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant by that, but she smiled as she said it. I hoped it positive.

“Only on food that’s worth eating.” I replied, “My compliments to the chef.”

Her grin stretched across her face. She let out a guffaw of triumph, then spoke, “You can give your compliments right here.” She pointed to her cheek.

I blushed at the implication and chuckled into my bowl. I stopped being able to meet her eyes and instead looked toward the wall. Someone had hung the pelt of a strange black-furred creature there. Moving my gaze was a deflection, and not a very good one. Sesta was so forward! She had absolutely no courtly manners, not that I’d expected her to. In a way it was endearing, but I...I wasn’t sure what I felt, honestly.

I contemplated the githyanki, the way her hair left loose strands dangling across her ears and forehead. Her kind sharp eyes, her cocky smile. She was certainly handsome.

Sesta eyed me expectantly but when our eyes met she straightened up. She seemed ready to change the topic of conversation when Rax sat down opposite me. Sesta had raised a hand as if preparing to speak but dropped it as the ratty old wizard put his plate on the table.

I see your progress is going well. He chided, the words appearing in the air.

I sighed and glared at him as he tore a nut open with his sharp teeth. He popped it into his mouth and began chewing. I searched the room for Xhindi and found him engaged in conversation with Niche— no help there. Sesta was still by my side. She was awkwardly glancing from Rax to I and back, as if unsure if she was meant to be involved.

“What do you want?” I asked. It came out more forcefully than I’d intended. I didn’t want to seem angry at him, but that’s exactly who he’d see; the fiery queen consumed in her own rage with no thought to how she’d burn others down in the process. In horror, I realized that description made me sound like Aelia.

I’d like it if we could survive our journey with an intact ship. He didn’t look at me, instead using his hands to eat and twirling his pinky finger to summon the illusion. On the finger he wore a gold ring encrusted with a gemstone which twinkled like the rising sun.

“I’m sorry.” My speech faltered. Something about Rax’s presence after our last conversation made me anxious around him, self-conscious. It made the voice in my head that doubted myself as loud as a fireball explosion.

What you think is irrelevant. Did the scholars record the sorrow of the wizard Missek when he failed to seal away the demon court? No! They wrote of the burning of their great city and the ruin of a kingdom. He waved his pinky.

“Who? What?”

Too many histories in my head. That's not the point, he continued.

It had put a chink in his metaphorical armor. The odd saying had made me realize that whoever Rax was, he was a person as much as any of us. He'd scared me so much because he saw through everything I pretended to be to who I was. There was a real him in there somewhere, too.

"What is the point then, old man?" I tried to be lighthearted.

He squinted at me for a second before he wrote. *The consequences of your actions on the world are what is important. As are mine. I will not have you burn down our ship.*

I wanted to argue with his assessment of the situation but he didn't stop casting.

Clearly, you need someone to supervise you. Someone who can stop you from causing too much chaos. I will do so, even if it means following you to Alloy.

I didn't quite know what to say. I was stuck in stunned silence for what felt like a minute.

"You don't have to...I mean. Rax, I can't ask that of you. You just got your freedom. You shouldn't have to use it to follow me around in case I make another mistake. It's not right." I argued.

He seemed to consider that but was interrupted before he could say anything. Across the room, Xhindi had struck a shield with his magic sword and a ringing noise flooded the room. Heads all turned to him. Niche was standing by his side, holding a chart aloft to display it to us.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the crew. We've made a slight error." Xhindi said.

My heart flipped in my chest as my mind whirled with the implications of his words. We're we off course? If so, how much longer was I going to be in the Sea of Stars trapped on this tiny wooden vessel?

"We won't be arriving in Hot City in three days' time, as was our original schedule." He continued.

No, no, no I couldn't be forced to wait longer to see my home! It couldn't be right, we had to be close. I couldn't lose any more time to—

"We'll be at the gates tomorrow morning!" Xhindi announced triumphantly. He raised his sword above his head as the small crowd cheered. Gith raised glasses to echo him and crossed arms in a celebratory salute. Sesta elbowed me and smiled wide. Rax almost sarcastically flitted his finger and an illusory firecracker went off in the center of the room.

"What say you, captain?" Xhindi nodded to me.

I was, at best, co-captain with Xhindi and Rax. In the moment, I didn't care. I stood up, raised my glass and hollered with all my strength. As I shouted, the candles in the room flared with light.

"To the Bellows!"

The crew rallied behind me, and I even caught Rax raising his glass to the ceiling. I was so grateful in the moment that I completely ignored the conversation Xhindi had interrupted. By the time I'd sat back down he'd slipped to another table. Sesta quickly kicked off the conversation and I gladly joined her.

The Bellows was a port on the Sea of Stars. Calling it a town is slightly inaccurate; it was tiny and held very few permanent residents. The port was built upon a series of large stones. Due to the Sea's odd gravity the largest hung twenty feet in the air while a collection of smaller stones had sunk into the sea. Wooden and rope bridges connected the various stones. The ones large enough to build anything on hung high up in the air. The silhouette of the largest building in town, an inn called the Sultan's Gate, dominated the horizon. It had a large central tower and a dome—clearly imitating the style of Hot City, though at only three stories I had never seen a royal style dome on such a lowly building. Spreading out from the stones like a spider web were a series of wooden docks. Instead of having supports that stretched into the odd ocean, the beams of the docks were chained to heavy objects. Objects which would float upwards rather than sinking due to the gravity of the sea. Most of them were rocks of some kind but on some of the more makeshift docks I saw used ruined furniture as weights.

Ten other ships were docked at the Bellows, all of them worldbreakers. There was little need for mundane ships in this sea. One stood out to me, another hellbreaker. It was complete with black sails, red accents, and a black metal hull. The sheen looked familiar as I gazed at it from the deck but I suspected I'd have to check my books and academic notes to see why. Most of the ships at port, including the hellbreaker, were larger than the Rapier's Point. Its dual masts and three decks were petite compared to a nearby soluntum ship sporting three enormous masts, each having three rectangular sails.

Eager to be out of the same five rooms, I lowered the gangplank and descended to the pier. The rest of the crew followed, leaving Rax and Niche behind as guards. Apparently, neither appreciated the Tavern atmosphere. I wasn't going to complain. I couldn't contain my excitement to be so close to home. It seemed infectious as I ran down the pier to the astral islands and the crew ran after me. Sesta practically picked me up and she swooped an arm around me. We galloped through the tiny streets of the bellows, disturbing the peace of a trader sleeping beneath his shop's cloth ceiling. A group of Kiptosian Earthens stood bickering in the street and rapidly scattered across it to avoid running into us. At the end of the spiral path we reached the Sultan's Gate.

It was a decent impression of the architecture of my home, at a massive discount. The walls were made of ashen black stone and accented with bronze. The front doorway was an impressive impression of the gates into Alloy's eastern Bazaar. Atop the door was the sign, which depicted a large gate being pushed open by a person made of flame.

Our whole crew stumbled into the tavern at the bottom of the Sultan's Gate. The room was done-up to resemble a coffeehouse. Sandstone arches carved in smooth patterns divided the room into several corners and elaborate tapestries hung from the walls. Geometric patterns covered the floor and ceiling, which rose up to an illusory glass dome. The illusion was obvious once you noticed it. This was the bottom floor of a four story building—that ceiling couldn't have existed, but it was enthralling. In the center was an open dance floor where a cadre of well-dressed Makripi women were showing off. A fireplace adorned one wall, roaring with an

animated flame which beckoned and responded to the dancer's movements. *That* was a good touch.

The tavern patrons welcomed us with a shout. It was a vibrant mix of creatures from across the timescape. Another gith sat in the corner alongside a pack of abyssal gnolls who were collectively feasting on what looked like a whole boar. On the other side of the tavern there was a party of adventurers, obvious by their armor. Three were orcs, one elven, and the last appeared to be a living granite statue. Opposite them was another party, a combination of drow and duergar. On a small stage at one end of the tavern was a collection of bards, most were ifrit but their lutist was Earthen.

Xhindi beelined for the bar and ordered a round of drinks.

"Underland Ale, six shots, as fast as you come!" He spoke.

I assumed the bartender was an ifrit at first. He was covered in roaring flames and wore a black turban on his head. When Xhindi ordered he turned around and I saw that his body was made of a series of floating metal plates suspended in the flame. A fire golem. A set of them had been built by an ancient member of the court of Alloy to guard the Foundry. Perhaps one of them had been decommissioned? Or was he an original?

Whatever his origin, he nodded and produced three bottles. He began mixing an Underland Ale and poured six shots. He was about to finish pouring when I interrupted.

"I'll pay for the next round," I said, consumed with excitement. "And one for everyone in the room!" The bar erupted in cheers and I thought I heard at least one man shout 'that's a lass!'

Underland Ale almost tasted like cucumbers and when it hit my tongue I almost regretted buying a round for everyone. When it swam into my mouth and I swallowed it my body shuddered. It came with a sweetness and zest that lit up my insides. It wasn't as impactful as ifriti flamefroth, but that dish would burn out a Earthen's throat. I was filled with a rush of energy that I carried onto the dance floor and I pulled Sesta with me.

The party went by in a whirl. I danced in a circle with the rest of the crew. We threw darts at an old dummy covered in rotting rusty armor. Xhindi got one spectacular shot right to its throat before downing another glass of alcohol and completely missing for the next hour. I flirted with the animated flame, making it bounce up my arm and flare through its chimney. We sat down to play a drinking game involving a deck of cards. Sesta lost almost immediately, causing a death spiral that led to her bowing out. She then took turns laughing at whoever else lost. I made it about halfway before I bet too big and got crushed by one of the githyanki. He handed me my reward, six shots, and I forfeited. Even in losing I felt like I was at the top of the world. I dragged Sesta back to the dancefloor and we spun around each other for what felt like hours. I inched closer and closer as we performed a traditional ifrit dance until. The last step involved the leader, me, curling the follower, Sesta, in my arms and pressing her against me. I did, and she followed, and our eyes locked.

I could no longer care about inhibitions or social consequences. She was handsome and strong and cute and I could be whoever I wanted tonight. I kissed her on the cheek.

“Sorry I never gave you your compliment earlier.” I said in a breathy whisper. Our faces were so close that I knew she could hear me.

“Any by your mouth is as fine as they come.” She purred.

I whipped her out of the dance step and we crashed together again. I stood on my tiptoes to kiss her lips and she graciously bent down. We separated and for a perfect second I held her in my eyes. We pulled apart and began dancing a jig as the band put everything they had into the music. We moved faster and faster, the music louder and more intense. Sensation built higher and higher and higher until with a final note the song ended and I practically fell into her arms.

She kissed me again while she held me. One hand went to my neck and she slowly caressed it before moving the hand to my thigh and picking me up in a bridal carry. I reached my hand up to her face and stroked her cheek.

“Do you want to...?” I asked.

Before I finished my sentence she accepted. “Yes.”

In a flurry we drunkenly paid the bartender the hotel rate and received a key. Sesta carried me up two flights of stairs and down a hallway like the Legions of hell were behind her, all while I was tucked away in her arms.

“You’re so strong.” I commented, entranced by her.

“You like that, huh.” She replied with a sly smile and a wry tone. “Room 203 right?”

“Yeah.” She trusted me to remember that part as she slid the key into the lock and opened the door. It was a completely unremarkable room. Wooden furnishings, linen sheets. A small desk and chair in one corner and a bed large enough for two in another. None of the grand style of Alloy reached the third floor, apparently. Not that I was going to spend any of my time looking at the room tonight.

Sesta foisted me onto the bed and I sat up, grabbing onto her collar and pulling her down with me. She managed to prop an arm onto the mattress before she fell while my flaming hair flared across the sheets. Her face was inches from mine as she lay atop me. I could smell her breath, the spices of her cooking, the odd clean smell of the sea of stars. The creases in her eyes and the way her ears subtly pricked up when she was excited. Her calves were against mine and our stomachs were pressed together. I took a shuddering breath.

“Hey,” I said while I fluttered my eyelashes.

“Hey,” she replied, finally breaking the tension by leaning down and kissing me. I responded in kind, putting all the passion I had into her. Kissing her, gripping her body with my hands, gently pulling her hair.

I held onto her and didn’t let go all night.

Hours later, both of us were exhausted and my head was laying on her chest. Sesta had kissed, squeezed or bit every part of my body and I was glad to relax and drift to sleep atop her. I figured she felt the same.

“Hey, so...you’re headed to Alloy right?” Sesta asked in a slow and delicate voice. It was clear she *was* just as tired as I thought.

“Yes,”

“So you’ll be gone by tomorrow. This will be our only night together.” She said.

I froze up. I didn’t know what to say. When she held me it all felt alright. It had been so long since I’d been loved and she’d reminded me how hot my fire could burn. Would one night be enough?

“You know, if you want, you could stay...be a part of our crew. Sail the Timescape. Spend more nights here.” Sesta offered and pulled me against her at the same time.

“I don’t know.” I said, and it was the truth.



8

Chapter 3: Hot City!

I didn't realize how cold I'd become.

The ivory flash of a translation blinded everyone on deck, and before the light was gone we felt a rush of heat. It was like being inside a roaring campfire. My hair and eyebrows flared. The heat rippled into the core of my body, sinking into my heart. As the flash receded, we could see Alloy spread before us. We were inside the outer walls, floating on a harbor of fire. In front of us, most of our view was taken up by the towering bronze walls. The walls were dotted with towers, each of which were topped with bulbous domes which tapered to golden spires. Rising behind the walls, on the hills of the city, were a tide of buildings. Great stone and metal towers rose from the bronze, accompanied by elegant spires, and the distinctive domes of temples. Gold tipped many of the roofs and domes of the city, and the city shined with a thousand glints of light upon polished metal. At the very top of the city, on a hill, was a completely black citadel. Its walls abruptly cut off the gleaming city around it and the ornate dome and reaching spires at the complex's center were visible from the harbor. My rightful home. The Charcoal Palace.

The harbor spilled from the bronze walls, black stone piers jutting out from the perfectly smooth metal. As always, it was bustling with activity. Hellbreakers from across the Timescape criss-crossed the fire and docked at the piers. Hundreds of ships, possibly thousands in the entire harbor. Only a minute after we appeared, I saw another hellbreaker translate into Alloy. It was odd to see it happen from the outside after you'd experienced the unique sensation of translating yourself. A roughly elliptical section of the Sea of Fire began glowing bright white. A second

⁸ Art by Raven Mimura for Wizards of the Coast

later, the silhouette of a ship rose from the glow—completely obscured in the same light. It began with the outline of five masts, which slowly grew larger. One, then two, then three sail yards erupted from the light. The quarterdeck, then the rest of the deck. Finally, the hull rose until the hellbreaker's outline was carefully rested on the sea. The light dispersed, and I could see the ship itself. It had a red and black hull made of some kind of stone, and each of its billowing sails were green. The deck scurried with red and black skinned creatures, each dotted with horns. Tieflings. The grandeur of the ship made me proud of my city, surely it would bring something lucrative. The ship quickly faded into the tangle of sails docking in the harbor.

The view was magnificent. It was beautiful. It was home. At last I was home! The fire inside me made me realize how cold the Mundane World was and how sterile the Sea of Stars. The heat wrapping around my body felt like a tender, loving embrace. As if I was back in the arms of my sister and the girls of the court. As if my mother were wrapping her flaming hands around my shoulders. I'd forgotten so much in my exile. As I looked up at the palace I wondered how much I'd truly lost. When I met Scilla and Yxmic, would they realize how different I'd become and scorn me? Would I forever feel lost in Alloy, now, as I felt lost in Vejabhar?

No, I thought. No. This was home, these were my people and I belonged here.

As if I needed evidence of that fact, I saw a Earthen man on the docks wiping his brow with sweat. It seemed he'd not even stepped off his ship for five minutes and the heat was getting to him. Ifrit were built for the heat, made of fire. According to the stories my mother told me, in the olden days our ancestors lived entire lives at the bottom of the sea of fire, completely immersed and somehow alive. I never tested that theory long enough to actually dive beneath the sea for long. All of the interesting stuff was above the waves.

As we approached the shore I ducked into my cabin, checking my dress and makeup for the thousandth time. I needed to be presentable when I entered the city. I wore my favorite dress from before my exile. It still fit after all these years—I hadn't gotten much bigger. The fabric was accented with patterns of glowing orange thread, woven from the silk of an inferno spider. I pinned a matching cape to my left shoulder, and sheathed my scimitar under it on my left hip. It featured a back skirt tied with a large ruby in a gold buckle, so the remaining cloth could be folded into a long loincloth in the front. The top featured two distinct sections of cloth which lay across my chest, crossing over my chest and connecting behind my neck. The cut strategically revealed my gold navel piercing. I wore all of my piercings—two in each eyebrow, one on my right nostril, seven in my ears, and of course the one in my navel. I covered my hands with even more rings than normal and slipped all the bracers and bracelets I could onto my arms. The looser ones formed a collection of bangles on my wrists. Most were ornately carved and embossed with intricate detail. Gems sat in beds of gold on most of my jewelry. My Tin pair dwarfed the rest, my point of pride. I slipped a golden choker around my neck. The ends, which rested above my collarbone, were shaped to resemble a lion's head. Gold was, of course, expensive but showing it off wasn't just about wealth. The gold showed our commitment to the gods. The more gold, the more devoted and passionate. These traits were prized in my home. I had left the silver ring professing my devotion to Basaamm back in Vejabhar. I'd traced a pattern

of temporary tattoos across my arms, chest, and thighs. A typical royal woman would have a group of attendants to draw them across herself, but I had to do my own. They were sloppy, but better than nothing. This entire assembly would scream ‘royal’ to anyone who saw me on the street. I was back.

When Sesta had first seen me exit the cabin on the Sea of Stars she wolf-whistled. Xhindi bowed to me, imitating the subservient salute customary of commoners to royalty in Alloy. Rax didn’t seem to care.

A phoenix flew from somewhere on the docks and perched on the railing. It held a stone tablet in its beak. Rax awkwardly approached the bird, wanting to grab the tablet without being burned. I strutted past him in my gleaming outfit and snatched the tablet out of the phoenix’s beak. The writing was in Ignan. Even if Rax had taken it he couldn’t read it. It included generic docking instructions and asked for our business in Alloy.

I am Shaahida al-Kamali and this ship came here to transport me to the city and do further business. I was empty of my own tablet, so I emblazoned the text on one of my rings and put it onto one of the phoenix’s legs. It happily flew away. I assumed that went well, because no more interruptions came between us and the dock.

The Rapier’s Point came to a halt upon the stone dock and the gangplank descended. I took my first graceful steps off of the ship, but before my shoe could touch it a hand gripped my shoulder. I turned to face Sesta who was giving me a small smile that didn’t meet her empty eyes.

“Hey, so...” She started.

My eyes widened as I realized my mistake, “Hey. What’s your plan after this? Are you...staying here?” I asked with an odd note in my voice. Did I want her to stay? I truly wasn’t sure.

“No,” she said, instantly quieting my internal debate. “It sounds like Rax is going to continue being our pilot. We’ll probably be in town for another night, hopefully pick up a shipment and head out of here.” She put an arm behind her head and smiled awkwardly. “See you around?”

“Yes. I’ll see you.” I said with a confidence I didn’t feel. What did I expect? That she’d follow me into the Palace and be my bride?

“Oh, umm. We, uh the crew got together on the trip, y’know we’re going to sail this ship and all, and we decided it was best to rename it. It’s good luck, dedicating it and all. After some discussion, we went with ‘The Ifrit’s Freedom’. Something to remember you by, I think” She spoke unevenly at first, but as her words continued she met my eyes and didn’t let go.

My heart fluttered in my chest. I took a set of rapid steps and leaned upward to plant a kiss on her mouth. The heat had gotten to her body and I could feel the delicate warmth of her lips on mine. She wrapped her arms around me and returned the kiss. I quietly wished I could hold us together for just a while longer, but I couldn’t. We separated and I sighed. The last bit of cold left my body.

“Something to remember me by.” I echoed. She nodded and I noticed her eyes had a new spark and her smile had turned into a self-fulfilled smirk. I was glad, because I hoped that it meant she was ok with all this, with me leaving after our night together. I had always known it was going to be like this. She belonged in the Sea of Stars, just like I belonged in Hot City. We couldn’t stay together and I’d barely known her, even if she did light my heart aflame. I let myself hold a long gaze at her before I looked away.

Sesta was still standing in the middle of the gangplank when Xhindi approached, clapped her on the back and hopped onto the dock without stopping his movement. He looked up to me. In contrast to Sesta there was nothing but joy in his crooked smile.

“This is goodbye then, my queen.” He bowed, with an equal mix of reverence and pride in his voice. He raised his hand to kiss one of my rings and I let him.

“And goodbye to you, my lord.” I pushed propriety and nobility into my voice, speaking to him as if a queen to her knight. “May your travels be blessed by the Kindling itself!”

“The same to you!” he bellowed. Then, changing his tone from boisterous to mock-seriousness he continued, “If I may ask a favor, should I be imprisoned in your city again, I ask for the same charity, and mercy as was granted me on Earth.” He ended the sentence with a smile and a deep look into my eyes. I noticed the greedy glint in his own.

For a second I contemplated what chaos Xhindi might cause in my city unsupervised. He, on the other hand, seemed to have no more time to waste and galloped down the street with his signature inhuman speed and paradoxically graceful lack of balance.

I took one last look at the newly dedicated Ifrit’s Freedom. Rax looked down at me from the railing and nodded down the docks, towards the gate into the city. It was as if he was commanding me. *Go, that’s where you belong.* I waved a hand to him and the tiniest of smiles came to his long jaw.

I stepped off the ship and into my future.

The gates to the city were open. Traffic was bustling and there didn’t appear to be any formal process before entering. Guards were stationed, of course, but the lines were disorderly and more than once I’d seen individuals slip through undetected. The last time I’d gone through the Magma Gate it had been a grueling process where anyone trying to enter or leave the city was subject to a torrent of regulations. Many traders needed specifically stamped seals from the Sultana in order to do business and many travelers, especially those from other worlds, were subject to a mandatory fee. I got in one of the lines and eventually approached the guardsman at the gate. Before me was a large Azer woman with a pronounced tail wearing a heavy shawl. She quickly passed. As I came face to face with the guardsman I held a denarii coin in my hand.

“Fifteen denarii!” He said. He was the first other ifrit I’d seen in five years. His skin was blue and his eyes shone with our native fire. His short but bushy beard was made of flame, like my hair. Home! The guard wore white military robes and a black turban. Tin bracers. Copper shin guards and matching vambraces—the metal for soldiers, warriors, and knights. I recognized the uniform. He was a member of the Illuminated. The order used to defend the palace - what were they doing patrolling the bronze wall? What had happened to the order of the

Unquenchable, who had previously been assigned to the walls. And the toll? Fifteen denarii for passage into the city? Most laymen didn't make five denarii in a month.

"Pay or I turn you around." He grunted, as if he'd said it twenty times in the last 20 minutes.

"Why? The toll is one denarii by the laws of Alloy and If you turn me away I will follow our cities laws, file a complaint and have you stripped of your rank!"

He scrunched his face and stepped towards me, a hand darting to the sword at his hip.

"You're awfully cheap for a woman wearing such fancy robes. How did you get those?

Thievery? Prostitution?"

I tried to object but he burst forward, putting a hand on my shoulder. "I'm taking you in for questioning."

"Unhand me!" I growled. The guard forced me through the gate to a guardhouse beyond it. The crowd thrummed into the busy streets of Alloy, but I was lead away from their path. Ten more guards with spears stood at attention we

"I am Shaahida al-Kamali!" I shouted, pushing away from him.

He ignored me and continued pulling me away from the gate.

"I am the first daughter of Yxmic al-Kamali, King of Alloy! Daughter of Rashimi al-Kamali, the rebellion's queen!

That got him. He dropped my arm, froze, and turned very slowly to face me. His bushy eyebrows raised as eyes met mine. He took a second look at me and recited a formal bow.

"Your highness," he shivered while he held his bow and faced the floor.

"Rise." I commanded, and he obeyed.

He pressed his hands together and muttered apologies. I waved a hand and the apologies ceased.

"I wish to see my Father, the Sultan and my half-sister, the princess. Take them to me or find someone who can." My words were simple. Strong enough to be orders but not harsh or biting.

"Yes, your highness." He bowed again and led me through the gate.

In a matter of minutes an assembly had gathered and eight of the Illuminated had prepared a Palanquin to carry me to the Charcoal Palace. I had refused, instead asking for a Nightmare to ride—which they'd happily retrieved. Nightmares were superficially similar to Earth's horses, but they had hair like mine; manes made of flickering flame and eyes like burning coals. My mare's coat was a deep black that contrasted well against its orange fire. Nightmares were sturdy things, but once broken they were obedient to a fault. The metal in its saddle and bridle was bronze, and I almost laughed to myself. The first time I'd seen a slave's band on my return journey, and it was on a horse. I hoped that would be a good omen.

The captain of the Magma Gate's guard offered to personally escort me, and I'd accepted. He was a fat ifrit man with hair and skin like the swirling smoke above a volcanic eruption. His black turban held a golden seal. He seemed a man of steady schedules and regular reports. He introduced himself as Captain Grey. The drive with which I rode my nightmare far outpaced him, and within the first couple of streets he was struggling to keep up. I heard his cries of "My lady!"

and “Please, wait!” but I had no time for such things. I toured the gleaming streets of my city with a gusto I hadn’t felt in ages. Fire crackled in hearths and smoke billowed from chimneys, beautifully woven cloths made from the fire-resistant textiles of the Sun hung from walls, windows, and above wells. The metallic tops of buildings shone above me more beautifully than any of the lights of the sea of stars.

I stopped at a crossroads where a canal of fire dug into the city. Grey caught up to me, panting. A stone bridge led across the channel and the street was large enough that activity filled it. Turning right here would bring me on the most direct route to the Charcoal Palace, but I didn’t want that. As Grey sputtered I waited for a caravan to cross the bridge before trotting forward.

“Are you sure you want to follow me?” I asked, “I’m not going to slow down once we cross.”

“I...I will not...I will not forsake the Sultan’s own.” He panted between words, catching his breath.

“I do not require keeping, I will relieve you of duty if that will help.”

“No, no. I am honored to serve you, Shaahida.”

I was ready to shrug and allow him to continue having a painful ride but I turned around in shock when he said my name. Not that he wouldn’t know it, I’d shouted it at the guard. No, it was because of the impropriety of a guardsman calling a Lady of the Palace by her first name in public.

I searched his face for any sign of embarrassment or a sputtering realization that he’d transgressed and found none. I was seconds away from glaring at the guard and galloping off on a deliberately harsh route—to force him to become even more exhausted by the ride—when I looked into his eyes and finally recognized him.

“Adri?” I exclaimed.

He nodded, “Yes, my old friend.”

And he was. He’d served as a low level guard in the Illuminated when I’d been a child and he’d been a personal guard for my mother’s quarters. I remembered his laugh when he’d caught me hiding in a firebush and none of the guards had found me in hours. I remember how my mother had invited him and the other guards for tea despite the difference in class. Adri Thryssi Carnelian Grey.

“How did you get all the way down to the gates?” I asked, suddenly excited to learn all about his life since I left. I spurred on my horse and decided to take the long way to the Palace at a leisurely pace. As Adri spoke, I soaked in the feeling of being home, the textures, flavors, tastes, smells, and sounds of the city I’d always love. The way the Sun’s light reflected off of the metal of Alloy was stunning. The angles were odd and comparing it to the ever-cycling sunrises and sets of Earth was almost impossible. It was a bit like if there was an infinite sunrise in every direction with light blasting across the horizon and onto everything in sight.

“When Yxmic al-Kamali defeated the Lady of bronze he re-assigned the guards. The Illuminated were supposed to be her most loyal, and so most of us died or surrendered. I swore loyalty to Yxmic after the takeover. I...I lost my faith in the Lady after your mother...” He

couldn't make the words out. I turned my head to look into his eyes, but he deliberately avoided my gaze, staring into a copper-covered street.

"After you fled," he managed. "I was rewarded with a good position in the Illuminated, but we were no longer assigned to the Palace. Yxmic ordered the remnants to the bronze wall. I suspect because he fears our loyalty to the Sultana still remains deep inside."

"And the Unquenchable?" I asked. "What of the former guards of the wall?"

"They were slaves to the Lady of bronze, remember? They fought with us tooth and nail through the city streets, eventually their commander fell in battle. Some surrendered, and are imprisoned in the Ashlarks. But most fled for somewhere they couldn't be recognized or hunted down. The Ash Desert, the Plain of Burning Coals, the Islands, some even went to Earth." He coughed, not wanting to draw attention to the fact they had that in common with me. I noticed anyway. It stung—that I had gotten the same treatment then as enemy soldiers received now.

"Do you work for Yxmic now, or the council? Do the people really rule Alloy now?" I had to make sure. It was my mother's life's work and now it was done.

"Yes. At every temple and fort in the city there assemblies to count votes once every year, on the day of striking. Yxmic does much of the administrative work but I'm commanded by the councillor of the Iskalat district...He really did it, Shaahida." He spoke sincerely.

It was a lot to take in.

"What about the wish jinn?" I asked, suddenly frightened, "They didn't leave too did they?" One of Alloy's major industries relied on a caste of wish-granting jinn who were previously bound by contract to the Sultana's service. Travelers came from across the timescape and paid fortunes to receive wishes from the jinn. Losing money to the war effort and the loss of the wish jinn business would leave Alloy in a desperate economic position.

"New Guild!" Adri said. "They answer to the council now, we managed to renew their contracts before they got any ideas about wreaking chaos throughout the city. Can you imagine? Us fighting a war in the streets while they summon a horde of elephants and turn all the water in the city into wine! No they serve us well and they behave. I'm told Yxmic and the council are far more gracious masters than Aelia."

I sighed. It had all worked out alright. As long as the wish jinn stayed the city would be rich with trade and travel. So long as they stayed loyal to Yxmic, he would control the city and we'd be safe.

Adri saw my relief and continued his life story, "So, I stayed in the Illuminated, kept working, kept living. Married. And then, out of the red, I get a summons from my councillor himself ordering me to be reassigned to the Magma gate and to escort you back to the Palace!" He said, excited.

"Congratulations! On your marriage, I mean. How is she?" My voice slid a register deeper and I leaned towards him as I asked.

He blushed, small flames spreading across his smokey face. "Oh, she is the most beautiful woman in all the worlds." He raised his arm and I saw a pair of wide silver bands etched with carvings on top of his uniform. Below them were three Tin bands on either arm.

I sighed, happy to hear that. I reflected on my own love life. How nice would it be to find the right person and for them to stay? To give me a band that meant eternal love and to not be lying underneath the metal. I sighed again and I turned right on the road we'd entered, towards the Palace.

"I'm glad the Sultan thought of me. That must have been after Scilla wrote me her note." I pondered. "Oh, Adri I was dragging you through the streets and the whole time you were forced by orders of the Sultan to follow. No wonder you're driving yourself so hard. I thought you were going to snuff out."

"I assure you, it is no worry. My duty is to you and to the Sultan. It is the greatest honor to serve." He assured me with his voice, but something in me resented the fact that he was forced to follow me. I couldn't go about my wild riding without inconveniencing him.

I continued winding through the streets of Alloy and questioning Adri until we reached the grand bazaar in the Pyraculum. Three enormous canals of lava met in the center of the sprawling plaza, and each held a constantly moving tide of barges and boats. From my vantage point on a small hill to the south, I could see a couple of tieflings enjoying a romantic day on a small rowboat while the captain sang. I hopped off of my nightmare to explore the stalls. Adri dismounted and held the reins for both of us.

Though the space was free of buildings the plaza was a maze of temporary market stalls and a hypnotic sea of brilliant fabrics from across the Timescape. Just as they had five years ago, vendors hawked wears of all kinds, shapes, and sizes. People of all kinds flooded the ramshackle 'streets' between the stalls. Though most of the city's population were Ifrit, Azer, and jinns, this market held the highest concentration of foreigners and journeymen outside of the docks. The green skin of Orcs, Gith, and Goblins met with the scales of Lizardfolk, Dragonborn, and others. Earthens, Elves, and Dwarves swarmed the streets. On the 'corner' of a path through the market I saw a changeling dancer transform between steps as they hit a tambourine. I threw a gold piece their way—Kindling for their hearth, as was the way. A gaggle of wealthy ifrit girls—judging by their copious gold jewelry—sped through, chasing the scent of a roast. I was filled with love and yearning for my friends. They were close, I assured myself.

As I toured the bustling bazaar, I began to notice the small ways I stood out. Much of Hot City's fashion had remained the same. Someone like Sesta, who'd only briefly visited the city in the past, might not have even noticed a difference. I noticed. I was hyper aware of the scene in Hot City, what people wear, how they talked. I was a lady of court! I had to know these things—and besides, it was fun.

One of the best parts of my days was spending the mornings in the harem with the other ladies at court, including my sister, Scilla, and our servants preparing my dress every day. Doing my makeup, helping us try on outfits. Encouraging us. I kept figuring out style. The servants were the most energetic, hardworking, and loving girls I'd ever met. Clothing the royal ladies of Alloy was a great honor. They one day excitedly chattered about us potentially marrying into the royal family, or finding a love match. I suppose in a way their dream had come true. I was the daughter of the Yxmic, the princess of Alloy.

The style had changed in Hot City. Some of it remained the same. The lack of coverings of the arms was important because you needed to see someone else's bracers and show off your own. There was a trend I noticed immediately. Some people wore see-through cloth, the kind you usually wear for veils, in long puffy sleeves. They reminded me of the silhouette pant legs of the Salwar. They were usually worn together, puffy sleeves with puffy pants. Usually arm bands were pinned to these or used as supports or for draping them across the body. They often had rings at the ends worn on the middle finger. The cloth draped between the finger ring and a bracer at the bicep.

The clothing was also much more revealing than I remembered. The statement might seem ridiculous to someone who was living in Makrip. The clothing in Alloy was both ostentatious and minimal compared to court garments there. It was true, though. I wore a few garments that revealed parts of my stomach, while many of the people around the city wore shirts that barely extended past the breasts. Many men wore no shirts at all, or men wore their shirts completely open. Xhindi had worn his shirt opened to his chest but it had still covered his navel. Salwar were as popular as usual, with a slight difference in materials. Some people wore garments in a typical style, while others incorporated the same see-through material veils were usually made of, like the sleeves before. Others wore dresses or skirts with nothing covering the bottom of their legs, showing off more bands there, thigh bracers, anklets.

One woman I watched, an ifrit whose body was completely made of blazing fire, had a gleaming collection of toe rings. She daintily showed them off. She didn't walk anywhere on her feet. She instead propelled herself through the air by the force of her flame. I was willing to bet she'd eaten a lot of souls to get that effect just right.

There was also a trend towards some more traditional jewelry, often draped off of things. Five years ago, many people had worn chains between metal bracers. I wore one between the ring on my right nostril and a piercing on my upper right ear. The style had caught attention and now people were doing it everywhere, and not just with metal. There were also beads, pearls, jewels.

I mentioned the veil-like sleeves, but there was also a pattern of shawls, boas, and skirts in the same style. The belts had gotten bigger, too. People stacked more material on them, or hung bags and badges on them, puffing the waist up and exaggerating that part of their silhouette. Much of the time this was paired with more elaborate dresses or skirts, as if leading the eye first to the belt and then down. Of these, almost all had some kind of split or opening. This was in line with the general revealing nature of the fashions and the fact that even to its most resilient citizens Alloy's streets were still quite warm.

I knew as soon as I strode through the bazaar full of stylish people, the smell of perfume, roasting meat, pipe smoke and spices mixing in my nose that I needed a makeover. I must return to Scilla and her girls and get caught up with everything I'd missed.

Eventually Adri and I made our way to the center of the bazaar, where twenty feet of clearance was given between the closet stalls and the canal. For a second I drank in the atmosphere while Adri caught up with the nightmares, significantly slowed by the unwieldy

nature of pulling two horses through a crowded area. Suddenly, a parade of dancers invaded the spaces beside the canals. They wore translucent fabrics over their chests, arms, legs, and wrapped around their heads in faux-turbans. Each had a knee-length loincloth embroidered with a pattern of a dragon. A squad of female dancers headed the parade, followed by a large multi-person puppet made to resemble a gold dragon. Following the dragon were the male dancers, and rounding out the parade were a final procession of drummers and singers. There was a small amount of fanfare, but not the bustling and light show of a true holiday. I recognized the spectacle immediately.

“Is it really almost the day of striking?” I asked as Adri finally caught up. He nodded an acknowledgement. I’d lost track of Alloy’s calendar relative to Earth’s. This parade marked one link in a chain of small festivities leading up to the Day of Striking, the high holy day for the Order of the Kindling. It was the oldest religious sect in Alloy, and its temple in the Charcoal Palace was possibly the oldest building in the city. It was the faith I’d observed in my youth.

My worship had been interrupted in Makrip, where no temples of the Kindling had been built. Bassaam, of course, refused to build one for my sake and instead commissioned a small altar in the palace. It was ill-fitting for my faith. We worshiped before roaring fires and golden braisers. The experience isolated me from my home in yet another way.

I’d never lost my faith. The Kindling, like many religious sects on the Sun, worshiped our world itself. Every day I’d pray when the sun rose and again when it fell. I’d prayed that someday I’d return.

In joy, I leapt off the saddle and joined the Kindling dancers. They performed a sacred ritual dance. Every devout acolyte would know it, and I could move right along with it. Recognizing my noble dress, if not my face, the dancers bowed their heads. The dance didn’t stop for a second, everyone following the steps in unison. No noble’s enmity would match that of the sun itself. With an infectious smile on my face, I danced along as the parade carried me slowly across the bazaar. We followed the canal until we reached the triple canal intersection at its center. I let the dancers lead, we did not cross and instead turned north. I could see the Charcoal Palace towering in the distance from the wide open space where all of the canals met.

I spread my arms like a phoenix’s wings and accented a kicking move in the traditional dance with a spray of flame from my hands. I pointed the flame towards the canal and away from any of the dancers or onlookers. It was timed right as the dragon raised its puppet head to give off the illusion that she’d spat fire. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Adri trotting on his horse, keeping pace with the parade and seemingly relieved I had to slow down to keep pace with it.

What we lacked in forward speed we made up with flare and reverent joy. More and more bystanders joined the procession, as was tradition. We joined in the singing. The musicians grew more intense. The fire running down the plaza plumed as if reacting to our passion.

Our song reached a crescendo and I let out another blast of fire, this time straight up into the air. The singers silenced and the drummers stormed a final roll. One last triumphant thump roared from the drums. For a beat, the promenade was silent. I had my arms spread in the final

move of the sacred dance and a dumb smile across my face. I suddenly felt the panting breaths in my chest from the frantic exercise.

The silence broke with cheers and applause as the children of Kindling celebrated. The dancers took bows and I bowed back. Conversations spread across the plaza like wildfire. I heard giggles and whispers erupt in a thousand tiny bursts.

Revelers approached me for conversation. My flame blazed in their kind words and celebratory hugs. An old woman held my hand and told me with a deep earnesty that I was a beautiful dancer. I blushed. One ifrit asked after me, he swore he'd seen me somewhere before. And in such royal dress!

"Tell me, are you Shaahida al-Kamali? The Vizi— I mean, the Sultan's daughter?" he asked.

"Yes! Yes, I am." I practically jumped with joy. "I have returned to my home! My people!"

A crowd gathered around me, oohing and awing. I grew slightly self-conscious. Being the center of attention was something I enjoyed, but now a flurry of questions came my way. I struggled to keep up and half of them concerned political matters I knew nothing about. I searched for Adri, hoping he could come to my rescue, but he was on the edge of the surging crowd. Far out of my reach.

A sound interrupted the worbling of the crowd. Slow clapping, with an added edge. The Ring of metal on metal. The crowd parted for a pale-skinned metallic with platinum blonde hair. Their species was a rarity on Alloy. They—like the others of Earth—weren't built for the heat. Outside of the cities' protective field they'd die, and even inside the risk of heat stroke was high. The trade quarters were filled with apothecaries and trinket-peddlers selling fire-resistant magics. Charms against heat, water summoning bottles, potions.

His outfit was an odd clash of ifritti garb and Farangian cleric attire. He wore a long black skirt which hung down to his ankles. It featured a series of ruffles with some supports to make the ends stick up like the roof of a Qaraqan fortress. His chest was covered by a double-sided tabard, which hung from his shoulders to tuck into his belt and tapered into a point above his knees. Embroidered on his chest in gold thread was the symbol of a Ram astride a globe. I knew from context it depicted Earth, with Farangia at the center of the globe. He was thin under his clothing.

On his bare arms, hands, and face he wore a typical collection of matching jewelry. The jewelry turned his whole visage from interesting to off putting. The metal was wrong. Gold symbolizes devotion to a god, and this is why it is so popular with nobles. The powerful say to the world, none can control me except the gods themselves! This priest did not wear bands of gold. He wore bands of Black Iron. Black Iron for the Iron Saint of Earth. Creon, the Deathless. The conqueror, the kingslayer, the savior of the Soluntum Republic.

Creon had been a simple general, pushed by the Soluntum senate towards a series of invasive wars on the Earthen continent of Farangia to reconquer lost territory. However under Creon's command the effort had gone from a slow march of conquests mired in losses and

retreats and instead become an unstoppable forward moving force. Ever expanding, ever winning, ever conquering. More brutal and efficient at extracting wealth and blood from the conquered than ever. More oppressive in its rule, and more bloody and ruthless in its tactics. Creon supposedly displayed supernaturally strong power with his element, iron. Creon had declared himself a Saint and founded a church as iron-fisted as its god, or so the bards and traders told me.

Ten years ago, Creon slayed the last free king in Farangia, an old and wizened humanitarian named Voletto the Good in violation of a treaty signed by an ancient soluntum king. The consuls, the two elected leaders of the Soluntum senate, tried to imprison Creon for oathbreaking. Instead, when the senate voted, the majority of the soluntum senators had been swayed towards Creon's favor. The consuls refused to honor the vote, so the senators revolted. Poch, capital of Soluntum, was thrown into chaos. Creon stopped his march to turn his army on Poch and restabilize the government. When the dust settled, the senate was put back in place and Creon had been elected, by popular vote, to replace the dual consuls as the singular dictator of the entire Soluntum Republic.

The dictator continued his conquest of Farangia. Word was beginning to spread that he planned to assault the Earthen kingdoms of Kiptos and Makrip in the coming years. Thwarting his increasing militarism and stranglehold on Farangian trade had become the subject of many of Bassaam's meetings in Demost. The Sultana had vehemently fought Creon, and admiration for the charity of her aid to the independent Farangian duchies was one of very few positive thoughts I retained for her. Aelia went to war with Soluntum, fearing that Creon had become unstoppable. She was right. Eight years later, she was dead by his hands. Him? Here? Infecting my city? It was then that I stepped towards him and he stopped clapping.

"Congratulations on your return, Shaahida al-Kamali." He bowed in the Farangian fashion. Hands pressed together and bending his head but barely moving his chest.

"I know that symbol." I spat, "You serve Soluntum. I question how you are allowed to take haven in my city."

He raised from his bow and gave me a serpent's smile, "I worship the Iron Saint, may his glory come to all men in all worlds. I struggle to take your comment kindly, my lady. Our church is but a humble guest of the Sultanate Council, whom we pay all deserved respect and tithe. We were personally invited by his majesty."

What? How could that be possible? My face tightened and I furrowed my brow. I wanted to scream that the stick of a man lied like a snake. Yet I held my tongue. I glanced to Adri and subtly moved my face as if to ask, 'Is he right? How can he be right?'

"He is right, my lady," Adri managed to make the words sound natural as he made his way through the parted crowd. "The church of the Iron Saint is welcome here, and Bishop Gaudent of Correns is a personal guest of the Sultan."

I glared my confusion into Adri's sympathetic but pleading face. Creon?

"Perhaps I could offer to join your escort to the Charcoal Palace, my lady." Gaudent said with his serpent's tongue.

"I would sooner be escorted by a festering corpse." I spat back at him.

"I implore you to reconsider, my lady. My faith has much power in this city. I would hate for us to begin our relationship on such a sour note; nor would I wish for my flock to feel offended on my behalf. They are also your people, remember?" He held a hand to me.

I glared at him. I could feel the fire of my hair growing more intense. Internally, I wanted it to burn rather than my usual preference that it give off harmless radiating heat. I stopped the instinct. Hurting him wouldn't help. At least not hurting him physically.

Adri jerked his head, silently commanding me not to make a scene. We were in public, surrounded by people and in full view of the Bazaar. Suddenly the shadows behind market stalls and carts became ominous. Anyone could be watching.

I adjusted my posture and pushed courtly politeness into my tone. "I must decline, as I already have an escort. Perhaps you may help me into my saddle and meet me at the next ball?"

He couldn't decline without seeming impolite, so he bowed and knelt before my horse. I stepped on his hands to reach my nightmare's stirrups. His efforts were entirely unnecessary, but I enjoyed the feeling of having power over him. Trapping him in obligation, forcing him to serve me.

"Thank you," he said, barely disguised venom in his voice.

"Thank you!" I replied with enthusiasm born of his suffering. I nodded to Adri, who loyally followed me. Waving to the dispersing crowd one last time, I turned and tore down the streets of Alloy.

As soon as we were out of earshot I whirled on Adri.

"What? Imperials, here? Why? How?"

"My lady," he began, "You must understand the city has changed since you left."

"Yes. I'd heard my father fought against tyrants, not let them trample through our streets." I quietly screamed.

"Your mother..." Adri tried. My face fell and the anger burned out of me, replaced with pain and a hollow feeling in my chest.

"The Sultan made a deal with the Dictator. It was one of the reasons he was able to..." He lowered his voice to a whisper, "Able to depose the Lady of Bronze. Do you know how many troops were mustered in this city? Without the armies of Creon, we had no hope of winning an all out war. He has a worldbreaker the size of a floating city! Thousands of troops, more powerful magic than I'd ever seen before. Without it, Aelia would have hid in her own flying fortress and pelted us with fire from above until we surrendered or died. The Earthen's golden city appeared in the sky above Alloy and Aelia chose to flee, rather than face him and Yxmic at once. She fought Creon in Farangia and there he defeated her even without our armies."

My head slumped and I couldn't focus on anything but the red brick of the street while I considered the implications of his words.

Adri continued, trying to comfort me. "He was the Sultan's best hope to free this city. And it worked."

I sighed, flooded with a whole new set of worries about my home.

“Let’s just make it back home, ok?” I fished for some reassurance. Adri kindly accepted. He gave me a hopeful smile, if a little forced, and spurred his horse up the winding street. It twisted and turned as it climbed up the large hill which the Charcoal Palace stood on. Even a mile away, I basked in the pitch-black architecture. With a very limited color palette, the artisans who’d built it centuries ago had been able to create a monument worthy of worship. Details cut into the stone were so fine you’d have to stick your face up against the multi-story wall to see the smallest notch.

I asked Adri the first thing that popped into my mind. “Where is my little sister anyway?”



9

Interlude: Ket

I watched the Charcoal Palace beneath a veil. The constant inner workings of the grand building, from Sultan to the councilmembers to the servants and slaves. Even when the building should have been quieted for the royals to sleep, there was always stirring. Constant bustle. This morning, my spying had granted me more of a spectacle than most days. I watched it unfold, with not a soul aware that I was there. A voyeur to the world.

[Alternate/Additions]

The second he stepped onto my world, I noticed. The flutter of his booted feet hitting a dock on Alloy. My Xhindi. My attention snapped away from where I watched the Sultan holding an audience with his citizens to the docks.

He was happily jaunting down the dock towards Alloy.

[End additions]

“Black gods, black gods, black gods!” the ifrit Thistle fawned as she collected five—no, six—dresses from her lady’s enormous closet. Her blue skin was covered in her own extravagant Alloy dress and her brown hair was tied back with a Tin bracer. Her heels clopped against the marble floor of Scilla’s wing of the palace as she practically paraded the clothes to her mistress.

⁹ Art from Diablo III

My invisible eyes followed her out of the closet and into the common room of Scilla's wing. It held a staircase that spiraled up into the rest of the chambers, and an impressive collection of luxurious couches. I wished I could lounge on one. I hated the thought, as it reminded me of everything I wasn't. Free. Whole. Safe.

Rohala, a tiefling, shushed her with one red finger, while she grabbed pink flower petals from a basket at her hip and scattered them across the walkway floor with the other. A lute hung from a strap on her back.

"Remember the surprise!" Rohala whispered.

"Sorry!" Thistle squeaked.

"I've got it!" Poppy said, keeping her voice low enough so that Scilla wouldn't hear.

I had learned much of all of the creatures of the Palace in my long years of silent watching. Thistle and Poppy were chief among Scilla's servants and so it was them who busied themselves around the Palace to begin Scilla's coming of age. Rohala assisted, partially because she was friends with Scilla, and partially because she had to arrive early to prepare her part of the ceremony. Flowers to be scattered, effects to be draped around the princess of Alloy. Scilla was twenty now, which was old enough to be married by the flame of the Kindling. So, they began preparations for her debutante ball. It would be the biggest ball in Alloy, after all. First came the lighting ceremony. Scilla was to be sequestered in her room until she'd finished her prayers to the Sun and then rise to be lit again.

Thistle was practically screaming in excitement. She enjoyed her job...a lot. Firstly, being the servant of a princess was hardly low-paying for Alloy's middle class. In fact, it was some of the best employment the women could get, especially as a stylist like Thistle. Soon though? She'd get to finally show off all her hard work for the whole city to see.

Another servant sprang into the room—a black-haired ifrit in a pink robe, "The ladies of court are here!"

"Let them in, Let them in!" Thistle said in a melodic tone. "It's almost time!"

"Shut up!" Rohala again quieted them, intent not to disturb Scilla.

In a din that Rohala very much disliked, Scilla's friends swarmed into the large room on the bottom floor of Scilla's tower. They wore the latest and greatest fashions of the city, each girl resplendent in gold. Most were ifrit, but three were azer and one was Earthen. At the front of the pack was Scilla's best friend, Sabeeka. She was a mephit, her skin flowing like a bonfire. It perfectly matched her flaming hair such that it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. The ladies gaggled amongst themselves and excitedly waved to the servants when they entered.

"Black. Gods. Can you believe? Our own Scilly, finally debuting? As the princess of Alloy?" Lady Sabeeka said with bursting pride in her voice, making some final adjustments to a set of gold pins that kept her flaming orange hair up.

"It's really happening!" Lady Deminita practically screamed.

Thistle wound down the chamber's staircase and leaned from the railing to catch the conversation. "Soon, she'll be trying on a huge engagement ring, I swear!"

“Black gods!” The chorus erupted.

“Proposals from the Emyr of Entill to the Dukes of Hell!”

“Yeah, and she’ll turn them all down because the Pharaoh is in the other room!”

The room filled with laughter at the remark. Poppy and Rohala finally made it down and were greeted with hugs and compliments on their outfits-which they’d each put long hours into assembling before they woke to serve Scilla.

It was easy to joke about it now, but it really had been a change of fortune, I could hear Thistle thinking. Last year we were maids to another one of these courtly ladies. Now, Scilla is the princess. Our gossip and giggles might end up turning the tide of a war someday.

Invading her mind was a parlor trick compared to what I could do when I was freed. I ached to wrench my claws into Thistle’s brain and squeeze. To burn my will into her flesh. I could not. Observation was all I could do, and I could only see into one mind at a time. Thistle’s was the most entertaining in the Palace. The performance of the mortal creature’s lives would have to suffice, in the stead of being able to *do* anything else. It was better than nothing. In fact, the excitement was just beginning.

“I just wish I’ll be there to see him get on one knee!” Another lady said.

The friends continued their excited chatter, “Remember when we were like thirteen and that guy dumped her ‘cause she wore that stupid black dress?” Lady Ruby asked, clearly a leading question.

“Yeah and she was crying all night?” A lady responded

“Yeah and I wanted to kill him and she told me not to!” Another chirped.

“Well, think about how stupid he’s feeling now! Leaving her and now she’s our princess!” Lady Ruby finished her biting comment. The crowd snapped in unified ascent.

“And then she’s going to get someone way better!” Lady Sabeeka extended the ‘y’ sound in ‘way’ into a shrill note, to emphasize the immenseness of the gap between the guy and Scilla. Poppy was pretty sure he’d gone on to become a very shy and insular fellow after his father had sided with Aelia over Yxmic and was arrested. He plead guilty to treason and was currently serving out a prison sentence. Rohala fussed with a tablet, double checking that everything was set for her surprise. She was about to take a couple steps on the staircase and command the room, but the ladies were still chaotically talking amongst themselves.

The ladies giggled and then silenced as a tall woman strode through the adjoining hallway and leaned on the doorframe to Scilla’s chamber. Lady Dahlia of the Ash Desert was older than most of Scilla’s friends. They were grouped around her age, and she’d met most of them in her tutoring. Lady Ruby was the oldest at twenty three and Lord Wreezit the youngest at eighteen. Dahlia was thirty-two and had shocked the norms of Aelia’s court by staying active in the ballrooms and parties of the city even after marrying the Lord of Ash. After his death in a battle, she had stayed strong and done more and more to give back to the community and the city in his name. She was confident, beautiful, and the envy of any woman of Hot City. In fact, after Aelia had fled and Yxmic took no wife, she had become one of the foremost women in court and

became a major influence in fashion and dress. The bazaar merchants and gazette criers loved her.

“She’ll get someone who deserves her.” Lady Dahlia said in a kind commanding voice. The ladies were quiet in admiration and nodded frantically. She waved a hand towards Rohala, casually commanding the room’s attention. “Please continue.”

Rohala grinned and nodded at Dahlia. Now under everyone’s gaze she addressed the room to lead the group in the ceremony. She strung her lute back over her shoulder and got her hands in position to play.

“Ok, everybody. Sign?” She pushed a fist into the air and then unfurled and writhed her fingers, imitating a bursting flame. Imitating me. The ladies repeated the gesture.

“Good,” Rohala continued. “Now, fall in line. Single file, up the stairs. Poppy?”

Poppy nodded and opened a box which she’d laid at a table at the foot of the stairs. It contained a collection of ritual candles. The ladies lined up and each took one candle. Most were ifrit who could light it with magic, but Poppy lit the rest herself. She smiled at Lord Wreezit, the Earthen, as she lit their candle. Wreezit winked.

“Don’t forget to smile!” Lady Ruby commented.

“Sorry!” Thistle replied, as she took the last candle in Poppy’s box.

Rohala shushed them before raising her hands. “Chant in three, two, one, now!” She lowered them and began quietly strumming the lute in a familiar and graceful tune. The parade of courtly ladies sang a traditional song in Ignan. I knew it well, and I sang along to the tune. My voice was nonexistent, a whisper of an echo of a roar made a thousand years ago. It was pathetic compared to the magnificent harmony of the party.

*Daughter beneath the Sun
Your life has just begun
Finding your rose has bloomed
What now will you burn from?*

The ladies got gradually louder, each supporting the other’s voice until Rohala began to think they might alert Scilla. She turned around and shushed them. The chorus continued.

*Forge your own light today
Bring about a new way
Look to the Northern Sky
Soon you will find your day*

“Guys, I’m serious!” Rohala warned and glared down the staircase. The chorus immediately shushed their voices for the next stanza, quieting to a whisper as they ascended the staircase to Scilla’s chambers on the top floor. One lady almost tripped on her dress and spilled her flame, but Lady Ruby caught her arm and kept her upright, giving a kind but stressed smile. There was no way she’d let anyone ruin this for Scilla!

*In the trials of life
There will be no breaking
The bonds that hold us through*

Sister, we will stay true!

The voices rose, but now they stood, fully prepared and lit with candles, at Scilla's door. Poppy came through the crowd to sit closest to the door, holding a velvet-lined box in her lap.

There's no one else but you

The flame in the heart renewed

The door opened a tiny wedge and Thistle, Scilla's lady-in-waiting, peeked through to reassure her mistress. The chorus raised their voices in anticipation of Scilla's arrival. Rising and rising in intensity until they'd peak with the end of the song and then she'd be there with her beautiful blue hair!

Let it turn all the stars

Into a sea of blue

Let it bind you to Ord

And he will see you—

"Guys, she's not here!" Thistle yelled and slammed the door open. Light from Scilla's windows shone into the previously dark chamber, lit only by the candles and hair of the ifrit ladies. The organization of the chorus fell apart. Gasps exploded from the crowd along with whispers of disbelief.

"No!" I gasped along with them, caught up in the drama. My ethereal eyes dotted across the room. In my physical body, I wolfed down magma. The show was getting good.

Thistle sprung into Scilla's expansive, expensive, and intricately decorated bedroom. The ceiling featured a dome of glass panels that was clearly the product of remodeling after the original top of the tower was somehow destroyed. Multi-armed dragonoid statues and carvings covered the walls. Scilla had left garments and detritus on their outstretched limbs, horns, wings, and tails. She fled over the white bearskin rug and past the gold-flecked couches to the open fire pit at the center of the living room.

"Curio!" She called into the flame, "Curio, where is she?" She was calling for a creature who lived inside the fires of the castle. Curio resembled a salamander, except that his body radiated fire and he was about the size of the average rat. He could speak to Thistle in the same way an untrained parrot could speak to its master. Scilla had a special fondness for him that her father seemed nonplussed about. Thistle didn't really get it, but she also didn't get a lot of things about Yxmic al-Kamali. He was super hot and super powerful but definitely off limits, both because he was a rich noble and because he was Scilla's dad.

Only seconds after she called, Curio erupted from the fire. The crowd of exasperated yet determined ladies gathered around it to watch him. Curio's speech was more barking than talking.

"Scilla left in a fervor?" Thistle translated, the worry in her voice was clear.

Curio barked again.

"She doesn't have an outfit for her debutante ball?" Thistle asked, even more concerned. He barked a third time.

“She’s trapped on a worldbreaker!?” Thistle practically fell backwards from the flame in shock. The crowd gasped again and worried, sad looks crossed their eyes. Was Scilla trying to run away? Why? Curio let out a series of snapping noises, like the crackles of a fresh flame. He got up onto his back feet and hissed.

“Oh,” Thistle sighed, “Oh, ok, sorry. Messed up translation guys don’t worry.” After a beat she considered Curio’s words and translated them in an even more passionate scream.

“She’s trapped at the dressmaker!” The crowd reacted with equal shock to the idea of Scilla panicking to get a new dress as they did to the thought of her leaving the city.

“Black gods, black gods, black gods!” They hustled and bustled around the room. Eventually, Lady Ruby drew a city map from her garments and pointed out of Scilla’s door like an adventurer charting a course.

“It’s an emergency. To the Hayyat Suq!” She correctly identified where Scilla would go. The best textile merchants and tailors sold their wares in the Hayyat Suq Bazaar to the west of the Charcoal Palace. That’s where she’d be! Lady Ruby rushed out of the room and the ladies followed her in a chaotic volley. They thumped down the stairs and crashed through the Palace. I intently followed them, the tendrils of my focus creeping down the tower and worming through the Palace’s hallways. The guards frantically opened the doors to allow the party to pass. Ruby’s stride never stopped. The gates opened to her and she burst through to find her friend.

“Wait for me!” Poppy called as she slipped on her outdoor shoes. She brought up the rear of the pack, while other ladies jumped over railings and vaulted tables to reach their friend as fast as they could.

Once the crowd had made their way to the Palace’s courtyard, Lady Dahlia snapped her fingers. As if magically summoned, a courtier appeared, running to her aid. He bowed and she yelled instructions for him to gather a series of carriages for the ladies. He quickly obeyed. In what seemed like seconds a procession of horses and carriages assembled for the nobles. Each eagerly rushed into their vehicles, commanding the drivers to the Hayyat Suq.

“Don’t take the canals!” One of the ladies thoughtfully warned, knowing traffic would be heavy because of the pre-Day of Striking procession which would be marching today. She barely had time to shout the advice before she and two of her sisters squeezed into a carriage and slammed the door.

Lady Dahlia waved Scilla’s servants into her own carriage. Poppy and Rohala eagerly flew into the seats. Rohala shouted her destination at the driver. Thistle stayed behind, giving Lady Dahlia a look. She did not move from the palace door.

“Are you not coming?” Thistle asked.

“Other matters to attend to, my dear.” Lady Dahlia looked Thistle in the eyes. “Show her the path, will you?”

Thistle nodded, not fully understanding her elder. She’d try her best! Lady Dahlia smiled and turned back to allow the guards to close the pitch black palace doors behind her. Her hips and her dress swayed as she stepped. The fabric was enchanted to look as if it was on fire, with patterns swirling and flickering as she moved.

Ord Below she is such an icon! Thistle thought, unconsciously biting her lower lip.

“Hey, are you coming?” Rohala asked out of the carriage’s window. “We need to help Scilla now, not tomorrow!” She strummed a quick riff on her lute to accentuate her words.

Thistle turned and sped into the carriage, practically diving into a seat. Poppy and Rohala greeted her with smiles and the driver flicked his whip to spur on the horses. They thundered down the boulevard. The driver knew Alloy well enough to avoid the busier roads, and reroute to find the fastest way to their mistress. The procession of nobles included many who stuck heads or even torsos out of the windows of their carriages to try and see Scilla in the distance. It was useless, because she was definitely in an enclosed building, but it was the thought that counted. The ever-present light of the Sun flooded the city and the moon hung anxiously in the sky.

The journey would be boring. I stretched, my body not able to fully extend in my cage. My consciousness took in the entire crawling, infested city. A monument to the power and industry of the puny little mortals. I refocused my attention to the Hayyat Suq and to the Princess Scilla. I reached into the minds of person after person until I felt Scilla’s familiar warmth. As always, she was fretting over something.

Scilla stood in the center of a bustling shop. Dressmakers, tailors, and jewelers churned around her in a flurry of movement. Her red skin and sharp orange eyes contrasted with both her flaming blue hair and the clothes she was trying on. It was black dress inlaid with glowing jewels. It was similar to something she’d seen Lady Dahlia wearing once, though this dress was far more expensive. She turned around in a triple-mirror setup. The dress was longer than she was used to, and the bright orange and red of the gemstones clashed with her flaming blue hair. Her hair was messily pinned up, as she hadn’t decided exactly what to do with it. That would come after the clothes.

“It’s close...” Scilla winced, “but this dress needs to make me seem strong. I need them to look at me and see a princess. Not a silly girl who has no idea what she’s doing.” She reflected into the mirror.

“You *are* a silly little girl, mortal.” I uselessly whispered. Scilla couldn’t hear me and continued her fretting.

“It has to say bride...but not scream it to the hills. It has to turn their heads without making them think they can walk all over me. It was to impress *and* intimidate. I can’t look like I’m desperate, or like I’m waiting for them. I have to be my father’s pride.” Scilla looked straight into her reflection’s eyes. She felt so out of place.

“There she is!” A familiar voice sang from across the room.

A volley of squeals and yells came from one end of the shop and Scilla recognized Thistle, Rohala, and Poppy run over to her in a gaggle. They surrounded and embraced her. Thistle awed at her dress. Following them was a slow trickle of Scilla’s friends from the Furnace. As they gathered with her, she instantly felt better. She’d fled the palace because she didn’t want to stay under her father’s eye, didn’t want to disappoint him. So she vanished until she felt she was ready. Her girls though? She knew they’d always have her back.

“Oh my gods! You guys!” Her face melted in earnest affection, “I’ve been so crazy, stressed and excited and exploding! My Debut is only a fortnight away! It’s going to be right before the Day of Striking! It’s going to be so cool! So I have to make it perfect.” She waxed.

Her girls nodded along with her. She projected her concentration and the importance of the mission and they understood. Something about her standing in front of them calmed the exuberant chaos that normally swelled when the girls got together.

“So, help me figure this out before I turn to soot?” Scilla offered. The girls’ enthusiasm exploded and they quickly organized into a support staff for the already existing shop workers. Poppy got a stool and sat by Scilla, preparing the basics of her makeup. Thistle shook hands with one of the tailors, an old colleague.

A flurry of options and considerations flew past. Dresses and skirts, shirts and wraps and vests and veils. Ruby began sketching concepts for hair and Oyassa fished through the shop’s ludicrously large collection of golden bracers, bracelets and piercings. Sabeeka put one ostentatious earring up to her.

“C’mon, try it on for size!” Sabeeka baited.

Scilla stared at the elaborately carved gold, with glowing blue plucked phoenix feathers, and a three inch gemstone embedded in the hoop.

“Isn’t it a little expensive?”

“Girl, you are literally the princess of our city? If you can’t buy it, no one can!” She smiled.

Scilla grimaced and Sabeeka placed a bag of gold in her hand.

“Love is like...forever! I am not going to let you worry about money today!” Scilla wanted to tell her not to waste it, but she knew Sabeeka was almost as rich as the princess was herself, if not more. Sabeeka’s family had heavily invested into trade between Alloy and Poch and it had paid off big time.

Scilla felt better, being taken care of by her friends, but it was still off. No matter how many combinations they tried it didn’t feel *right*. She considered the implications of different lengths, sizes, cuts and trims. What about color? A black dress like the one she wore before would remind people of the palace, remind them she was royalty. Ugh, but it was no fun! It didn’t feel like her. It felt like what Yxmic would want.

She was flooded with those thoughts, too many thoughts. Always second-guessing herself and her friend’s help. Always wondering if that’s what she should *really* be doing or wearing or thinking. She lodged her chin in her hands and slumped down on her stool. A lock of blue flame fell across her face. She was about to collapse on the floor from the worry of it all when one of the tailors brought her a garment. Ruby and Rohala flanked the tailor on each side.

“Princess Scilla?” The tailor asked.

Scilla looked up from her malaise. Her gaze slowly rose to the garment and her eyes widened. She lit up, her flames sparking, and ran a hand across the cloth in awe. It was intricately woven with three different shades of blue creating a repeating v-shaped pattern. The hems and accents were made of gold thread and it came with a matching belt. It was cut to

perfectly show off the blue metallic tattoos which marked Scilla's arms and upper chest while not revealing too much. Sensing a change in attitude the flock of girls leaned into their princess.

This one is perfect. Scilla thought.

"May I?" She asked the tailor and raised her hands to hold the garment hanger.

The tailor dutifully nodded. Scilla snatched up the dress and her team gathered around her. She squealed and raised her hands as they parted to reveal how it fit. It was the perfect size, as if it had been tailored for her specifically. She smiled with confidence and pride.

This will do, Scilla thought.

"Where did you get that dress?" Scilla asked the tailor. If she could find the seamstress who'd made it she'd give them a hefty reward. Perhaps an offer to work for her in the palace! Even if she refused both offers Scilla at least had to know so she could commission the seamstress in the future.

"That stylish woman at the door said it would be perfect for you!" The tailor said.

The tailor pointed across the room, opposite the door that her friends had walked in through. Among a group of workers from the shop was an obvious outlier. There was a uniformed soldier meekly waiting beside a familiar ifrit woman. She had long orange flames for hair, matching eyes, and brown skin. She wore a killer outfit, red with glowing orange highlights. Her body was covered in gold and she had a full face of makeup. Two large Tin bracers adorned her biceps. She was making a 'quiet' motion with her finger up to her mouth.

Scilla teared up in an instant as she recognized her half-sister Shaahida, who had been gone for so long. She turned around and her whole procession was gawking, hand above their mouths but dutifully silent to preserve Shaahida's introduction. Scilla couldn't help but to break into a smile and run towards her sister. Shaahida began running too, and they collapsed into each other and spun around and around, holding each other tight for the days they'd been apart.

"I can't believe you're here!" Scilla said, still crying.

"I can't believe you thought my dress was perfect!" Shaahida echoed, with tears welling up in her own eyes.

"Black. Gods. That is so cute!" Oyassa exclaimed. The spell Shaahida had worked to keep them silent for Scilla was broken and a chorus of joyful words and welcoming hugs barraged the both of them. The ladies practically lined up to wish Shaahida welcome and give her deep hugs and cheek kisses.

"I missed you!"

"I can't believe it's been so long since we've seen you!"

"I need to know everything!"

"I missed you all so much!" Shaahida exclaimed as she squeezed Thistle in one arm and Sabeeka in the other. She stepped forward and brought them into Scilla, and it escalated almost immediately into a full group hug.

"Black gods! Black gods! We love you guys!" The girls circled around.

"No, I love you guys!" Both sisters said at the same time.

“Let’s go home before someone cries,” Poppy exclaimed, doing a poor job at hiding her own tears in the embrace. She was reassured by a flood of the group. The girls were taking up a lot of space, and Scilla ordered them to disperse for the good of the shop. They obeyed.

Shaahida stood forward, fixing Scilla’s collar and adjusting the dress.

“Well now that you have this on, how about we finish the look?” She suggested.

Scilla smiled and the crew began their work in earnest. Scilla was infused with a new confidence, accepting or rejecting accessories with a single-minded passion. She commanded Ruby to wrangle her hair into a series of curls which would flow onto her neck and back. She needed room for her crown, which she sent Lady Sabeeka to gather. Scilla spun a black cape around her shoulders, with two golden pins. Shaahida connected them to a necklace with a weighted gem to ensure the cape sat comfortably on her shoulders. She stepped into a pair of heeled boots dyed a similar blue to the dress. She stood with confidence, and with perfect timing Sabeeka returned to place the crown on her head.

It held the entire outfit together. She’d inherited it when Yxmlic became Sultan. It was dreadfully out of use, as Aelia had ruled for decades without having any children. It was, of course, completely twenty-four carat gold. The crown was made up of a corona of spikes that stretched from ear to ear. In front of the spikes was a semicircle of intricately molded rose flowers. It made Scilla look like a ruler.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. In a breathy voice, almost a whisper, she let out an exclamation of joy. “Black gods. I look good.”

“You look like a princess.” Shaahida slowly nodded in approval. When she gave the compliment there was authority in her voice. After all, she was the only one of them who’d been a queen.

“You look like a saint.” I whispered with a smile. After all, I was the only one who’d been a god.



10

Chapter 4: Home

“Shaahida! Come on! We have a seat.” Lady Sabeeka called me into her carriage. She waved one of her glowing orange hands out of the open door and beckoned me.

Scilla and I looked at each other. Both of us silently asking the other permission, negotiating if that would be alright. We nodded in unison and understood each other immediately. I whistled to Adri to follow. I could see him assisting some of the other ladies into their carriages and let him continue. One could mistake him for a friendly uncle or an overbearing older cousin. Scilla and I dashed to the carriage hand in hand. I squeezed hers a little as we sat down together. I swore I wouldn’t let go until I slept. I took a silent vow to the Sultan’s Breath that I would never leave my family again. Sabeeka greeted us with a joke I barely understood, but Scilla giggled and that was all that mattered.

¹⁰ Art by [Ricardo Rivera](#)

Holding her hand was like taking a deep relaxing sigh and flopping into bed after a long day of exercise—a marathon of endurance and persistence. I had spent an intolerable amount of time trying to return to this moment. Home, surrounded by friends and laughter. I was gazing out into Alloy from the carriage window when I realized with a start that I had little idea what to do now that I was here. Thinking about it, I didn't much care. I could fulfill any duty and be happy so long as I stayed.

In a haze of relief, laughter, and good company the carriage brought me to the Charcoal Palace. The contrasting colors and wild smells of the bazaar gave way to a series of increasingly wide lots full of extravagant houses. Some would even classify as villas. Eventually we reached a stone wall, carved in the same style as the palace. Thick blocks of ashen material with detailed designs and statues adorning it. Some details seemed to poke out of the wall. I'd realized in my youth that the entire surface of the original slab of rock was gone with only the peaks of outstretched material being close. Every inch of the miles long wall was carved. It was a testament to the might and magical prowess of the original lords of Alloy.

Upon the wall was a gate twice as large as any in Vejabhar. The procession halted on the bridge leading up to it. As we stopped I looked out onto the lava flow that swept under the bridge. It was at once a security measure, a natural feature, and a necessity. Great flame rose out of Alloy like any other part of the Sun. On this drawbridge it was released as flowing lava which cascaded down into the canal system and eventually drained into the sea of fire.

When the carts stopped, Scilla suddenly stood up from her seat. For a split second I worried that something had gone wrong. In an instant I remembered the procedure for opening the Furnace Ward's gate. Soldiers stood at each end of the gate, ifrit men with skin and hair made of fire, clothed in black armor. They recognized the princess and bowed. Nothing more was needed from them. Scilla and I would need to approach the gate, Scilla giving a password which would deactivate the magical protections on it and simultaneously magically command the gate to open. We did just that, repeating the motions that were beaten into my muscle memory. I even raised my hand to give the incantation before I realized that I no longer knew the password. Scilla easily recited a set of words in Primordial. It translated to something along the lines of "Wayward beacon, mark my vow!" Poetic but meaningless, as they all were. Five years ago, the procedure had been to change the password every twelfth moonrise. Surely enough, the gates opened.

Scilla's tiefling friend excused herself, and took a long bow with her lute. She had tiefling friends now? Adri really had been serious about the city being more free than ever.

"I must take my leave, Scilla," the tiefling said.

"Who is she?" I asked Scilla out of the corner of my mouth.

"Oh, you really have been gone a long time!" She laughed. "This is Rohala. She plays for us all the time and she's like the coolest girl ever. She learned ten instruments by the time she was six years old! Ten instruments!"

Rohala smiled and made a wave of her hand as if to say 'Oh, you're too kind.'

“Well, if she’s a friend of yours she’s a friend of mine.” I looked Rohala in her goat’s eyes.

“An honor.” She bowed again to me and wasted no more time before skipping down a street in the Plume Ward.

I gazed longingly over the ashen flower field of the Furnace Ward’s gardens. The fields rose and rose, ascending the hill which the palace sat on. The closer I got to it, the more colossal and imposing it seemed. Our carriages took a circuitous route to avoid any steep inclines, but every so often we’d cross with the footpath which marched directly from the southernmost gate to the Palace. The carriage path was made of ashen cobblestones tamped down with age and wear, while the older and grander footpath was brick in a pattern of black with Tin inlays. Once every lunar cycle, on the third day after the New Moon, petitioners would gather for an audience with the Sultan. Today it was cold and empty save for some dignitaries carrying clay tablets.

The Furnace Ward was made up of a series of the black stone walls forming rings around the domineering palace. First was a circle of five temples, the greatest and most elegant in the land. The area was so wide and divided by the walls and the central hill that one could only ever see three temples at most at the same time. The rest of the land was covered with the ashen flowers. We passed the temple of the Kindling and I clutched my lamp, hidden away on my belt. I would go and pray sometime later. As we rode we eventually saw all five. The temple of the Blistering Atonement, The temple of the Irreducible, the temple of Sight, and the temple of the All Consuming. Each was dedicated to a Saint of the Sun, except for the Kindling. We worshiped the world itself.

Second were the gardens, which featured a far wider variety of solar flora and fauna. Flame glinted in the body of almost every living thing on my world. Blazing light flared from the branches and shone off the scales of lizards. The ring was scattered with temporary homes and party villas for the nobles of Alloy.

Directly abutting the palace was a ring of government buildings as well as lodging for many of the officials, scribes, and dignitaries who worked there. Almost every order or guild in the city had some kind of representative staying in the Furnace Ward. The Mundane matters of logistically governing a city as large as Alloy and its surrounding territory were dealt with there. We royals got to step through the gates and deal with the fun part.

The carriage’s trot led us through the final gate into the palace grounds and up to the courtyard. We stopped in full view of the grand front doors whose black wood was embellished with bronze. As soon as Scilla stepped out onto the earthen courtyard the doors opened. Both of the guards bowed such that one hand was holding a door handle. They propped the twenty foot tall doorway open with their bodies.

The Palace was built to an absolutely enormous scale even compared to other castles. The lowest door was twelve feet tall, and the thinnest hallway more than five feet wide. It was easy to feel small and overpowered just by being inside. The intricate carvings reinforced its otherworldly presence. A cadre of statues of creatures rose out of the walls around the doorway, reaching for it as if begging for entry. I could imagine the awe and anxiety of a petitioner

approaching this building that seemingly survived from before time itself. There was something welcoming about it too. It was large and strong and if you locked the doors they'd never fall. It was safe, even though it was terrifying.



¹¹

Scilla, still holding my hand, raised an arm and declared to the palace and the sky, “Weclome, Duchess Shaahida al-Kamali, to the highest throne in the land! Welcome home.” She smiled.

She didn’t even have to ask me about my name. She knew I had married Bassaam. She knew how I felt about him from the letters I’d written. She knew I’d arrived without him. She knew I’d want to use my name, my true name, and not the one he had given me. She cared.

I smiled back with deep appreciation.

The ladies gathered behind us as they slowly caught up from their own carriages. We began to saunter down the hallway, almost conjuring another storm of chatter, before the sound of orderly marching filled the halls. The walls, ceiling, and floor at the end of the hallway lit up, heralding a group of flaming ifrit. There was really only one person it could be.

“What is this ruckus!” He spoke in what should have been a soft but reprimanding tone, like a tutor finding his students clanging cymbals together—Instead his voice reverberated through and around the black stone walls. I swore I could feel the room shaking. I’d felt the sensation before when I spoke to the Lady of bronze in this very palace’s great hall. The source

¹¹ Art by [Igor Sid](#) on Artstation

of the light revealed himself as he entered the hallway. Yxmic al-Kamali, the Sultan. My father. He was surrounded by a cadre of servants, personal guards, and underlings.

I looked him over and saw a thousands signs of newfound wealth and power, along with heavy weights upon his soul. His beard was as bright as it ever was, the same unique blue flame as Scilla's. He'd tied it in a series of golden bands. In fact, gold adorned much of the body of a man who used to be so reserved that he barely wore any metal, save for his wedding bracers. He was still wearing the pair, and I twinged in grief remembering the long ago loss of my aunt. I had been barely a child when she died, but her absence had cast shadows over both our childhoods.

Yxmic looked more put-together than I ever remembered him. On his head, a fine firesilk turban was wrapped with the crown jewels of Alloy. Matching it, and Scilla's new dress I might add, he wore a blue tunic, well fitted to his chest.

I looked down and saw that he no longer had legs! His torso thinned into a long tail made of smoke which eventually tapered to a point and trailed off into the darkness of the hallway behind his entourage. His supernatural appearance made me analyze every mark of muscle or piece of skin on his body. He'd gained thousands of souls. He really was Sultan, then. He'd lit the altar of the Sultan's Breath and transcended mortality like the Lady of bronze before him.

I gave a smile and a wave, worried Scilla announcing my entrance had offended him—it was usually done by commoners. Or had the noise disturbed him from his busy day as Sultan? Had my father become harsher under the pressure of leadership? In a matter of seconds the image of my father in my mind transformed from a loving, supportive man to an echo of the tyrant I feared more than death itself.

Scilla was completely unbothered and rushed forward into her father, pulling me by her hand in the process. She embraced Yxmic around the belly. While his posture remained straight and clear, his eyes softened. He swept an arm around Scilla's back.

"I thought this was supposed to be your sparking ceremony? Where did you go? And you took all of your maids?" The concern in his voice was genuine and born of love but still harsh. Being Sultan hadn't changed him *too* much, then.

"I..." Scilla sighed, "I needed to—"

Seeing my sister in trouble, I swooped in. "She needed everything to be ready for such a tremendous day, father. Doesn't she look wonderful? These things take time and practice and we can't do them all by ourselves." I kept my voice strong despite my fear and worry.

Yxmic eyes widened and he let go of Scilla in shock.

"Shaahida! You really are back!" He burst into uproarious laughter, magnified to cacophony by his magical reverberating echo. "Where is Adri? He was supposed to escort you and report to me."

"Sir!" Adri's voice came from behind a collection of bags and purses that he was politely carrying for the ladies. They stacked from his hands all the way down to just below his eyebrows and he seemed to be struggling to carry them. I swear I saw the Sultan roll his eyes. A second later, a group of servants were rushing to take the luggage from Adri. Once he was free, Adri bowed to the ladies and saluted the Sultan.

“I was escorting her highness when she found Scilla in the bazaar and...well.” He gestured to the two of us. We were still holding hands, fingers interlaced.

“...Inseparable.” He managed.

“You kept her safe. That’s all that matters.” The Sultan looked straight into my eyes as he spoke. Adri saluted again and excused himself. All of Yxmic’s focus was on me. I could tell he was interrogating me with his eyes. He looked me over as I’d analyzed him before. Clearly, we’d both changed a lot since I’d last seen him. He took a step towards me and it took all my will not to flinch. I prayed that it would be alright. I’d done worse, I’d faced worse. What, was my uncle going to banish me again? He wouldn’t do that. Would he? My heart raced as I spiraled in frozen internal panic.

Yxmic leapt forward and grabbed me in a hug. My tension melted away and I returned his embrace. He lifted me up in the air like I was still as light as a child. Scilla squeezed my hand as she let go. Presumably she didn’t want to get carried into the air. His embrace was warm and comfortable. It reminded me of all the good times. When he’d caught me in tag and lifted me into a hug just like this one. When I’d won a game of Backgammon against my mother and we’d celebrated together, Yxmic putting fuel on the fire of their rivalry. When I’d cried over my coal bat flying away and I’d been too scared to tell my parents because they had entrusted me to take care of the little creature. Yxmic let out a flat but deep laugh and set me back on the floor. I was wrong, his heart had stayed as true as ever, and I was safe. Why had I been so worried?

Worried because you’ve been burned, I thought. So scared of the flame that you wonder if even the holy heat of the Kindling will burn your skin away and reveal the skeleton underneath. I was empty somehow, hollowed out by my pain. I’d done nothing but wrap skin around hollow bones in a desperate disguise and prayed that no one noticed I died a long time ago.

Yxmic was whispering to Scilla and his advisors. She nodded and then returned to my side while Yxmic continued his discussion. Scilla put my hand in hers. She smiled but her expression turned.

“What’s wrong?” She asked as she noticed my expression.

Seeing her smile and feeling her touch, suddenly those pained thoughts seemed ridiculous. It was going to be ok. She was here. My father was here. My friends were here. I’d have to figure myself out, but now I could do it in peace.

“Nothing for you to worry about.” I allowed my smile to return. “How about we get some lunch? I’m starving.”

“Halt!” Yxmic said in his booming voice. “Cancel my meetings today! Rezeem, you’re in charge of all of my affairs—consider it a field test.”

His retinue balked. Rezeem, a red robed azer squealed in confusion. No one corrected him nor spoke against him. He clapped twice and spoke again.

“Everyone! We must celebrate my beautiful daughter’s coming of age and my loyal niece’s homecoming. I declare a feast of honor!” His words rang through the building and I

somehow knew that every servant and staff in the palace heard him and began carrying out his orders.

Energetic cheers came from my friends while more dignified ones came from the Sultan's retinue. Rezeem bowed and shuffled out of the room, taking a dozen men in his wake. The rest of us cascaded into the dining rooms. One long, happy, gossip-filled lunch later I collapsed on a couch on the third floor. Scilla sat beside me and conversation continued as the frantic energy of the night wound down into a warm, comforting quiet.

I put my face into one of my hands and slumped over the oaken desk. I'd been trying to figure out the logistics of the palace for hours. With my family's mansion gone I had nowhere else to stay. Yxmic had ordered a room to be cleared in the palace when I brought it up at dinner. Unfortunately, the organization of exactly who was using which room and for what was almost nonexistent. By the time I had all my notes laid on the table I could write an ethnography of the Charcoal Palace's various servants, cooks, maids, and guests. It wasn't helped by the labyrinthine layout of the building itself, and the fact that it seemed to *change*. No one ever seemed to notice the shifts as they happened but it was an inevitable conclusion from the evidence. No map was accurate. 'Doorways' opened to flat stone walls and hallways featured extraneous doors and staircases, as if in waiting for a better purpose.

There *should* be multiple full chambers within the palace walls fit for a litany of royals, but other than the towers Scilla and Yxmic claimed and the full guest quarters I couldn't find any.

I was at my wits' end and just wanted to know where I was going to sleep. Thistle had barged into the room and dragged me out of my funk by insisting that I could take her room.

"It's really no big deal!" She practically begged as she leaned on the wide, thick desk.

"You work for Scilla! You'll need somewhere to stay in the palace. It would just be putting the burden onto you to wrangle..." I gestured at the notes with exasperation, "*this* instead of me. I'll just stay on a couch in Scilla's chambers until I can figure this out."

"Her couch! Do you hear yourself? You're a Princess!" She sounded somehow more offended at my humility than at the idea of being kicked out of her room.

"Yeah, a Princess who's broke! What am I going to do, beg my dad for a treasury after being here for three nights?"

"Shaahida, it's fine. Stay in my room! I'd be honored to take that burden for you." She said.

"Why? What have I ever done for you? I haven't even had time to learn what's going on in your life and now I'm asking for... I don't know."

Suddenly she got serious, the playful joy didn't leave her voice but it held back. "What you did? Shaahida, your mother died to free us! Your father sat on that throne and the first thing he did was order us to remove every piece of bronze from our bodies and be paid two thousand gold for being forced under the Lady's service. Lots of people left, but Scilla was my lady. I

wasn't going to abandon her and I had nowhere else. I'm as committed as you are to Hot City now. Maybe it's still service, but I'd take a life in Tin over one more day in bronze."

I was stunned into silence. I hadn't focused my thoughts on the slaves kept in even the highest of noble houses. Especially the highest, even. My mother had owned slaves herself, before she freed all of them when I was a small child. The employed servants we had seemed to have either fled to the winds like me or died like my mother. I remembered Thistle, though. She was only a couple of years older than us and she'd started working as Scilla's stylist *before* I left. I hated the idea that I'd been complicit in that, even if I'd been a child and even if my mother had done everything he could to bring it to justice.

It seemed like Thistle was going to continue, resuming her normal peppy tone, but she was interrupted by a knock on the door. I rose to open it, but she got there first. She swept into a bow as she opened the door for me, copying the motion of the palace guardsmen.

I had been successfully avoiding Yxmic's gaze for three days. When we ate, I passed him plates silently. When we passed in the hallway he smiled. I forced my cheeks to pull my lips into a smile to meet his. When he embraced me I put my arms around his chest, but I didn't close the space between us. Yxmic stood there, filling the entire doorway, his turban almost scraping the lintel. He was alone, without guards or attendants. I'd never seen him alone since I returned to Alloy. I was shocked awake. My posture straightened in an instant and I blinked my eyes into focus.

"Shaahida." He said. His tone was somber. I shivered. "We need to talk. Thistle, leave us."

I wanted Thistle to shut the door on him. Of course, she was more sensible than that and lithely moved out of the doorway to follow Yxmic's orders.

"I need to get ready. I just woke up." I said. The words sounded pathetic coming out of my lips. I barely felt in control of my body.

"Five minutes." Yxmic said. I nodded and shut the door.

Five minutes later, I had put on a simple dress and shoved my things under the bed to make the room appear clean. I took a centering breath in, and then opened my door. He stood, as if he hadn't moved at all. I led him into my room and he closed the door behind him. Without thinking, we both sat on the couch facing the full window. I stared down at my hands.

"Where is your husband?" He asked. I knew exactly what he'd ask but his bluntness still made his words hit harder than a cannonball.

"He's not my husband anymore."

"What?" Yxmic asked, his voice low and quiet.

"I left him. I don't want him."

Yxmic stood and shouted with the force of a volcanic eruption, "What? You cannot leave your husband!"

I froze in fear for a second, and gripped my dress between my fingers. But no. I wasn't going to give in. I stood to face my father and shouted right back.

"I can and I did. I'm getting a divorce!"

“Shaahida you cannot do this.” Yxmic thundered.

“Why?” I snapped.

“It is forbidden! Marriage is the deepest and most holy of ceremonies in our law! You promised yourself to him, you cannot break your vows. You will be an oathbreaker, a dissolute, a smothered flame!” He bellowed, stepping towards me. I stepped away from him in turn and my back hit my bedroom wall.

“You’re an oathbreaker!” I cried, “You betrayed Aelia!”

The room was silent. Yxmic’s eyebrows were raised, ever so slightly, above his bloodshot eyes.

“You have all right and power to divorce me, and you don’t only because you are afraid for...for what? For my reputation? For your image? What would be worse, severing me from my husband and proudly disavowing the marriage as a necessity of war, or the Court discovering that your eldest daughter is married to a no name [King] of a backwater Earthen province.

Yxmic was, again, silent. Unmoving.

“Let me be free, father! I want to...” I stopped myself from saying I want to get married because I couldn’t commit to the thought. “I want to find love. True love. And when I do I want to be able to give my life to it unshackled from the pain of my past. I love you, father. I do, but I can’t back down on this.”

I hadn’t realized I had moved closer to him, right against his face, with my hand braced on his shoulder.

“How many people know about your husband?” Yxmic asked carefully.

“None in Alloy.” I said. Except for Xhindi...and Rax...and the crew of the Ifrit’s Freedom, I mentally added. How hard could it be to track them down? The ship had supposedly sailed. I believed I could buy Xhindi’s silence. But Rax? But then, who’d listen to Rax?

“Good.” Yxmic said, “We can discuss this another time. I love you, dearest. I missed you so much. I’m sorry.” He extended his arms to me. Despite everything, I embraced him.

I was dreading dinner. The food would be excellent. Truly befitting a Sultan. A menagerie of the greatest tastes and flavors of Hot City. No, I feared the company. Not only would I have to face Yxmic, again, but I’d dine with the entire Court of Alloy. It was the end of my welcoming ceremony. It meant sitting next to Bishop Gaudent and revisiting our awful conversation in the bazaar. He had a scheming slime to him that threw off my nerves. At least in the intervening days I’d acquired a ring of mind shielding, and was therefore sure he couldn’t get his way into my thoughts. You could never tell with Spellcasters, even Clerics.

Of course, Bishop Gaudent of Correns was chosen to escort me to the dinner table. When I opened the door to him, he looked more at home against the pitch black stone and odd carvings of the palace walls than the bright colors and heat of the bazaar. He wore a similar outfit to the ones he wore before. Black iron metal, tabard with the sigil of Creon.

“Lady Shaahida al-Kamali.” Even his bows seemed insincere. He looked to Thistle but quickly shifted his eyes back to mine. She was beyond consideration to him.

“Priest.” I said simply, not moving an inch. He would see Thistle returned to bronze in an instant. Let the flesh hungry monsters of the world consume the labor of the less fortunate like his iron lord consumed their souls.

“I came to invite you to dinner on behalf of his majesty. The court of Alloy is assembling to greet you. As you should expect, attendance is mandatory.” He gave his typical smile. It was small, but you could almost see where a deep pleasure was hidden behind his politeness. He probably begged Yxmic to be the one to collect me just to annoy me.

“My apologies. I thought you were a priest, not a messenger. Tell my father I’ll be there soon.” I said, brushing him off. I turned around to get back to the paperwork and motioned for Thistle to close the door.

“I was instructed to escort you to the dining room. I’d hate to keep your illustrious uncle waiting.” I could feel his smirk from across the room. I turned back to face him and he was holding the door open with a hand while Thistle awkwardly leaned away.

“When is dinner served?” I asked.

“I believe it should be a matter of minutes.” He replied. Of course it was. Great. I took a deep sigh and straightened my back. He extended a hand to me. I ignored it and strutted past him and down the hallway to the dining room. He acted as if I hadn’t just spurned him and walked at my side, slightly behind me. At least in the presence of the court he’d respect my position of power over him.

Thistle gave a quick and precise bow to the both of us. She waved her eyebrows as a silent message. *Have to go. Good luck.* I nodded and dismissed her from service. She practically sprinted down the hallway opposite the dining room, getting out of our sight as quickly as she could. At least she could simply avoid Gaudent. I was far too obvious and far too argumentative for him to ignore.

The carvings in this hallway were devoted to Saint Imix the All-Consuming. He was a creature made of fire with the vague impression of eyes and a hungry mouth on his head. The stone depicting him was so smooth, with round and sharpened ends mimicking the shape of a flickering flame in three dimensions. As we made our way from my temporary study to the dining room, the walls told the story of how Imix fought alongside Ord in the First War, and mourned his death. How he searched all of the Timescape to find a way to rekindle Ord. How he eventually allied with the Dragons of a volcanic range on Earth. They’d worked together to create great creatures of fire and went to the great dwarven kingdom of Myr to revive the god. Imix failed, and fire spilled across Myr. The dragons pillaged Myr. They’d only worked with Imix out of the hope he’d lead them into Myr’s treasure hoards. Chaos emerged, and Imix raged. His flame burned the dwarves and the dragons until a dwarven saint banished him to the Sun. The final carving was a statue given its own five foot niche in the wall. It showed Imix exploding in flame and the walls around the niche depicted the Plain of Burnt Dreams which his rage had created. It was a sad story and it made the walk alongside Bishop Gaudent even more insufferable.

“So, how was your first weekend at the palace?” He asked. Just being in the same room as this creep was infuriating, and his false politeness made me shiver in unease. Shiver! I wished so dearly I could have left behind that feeling when I returned to Hot City.

“Can you cut it with the polite tone?” I asked, trying to bore through his eyes into his soul, “There’s no one watching us here. We both know it’s an act.”

“Would you prefer that I speak with no decorum? I am not a beast, your highness.” He spoke in his soft cool voice, contrasting against the fire in my own.

“I prefer you say what you mean! You’re playing games with me. If you hate me, you hate me. I tell you exactly how I feel. Show me your fangs like the snake you are.”

He considered that for a second, gazing at a carving depreciating Saint Imix beheading a dragon. Finally, he smiled a large toothy smile. His canines really *did* remind me of a snake’s fangs.

“In all fairness, your highness, I do genuinely value politeness. I spent many years learning the art of oration and politics. I don’t want to let all those skills go to waste.” He seemed like he was going to continue, but the seconds dragged as he said no more.

“Well? Spit it out!” I commanded. “What do you really think of me?”

He chuckled as his boots clacked on the reflective black marble floor. “I think you have a great animosity for the Iron Saint and his followers. You are not unique in that. I think your passion is evidence and you are held in your beliefs as if you were welded metal. You returned to Alloy without your Earthen husband. Perhaps you hold disdain for our whole race? Perhaps the heathens of Makrip have given you a false impression of the glory of our world?” He used the garbled Soluntum translation of Makrip’s name. “Perhaps you have only seen into the Iron Church as an outsider, rather than hearing the eternal word yourself.”

“And you’d offer to teach me?” I challenged him with venom in my voice.

“I am certain my flock would be delighted to see your highness in my church.”

“No special treatment for such a powerful convert? I think my time is more valuable than that.” I chided. Suddenly, it felt good to be the one biting him with every comment. He didn’t seem to mind.

“Perhaps a more generous reward will come with prayer? The Iron Saint is kind to those who give him power. It is a central part of our most sacred doctrine.”

I snorted, “I’m not an enemy of Creon because of ignorance, nor because of prejudice. I hate him because he’s a ruthless tyrant who smothers any faith that doesn’t worship him, who impales his enemies with Iron spears, who slew the rightful Emperor Voletto the Good and left his land to fester and rot into warring states and monster-infested wilds. He keeps slaves and slaughters innocents!” My words became more intense until I shouted the last sentence.

Gaudent immediately bit back, speaking with more energy than he had since the bazaar. “What of Sultan Yxmic then? Is he a tyrant for overthrowing the Lady of bronze, as Creon to Voletto?”

“He saved this city! He freed us to rule by our own determination, he removed an unjust leader who killed her own trusted advisors when they questioned her!” I wasn’t going to mention

my mother by name, but bringing up the Lady of bronze caused memories of her to flood back into me. Her hand holding my face and ordering me away. Our mansion burning in the distance, visible from the Sea of Fire. The gold ring she gave me. The one I still kept on my right thumb.

“Do you think Emperor Voletto the Good received his name out of purity alone? You think it not a work of wordsmithing and propaganda that even decades after his death the man who united Farangia under a draconian code is revered as a lawkeeper and a hero? You are young, but not naive enough to think so uncritically of power and leadership. Worship of the Saints of Farangia was purged because each entrenches itself in the people. Religion, slavery, violence. These are all tools of war, tools of power. Iron pierces magical veils, it is unsophisticated. Raw. Honest. Likewise, the Iron Saint is pure. Unfettered by the corruption, lies, and pride of the past.”

I didn’t quite know what to say to that. Thoughts roiled in my head, trying to become a coherent argument against him. My frustrations were mirrored in Imix’s explosion at the end of the hallway.

“That...” I nearly shouted, “How does any of that justify his actions? Do you think that just because he’s powerful that means he’s right? That’s insane!”

“That’s war.” He answered, his quiet voice returning, “Whatever you believe, our world...our *worlds*, are a battleground between the forces of law and chaos and it always shall be. Creon can bring safety, opportunity, freedom. Before I wore the iron I was weak. I am no murderer nor soldier. But now? No one is foolish enough to attack one blessed by Creon. The same logic applies to your city. Do you think the Lady of bronze would sit idly by and allow her land to be ruled by her betrayer if it were not for the fact that an attack here would open her to a counterattack from my lord? One that would risk her own death?”

I shuddered at the thought that he might be right. That Scilla and Yxmic and I would have to tolerate monsters like Gaudent and Creon, because without them we’d lose everything. I thought of Bassaam, and how I desperately clutched to him to avoid death at the Lady’s hands. I didn’t know what to say, and Gaudent considered that a win worthy of silent celebration behind his polite mask.

I began formulating a rebuttal when a pair of servants opened a gold-lined door in front of us. The dining room. I’d not waste any more time with the contemptible Earthen.

“Shaahida al-Kamali!” An attendant announced, “and Bishop Gaudent of Correns!”



12

Chapter 5: Five for Death

Fives are a bad omen in Alloy, which is why it was so unfortunate that this feast was on the fifth day of the week and why, at Yxmic's table, the fifth seat from the head counting clockwise was forever empty. The room was glittering with full decor and celebratory revel. Red satin curtains hung from the walls and magical lights from the ceiling cast the room in soft light. Yxmic was at the head of the tremendously long table. It fit most of the size of the room. The room was so large and the ceiling so high that I thought I could fit an entire dragon carcass inside—clipping its wings and hanging it from the ceiling. Rohala was in the corner, playing a calming song on a harp. The instrument had its own personal niche in the wall about a foot off of the floor. Beside the Sultan was Scilla, and my chair was on his other side. Gaudent's seat was beside Scilla. I suppressed a fume of anger that I'd have to sit this close to him. The rest of the table was made up of influential members of the court of alloy. Lady Dahlia sat nearby.

On Gaudent's other side was Vicar Whitesoot, a multi-armed creature with a body like a centipede. She rested many blue humanoid hands on the black stone of the table. She wore a regal and stylish headdress with a trailing veil that hid her face. Whitesoot was the head of the Farrier's guild, responsible for most of the lucrative trade between Alloy and other realms. I think she was Sabeeka's...aunt? Godmother?

¹² From Art by [Mike Franchina](#) on Artstation

Beside me was the High Priestess of the Kindling. I recognized her as I'd worshiped in her temple all of my life. She gave a smile and made a Kindling honorary salute—good tidings.

She was a tall woman, features unclear though she seemed shorter because I arrived while she was already in her seat and I'd grown about a foot since I'd last seen her. She wore a draconic skull atop her face and a set of black robes with red accents. It was her uniform as priestess and also the only clothes I'd ever seen her wear in twenty years. It was as if she was ready to give a sermon at any time. It was a tenant of our order that priests, monks, and acolytes only be referred to by their title, but the High Priestess was more devout than most. Most would tell their name as soon as a formal event was over, or give it in moments of intimacy, or simply use it whenever they weren't at the temple. She never gave her name, and I knew her only as the High Priestess, and she called everyone by a unique title instead of their name. She called me the 'Rising Phoenix'. Despite spending every eighth day in her temple as a child I'd never seen her face under the skull mask.

She hadn't been replaced, apparently, keeping her position despite the revolution. I was unsure how to think of that. I suppose I wanted to trust her after all these years. There was a nagging doubt in my mind that stopped me. The priestess had once claimed to be loyal to the Lady of bronze. Was she really trustworthy if she changed sides that easily? I glanced up at her and caught her smiling gently down at me. I returned the smile.

A blue skinned and smoke-haired man entered after Gaudent and I. I recognized his attire as the ceremonial garb of the General of the Fist of Krak al-Tawil. It was the last remaining of three city military forces, along with the Unquenchable and the Illuminated. The Unquenchable were gone, and I saw no Illuminated representative here. The Fist must have been loyal to Yxmic.

"Greetings, Master of the Similars." The High Priestess called.

The General entered with a group of guardsmen. They obediently saluted the Sultan in unison and retreated into the corners of the room. The guards dressed in uniform, save one, who wore a blue sash around his chest. He sat down beside the General and took off his helmet, revealing a scarred face of obsidian with one eye glowing like an ember.

The General bowed and extended a hand to me, "General Al-set of the Fist. This is my squire, Hilal bin Immet" I shook it. As soon as he spoke Hilal's name Rohala stopped playing her harp. The sudden silence caused the room to tense. Eyes shot to Rohala. I noticed that she was staring straight at Hilal and he stared back. They were trapped in a tense gaze. Desperation from him, anger and anxiety from her.

"Play!" Yxmic offhandedly commanded Rohala, not looking away from Lady Dahlia, who he'd engaged in conversation.

Rohala's voice stopped up in her throat and she did not continue playing. I tried to meet her eyes and catch her attention but her eyes darted to the floor. She looked at the harp and put a hand to it but couldn't play. She avoided everyone in the room as if we were gorgons who'd turn her to stone on sight.

Yxmic rose his eyes to find the panicking tiefling. “Play!” His order was intent this time, annoyed she hadn’t listened.

“Sorry!” Rohala blurted. She raised her hands but they were ever-so slightly shaking. Hardly a second passed before another voice split the silence. Rohala was in position to continue playing but hadn’t started.

Gaudent spoke, “What has distressed you, tiefling? Do you require the services of a cleric?” Why would he focus attention back to Rohala? With my luck, just because he knew we were friends and he hated me. I glanced from her to the High Priestess, not knowing what to do to help. Should I intervene? I felt the pressure building but just as easily I could feel how this might twist against Rohala if I wasn’t careful.

Rohala gave a small bow to Gaudent, “My Lord, I...my thoughts have no bearing on the court. I apologize for the interruption.”

She turned and bowed even deeper before she addressed Yxmic, “My...your royal highness. I beg your forgiveness. I apologize.”

I could hear the fear in her voice at making a mistake that was now the focus of the table. The Bishop had just talked about how everything Creon did was to gain power. What did Gaudent gain from humiliating her?

Yxmic seemed unimpressed and Gaudent stared Rohala down in disappointment. The rest of the table seemed between mildly intrigued and indifferent. Scilla was as confused and offended on Rohala’s behalf as I was. Before either of us could speak, Gaudent attacked Rohala again.

“Do not lie, creature! Iron knows whence you speak!”

“I’m sorry. I...I don’t know. I didn’t mean to interrupt... I.” She struggled for words under the bishop’s gaze Rohala stepped away from her harp and bowed to her knees, putting her hands to the floor.

Instead of Gaudent, this time the High Priestess spoke. Her voice was lilting and something about the way she spoke always gave a hint of intimidation and power. Despite Yxmic’s place on the throne, she was always in control.

“And you, Adorned Soldier?” She addressed Honor, “Why have caused our little Flower of the Brimstone to weep so?”

The High Priestess never called anyone by their names. Either she used official titles or strange poetic ones of her own design. She was redirecting attention off of Rohala but still continuing to focus on the same subject. To get Rohala out of danger we needed to move on and forget this happened. We needed to stop fucking talking about it. I knew what I could do.

Hilal twitched and threw a glance at Gaudent, which the metallic ignored. He stood unto his full height and began to speak, “She—!”

“Enough!” I rose from my seat as I yelled the order, releasing the rising tension in my chest. “This matter is not of our concern. Let Rohala play or let her withdraw.”

Hilal glared at me. “If I am to be insulted in the very palace of...”

I didn't let him even finish the sentence, "Do you want to insult my position over you in my own palace? Are you going to sit down or do you demand satisfaction?"

I'd let my patience run thin, but even for me this was rash. Potentially inviting him to duel me over something as insignificant as this?

Smartly, Hilal realized his impropriety. He snapped into perfect posture and stared straight at the wall. He delivered a salute and sat back down into his chair.

Gaudent glared at me with hatred and disgust even more thinly veiled than usual. Scilla, seeming like she hadn't gotten past the 'not knowing how to help Rohala' phase, nodded to me. The High Priestess looked to me with an intrigued and affectionate expression that read somewhere between matronly and flirtatious.

"The Daughter of the Sun speaks. I bow to her." She spoke in her trademark ominous and cryptic manner.

"Does that satisfy you, Sultan in Ember?" She asked Yxmic.

The table exchanged glances and finally the Lord of Alloy made his ruling.

"Dinner is served." Yxmic wiped the history of the room clean. His words brought everyone away from Rohala and to the more pleasant subject of the feast. As soon as his words echoed out of his mouth, servants danced into the room and delivered a piping hot, delicious smelling meal onto each of our plates. Rohala quietly excused herself and left with the rest of the servants carrying emptied trays.

"What was that about? Are you ok?" I asked. We crowded around Rohala, Scilla and I each taking one of her shoulders. We were trying to comfort her and barely succeeding. She led us out of the palace and onto a patio overlooking the courtyard.

"Really. It's not an issue." Rohala spoke while still clearly shaking from the conversation in the dining hall. She took in deep breaths every couple of seconds.

"I'm commanding you to tell us." I said, offering her a hand.

"Hilal was...my master. He made....I...He sold me, after the war. I thought I'd never have to see him again." Rohala mumbled.

I was sure Rohala was free, but how had she been? A question for another day.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I asked. For Rohala to act this broken he must have hurt her while he'd owned her, badly. I wanted to hug her but I was afraid she'd shatter at the touch.

I wish I could question her. How had Hilal hurt my new friend, and could this be related to Gaudent and whatever he had planned? Why had he chosen to spring on Rohala for her slight misstep in front of the entire court?

"I heard... We heard he got married to a wealthy woman. A guildsman with the Farriers." She said. She sat on a chair close to the railing and held the stone barrier tight against her chest. She slumped her shoulders and stared out into the city. Wind whipped her black hair across her face.

Vicar was the head of that guild, and she saw the whole fight. That couldn't be a coincidence. If only I could have read her expression under that veil! She'd stayed almost totally

silent over dinner. She'd chuckled once, at one of Yxmic's wry jokes I think. Maybe he'd placed her next to Gaudent for a reason. Were the two allies? The political web of Alloy grew denser and denser each day and I was barely caught up on what had happened since I left.

"That's awful." Scilla comforted Rohala with a sympathetic smile. She wrapped her scarf over the tiefling's shoulder. I realized I'd been too stuck in my scheming to help my friend and a note of guilt rang through my body. I knelt before Rohala and offered my hand. She took it.

"It's going to be ok." I said, knowing all too well how it felt to be betrayed and abandoned by a man you thought you loved. "I won't let him or anyone do that to you."

Scilla nodded along and wrapped an arm around her.

"Yeah. Want to go get some drinks and just get away from everyone? We can stay in the tower?" She offered, the pain at Rohala's humiliation clear in her voice.

"No, no." Rohala brushed her off. "I think I need to go home. Is that alright, mistress?"

"Of course, Take your leave and wind down." Scilla looked into her eyes.

"Please." I added.

She walked from the palace and into one of Scilla's carriages in the courtyard. A tense energy hung in the air for the rest of the night. The guests eventually dwindled away until only the royal family and Gaudent remained. Gaudent. The iron snake. I frowned up at the palace from the patio where we waved Rohala goodbye.

It was many hours later and I couldn't sleep. To ease myself I walked through the carved walls of the palace alone. It was a small thing. Ultimately, a petty argument played out on the stage of the opulent dining hall. Blown out of proportion by Gaudent for gods-knew what reason. It chipped at my optimism, though. This place was no longer a blissful garden of peace, a fantasy in my mind, or the memories of a better childhood. It was no longer full of constant warm welcomes and reunions. Now it was just a palace with my family—the royal family. A court full of strife and politicking and alliances and war like every royal house was.

I strode into the now dark and emptied dining hall. The palace had no windows and the doors closed when the Sultan went to sleep. While reflecting into the smooth surface of the dining room table, I heard a noise. Voices coming from another room. Blue light crept from beneath the great doors which led from the dining room to Imix's hallway.

Yxmic's voice and...who? I listened with my ear pressed against the door. A calm, dispassionate voice with a thinly veiled venom. Who else but Bishop Gaudent? My hair lit up and I suppressed my urge to open the door and slap his across the face for what he'd done.

"I beseech you, my lord. This wanton, flagrant disobedience and chaos before the court calls for an answer! The girl should be punished, or at least removed from her position. Your majesty, you cannot ignore your own daughter commanding you! It invites critique! It shows weakness and an unwillingness to enforce your rule. Will you let your daughter veto any decision she doesn't like?" Gaudent said. "Not even the councillors have that power, and may I remind you she is an unelected single woman."

Ridiculous. As if that prick couldn't get more infuriating. Worse, Yxmic lingered in silence and that made me worry. Did he agree with the snake? I hated how much I was

intimidated by my father. I never felt secure in his opinions of me, and I'd been so scared about getting into trouble over Vejabhar that I'd hardly spoken to him. Was that going to come back and bite me? I didn't trust him like I trusted Scilla.

Yxmic finally said something in his contemplative voice. "It was a conversation over dinner. Quiet yourself. She won't get in the way. This is of no concern to him nor you. Tell your Saint that he'll get what he wants. No delays. Begin on the Day of Striking." He was even, but authoritative. There was no hint of derision or anger at me, but also none at Gaudent's implication that I was too hot-headed. He didn't defend me.

What were they talking about? Creon has plans in Alloy? That couldn't be good, especially if he'd wrapped his tendrils around the Sultan. Did the council know about this? The Day of Striking was only about a week away—and it was the day of Scilla's debutante ball. That was tradition. I'd be so busy, the whole day. A perfect distraction, if that was even an intended piece of the puzzle. Yxmic and Gaudent separated. I wanted to go back to bed more than anything.

The next morning the girls, Scilla, and I were making our way down from her tower to a brunch in the Plume Ward. As we turned a corner, I caught Poppy by the arm and took her aside. She was the obvious choice for my spy. She was the maid that cleaned Gaudent's quarters. She was good at sneaking around to clean and tend the house while not waking any of the royals.

"Poppy!" I whispered, "I can explain more later but I need your help. Bishop Gaudent is up to something, and I need you to watch him. Tell me if he breaks schedule, or goes somewhere odd, or if you can find anything strange he has in his room. And I don't want you telling anyone, least of all Yxmic, ok? Can I ask that of you?"

Poppy didn't waver for a second.

"What about Scilla? Is she in on it?" She smiled.

"No. She's worrying about her debut and busy with her friends. I don't want her to get involved. I'll deal with it without anyone else knowing or having to worry."

"Cept me." Poppy jokingly replied.

"Except you." I nodded. "Keep Watch."

It had been three days since Poppy began her spying and she hadn't found anything so far. The next incident came when we were lounging around in a luxurious balcony on the second floor of the Charcoal Palace. I ate an indulgently satisfying bowl of soluntum grapes. Yxmic was reviewing legal documents for some official function or another. Scilla was ranting on, reading a romance from the palace's library. Every once in a while, she put it down and reviewed the arrangements for her debutante ball.

Gaudent ruined it by miserably stepping onto the balcony, but he saw us clearly busy and silently made his way to Yxmic. He leaned down to whisper in his ear. I squinted at him, but I'd resolved to stay neutral until I could figure out exactly what he was planning. He hadn't spoken a word to me since the dinner aside from polite greetings.

Just then there was a knock at the door. Yxmic motioned with his hand and it opened. In walked a bedraggled messenger. He had his hands on his knees and was frantically panting. He mumbled something incomprehensible in Ignan and I raced towards him, plying him with a glass of water. He made a praying motion at me and bowed, then drunk the thing in one swig.

“Speak up!” Yxmic ordered, barely considering the interruption. The messenger let out a long panting breath before swallowing in the air.

“Aelia is dead!” The noise of the room vanished. Scilla snapped her book shut and the men stared at the messenger.

He continued, rattling off intelligence. “Saint Creon beseiged her fortress. Eventually, Aelia’s forces ran out of food and decided to attempt an assassination on the Saint. They failed, and he slaughtered them. It was less than a week ago. We just got word from the front.”

Yxmic’s beard went out in shock, his golden rings falling to the floor. Gaudent froze, and slowly a smile curled onto his lips.. He seemed frozen. Scilla’s jaw hung open and she looked to me as if to ask, ‘Is this really happening?’ I cracked an ear to ear smile.

Yxmic seemed about to speak when the messenger caught his breath and reached into his satchel.

“And, sir, I have a message from Saint Creon the Deathless himself.” He said. He handed Yxmic a clay tablet. On the bottom was the Imperial seal - a ram astride the earth.

Yxmic took it, sat at his desk, and began to read. Scilla and I rushed to read it over his shoulders and Gaudent, though subtly, moved to do the same.

“Creon is petitioning us to host him in the Court of Alloy.” Yxmic read aloud, “He says he will arrive by the time of Scilla’s debut. He says he’ll share Lady Aelia’s treasury with us upon his arrival.”

I looked at my sister in horror. Creon? Here? Why mention Scilla’s debut unless...unless he intended to vie for her hand. It could be someone else in his court, maybe. Hopefully.

Gaudent jumped into action and stepped around the desk.

“This is a great blessing my lord! I shall begin preparing the palace at once.”

“No.” Yxmic’s word was final. “Leave and stay in your chambers until I summon you.”

“My lord!” Gaudent tried to speak.

“Not now.” Yxmic thundered. Gaudent turned on his heels and quietly left the room. Yxmic turned back to the messenger.

“Get me every piece of information about this incident and the fate of Aelia and the armies of Creon the Deathless.”

The messenger nodded and sped out of the balcony.

“You!” He pointed to another servant. “I want every contact we have, even the infernal cities. We need alliances and we need an army. Dashmir!” He pointed to another servant, “I don’t care how much of the treasury we burn. Go to the dukes of the Sun and get their hands and their swords. If we are not careful this city will go to war.”

My heart dropped. Could our home really be that fragile?

“We can’t seriously be considering allowing him into Alloy?” I said, approaching Yxmic’s desk and crossing my arms.

“We have no choice, Shaahida.” He said, his voice heavy as ever.

“But-”

Ycmic didn’t let me finish, “The Emperor has done us a great service, and commands the greatest army in all the worlds. We would be fools to make an enemy of him, especially now.”

Yxmic turned his eyes away from me.

“Go, all of you!” He dismissed everyone in the room. Scilla stood but he stopped her with a motion of his hand. He looked Scilla in the eyes with a mix of despair, desperation, and determination.

“I need to speak with you, my dear.”

I stopped for a second, but he waved me off. Private conversation then. I slipped out of the door, but the grim look in his eyes made me want to listen in. The servants rushed to obey his order and leave as soon as possible, but I stayed behind and listened at the door. My trust in Yxmic wavered more and more and I needed to hear what he’d say to my baby sister, especially if it was important.

He floated over to her with a whoosh of air. I heard her stand from the couch. The timing of her uneven steps betraying her nervousness.

“I...I don’t understand.” She cried quietly.

Yxmic spoke in a loving but intimidating voice, quiet enough that I could barely hear through the open crack in the door.

“My dear...If this is all true, I apologize. Your debut has become infinitely more important. I do not just wish you to find a good match for your own sake, I need you to secure a political alliance. Creon has made a move towards an alliance with us. You may be instrumental to keeping the peace between us. That is your duty now.”

“What?” She stuttered in quiet distress.

“What?” I demanded under my breath.

“If the Court favors an alliance with Creon, your hospitality could be vital to gaining it. Should they refuse an alliance...we will need powerful allies.” He trailed off. “I’m going to call in every favor, every debt owed to me to get a match for you at the ball. That should give us insurance, in case our alliance with Soluntum fails.”

“Father, I can’t...I’m not ready, I didn’t prepare for this much pressure. The fate of our city could rest on this, our lives could depend on *my* match! What if...” She stumbled for words and began crying with little choking sobs.

“My dear...You were born to do this. I know you can.” His words were supportive but intent. He wasn’t relieving the pressure on her, he was increasing it.

She let out an uneven breath.

“My dear, go and prepare for this. I need you to be strong. We all rely on you.” He ordered softly.

She ran from him, heels clacking on the stone and I frantically jumped to my feet and looked inconspicuous in the hallway before she burst out. She barely left the doorway before she ran to me and took me in a hug.

“Hey! It’s alright. We’re going to get through this.” I held Scilla by the shoulder. She looked up at me with those big, teary eyes and I squeezed her tighter. A desperation clung to my voice now. “I’m not going to forsake my city again and I’m not going to give up.”

She sobbed, and then laughed in a tiny interruption of her breakdown, “You were totally listening in, huh?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, “because I care about what happens to my little sister, and I’m going to look out for you.” I raised her eyes to meet mine. “I will fight for you every day. I will make your debut the stuff of legends, and I will take care of everything. I promise it’ll be ok.”

She tried to stop crying and managed it. She lifted her head to look at me, and steeled her expression. “I need to be strong. I can be strong for our city.”

“You *are* strong.” I held her face. “You are a princess of Alloy. You fought the Lady of bronze and won. Your beloved sister was banished to Earth, and did you ever give up on her? Once, in five long years, did you ever think she’d abandon you? No. You believed in me despite everything, and I will always believe in you.”

“What if I can’t do it?” She asked in a tiny voice. “What if I fail or the Earthens attack and someone else dies, like Bibi Azure or...or you. What if we all have to flee and you have to lose your home again because I’m not strong enough?”

I sighed into her. Truly, I wasn’t sure. Truly, I should have been just as terrified. I wasn’t. Something else animated me, a deep burning flame that I held in my heart. My debt to Alloy, my conviction, my love. My anger.

“If everything goes wrong, and Soluntum declares war on us, and you think you’ve lost everything, you haven’t. I’ll be there and I will kill Creon the Deathless myself before I let her lay a hand on you or anyone in my home ever again.”

We held each other for a time, but finally Scilla let go and retreated to her chambers. I squeezed her one last time and told her I’d be waiting in my chambers if she was ever in need. As soon as she was out of the room, I spun around. I punched into the wall of the palace as hard as I could. A horn on the head of one of the intricate carvings chipped, and fell to the floor. I barely felt the pain in my fist. I stormed back into Yxmic’s office. He was slumped on his desk, frantically writing with a glowing pen.

“You can’t do this to her!” I yelled.

Yxmic stopped writing, but otherwise didn’t move or indicate he’d heard me. I walked right up to him and stood across his desk, leaning so my eyes were level to his.

“She’s a child. She went through this whole war and she deserves to marry by her choice, not have her hand fought over like a pawn in a war game!” I said.

“What would you have me do?” Yxmic said, finally looking me in the eyes.

“Give me a divorce.” I asked.

Yxmic grunted, and began to stand, but before he could I pointed a finger at him, commanding him to stop.

I continued, "Name me, your eldest daughter, as your heiress. I've already had my debut ruined. I'll marry whomever I need to in order to keep peace and keep Scilla safe. I'll be the sacrifice."

"Shaahida." Yxmic sighed.

"Why not?" I said, knowing he had already made up his mind against me.

"Firstly," he answered, "Because I have already declared this to be Scilla's debut and a ball in her honor. Do not rob your sister of this day."

"It wouldn't-" I argued

Yxmic continued, "Secondly, because your history and the fact that I have used my own power to affect the legality of your marriage would doubtless become known, and would jeopardize your ability to partake in a political marriage."

"But-"

"And thirdly, Shaahida, my dearest, my love. Because you view this choice as a sacrifice. It is not. You do not need to put yourself in harm's way to protect Scilla. We can both protect her. You deserve to be happy."

I had no idea how to react to that, so I said nothing. Yxmic stoically returned to his paperwork. His pen scratched against the paper. I wrapped my arms around myself.

"You aren't going to budge on this, are you?" I asked.

"Saint Creon the Deathless personally asked for an invitation to Scilla's debut. I cannot refuse. I have no choice." He stated, fact as immovable as the stone of the palace.



13

Chapter 6: The Devil's Welcome

Scilla's debutante ball was an absolute spectacle. Everyone who was anyone in Alloy's upper class came to the party, and a veritable flock of suitors crowded the throne room. The Charcoal Palace was fully decorated with banners, streamers, and floral decorations. The bouquets predominantly featured ashgrow azures, whose bright blue petals matched with Scilla's flaming hair.

The dining room had been transformed into an elaborate buffet, and a set of flickering magical motes now backlit the bar. It felt like overnight the Palace's walls had turned from a court of law into a den of chaotic reverie.

The hour turned, the Moon fell over the horizon. As soon as its last shining sliver disappeared from view a bell rang out. Eighteen rings for eighteen years since Scilla's birth. Everyone from Alloy knew the meaning of the signal and everyone else had a translator or guide who did. The crowd fled from the rest of the palace to fill the enormous throne room. Every available seat was taken and the only empty space was the carpet with its procession to the Sultan's throne. Music played continuously, keeping the energy up while conserving the official tone.

¹³ Art from [chacha08](#) on [wall.alphacoders.com](#) Attribution is unclear if this is his art or just something he reposted.

I wasn't sitting with them though. No, I had not gone to a debutante ball before I'd been forced to flee my home. Though Scilla was the main event, this ball would also serve a litany of other maidens ready to become eligible debutantes. It would also serve as the stage to announce the arrival of Yxmic's big ticket guests. Yxmic hadn't given me the guest list. He'd been busy ever since the dinner where I'd snapped at Hilal and I didn't want to say anything in front of Gaudent, who was somehow still staying at the palace. He attended dinner but I hadn't seen him nor tail of him otherwise. I could guess which kind of people would arrive to ask for Scilla's hand though. Rich, Powerful. Princes and Princesses. Perhaps even a King. People important enough to announce their presence with fanfare.

We all waited in the long main hallway leading from the front doors of the palace into the throne room. It had barely been a few minutes, but the wait had felt like hours. I had gotten myself dressed up. I repeated my outfit from my arrival to Hot City. It was my best one and I wanted the people to connect their impression of me with the festival dance that day. I'd gotten a set of hair pins from Thistle that I used to push it to one side, to look distinctive against the other fire-haired ifrit girls. Yxmic had also given both Scilla and I diamond necklaces, for security. They would act as the material component for the spell Revivify, which could redirect a dead person so long as they weren't dead for more than a minute. I'd return to life, so long as my soul was intact. Thinking about my own death was one more thought I didn't need and I was already spinning a multitude of plates. The food, the decor, the band, the events in the garden, keeping Scilla safe, being open to help her if she called, looking perfect in front of a crowd of the most powerful people I'd ever met. I wasn't even thinking about actually meeting someone. That made me think of Sesta and I forced the thoughts away. She was certainly gone now, floating in the Sea of Stars.

I was not the first to be announced. Several of the courtly ladies were the right age, including Sabeeka, who was right before me. She was absolutely stunning in a set of matching metal sleeves that almost resembled armor and a jewel-encrusted skirt that fell to her calves.

The waiting felt almost interminable as a lump built in my throat. Today had to be *perfect*. I would not allow anything less. In a matter of seconds I'd be in front of all those people and the pressure would be on and I'd have to fight for my life. My heart pounded in my chest. It should have been exciting. Celebrating Scilla's debut, celebrating my return. Finally, formally, re-introducing myself to the people of my home. It wasn't comforting, or safe, or fun. It was tense and scary, and if I failed Scilla could fall apart and if she failed we would all be doomed.

A magically-empowered feminine voice called Sabeeka's name. It was her cue to step through the door and present herself to the crowd.

"Wish me luck!" Sabeeka wriggled her fingers at me in one last wave. She was leaving already. When she was finished I'd walk through next! Oh god, oh god, get it together Shaahida. The music got louder as I approached the doorway to take her place at the front of the line.

"Good luck!" I managed as she was already most of the way through the colossal doorway.

I watched her gracefully cross the throne room to stand before Yxmic, curtsy, and excuse herself to take a seat. The open double doors blocked my view of the crowd who filled the rest of the room. They were carved with images of ifrit with crowns bowing down to a throne which was carved into the center of the doorframe where the doors would meet when closed. I could hear the crowd's cheers and clapping.

All I had to do was repeat what Sabeeka just did. I just needed to perform, just like I performed every day at court with Bassaam. One more night. It was going to be ok. *This is her day*, I repeated to myself. *Make it beautiful. Make it count.*

"Shaahida al-Kamali, Duchess in Alloy!" The voice announced.

"Her majesty, the Rising Phoenix!" the crier called. The High Priestess was standing to my right, reading names and titles off a leather scroll. I looked at her and she gave me an encouraging smile.

I could almost hear her whisper, "Go forth, child."

Yxmic sat on the throne with a controlled expression. He was forcing a welcoming demeanor but there was no glint in his eye. It seemed like he hadn't slept in days. The rest of the court of Alloy was scattered across the front of the crowd. Lady Dahlia caught my eye and gave me a nod of encouragement.

I was now in front of the crowd. No turning back. I surged forward, relying on my pure will and rage to carry me to Yxmic. I bowed, and took my seat. I had a place of honor, occupying one of the smaller chairs next to the throne. I would be at Scilla's right. Sabeeka sat on my right. She took me around the shoulders as I sat down.

"You looked great!"

"Thanks." I let out a deep breath, glad the moment was over and the eyes of the party turned to the next debut. He was a blue eyed azer, announced as a count of Ash. The entrances came one after the other. Most weren't of much concern. The ones I was looking out for would be obvious. Foreign dignitaries or royalty.

"This ends the presentation of our Debuts, save for our Princess. In her honor, we welcome these following guests to our fair court before she arrives." The High Priest made the announcement and cleared her throat as if to speak, but didn't continue and actually let out any sound.

Suddenly the music stopped. The drums, flutes, lutes, lyres, and trumpets were silenced. Then a note played, and then another. The instrument sounded superficially like a lute, but it was tuned bizarrely and there was an obvious amplification. It almost reminded me of the way the High Priestess' voice boomed when she channeled her divinity into it. The string plucks had reverb which bounded around the room and soon drums followed in a completely different style. Sabeeka smiled ear to ear. Desperate for an explanation, I looked to her.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"She's back! Khayra!" She giggled.

The music escalated, growing in speed and adding a horns section.

My heart sank. Oh god, why couldn't I have gotten the guest list beforehand? At least I'd have some warning!

"Khayra? Your older sister Khayra? Kissed me when we were thirteen, Khayra? *That* Khayra?" I was frantic again. Before Sabeeka could answer, the High Priestess broke her odd silence.

"Lady Khayra ibn Yazid, head of the Assayers Guild of Alloy and Amira of Sunspot!" She announced.

Unfortunately, she'd had a glow up since I'd last seen her—literally; she was made of glowing fire. She walked with the cocky stride of a bachelorette entering a party with a pack of bottles full of fine mint whiskey. Five flying carpets exploded from behind her, writhing and dancing in the air. She spread her hands as if commanding them like a Maestro. She'd grown out her bright red hair into a truly impressive woven braid which she'd wound around her neck like a scarf. I bet she stroked it often while talking. She wore a staggeringly large white turban over the rest of her hair, complete with the golden baubles you'd expect of Hot City nobility.

She might as well have commanded the flying carpets to spell her own name in the air above her. Worst of all, she was clearly having fun. She pointed and winked at someone in the crowd before putting up a hand to her ear, prompting the crowd to roar. She walked in time with her music until she bowed before Yxmic, hands still spread like she was asking for a hug.

She strolled over to Sabeeka and I before taking her seat.

"Sabeeka! My little copper!" They shared a short embrace.

"And Shaahida! I wasn't expecting to see you again" She snarked. I raised my eyebrow at her, thinking that I'd probably say something stupid if I opened my mouth. She knelt before me and extended a hand. I took in a breath and caught her perfume, which made her smell like savory spices.

"May I?" she asked.

I graciously extended a hand and she kissed one of my many rings. She smiled up at me and I couldn't help but return it.

"See you on the dance floor," she winked with absolutely no tact. She promptly whooped and took her seat. Sabeeka was still grinning as she left.

"Head of the Assayer's Guild? When did that happen?" I whispered.

"Black gods, it's so cool!" Sabeeka exclaimed, before pointing at the five carpets which slowly floated to flank Khayra. "You know the tapestries? Daddy was right on the cusp of figuring out how to double our production. Khayra goes off to college in Poch and she meets this girl, Otagi, right? And she's got mad connections, I'm talking like her cousin runs the money exchange and docks. They meet this artificer guy and together they figure out how to up production like three hundred percent! Next thing you know, everyone in Poch is paying us ten gold to fly around the city!"

I eyed Khayra. A Lady of Alloy? Rich? With allies and contacts in the greatest city in the Timescape? Maybe she would be a good match for Scilla. At the very least, they weren't strangers. Then again, that smarmy smile was still plastered across her face and she was already

sending for a servant to get herself wine. Would she take Scilla seriously? Would she care, would she treat her well?

“Announcing Lord Galurius Antino de Valerio of Poch!” the High Priestess spoke. I was barely past the weave of thoughts about Khayra as the next guest strode into the throne room. He was a tall, broad-featured mica man with long brown hair and a beard, both tied into braids with golden thread. He was older, at least at middle age for a mica. How old was that? Forty-five? He wore a very Solunum outfit, complete with a sparkling golden wreath of laurels on his head. One of his sleeves was covered with copper-plated armor. I wondered whether to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume the copper was worn as the metal of soldiers. He carried a halberd one one hand. I decided to give it to him.

Khayra whooped a comment at de Valerio that I didn’t quite hear. It might have been ‘My Guy!’. Once the mica gave a curt and military bow to Yxmic he sat right beside Khayra. Thinking about it, de Valerio probably had something to do with Lady Khayra’s fancy new title. He seemed reserved, and I didn’t see him move his face the whole time he was on the runway.

The next couple of guests were dignitaries and officials from the guilds of Poch, none holding significant titles. If Scilla was marrying anyone from that city, it’d be either Khayra or de Valerio.

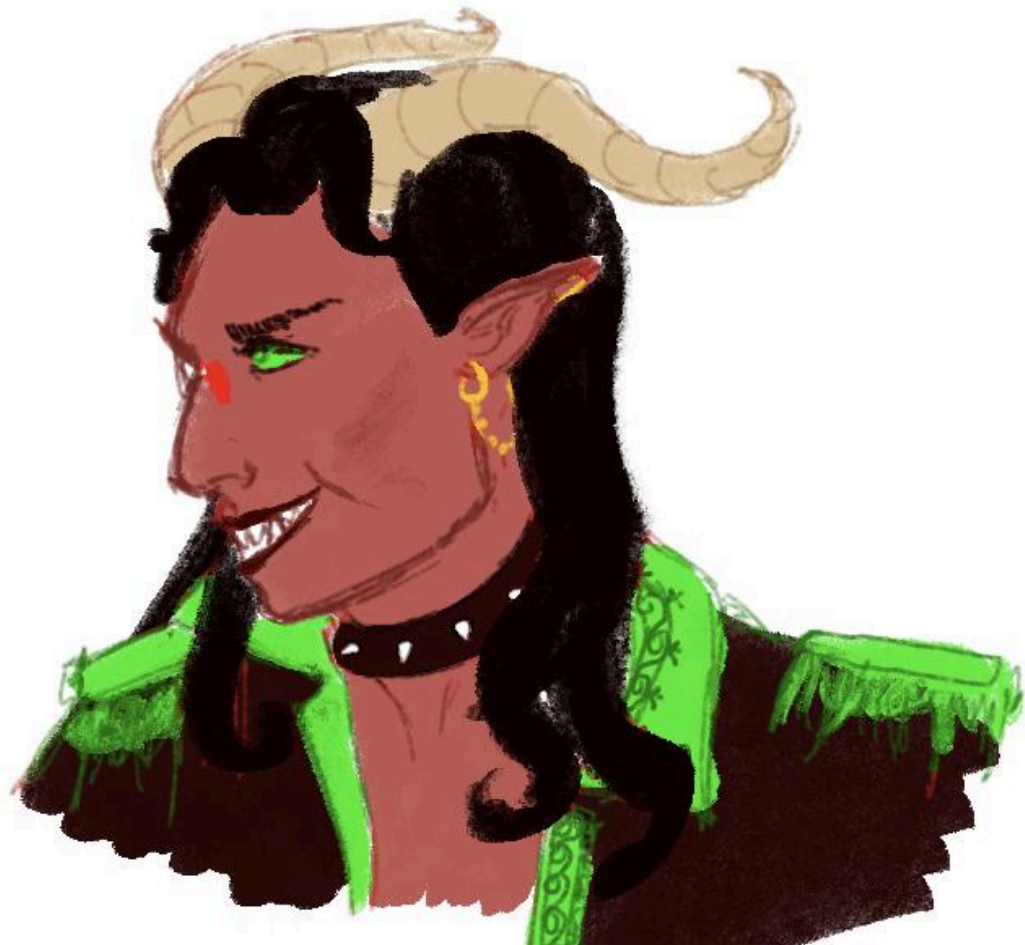
After the last guest from Poch bowed, Khayra’s music ceased. A different tune replaced it, not the original debut music. This time, there was even more distortion on the instruments. The lyre and harp strings practically screamed, and a chant matched it from beyond the doors. The audience whispered to one another, not knowing what was going on. I did the same, glancing to Sabeeka and Khayra who both shrugged. de Valerio didn’t move except for stroking his beard.

The first phrase was in a language I didn’t understand. It resembled Draconic, a language I also didn’t know, but had heard often—as the Arcane scholars of Makrip were obsessed with it and its connection to magic. The language was deep, spoken with the throat and keening up at the end of the phrase. A pounding of feet sounded in the chamber. It rose and rose into a cacophony until the phrase ended with a “Hah!”

The sound completely silenced. I could hear a pin drop. The crowd hung on the High Priestess’ words and the darkness beyond the open doors. A figure emerged.

“Announcing the Qadi Takabirit of the Emirate of Burning Coals!”

My jaw dropped. A gasp filled the room. de Valerio spat and gripped the arms of his chair with his fists. Sabeeka put her hands over her mouth. My eyes snapped to Yxmic. The Sultan did not move an inch. His stare was unflinching and I could imagine the deep, guarded, expression he’d give the new arrival.



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Takabirit was a jinn—his size and body were similar enough to a humanoid. He must have been more than six feet tall, not counting his four bony ox horns which crept more than 5 inches higher. He wore an open military jacket around his shoulders, exposing his chest down to his thin waist. His skin was red, but an unfamiliar shade. The Red skin of an ifrit was soft; it almost glowed like the orange of the sun. His skin was deeper. It reminded me of raw meat or coursing blood, especially with the curves and niches in his body. He was clearly muscular but I could see his infernal ribcage pressing against his skin. His face was similarly gaunt with hollow cheeks that defined his cheekbones. Hardened pieces of his body, almost like plates, stuck up beneath his skin and around his shoulders, chest and abdomen. As if his body alone was a suit of armor. He wore a pair of red-tinted sunglasses deeper than his skin which obscured his eyes. When he got close I could see a faint green smoke rising from beneath them, and matching green eyeliner and lipstick. His hair was black as crow's feathers. There were gold rings and chains looping between his horns, as well as on his fingers. His lack of shirt exposed a pair of studs around his navel, as well as a litany of black tattoos. There was no bronze on his body. Overall,

¹⁴Art by Oliver Martin

he was quite fashionable, and not unattractive, but he was a jinn. A free jinn, powerful enough to hold a noble title in one of the great kingdoms of the sun.

He was bad news. Had Yxmic seriously invited *him? Here?* To court *Scilla?* We must be deeply, deeply, desperate.

Takabirit walked with an ornamental cane of black wood accented with silver. He gave Yxmic a devious grin and held his cane in the air as he theatrically bowed. Those close to his seat shuffled or turned away from him, but the ones who met his gaze were enraptured at the sight of him. He was followed by a retinue of solar men in similar military coats, though they wore them closed with no gold.

“Announcing Knight-Lord Sayf al-Hajar of the Emirate of Burning Coals!”

Sayf al-Hajar was even stranger than Takabirit. He was a stone jinn and his black craggy body made him almost blend into the walls of the Charcoal Palace, he even had intricate carvings in a similar style. Runes ran along his stone skin. He stood almost ten feet tall. Four tiny red eyes shone from his enormous horned head. As he stomped across the throne room, I swore I felt the ground shake. One of Sayf al-Hajar’s arms was sharpened to resemble a lance while the other held a shield a foot taller than I was of the same material as his body. Carved into it were three humanoid skulls and a statue of an entire humanoid body. When Sayf al-Hajar knelt into a bow, the skeleton animated and repeated his gesture which made me shuffle into the back of my chair and squirm away in terror.

Moranon, Marquis of Acheron

Nearly indestructible, the Stone Devils are the bulwarks of the Seven Cities. No unit of Stone Devils has ever broken morale in the history of the timescape. Their hearts grind spirits into black soulblood that corrupts everything it touches.

Loyal and Unyielding, Marquis Moranon faithfully serves Asmodeus, Archdevil of Acheron the City of Whispers. Asmodeus just wishes his servant was a little more ambitious....



MCDM

¹⁵ Art from *Kingdoms & Warfare* by MCDM Productions LLC

Sayf al-Hajar took a seat behind Takabirit and towered over the room. An infernal entourage followed them and took the surrounding seats. Sabeeka leaned over my armrest and put a hand on my arm.

“He isn’t seriously expecting Scilla to marry one of them, is he?” She asked, gesturing at the jinn.

I gave her an unsure look. I took all this time to prepare and be ready and now... How was I supposed to be ready for this! These weren’t typical dignitaries or even Emirati nobles, they were magical spirits. I’d never even seen a jinn who wasn’t bound in bronze. Would they use their magic on Scilla to entrap her? Would they turn us all into toads on their whim?

The High Priestess seemed unbothered by their presence. As she hemmed to return the room’s attention to her and the door.

“Introducing the procession of the Dictator of Soluntum!”

The door flew open this time, revealing the entire hallway where the debutantes had stood. Now, it was full to the brim with earthen men in fine soluntum clothing. Each wore an iron wreath on their heads and carried an ornamental spear. At the head of the group was Gaudent. He still wore his black iron but now it was atop a close cut white dress in the alloy style. I swore he had added a black iron piercing to his bottom lip.

The High Priestess waved her hand and a burst of white flame wreathed the door. She spoke, this time with a deeper reverence than she’d given any of our esteemed guests, and an even deeper pride.

“Finally, announcing our Princess: Scilla al-Kamali of Alloy!”

A round of applause filled the room, and I joined in. I took a deep breath of anticipation and exhaled as the doors opposite the throne opened.

She looked perfect. Her outfit was similar to the one she’d prepared at the Hayyat Suq. That one was a first draft-this was a fifty page thesis. She wore a wide smile full of awe and power. Every eye in the room turned to her. Her blue flaming hair made a halo around her, she shone like a god before a temple of eager worshipers.

She made her way to Yxmic with elegant posture. She did not rush. Every step was graceful and smooth. The crowd had plenty of time to appraise her and notice every detail of the perfection she’d sculpted herself into. Her eyes were focussed on her father. I swore that despite her apparent confidence those eyes held a deep nervousness. A single bead of sweat coursed down her forehead to her cheek.

Then she was before Yxmic. She gave a full ceremonial curtsy, bending her nose almost to the steps of the throne. Yxmic finished the assembly, placing the rose and spike covered princess’ crown atop her head.

“Rise!” he commanded, the pride clear in his voice, “Rejoice and bow for your princess!”

The crowd bowed to her. Some, especially the lower class ifrit, knelt in respect. Only three people in the throne room stayed fully standing. The Crown Princess of Kiptos bowed her head, crossing her hands and placing them above her heart. It was respectful, but acknowledged her view of the two as equals. The two demons, Takabirit and Sayf al-Hajar, stood. Takabirit

gave a theatrical nod of his head and waved his cane in a flourish. Sayf al-Hajar physically rose but was otherwise stock still.

Rude. Befitting of those creatures. Why had Yxmic invited them? Did he seriously think Scilla would marry a cheek-curling imp or a block of stone?

The rest of the doors in the throne opened, allowing the crowd into the rest of the palace and letting the party begin in earnest. The room slowly emptied as interest turned to food, dance, or dice. As I tried to step off of my chair, I hadn't realized that I was shaking from nervousness. I had no idea how to help Scilla or what she was up against. Scilla stood up from her throne beside Yxmic and began toward the first dance. I forced myself to stand and accompany her, but when I got close she caught my eyes. Her look told me to back off. Why? I desperately hoped that she could handle herself. I told myself that listening to her was the most important thing, but now I was worried, really worried for her.

What would help? I needed to keep the demons off of her. I didn't care why Yxmic invited them—they were quite literally beings of Evil. I wasn't going to let them get close to her if I could help it. What else? I couldn't reassure her if she didn't want to talk, but I could stay close just in case. I could make sure no one else caused any trouble or stop it when they did. I hated that despite having so much time I hadn't had a plan that accounted for this. I hated that I felt no control over the situation. I had planned to improvise, and that was no plan at all.

I resolved to follow Scilla down the throne room to cross to the ballroom, when she was interrupted.

Lady Ruby of Izo knelt in the middle of the walkway, holding up a bouquet of ashgrow azures and scarlet-petal lilies tied together with a silver bracelet. Her hair and jewelry matched her name. Most ifrit had flames incorporated into their bodies in larger ways, while Ruby resembled a typical human, only with motes of flame dancing under her skin. Her face was perfectly symmetrical, covered in makeup, and holding a yearning, desperate expression.

"Scilla," She cooed as she smiled up at my sister. "Scilla, I've known you for most of my life. Every day I'd see you and think how good it would feel to be standing right beside you. And then you finally noticed me in the crowd of pretty faces and pretty dresses and I thought I'd never be happier."

Wait.

"I didn't want to besmirch your honor so I kept my feelings hidden, but you're a woman and so am I." Ruby continued

A silver band around the flowers. It couldn't be...

"I've loved you for as long as I've known you, Scilly, and I know that you love me too. I'm sorry for hiding for so long. I'm sorry I couldn't do this sooner..."

I looked to Scilla trying to catch her eye, but she was transfixed by Ruby. Her hands were on her mouth in what could have been overwhelming joy. Then I noticed her eyes. Terror, embarrassment, emotions bubbling over like a stew left to boil too long.

"Scilla of Alloy, will you marry me?"

Every eye in the room turned to Scilla, including the demons, Rehukha-atum, and Khayra. Scilla's eyes darted to and fro while her body was frozen. I rushed forward to help her, but before I could she recovered and put a hand in front of me. A motion for me to stop. I did, and nodded in acknowledgement, but she wasn't looking at me. She looked down at the kneeling Ruby.

Lady Ruby was still staring up at Scilla in admiration, smiling even wider now that she'd proposed. Scilla let out one deep, tense breath and gave her answer.

"No." Scilla was struggling against her own voice, but she made the word out without choking up or losing face. "No, I will not marry you, Lady Ruby of Izo. Please, take your leave and enjoy the ball."

Lady Ruby's heart broke. I could see it on her face. She dropped the bouquet and crumpled on the floor. There was an awkward, terrible pause where it seemed like no one knew what to do. Ruby got up, bowed deeply to Scilla and fled the room as fast as she could.

I rushed to Scilla to...I don't know. To comfort her? To console her? I reached out my hands to hold her and she held her hand towards me.

"No, not you either." She finally looked me in the eye. "Go."

I stared at her, utterly confused and a bit betrayed, "I just...Are you ok? I want to make sure—"

"I am *fine*." She said through her teeth. She was not fine. I moved to take care of her, letting out a little sigh of exasperation at how she failed to hide her flaws.

"No!" She commanded, gripping my wrist with her arm. "No..." she said softer. She ripped her eyes from mine and practically stomped down the hallway.

I stood frozen by her words. What did I do? What was she feeling? I didn't know, and I had no idea how to help now that she'd rejected my comfort. Did I put too much on her in a painful moment? Was I being overbearing? The crowd slowly moved on, but I caught Takabirit smiling behind his glasses out of the corner of my eye.

The party migrated to the ballroom. It was decorated with ashgrow azures like everywhere else. The dance floor was large and beautifully decorated. At the edges of the room, covering the non-dance floor sections of the ballroom hang a balcony which ran around all four walls. On one end was a bar, opposite it was a stage which Rohala and her band migrated to, and the other two sides were stuffed with tables and couches for the guests to relax on after tiring from dance. Beside the dancefloor was a fountain dripping with lit flames. The flecks and sparkles dancing with the flame along with its almost liquid consistency made me realize it was in fact heartglow, a beverage made with fire from the great red river elsewhere on the Sun.

I tried to pull Scilla into a corner to check up with her about Ruby, but she walked in the center of the hall, surrounded by courtiers, and didn't let me move her. Maybe it was better this way? She seemed to be keeping focus on the ball and her role in it. She never could have married Ruby. Ruby was a wealthy lady of Alloy, yes, but Yxmich already controlled Alloy. Scilla's marriage needed to secure an alliance-and a powerful one. I hung on the balcony and cringed when I realized she was now working toward that goal. Khayra had asked for a dance, and Scilla

had accepted. She allowed the Lady of Poch to carry her onto the floor by the arm and the two danced a wild Hot City tango. I could feel Khayra's playful smile across the ballroom, never mind actually seeing it.

Khayra and I were never even really dating, so why did it feel so strange to see her having fun with Scilla? She was a successful woman who'd earned the title of Lady and a safe place in Poch for her time. Compare that to me, who'd only ever lost and failed on Earth. Maybe that's why.

Still shadowing Scilla, I decided to get a drink, hoping that it would calm my nerves. The bar was on the balcony floor overlooking the dancing. I sat down in one of the barstools backwards and leaned on the bar itself to keep my eyes on Scilla.

"One shot of whatever your strongest ale is." I ordered.

I heard the bartender approach, and clink a bottle onto the bar.

"If that's your pleasure my queen, but I think this one might not be to your taste." I knew that voice, that attitude, his pet name for me. I turned around in shock.

"Xhindi? Why the hell are you here?" I demanded.

Xhindi leaned on the bar, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. He was wearing an apron and shirt along with face makeup—in uniform to be a servant at the party.

"Well, It's a long story." He started.

I didn't let him finish. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down so we were at eye level—him standing behind the bar and me on the sturdy oaken stool.

"Just tell me, and tell me you're not up to something. This is a very important ball and I don't want you ruining it." I growled.

He smiled apologetically and put up his hands in mock-surrender.

Xhindi let out words as fast as his sword swings. "Look, how about I just explain what I've been doing since we last saw each other. You've had a very eventful week, haven't you. I like what you did with your hair by the way. Are those pins artisanal?"

I continued glaring at him, but let him continue. He took the hint.

"Well? Well? Your sister's debut. That's a beautiful dress by the way, I still love the golden necklace. Very fitting."

"Xhindi!" I warned.

"I know, I know, I know. So. It began a hot day. Three days ago. Alloy. The Pyraculum." He dramatically spread his arms as he began the tale, naming one of the city's wards. The one containing the Grand Bazaar.

He continued, "You see I spent all this time getting to Hot City after being captured by your lovely husband in Vejabhar. Well, I was looking for something then and I'm still looking now. I tried to get Rax on my side, but he wouldn't agree. I've decided to trust you after our little soiree, so I'll tell you my quest. So I've been looking for a dragon. That's right! You know there are dragons on the plane of fire. You do. You're a very smart girl."

I could have snorted at the odd compliment if I hadn't been so concerned that he'd somehow blow everything up in my face. He said he trusted me. How far did his word really go? I didn't actually say anything, so Xhindi continued unhindered.

"So I went to a tavern. I looked around the streets. Who would have the heart of a dragon who's killed at least 5,000 creatures? More importantly, who would have it intact? After a mighty tavern crawl and a lot of dead ends, leads ran out. I needed to go..." Before he finished his sentence he pushed his face close to mine and draped his arm over the bottom of his face. He spoke a couple of octaves lower, growling.

"...Into the underworld! The criminal underworld, not the one with all the undead. I went deep, searching and searching and searching. In the end I figured I had two options. One, Slay a Dragon who had consumed at least five thousand souls. Doable, but difficult. Or Two, steal a heart myself."

That signature greedy smile crossed his face.

"You might have guessed, but I've done a bit of snooping work, and someone at this party happens to own said dragon heart. In fact, I suspect that they probably own it for the same reason that I want it. Although maybe not the same target. Anyway, anyway, that's not really important. What's important is this. I won't interrupt this party whatsoever. I will simply snatch the key off of this very, very beautiful target. Not ruining anything about their day. Grab the heart. And be off before anyone notices."

My jaw was on the floor and my face still in disbelief. In a moment it curled into quiet anger.

"Xhindi!" I whisper yelled, not wanting to worry anyone at the bar. "You are *planning* to steal from a guest in my house. In our dance hall! What in the nine rivers of Hell!" I berated him.

"You might not want to say that in front of this crowd," He put a hand to one side of his face, and then pointed at Takabirit and Sayf al-Hajar—chatting with a group of azer on the balcony—with the other. "Some people might get offended."

I bared my teeth at him and he retreated a couple steps behind the bar.

"Oh, come on. Oh, I promise I won't get in the way."

"You can't be seriously going through with this..." I roared and then let out an exasperated sigh. "Tell me who it is!"

"Oh, come on, I can't tell you who it is, that'll ruin the surprise! It could be you."

"I don't own a dragon's heart." I pointed out.

"Fair point. Then again, have you considered everything your mother stored in her vault before you left, huh? Could be anything in there." He rolled a gold piece between his fingers as if to punctuate the potential wealth. I had no idea how he'd gotten it or how it appeared in his hands.

"No, It's not you." He clarified after a second. I'd half believed his words about my vault were some kind of double bluff. I saw in his face that this wasn't a lie and he was just messing with me because he was full of himself. I searched my mind, putting a hand against my temple and forehead at his inconceivable plan.

“Is there *anything* I can do to convince you against this?” I struggled against the overwhelming force of his idiocy.

“Yeah, not really,” he taunted. “I guess you could kick me out, but then you have to say why you knew me.”

“I could say that you were a criminal from Vejabhar, who I locked in prison a long time ago.” I spat back.

“Ehh. Could you though? What if I told them the truth about you and the Rapier’s-oh sorry. The Ifrit’s Freedom.”

Internally, I got his point. The news that I’d potentially made an enemy of the Iron Wizards would not be received pleasantly, especially now that alliances and invasion were on Yxmic’s mind.

“Oh, you really think they’d believe you over me?” I challenged him, crossing my arms. I walked over to the end of the bar to block his escape.

“Look, look, look, we owe each other this, right? I want to help you out. Anything you need for this party? I’ll get it to you. My...my *trick* is just a little snatch. It shouldn’t take that much time. Most of the work is going to be survey. That’s why I chose to be the bartender. And if you need anything...for example, doing a little something to help the charm of your little sister over there, maybe? Keep some of the more suspicious characters away from her without seeming like the Sultan is against them...I could help.”

I sighed, “If this gets back to me, I’m not letting you out of prison.”

“Didn’t we have a deal?” he squirmed.

“No. I’m sure you’re perfectly capable of escaping anything without my assistance.” I said and turned my back on the infuriating adventurer. I held too much respect for him to punish him further. Let him make his mistakes and face his own consequences. One less headache for me tonight.

“My queen, you’re going to make me blush.” Xhindi called after me as I left the bar.

I took the shot he poured for me before I left.

Xhindi’s potential help didn’t exactly fill me with confidence. I felt as useless as I did when Lady Ruby proposed. I twinged, realizing that I could have gone back to see if she was alright. The feeling died as I remembered who Lady Ruby’d been when I became her friend. She wouldn’t want reassurance, not from any of the ladies of court and certainly not from her love’s *sister*. She was probably jealous that Scilla wasn’t furious at me right now. If she was thinking of me at all. No, she needed space, and running after her wouldn’t accomplish anything.

I needed to get my head in gear and focus on whatever I could do to help Scilla.

Scilla!

I was heading down the stairs to try and confer with her again, or at least check on her, when I saw Takabirit descending the stairs opposite mine. The first dance had ended and the couples separated. Another dance was starting and the demon was headed straight for her. Not on my watch! I cast a spell as quietly as I could, thumbing my lamp where it sat on my belt. Magic flowed through it and into me and I gained a dash of confidence. My words moved quicker and

more fluidly, and I felt an animal presence in my mind. Animal, but elegant, like a snake adept at following the charm of its master. The spell would make me more charismatic and I needed Takabirit to pay attention to me. I had no room for flubbed words.

I practically ran across the room. With my arm I interrupted Takabirit, laying a hand in the air before his bare chest. He cocked his head to me, raising a black eyebrow beneath his tinted glasses.

“May I have this dance?” I asked, putting on my best courtier voice.

This was the first time I’d gotten close enough to smell him and it overwhelmed my focus for a couple of seconds. Takabirit smelled like brimstone, the ash of a dead fire. That sounded harsh but oddly there was something comforting about it. He didn’t smell like death, though or like a loss, but instead like a wild beautiful night that had ended peacefully.

“I acquiesce, my lady.” He took my hand and bowed, kissing a ring. He sounded intrigued, and as he looked back up at me his demonish smile had returned. He tried to pull me to the dance floor as Rohala’s music picked up again, but I surged forward.

“Do you know the Girani Stomp?” I whispered, figuring he wouldn’t.

“Can’t say I do.” He admitted.

“I can lead, do you *acquiesce*?” I turned his word against him. He simply smiled back and took off his glasses, revealing fully green eyes. He threw them and his cane to a tiefling attendant who stood on the edge of the room, under the balcony.

“Wouldn’t want to lose them.” He said, following me to the floor with rabid energy. His eyes were entirely on me, not a glance elsewhere. He had a keen focus that I was starting to either fear or enjoy. Definitely one of the two.

I pulled him to the dance floor and matched his energy and intensity. I led him through the steps of the Girani Stomp in time with Rohala’s song. I’d heard it before, but it sounded even better with a full accompaniment and a flock of dancers tapping their feet along with the beat. Takabirit was surprisingly adept at dancing and picked up the stomp quickly. He didn’t trip and embarrass himself like I’d wanted, but he also never fell on me. He even managed to do it without stepping on my feet. Ever! I talked him through the steps and he listened, hanging on my words.

Once we had the hang of the dance, he started conversation.

“So, what made you so eager to have this dance, Lady Shaahida?”

I could have snorted. He was so direct. He couldn’t somehow know this was because of Scilla, right? No, I had a ring of mind shielding.

“Well,” I improvised, “You’re very strange.” Great job Shaahida, very respectful of your guests.

He snickered, “Never seen a full fledged Lord of Hell before?”

I gave a tiny nod on beat and we shimmied, our chests pressed together.

He continued, “Well then, I’ll have to give you the full complement. I’m not nearly putting on enough charm.”

“This is you toning it down?” I said as I spun and fell back into his arms.

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. We cycled through another set of steps.

"I believe you underestimate the importance of flattery and diplomacy in Hell." He said, as if that explained anything. "So, *strange*. Is my exoticism the only thing that interests you? Ironical for a denizen of Alloy, I'm sure you're aware."

I was. People across the Timescape came to Alloy for pleasures and wishes. It was easy for many on Earth or the World Below to see us and see only the image of a city of pleasure, excess, and allure.

"That's not all!" I said, hating the idea that he'd think that *I* had that revolting attitude. "I like your..." I looked him up and down. "Clothes. You picked up our style, but kept it your own. And I respect the commitment to getting a piercing."

He actually seemed legitimately thankful before he began gloating. "Well, I do so admire your beautiful home. When the Sultan sent for my uncle, I hastened at the opportunity to come here. And to the Princesses' debut of all things! What a spectacle?" He began to lead, and dipped me so my head was upside down. I saw Scilla dancing with Rehukha-atum across the floor. He pulled me up a second later. It was impressive how easily he could lift me and carry my weight, but he'd struck on the exact wrong nerve. I wanted him to *ignore* Scilla. He'd have to focus on me.

I took back the lead and swung him so that he faced away from Scilla. "You know, staring at a lady while dancing with her sister isn't the best look." I chided quietly, hoping to bait him away from Scilla and onto me.

"Well," Takabirit said, "We demons are not known for looking upstanding...But I am nothing if not a man of my word. Do you want my undivided attention, Shaahida al-Kamali?"

I wanted his undivided attention, I realized as he pulled me in, close to him in the final move of the Girani Stomp. Our chests touched and our hands were pressed against one another. Then he said that final word and I almost dropped the courtly lady act and slapped him across the face. It wasn't his fault even if he was a scheming, sharp toothed creature of the depths. The High Priestess had announced me with my full legal name.

When he didn't get a verbal answer, Takabirit continued. "Queen of Vejabhar, is it? Where would that be? Nice little ash-covered mountain?" He might have been teasing me but I was flooded with relief. He was from Hell! He didn't know where Vejabhar was, nor that it had a King. I wore no silver bands, and by my tenacity he'd assume I was single. Which I was, for the record. I made a mental note to beg the High Priestess for a holy divorce with Bassaam.

"It's a quite nice little place. Out of the way. Most haven't even heard of it. It's another city-state. Hardly comparable to the splendor of Alloy or Styx, I'm sure." That much was true, Vejabhar was a Makripi backwater. Khayra and de Valerio were the only notable humans and both were from Poch. I didn't see any reason they'd even care to know about the city.

"You're very flattering my lady. I'm sure you know that's the best way to a demon's heart."

"Are you admitting an interest in marriage, Lord of Styx?" I prodded.

He flashed his signature grin, and I was almost becoming accustomed to it on his face.

I felt a fire between the two of us. I could keep him on the dance floor all night and Scilla wouldn't even have to think about him. Those green eyes fixed on me, that smile flashing again and again. The song ended but I kept him on me and he followed. We danced in a variety of styles, starting separate and gradually growing closer until I finally swept his leg and dipped him. He was surprisingly light, but it still took all my strength to keep him off the floor. His coat slid down off of his shoulders and hung around his elbows. Looking down, I saw a mark on the top of his right shoulder. A black tattoo of a five pointed star inside a ring made of twelve circles. An Ignan rune was stamped on the inside of the star. A slave mark. A slave mark I recognized.

Five years ago. A great black ship, Alloy fading in the distance, the white glow of translation. The ship was crewed by demons. Beneath me. Beyond notice. One demon was a servant and a chef, skinny, young - younger than me. Red skin and shining green eyes. His slavemark stamped on his shoulder.

I separated from Takabirit and he shuffled to his feet. He stared into my eyes, terrified. Whatever else was true, Takabirit could **not** have been Prince of Styx. He wasn't noble, he wasn't rich, he wasn't powerful. Five years ago he was a slave, picked off of the streets of Alloy by my father, desperate for a crew that would keep my secret. I couldn't begin to think of what to do next. Then, my eyes caught the crowd and a frantically waving Poppy. She needs me.

"Thank you, but perhaps we shouldn't spend all night together." I wrapped myself in my coy noblewoman act like a blanket in frozen winter.

His posture straightened, he snapped out of his fear and back into faked normalcy. "Of course, my lady." Confusion and pain still hid in his eyes.

"May I take this dance, then?"

My stomach dropped.

I spun and there was Gaudent. I glared at him and stepped past in disgust.

"Looks like she's not into iron" Takabirit snarked behind my back.

"I suppose I should have considered, after all the lady has a reputation for her belligerence and uncontrolled emotion."

I walked away. *Quickly*. Originally I beelined for Poppy, but I realized that would only attract more attention to her. She was no longer waving and was now chattering with Thistle and Sabeeka in a corner. I slid into another group first, waiting in conversation before meeting my girls.

"Has anyone talked to Scilla?" I asked, glad for the distraction.

"Not since she blew you off. I don't think she wants to talk to any of us right now." Sabeeka said, "Khayra danced with her. She seems happier up there."

"I hope she is," said Thistle. This was the first time I'd seen her since I got in line for the debuts. She'd finished her look and come to court in a stunning purple dress with matching pointy earrings.

We collectively looked onto the floor where Scilla was doing a waltz with de Valerio. She looked cool and collected, but I could just tell something was eating her up inside. Pressure was likely. She needed to try so hard. She was probably conflicted and confused about Ruby. Hell,

what if she actually did want to marry the girl but couldn't because her hand was too important as a bargaining chip. Anger stirred inside me at the thought. She shouldn't have to do this. She deserved a happy, free life. Freedom! Wasn't that the whole point of the revolution? Yet the most powerful woman in the city couldn't live as she wished.

I commiserated with the girls, keeping the conversation going while subtly moving Poppy so that I was between her and them. Thistle told a joke that got Sabeeka chuckling and I used the opportunity to cast Message to Poppy, gripping my lamp under the table.

So, What did you find? I asked

Not sure yet, but there's a secret chamber in his room. I found the door behind one of his bookshelves. I wanted to investigate but he came in, to change, he said. But he was already wearing his dance outfit. The spell carried her voice to my ear in a private whisper.

He's here now. Go while you have time. I can keep him here if necessary. How long do you need? I said.

Let's say two hours. That should be enough time to search whatever he has back there. Poppy thought. She propped her hand up on her chin.

Don't emote. It will tip people off that we're talking without talking. I said.

Sorry! She said, *Two hours, is that ok?*

Yes. Meet me back here in one hour. If you don't I'll investigate myself and I'll bring a guard.

Poppy looked like she was about to nod, but stopped as she remembered not to emote.

"You two alright?" Thistle asked.

"Oh, I'm just thinking about the day. It's been crazy. Maybe I'll get back out on the dance floor." I covered for Poppy. She took the opportunity to make an excuse about checking that one of the chambers was prepared for the party and dashed away. One more thing to juggle on the busiest and worst night of my year.



16

Chapter 7: Queen to Queen's Rook

Most of the hour passed uneventfully while my mind was racing. Gaudent was hanging around the dance floor in his usual coiled snake routine, and it seemed like only the most desperate of debutants were willing to dance with him. They deserved better. Takabirit had busied himself with other dancers, and once I saw him in the arms of the male Azer who'd followed my debut. I mentally marked down 'goes both ways' onto the very short list of positive traits the creature had along with nice perfume, fashion sense, dance skill, and devilish charm—that one was both a positive and negative.

De Valerio appeared to be in some kind of verbal sparring match with the High Priestess, who was looking him and his Capital party attire over like a curious bird. Kashmir and her entourage were devouring a plate of spiced potatoes while a servant delivered a second identical tray to sate them. Sabeeka and Thistle had returned to the dance floor and seemed happy. Thistle managed to get the hand of Lady Dahlia in a dance and Sabeeka was with one the Capital courtesans who'd accompanied Kashmir. Maybe she already knew him?

I decided to approach Rehukha-atum, because she was the only one of Scilla's potential suitors that I hadn't heard anything of yet. I searched the room for her, and then balked at her position. She was sitting on a grand table with a chess board on a balcony overlooking the dance floor. Across the board was Sayf al-Hajar, the hulking stone demon. Rehukha-atum was playing white, while Sayf al-Hajar played black, her ivory pieces contrasting with the basalt black of his

¹⁶ Art by Victoria Buch Reiten on [Artstation](#)

body. I was scared to approach. He wasn't going to hurt me, this was a diplomatic ball, he wasn't going to hurt me, I wasn't going to be afraid of him. I muttered the words as a prayer to the Sun as if that would make them true.

I locked my eyes on Rehukha-atum in time to see her lithely move a chess piece—her queen—across the board. Sayf al-Hajar gave a deep nod. The skeleton in his shield uncomfortably animated again, moving jerkily like a dying horse and knocked over the black king. He admitted defeat. With little fanfare he stood up to his full ten foot height and stalked to the side of the balcony. Rehukha-atum was alone again. This was my chance. My nerves thrummed and the well in my stomach plunged. Now or never, Shaahida. Move!

Unfortunately, as I was making my way to talk to her, I was intercepted. Gaudent, ever the eyesore, slid behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. If I did nothing the snake was going to use every opportunity to get in my way or further whatever plot he had going. I decided I wasn't going to let him. I marched to the table and slammed a hand down, perhaps a little too forcefully in hindsight. I was there, that's what mattered, by the gods. Rehukha-atum's movements were smooth as she turned her focus from her servants resetting the board.

Before Gaudent could make an introduction to Rehukha-atum I sidled up to the table and greeted her myself.

"Hello. It's a pleasure to see your highness in our home." I said warmly.

The heat didn't make it to Rehukha-atum's face and she flatly nodded, "And so unto you."

"Perhaps we could both play you, and see which of us is superior?" Gaudent suggested with the slightest twitch of his cheek.

"Must everything be about competition, Gaudent?" I kept a veneer of kindness over my jab.

"Only to those who see themselves as finite." Rehukha-atum said. "Ancient proverb."

Neither of us really got the Kiptosn's wisdom, but it shut us up long enough for me to slip into the chair and Rehukha-atum to start playing.

"No. Not many are willing to stop dancing for a game of pieces." She nodded towards Sayf al-Hajar. "I take it that you are one of these few?"

"Yes."

"Then by all means, begin. You take the first move, as a sign of good faith." She waved her hand and both it and the board glowed with magical light. The board spun, reversing the position of the colors. This time I was white, and just as she said I'd have to make the first move.

I hid my new bout of tension over potentially losing the game and embarrassing myself with a confident smile and a double-bluff of falsely demure demeanor, "You know, in high level chess games of equal skill, the first move wins an overwhelming percentage of the time. At least that's what I've read."

"All the more impressive when I beat you then," Rehukha-atum coolly mirrored my smile. *When.* When she beat me, not if.

I started off playing defensively— planning to keep as many pieces alive as possible. I marched my pawn forward keeping a ‘v’ shape which would secure its position. Rehukha-atum advanced her knight, threatening to take my pawn. She had delicate slender fingers and manipulated her pieces in quick snappy movements. I imagined she’d make a great pickpocket were she ever to suffer the misfortune of relying on theft for money.

“A decent first move.” She commented. “You can call me Rehu while we play. Faster off the tongue. Your move.”

I didn’t know exactly how significant names were to Kiptosian culture, but if they were as stringent about titles and speaking the full names of high status individuals as Makrip was then Rehu had just paid me a great token of respect. Or I was likely just overanalyzing. Focus on the board and on your opponent, not on esoterica.

I played my own knight to further reinforce my pawn. We continued like that, advancing and escalating on both sides. I lost a handful of pawns and managed to catch Rehu’s knight in a fork, but the game was only beginning. I needed to hold onto my lead. I advanced a bishop to support my pawn’s defensive line and Rehu grinned.

“Beginner’s folly, Lady al-Sahli.” She moved her queen diagonally through a gap where she’d taken my pawn and took one of my knights with it.

“Discover check.” She finished.

A shocked gasp flowed through the onlookers and I finally took in how many were watching our little game. My eyes had been glued to the board and the princess while she calmly played and idly took grapes from her servants. The enormous body of Sayf al-Hajar loomed over my side of the board, though he was standing completely still and gave a subtle nod at Rehu’s play. Thistle and Sabeeka had wandered over and looked at me insistently, willing me to victory. Gaudent smiled in satisfaction and presented a quiet compliment to Rehu.

Rehu’s play was brilliant, exploiting my defensive strategy against myself. Rehu was *good* and I couldn’t help but catch the subtext of the princess playing the game of chess at a highly political ball. She was declaring her ability as a strategist and showing the room how much better she was than the other candidates for Scilla’s hand. She might even actually challenge Khayra or de Valerio after she beat me.

Rehu was playing offense, constantly moving forward and threatening my pieces, forcing me to defend them. She burned through a series of pawns which broke my defensive line, turning the ‘v’ formation into two diagonal lines.

I needed to play, too. I got aggressive to match her energy. Instead of moving my king to escape the check I took the opportunity to castle, putting a rook where my king had been and forcing Rehu to either trade her queen for the rook or retreat her queen to safety. I hid a smile as I made the move and my girls rallied around me.

“Textbook.” Sayf al-Hajar’s voice was like a pyroclastic flow enveloping a canyon and just as slow. “The A’ia Gambit is clearly the superior strategy in this endgame.”

I wasn’t sure exactly who or what he was talking about. Clearly chess strategy, but I’d done far less knowledge of theory than my words had suggested. I played casually in my

childhood and the game of kings was by no means unpopular, but I somehow suspected Rehu devoured chess theory with the same voracity she gave to her grapes.

She seemed unbothered by the behemoth Sayf al-Hajar's presence. She popped a grape into her mouth and smartly retreated her queen. She stopped in the middle of the board, forking one of my pawns and a bishop.

"I don't know if that's necessarily true," She addressed Sayf al-Hajar without looking up, "I've always preferred the three isles offense in a fortified rook focussed endgame."

"What about the Hot City Gambit?" I asked. Both narrowed their eyes at me as I invented chess strategy out of thin air. I took the most extreme, flashy play. This game was no longer about Rehu and I. It was about the audience. I took the queen with the threatened bishop. Another gasp filled the crowd.

Rehu grinned. "Check." The now empty space my bishop once held allowed Rehu to move her rook and check my king. Shit.

Instead of mourning my bishop, I maneuvered my knight between the rook and king into a space where it was guarded by a pawn. Behind us, the fire fountain just beyond the dance floor erupted in a timed flourish. The game got more intense. My energy was flaring.

I realized the entire day I'd been defending, taking and taking and taking in what everyone else was doing and only acting myself occasionally. I needed to be the one acting, the one pushing everyone else's focus around.

I had pulled Takabirit onto the dancefloor, and I'd push Rehu into checkmate or surrender. My moves became faster and Rehu matched my speed. I was starting to win and that finally made the game interesting. I pulled on the attention of the growing crowd. Sayf al-Hajar gave occasional commentary in his inhuman voice. He was clearly invested, in a way that was almost childlike. I got the impression that he was a wholehearted chess fan and this was the most entertaining thing he'd seen all day.

We took pieces right and left, knight takes bishop, rook takes pawn, queen takes knight! The tension rose and rose until finally both sides were down to the barest essentials. I was pinning her king on both sides, and all I needed was to maneuver my rook or queen to make a checkmate and close off the kings' last escape route.

I advanced my queen to prepare for the final blow. I smiled at Rehu, busting with self-satisfaction. Rehu was as flat and contemplative as ever. Then, a tiny smile cracked the side of her face. She moved her rook from its place defending her king and slid it across the rank.

"Checkmate."

No. I looked down. Rook checks King on the F file while he's pinned to the pawn on rank One. I could move right to G1, couldn't I? No, her bishop had the spot covered! Move forward to rank Two? No. Her other rook covered it entirely. She was right. Checkmate. I'd lost without even noticing.

In the same second, the crowd went wild. Thistle and Sabeeka erupted in shock, onlookers flooded around Rehu with praise, shaking her shoulders and roaring as if they'd been

driven mad by fel magic. Sayf al-Hajar rigorously nodded and his shield skeleton animated to give a rapturous applause.

The energy was a fire and I was a burned out pile of ash beneath it. I sank into my chair. A hand came to my side adorned with cold metal jewelry. I looked up hoping it was someone supportive. It was, instead, Gaudent.

“An exemplary game as always, Lady al-Sahli. I assure you, Princess Rehukha-atum, that not all in the city are so unpracticed at the game of kings. Not to discount, of course, the fact that your particular skills are legendary.” He crooned.

“You shut up.” I told him, I stood from my chair to glare at him. He was wearing heeled boots and our height difference was even more pronounced now.

“Merely a comment on your game and a congratulations to our esteemed guests. I apologize for any offense.” He smiled a wicked grin. He *actually* thought he could get away with this, now. After the fall of his Saint and in front of a royal guest.

I wanted to speak again as I boiled in rage. Somehow surprised that Rehu hadn't already reprimanded him for his speaking out of station. Instead a dizziness fell over me with the stares of the crowd. I was still embarrassed from my failure at the board and though my spirit was aflame my throat choked on the words. I gripped the top of my chair as I barely managed to hold onto my strength. Sabeeka and Thistle's eyes were the worst-staring at me with worry and pity for my loss. My heart was pounding in my chest. I hated being worried over and the boiling rage flooded over into resentment and guilt and the wish to flee back into my bedroom in my long-gone home.

I heard another voice come instead. The voice of Takabirit.

“Hey. He who would speak ill of a lady of this house in its very halls. Disrespect our host and question her honor? I had never met a man so pitiful, mirthless, and glour.” The tiefling came up behind Rehu. He advanced so that he was standing beside me and gestured with his cane. Poking it at Gaudent through the air as if he was a lecturer marking a chalkboard. “Such words. Such words are hardly appropriate. Or are you not a fellow guest of our Sultan?”

His words were a balm, the focus of conversation dove onto the flamboyant tiefling and off of me. Best of all, Gaudent was completely enraptured. I took a breath of relief and tried to center myself while the two of them began to circle. The second breath was even more of a relief.

Gaudent's form changed. He came to gloat at me, and Takabirit had taken the bait. His back straightened, his posture paradoxically relaxed, and he fingered one on the black iron rings on his middle finger.

When he spoke, it was in a boisterous tone that I'd only heard once before-the bazaar. “Come you defend this lady's honor? Irony since you have none, Son of Hell. Tell me, did the court send the son of its least ranked King because they saw his city as replaceable? Or were you just here because the Marquis of Acheron doesn't know how to dance?”

Gaudent didn't even look at me as soon as Takabirit spoke up. He strode forward beside me but his face was stuck in the demon's.

“Such harsh words demand an answer, metallic.” Takabirit said. He was gripping the top of his cane. “I believe this place is too sacred a host to handle such an exchange between us. You daire to insult my uncle and our great court but speak not of your own. You are a whore of Creon but that vile earthen, chaos-loving Saint is dead. Whose whore will you be now?”

Gaudent bit back, lightning fast. “Oh I assure you this house is sacred enough. Many great duels have been fought in these halls. All by far greater men than you or I. Though, looking at your horns. You're not exactly a man yourself.”

Gaudent laughed a harsh but self-satisfied laugh. “Nevertheless, I'm willing to look past your inadequacy and allow you the pleasure of demanding your satisfaction. If it's the city the demons want. I assure you that my Saint will not allow it to fall to such heathens. You call me a whore, demon? You are nothing more than a beggar ravenous for the wood off of the brothel floor.”

This is getting out of control quickly. It would be scandalous not to mention politically volatile. The distraction helped calm me down but this was now trending back down into “ruining Scilla's night” territory. Still, I was unsure how to break them up without exposing myself. There was also a part of me that desperately wanted to see Takabirit go to town on Gaudent. I wanted him to butcher the priest in a way that I suspected would get me in deep trouble with Yxmire were it my own hands instead of his.

“You go from insulting this lady's honor to my own? You distract yourself from the very purpose of your words. I will not allow you to forget them. I'd call your name for a challenge but...I don't seem to remember it.” Takabirit toyed with Gaudent, sizing him up like a shark about to feast.

He continued, “Now let us remember the insult you paid to our dearest host, Shaahida al-Kamali.” He gestured a hand to me, and looked me in the eyes behind his tinted glasses. “I'll not allow such an insult to be paid. As a gracious guest under her hospitality, hospitality which *you* so ruthfully exploited. I will not allow you to pay this disrespect to our generous host. Any creature, any demon of honor would put you to the blade for such words. But I suppose I should not expect less from a man who lives to no code. Bound to a fate of chaos and destruction.”

“As you answer my words with blade, I believe you've portrayed just how inhuman a creature you are, so hungry for violence and death. Though, of course, I will answer. I would be honored to show the court of Alloy my strength.”

“I assure you,” Gaudent said, looking me right in the eyes and catching me off guard, “That the Sultan will need no demonish army for protection.”

This had escalated from an uncouth remark into a political argument and potential duel. A duel over my honor no less. I would not let the two of them use my fate as a chip in their match. I jumped between them and pushed the two furious men apart. I pulled my voice into my calm courtly tone but it didn't hold and I might have come off as just as offended and bloodthirsty as the two men.

“I will not have a fight over my honor in my own home. Settle this dispute but do it not with blades. I will not have blood shed over my name. And speaking of the fact, Bishop, I have

taken your many insults hidden under kind words, but now? You insult one of my guests in front of me? Too far. I believe he is correct that your comment on my play was an insult to myself. I ask that you forgive your words, lest I petition our great Sultan to refuse our hospitality.”

I exhaled like an erupting volcano before turning to the demon, “You Prince I appreciate your zeal but please. Let this not be a night of fire and blood, but one of merriment and joy. Back down, both of you.”

I continued, reinvigorated. “That is not the way of our city, and it is certainly not the way of our balls. This night is not about you nor me. It is for my sister and I would hate for our ruinous fighting to take center stage away from her debut.”

Gaudent stepped back and steepled his hands, in what could have been any number of things but could charitably be interpreted as a gesture of acquiescence.

Takabirit meanwhile, came into my space. The foot of his cane landed between my legs. He leaned down into me and whispered to me. “You are backing down, Shaahida. This pitiful creature does not deserve your sympathy or your mercy. We have a system for these things, and it is a very effective one. He should pay for his words and pay it dearly.”

“No. Not like this.” I dropped my voice to a sharp whisper. “Not here, not now.”

“I would be impolite to refuse you, but I *insist*. This creature cannot be allowed to stay in your court. Paying you such an insult? Leaving him alone will send a message.” Takabirit said.

“My honor is none of your concern.” I said, “If you value it that dearly, allow me to handle it myself. And if you insist on drawing a blade in my court, it will not just be Gaudent who demands satisfaction.”

“Ah, now the lady comes with words.” Gaudent bumped between two of us. “I am flattered that you defend me with such a righteous challenge. Lady, it speaks to the great friendship between my people and yours and the generosity of your words. I know it allows you to be charitable with my own, meant only in jest.”

Suggesting that I had entered to defend him! I should have expected as much from the snake.

He continued “Surely this demon has transgressed against your will. What right does he have to stay in this court? By both our honors and my Saints I challenge you, Baronet Takabirit of Styx, to a duel.”

Gaudent spread his arms and his metal rings extended into claws. A holy light, glimmering off of them. He threw a black iron ring into the dance floor, then leapt from the balcony and onto the dance floor with a lithe of grace. The crowd raced to the balcony with me at the front. I figured he would attack but he really just decided to jump to prove his point. Before he landed, the black iron on the floor expanded into a sea of spikes. It grew into the air and solidified into a platform about ten feet off the ground. The platform reduced his leap from a majestic fifteen foot drop to less than five.

The platform wobbled as the iron melted and then resolidified into a ring on his finger. Once he was standing on the floor he splayed his hands and his arms, inviting a challenge.

Takabirit grinned and stepped forward. Two almost barely noticeable slits in the back of his military jacket widened. It seemed for a second like his back was writhing and I feared some kind of spell or curse had befallen him. His wings burst from the slits and extended to their full height, which made him look three times as large.

“Do you require assistance?” Sayf al-Hajar rumbled.

“No, allow me to handle this my Lord.” Takabirit hissed.

Sayf al-Hajar nodded, and backed off.

Seeing my chance I put a hand to him, raised daintily in an obvious invitation.

“Might you carry me down?” I asked.

He nodded and took me without a second thought. He swept me off my feet and for a second my heart raced. I could laugh at the ease at which Takabirit lifted me. It told me his strength was enormous. I couldn’t afford to let it get between me and victory if the tide did turn and this duel commenced. I’d consider those feelings later. I put my hand on my hip and felt for the handle of my lamp.

People surged off of the dance floor and up from the staircases to the balcony. No one wanted to be in the middle of the fight when it went down. The two fighters were making an even bigger spectacle now. I needed to shut it down.

“If you draw sword or sorcery against Takabirit or myself I shall answer in kind, Bishop!” I charged after him.

Takabirt stepped back and held his cane. He grabbed the top and slid it to the side. The cane was a concealed sword. He drew it and it billowed with flame. It was a thin rapier made of jet black stygian steel. Accented with a red, for blood. He whipped it through the air in a curving pattern. He flicked his wrist on his other hand, the one holding the scabbard. It flexed and magically rewrote itself into a black and red shield.

“En garde you pitiable creature!” The demon roared. With a wave of his hand he whipped the enormous military jacket off of his body, revealing a red sinewy chest covered in black tattoos and golden piercings. He flipped off his red tinted glasses and I saw his deep green eyes leaking smoke into the air. It was as though his face was transformed. There was still a strange handsomeness, but now his hollow cheeks and the infernal groove marks on them were more noticeable. It stole away all his tenderness and left only a hungering anger beneath it. It made me want to smack his face for exploiting this situation.

Even more though, that look in his eyes ignited my rage with Gaudent and his generic earthen attractiveness, an absolutely punchable face portraying absolutely no taste. I bet he had told the hairdresser to give him the most popular option for “men’s Farangian haircut” someone infinitely more creative had made him that dress and those god-awful rings. He’d given me insult after insult after insult and now the god he served was dead. What point was there in keeping him alive? Why shouldn’t I answer his demand for satisfaction and burn him like the weak, impudent earthen he was? Remind him of what my Sun would do to him if not for the hospitality of our magical city.

With that thought, the room exploded.

A ripping sound tore through the high ceiling and arches of the ballroom. I wrenched my head up to find the source of the sound, turning my whole body. Everyone else had the same idea. In a moment of frozen time I gazed up as a leather bag flew through the air above the balconies. Gold pieces, vases, weapons, armor. Bars of the metal and the glittering jewels fell from the open mouth of the bag, all far too big to fit inside it, unless the bag was magic. Above it all, was Xhindi. Adventurous, greedy, chaotic Xhindi, who has halfway through throwing off his waiter's apron while leaping from the ceiling.

For that mesmerizing second they all hung in that air. Then, like a tidal wave cresting, the torrent of gold hit the floor with a thousand clinks and clatters. It spilled across the grand room like the billowing flame erupting from a dragon's mouth.

"Is this part of the duel?" Scilla asked Khayra, who she was now standing with. Lady Khayra shrugged and took a shot of her bubbling drink.

"Go Shaahida!" she yelled. I sighed.

Xhindi deftly landed onto a shield which exploded out of the bag's open mouth and rolled to a relatively safe landing atop the ever increasing pile of treasure. The force of the torrent kept the small leather bag flapping in the air in the middle of the room.

Takabirit wheeled on him. As his green eyes turned to the treasure I noticed its color and inscriptions. An image of the Archdemon Asmodeus was emblazoned on the front of each coin. Only one person in this court would carry so much Hellish currency.

"Thief!" Takabirit screamed and immediately drew his blade on Xhindi. "Accursed thief, you stole my pouch!" He abandoned Gaudent and I to intercept Xhindi, climbing the ever growing hill as Xhindi was carefully speeding down.

I sighed internally. What else did I seriously expect from this human? I said I wouldn't help him and I certainly wasn't going to get in the way of Takabirit's rage. He was actually making some leeway against the tide of treasure and that on its own was frightening. I backed away and saw Gaudent bouncing between stances, slowly retreating out of the way of the flowing gold.

I eyed him as if to ask if the duel he was insistent upon was still happening. He said nothing but still gave me an answer. Atop the pile of gold Takabirit had met Xhindi and drove his blade toward Xhindi's chest. Xhindi, of course, dodged out of the way by bending his body in a motion that would challenge even a gymnast's flexibility. At the same time, Gaudent's hand flew open and a dark bolt cracked from his palm into Takabirit's back. Iron exploded from the spot of impact, spikes impaling the demon between his shoulder blades. His green blood splattered over Xhindi's face as it erupted from Takabirit's chest. Takabirit screamed a horrible noise that was at once terrifying and pathetic.

The crowd gasped and pushed away from the edge of the balcony.

When the spell hit Takabirit, the gold around him began to glow. A second later, it shuddered and exploded, a plume of red hellish light whipping toward Gaudent and washing the left side of the room in a river of blood. The crowd screamed and partygoers ran in fear of

garments ruined by splatters of infernal blood. Notoriously hard to clean out of anything, that stuff. How do I know, you ask? Good question.



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Takabirit grit his teeth but yelled a warning, “Don’t cast magic anywhere within five feet of it! The gold is cursed!”

I didn’t even think before whipping out my lamp and firing a spell at Gaudent, he was safely away from the gold and I’d had enough. I hit him with a Fireball. A flickering bolt flew from my lamp’s spout. He caught my gaze and I felt my mind slip. The magic I pushed into the world contracted and I felt his ephemeral psychic hand grasping at my throat as I spoke the incantation to finish the spell. If I opened my mouth, he’d get his tendrils into me and shatter my mind. If I didn’t, my spell would fail. I erred on the side of my roaring hatred.

As the words slipped out of my mouth three things happened at once. The Fireball spell was cast, and an explosion of flame coursed across Gaudent’s body, alighting a scream. His body was hidden by the wall of fire but I knew he was getting his due for all he’d done to me. Gaudent’s psychic tendrils wrapped into me, exploiting my casting to grip the very willpower I used to manipulate the timescape. Then they squeezed and pain filled my head. It burned, but not the comforting heat of fire, instead the ice cold of a thousand daggers to the brain. Blood leaked from my nostrils. Finally, Xhindi kicked Takabirit. He knocked the demon down and his body rolled to the foot of the pile of gold.

I wheeled on Xhinidi. We were the only two standing, but not for long. Takabirit was only knocked prone and I would bet my life that Gaudent’s animosity wouldn’t let him die so long as he could get another good hit on me.

Xhindi spread his arms and bowed to me as I heard the last of the crowd dispersing from the ballroom. His posture was as relaxed and fluid as ever. If he wanted to escape without Yxmic raining hell on him, now was the time to do it. I stared Xhindi down. I couldn’t let him escape, not in front of the eyes of the Palace. Not without a fight. He met my eyes with a wink, and pulled his satchel around his chest tightly.

“I bid you adieu, my queen.” He said, trying to walk past me.

I caught Scilla’s eyes as she hung on the balcony. I tried to look as apologetic as possible, reaching out with my eyes. She gave me a conflicted and sympathetic look. She was gone, safely out of the room before I had a second thought.

I pointed my lamp at him, “Are you so sure, thief?” I said. I did my best to pretend I didn’t know him.

His face sank. “Deal’s off then, isn’t it?”

I knitted my eyebrows, not giving an answer.

He shrugged. “Well, I’m sorry for this.” His posture changed in an instant as he crouched for a low tackle and dove towards me. I widened my stance and prepared to meet him, unsheathing the dagger he’d given me. At the last second, he spun and used the motion to draw his great red scimitar. The flat of the blade smacked against the side of my head and I crumpled to the ground like Takabirit had.

I still had some opportunity left, and I hefted my lamp to blast Xhindi. He saw me and flipped a gold piece between his fingers.

“Wouldn’t do that if I were you! Cursed, right ‘hida?” He gestured at Takabirit, who had just stood up.

“Fuck off,” I said.

I focused on Xhindi and instead blasted a spell towards the closest door, the one he was running to. An old favorite spell of his. Web. Silk shot from my lamp and covered the door, completely sealing it. He’d have to find another way out and deal with Takabirit and I when he did. I smirked at him and he gave me a knowing smile back. I’d just piqued his interest, not that that was a good thing.

“Sorry?” Takabirit roared, answering Xhindi’s comment to me. “Not as deeply as you’ll be after I tear you limb from limb!”

The demon howled and charged Xhindi again. Green flame flowed from his mouth and he spat a plume toward Xhindi. It hit him straight in the shoulder and the fire began singeing his clothes. Xhindi ducked behind a pillar while Takabirit poked his blade into the space, narrowly missing the nimble man once then pinning him in the already burned shoulder.

For a second they stared. Then Xhindi’s eyes began to turn green and flow with smoke. He erupted in rage and ran from Takabirit. He drew his blade, not on the demon, but on me. I looked from Xhindi to Takabirit. Both glowing green eyes. Had Takabirit enchanted him? Either way it was foolish, stupid, fucking despicable that he was approaching me. I should tear him apart for that.

At the worst moment I saw Gaudent rise, body covered in burn wounds. His eyes were green as well. He raised his metal covered hands at me. Me! Now! For interrupting the debut, for daring to challenge me, for barging into my perfect life. I should make all of them bleed! I don’t care if I throw away my lamp all I need is to rip, bite, and tear into him-

Xhindi whipped his sword at me and I saw it reflected in the blade. My eyes glowed green with magical smoke. I put the dots together. Takabirit was a Hate demon, and we were all in his grasp now.

I backed up and out of the range of Xhindi's strike. His movement was wild with rage now, losing all of the floating fluidity he once had. I drew the dagger he'd given me from the inside of my lamp's pocket dimension. Dagger versus sword wasn't a great option but it was the best one I had at the moment. Xhindi and I crossed blades. As much as I tried to cool down the ever increasing, boiling rage inside me I simply couldn't—Takabirit was too intent on stoking it with his powers. Xhindi cut a couple of slashes in my arms and I managed to poke him once, a glancing hit which would have split the shoulder of a lower level creature.

I lashed out at Xhindi and he caught the small blade of my dagger with his sword. I used the opportunity to lean into him and pluck the cursed gold from his other hand. His eyes were too blank with enchanted animalistic hatred to notice. I tossed the gold back into the pile, which was now spilling to the edges of the room and piling up to ankle height.

The fight progressed up the balcony stairs, I was always forced back to guard with my shorter range dagger despite my intense desire to spill Xhindi's infuriating guts.

Takabirit, for his part, ignored all of us, instead flapping his wings and taking off in a shower of gold, heading straight for the open bag floating in the air.

Gaudent, seething with our shared magical rage, leapt upon me. Magic flashed over his fingers and the iron rings transformed into sharp talons at the end of his fingers. He tore at my back and I could only barely afford a dodge while I was still trying to hold Xhindi off. Gaudent's hand sunk into my lower back and he tore four gashes into my flesh. My mind throttled with the pain and I reacted by turning my attention to him, biting his neck while I stabbed him in the gut. We both yowled in pain and my concentration broke. The Web spell holding the first floor double doors closed vanished, and the pressure of the piling treasure burst them open. It flowed out of the ballroom and into the adjoining hallway, following the slope of the hill and trailing into the Palace courtyard.

The rain of treasure made a chaotic din that rang in each of our ears, and our murderous rage was abated for a moment by panic and pain. I shut my eyes and clamped my hands over my ears begging the Sun for the noise to stop!

With a final crash it did, and my eyes opened. I saw Xhindi. His eyes were no longer green. I looked at the wound on his shoulder and a pang of guilt ran in me. In the reflection of Xhindi's eyes, I saw that my own were clear. Gaudent's eyes weren't and he made another leap onto me with his claws, aiming for my neck.

Idiot, too blind with rage. We were clear of the gold's curse. I could cast magic on him without worry. I was also just as furious at him without magical rage. I waved my lamp and a plume of flame engulfed the priest again. He howled and writhed in the air. After a couple seconds I let up, and he remained enraged. His screaming stopped, replaced with a growl. He raised on his hackles to leap at me again.

In the second of quiet before he attacked I heard the tinkling of boots on metal. Xhindi was running! I turned and ran down the stairs. I confirmed my theory, seeing the human running full tilt with his chaotic gait.

I yelled at him, ordering him to stop. Of course, he did not listen.

“Sorry, my queen!” He galavanted. He launched himself into the treasure pile and hopped atop a large piece of treasure, a full suit of armor.

Gaudent tumbled down the stairs after me, beleaguered by his wounds. Beleaguered but not halted. He pursued me like a hungry jaguar. I struggled to keep ahead of him and his iron claws while I put all the power I had into my legs. Not thinking ahead, I jumped after Xhindi and onto a shield, riding the wave of treasure flowing into the hallway.

Across the room, Takabirit had finished his climb and worked the strings on his magical bag. The Seal finally slid shut and the gold stopped pouring. Unfortunately, it was too late to stop Xhindi from making his escape. Our makeshift boats slid to a stop as the gold poured out onto the much larger courtyard. It dispersed, some piling close to the doors into the palace. Xhindi lithely hopped off his ride while I slipped and rolled around on the treasure-covered floor. Gaudent crashed into my body and flew a couple more feet through the muck until he landed with a wet thwack. I winced.

The coins dug into my skin as I got up to my feet as fast as possible. The floor was slippery because of the abundance of coins, making it a struggle just to stand. Xhindi was already full seconds ahead of me. Guards ran through the courtyard to swarm him, but they slipped on the gold. One stupidly flew to scoop some up from the ground and Xhindi gleefully kicked him in the ribs and trampled him as he grunted in pain.

Gaudent raised his head, eyes no longer green, and pointed a finger at Xhindi. Magic swirled around him.

“No!” I yelled a warning, but I was too late. The curse went off and the courtyard exploded with stygian blood. It got even further in the way of the guards and I, pushing everyone who was already on the floor onto their backs and knocking down anyone who wasn’t. I avoided the tide by expelling a monumental plume of flame, which evaporated a small section of the wave in front of me. This, in turn, triggered more of the gold. I leapt into action and struggled to outrun it through the rough terrain. That gave me an idea.

I targeted a blast of flame at Xhindi’s side, not trying to hit him, but rather to activate the remaining gold around his feet. It worked. As I made it a dozen paces forward the liquid exploded out of the treasure and Xhindi was soaked. He avoided being thrown to the ground by the force but I pelted wave after wave of fire at him while I continually burned the air around me to avoid the feedbacking from the treasure directly around me. Always forwards, always moving while Xhindi was bogged down again and again.

Gaudent yelled a battle cry in Common from behind me. I spun to see Takabirit flying out of the Palace, speeding like an arrow towards Xhindi’s chest. Gaudent meanwhile was crouching, and at the perfect moment of impact he threw an iron ring to the ground and jumped off of the metal platform it generated. He caught Takabirit in the air and they went into a brief talespin.

Both hit the ground hard and Takabirit screamed. The two wrestled and lashed at each other on the ground. Neither let the other stand. They were occupied.

Xhindi was still *my* target. I kept the barrage going. He tried to evade me, ducking out of the way and never once getting hit by my blasts, but he had no way out. The treasure was everywhere and there was only one gate out of the Palace. One last wave crashed across his body and finally knocked him to the cobblestones at the far end of the courtyard, right behind the open gate.

A far-too-late guest had halted their cart in front of it and a guard attended the Nightmares leading it. Xhindi was on his back, soaked head to toe in the infernal blood of the river of Styx. He was panting and undoing his satchel, reaching for something inside. His sword was on the ground beside him. I charged up and dove for it before he could react. He put his hand into the satchel and quickly pulled out an item while I drew the blade and put it to his throat. We were in a repeat of our positions onboard the Ifrit's Freedom.

That last time I'd admitted I was planning to kill him. Would I actually go through with it today? That would almost certainly be the punishment for theft from the Sultan's palace. What the hell was he thinking?

He demonstrated exactly that as he slowly finished pulling the object from his bag.

"Please, Please. Let me go. I need to do this." He panted. The cheer dropped out of his voice and a deep, serious, desperation was all that was left. The object was a lamp. It was thick and broad, held from above by a semicircular handle connected to both ends. The body of the lamp was long and made of glass. It was for display and its form would fit right in on the streets of Poch. Its decoration was Alloy through and through though. bronze with gold burnishing and a bark blue metal plating. Inside, instead of fire, burned a magical light. This was the lamp of a jinn, I knew it as soon as I saw it.

"Sorry. It wasn't a dragon's heart. But, don't you see? I need to free her. They took her. They enslaved her, Shaahida." He urged me, "Please just let me go just this once and I promise you'll never see me again."

I looked into his eyes, looked at the lamp, and I knew it was over. Checkmate. The guilt Rax had revealed in me, the joy that my city was free, the distrust of Takabirit and the hatred, the deep hatred for the part of me that planned to kill Xhindi days ago. The part that had been revealed today and wanted to rip Gaudent's voice box out of his throat with my teeth. I was not going to kill him. I waited one long second before I withdrew the blade and dropped it at his feet.

"You're more merciful than I deserve, my queen."

I couldn't help but give him a little smile despite myself.

"Now," He continued, voice returning to banter mode, "You know the first rule of thievery?"

"Don't get caught?" I reminded him of his position.

"Always watch the hands." He said. One hand held the lamp. The other rose to his side, holding a glowing vial. He threw it to the ground beneath him, which released a torrent of smoke and activated the cursed gold around his feet.

I reached for him but I hit only thin air. The blood exploded under him and coated me mid swing. I splashed onto the ground, knocking my head on gold and cobblestone and landing on my back. The blood was viscous and rotted of iron. It mixed with my own, flowing from the wounds I'd sustained. I felt the thrumming power of my souls beneath my bones. How they were soothing my body and strengthening my resolve.

Pain rocketed through my nerves from my fractured back and throbbing head. I kept the sword in my hand. I used my other arm as a lever to force myself up from the disgusting floor. As I got up I saw the smoke passing through the gate and out of sight. Takabirit was running towards me with a concerned look on his face. Gaudent, meanwhile, was in hot pursuit, firing bolts of black iron into Takabirit's back. Gaudent flung out an incantation. Black iron chains erupted from the ground, wrapping around Takabirit and restraining him.

"I consign you to your fate, demon!" Gaudent prayed.

I leapt to my feet in Takabirit's defense. I threw my dagger at Gaudent's side and it punctured into his stomach. He growled and stumbled backwards, which gave me the perfect opportunity to tackle him. I slammed my shoulder into his stomach and brought him to the floor. Takabirit screamed behind me as I heard the chains tightening around him.

"Will you just concede! You impudent man!" I growled at Gaudent.

"Will you?" He answered.

I took the dagger out of his stomach and drove it into his chest. I hoped the pain would break his concentration and Takabirit would be freed. Gaudent screamed. I celebrated for a second before a chain clamped around my leg and pulled me off of his body. I flipped onto my back. In front of me, Takabirit struggled against his restraints and was readying to spit fire at Gaudent. Writhing around his feet was a sea of chains, grasping treasure and coiling themselves around Takabirit's legs. Five were following the one that grabbed me, rushing forward to entangle me. No way. Takabirit's sword was left on the floor and I scooped it up. I tried to use it as a crowbar to wrench the chains off to no avail. I looked up to Takabirit.

"Blast the chain, trust me!"

He did, spitting fire inches from my foot which melted the iron chain. I was free from its grip! I ran to Gaudent again, meeting his claws with the sword. I outranged him in melee, which let me slash his forearms a couple times before he could close distance. When he did, he roared in bestial anger and buried his hand into my stomach. Both bloody and absolutely furious we took out the frustrations of a week of snide remarks and not-so-subtly hidden revulsion out in physical force. I led him in a dance across the courtyard, baiting him further and further from Takabirit. Strike after strike, dodge after dodge, cut after cut.

"What?" He panted as we approached the building to the left of the courtyard, topped with three spires. "No more fiery words now that we're crossing blades?"

"Oh, can you not tell how much fun I'll have gutting you?"

I pushed forward and went for a heavy strike into his chest. He moved his arm and the blade bounced off of his black iron skin. He smirked.

“Another failure, my lady. What a shame you cannot see how futile you are! You doubt my Saint? I will show you Creon!”

An image shimmered across the courtyard. We were suddenly in a field of corpses in plate armor. They were each impaled through the chest, arms, or neck with sheer rods of black iron. Standing right in front of me, where Gaudent had once been was...a Saint. Creon was tall with fine features. Golden hair and a blue glow that matched his eyes. Two enormous wings came from his back which made him seem a thousand feet tall. His glow was imposing. Standing in front of him was like being in the epicenter of an earthquake, his very presence rattled the earth and superseded the light of the sun.

I looked into his glowing featureless eyes. He was no Sun. Even with all those souls he was just a man.

“Do you understand the consequences of your blade, Ifrit?” He asked in a booming voice. I caught his accent. Soluntum, with a slight Poch roll to the ‘r’ in ifrit. The world rumbled with his words.

“No, I just don’t care.” I rebuffed.

“Without my shelter your precious city will fall. You will lose everything! And what? To spite me? Heed my words, you will look back on this moment and regret it. You will beg for my shield around your delicate home and I will deny you. I want you to know that when the city bleeds out, it will be your doing, Shaahida al-Sahli. Are you that pointlessly defiant? You cannot escape the allure of power. You need me.”

“You don’t scare me, tyrant.” I spat up in defiance. It was easy for me. Politics, court, relationships, even dueling were all struggles, but telling off some asshole? That was in my blood. Maybe I was defiant, but it always had a point.

I stepped forward to grab Creon but the wrist and the air around him rippled. “I’m defiant because I know your presence would defile my city as much as the Lady of bronze returning. I’m defiant because I assure you we don’t need your help. My city will not fall. My people will not break, and if it’s the last thing I do, I would stop you from laying a finger on anyone on the Sun.” I smirked, “But I won’t, because you’ve been dead for days.”

I saw right through his illusion and swung Takabirit’s sword into the image of Creon’s chest. Reality rippled. For a split second Creon disappeared and Gaudent stood before me, face red in anger. The strike was inches from piercing the priest’s skin...until it wasn’t. A loud pop sounded in the courtyard and Gaudent was obscured in a flash of white and blue light. The light receded and Gaudent had vanished into thin air.

The chains vanished, freeing my demon ally. Takabirit roared in anger and stomped around the courtyard searching for Xhindi and Gaudent to no avail. A couple seconds later he noticed me and came to help. I threw him his sword and he took it with what might have been a respectful nod.

“Is this over?” He asked, gesturing at the air.

“I...” I considered it. He had been adamant on escalating the situation which had led to all this mess. Then again, his items had been stolen under our nose in our own Palace. He’d be

embarrassed by this no matter what I did. Besides, I was tired and he didn't actually want to fight me.

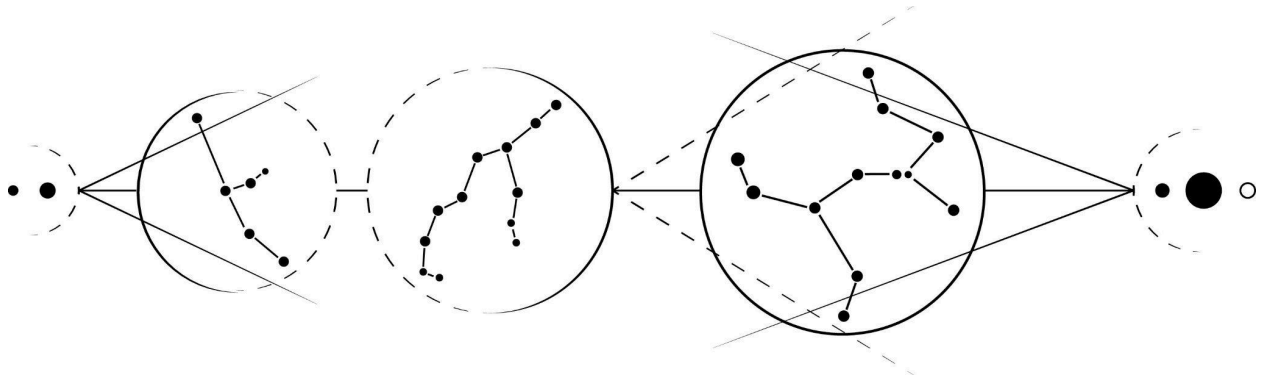
"Yes. We're even." I said, welling up all the strength that remained in my voice.

He sheathed his sword and shield back into a cane and leaned on it. There we stood, covered in cursed blood, panting, and lacking any tangible victory. He was still holding me and I could feel his body shaking. Mine was too, and I gripped his hand a little tighter. We gazed out of the gate and into the sprawling city below as if asking the same question. Where could they have gone?

There was a long pause, almost a minute of quiet panting and hot air on our bodies before Takabirit finally spoke. We both found a seat on the steps of the palace.

"Thank your father for the invitation, he's been a very generous host." He didn't hide his exhaustion and anger.

"You've been an excellent guest." I replied, not disguising mine either.



18

Chapter 8: Midnight

A group of guards descended on the courtyard. Xhindi was long gone. I told them everything that a normal respectable Lady would, and not that Xhindi was a man I knew because I broke him out of prison. Takabirit rendezvoused with his men and made an order in Infernal. All of them save two, Sayf al-Hajar and another tiefling, marched out of the gate and into the city.

“I’m ordering them to find the thief. If he has this blood on him, we can track him. It should wear off in about an hour.” He said over his shoulder, cleaning the stygian blood off his face.

“Good idea. I’m sure the Sultan will agree,” I nodded to one of the Illuminated guards, who joined the search party.

“Sorry about the dress. It’s a good one on you.” He said.

Pausing my walk, I turned to look up at his green eyes and newly hunched posture. “It’s...It’s fine. Thank you.”

I tried in vain to get the blood off of me as I walked back up the steps of the Palace. Takabirit and Sayf al-Hajar had a conversation as they followed me back up the steps.

“Why didn’t you help me down there? A thief steals my treasury out from under me and you just stood by!” Takabirit complained, animating his expressions like an aggrieved mistress.

“You stated you did not require assistance.” Sayf al-Hajar said, like it was the simplest thing in the timescape.

Takabirit sputtered and failed to consolidate a reply before my girls flocked to me, drenched from the knees down. Thistle stroked my hair as if mourning a lost love, Sabeeka pressed me in a hug, and Rohala put a hand to my shoulder and glared at Takabirit. They addressed my wounds in a worried fray.

“Don’t worry. I have souls. I’m strong. I’ll heal soon. Just give me time.”

¹⁸ Art by [Varsha Simha](#) on Artstation

An hour later, the blood hadn't yet evaporated. It ruined my dress and hair, and I knew no amount of evaporation would change that. I had used my souls to heal just like Xhindi taught me, but no amount of souls would fix the garment. Only sewing needles and gold for the seamstress. I prayed to the Sun that it was mendable, and then prayed again for the sorry state of my family.

The party was canceled and Yxmic had emerged from whatever hole he'd been in since the debuts to assure the guests that another ball would be held in the Pyraculum a week from now. Everyone was invited! The season was only beginning! He'd pay for anyone's damaged garments!

I had avoided his eyes even more than I had before. Scilla absolutely refused to talk to me and I knew it wasn't a good time to press her.

Perhaps everything would end up well in the long run, just a bad start to a good season. It was also, as the High Priestess pointed out, "A bad omen." She personally saw me after the fight and blessed me with healing magic I didn't necessarily need. I felt poor for myself as the last guest filed out of the Palace and Takabirit's men collected the last coins and treasure from the spill.

I was so worried I almost forgot that I was supposed to meet Poppy at the ballroom. I didn't forget, though. I was raised to always be punctual.

So I waited...and waited...and waited. I waited until ten minutes had passed from our original hour deadline and I couldn't take it anymore. If Poppy was disorganized or worse, screwing with me *today* after all the shit I went through, I was going to wring her like a wet towel. If not? If not she might be in some kind of danger and I couldn't have this night go any worse than it already had.

Gaudent was nowhere to be seen after he disappeared in the courtyard, so I figured I might as well march up to his door. It was, of course, locked. Not that that mattered when I could command the servants to open the door with their keys, which I did. The room was cleaned, but it still bore signs of life. The black stone of the interior was covered in white drapes. Black Iron adorned much of the room. On one corner a statue of Creon, in another a set of rings. A sword made of the metal hung on his wall. His walls were lined with bookshelves and a writing desk sat in one corner, bare of paper or ink. It seems absolutely mundane. Where was Poppy, then?

The servant that let me in, a kind woman named Ash, waited by the door and I ordered her to search the Palace for Poppy and ask when everyone had last seen her. It must be nice to have such a common name, like Ash or Jasmine or Amir. There's a million girls named Ash in Alloy, maybe someone mistook you for one of them? No one would ever be able to say 'Oh, you don't mean Shaahida al-Kamali, you're thinking of the other Shaahida, from down the block!'

My thoughts were spiraling away from Poppy because I did not want to worry about Poppy and I was absolutely worrying about Poppy. I frantically searched the room, looking for any sign of her or Gaudent's misdeeds just in case. What was it that she had told me? She found something behind his bookshelves! I searched at every angle until finally, I saw it. A thick book with a leather spine labeled, "A field guide to the Horticulture of Corwell" who in the world

would take a book like that to Alloy? For entertainment? I grabbed the book and a mechanism clicked.

The shelves turned open and revealed a secret door. The Stone of the wall buckled and I could see a passage below. Completely dark. My hair illuminated enough to see that it was a spiral staircase about four feet wide and six feet tall which wound down into nothingness.

“Poppy?” I called before quickly realizing my mistake. If I made a sound I’d alert anyone there that I was coming. I went across the room and picked up Gaudent’s sword. Better it than nothing. It was heavier than I was used to, fashioned in the Farangian manner with a wide straight guard, and a long and heavy blade. The thing was built for combat in the full plate armor that was so beloved by Farangian knights.

I slunk down the stone steps and followed the depths below. The carved stone of the Palace gave way to less detailed forms as the stairs descended. The walls turned unadorned and simple. Soon, the carving was basic enough that it might as well have been natural stone. After what felt like five minutes—five for death!—the staircase ended with an open archway into a large area. The stone here was not so black, instead more of a burnished bronze. Occasional embers and burn scars dotted the walls and passageways fanned out from the central room. Each was carved in the same style as the palace, but done on a far tighter budget. Whoever built this place clearly never intended it to be used as a host for balls.

The otherwise empty room was full of boxes, the kind used for shipping materials in Alloy’s harbor. These could survive a trip into the flames of the outer world if necessary.

I puzzle over them before I reminded myself of my mission and searched the room for Poppy. I snuck around in the darkness for a collection of hopeless minutes until I heard a sound. From one of the passages there was a flicker of light and wild animalistic screaming.

I drew Gaudent’s sword and it was slightly uncomfortable in my hand. It was of Farangian make and therefore slightly foreign in design to the blades I was used to, heavier and longer. It would do, though. I held it in one hand while I had my lamp ready to spew fire in the other. I crept down the hallway as silently as I could. To my surprise, it ended in another staircase. Light flowed up from below and I saw a shadow fall over the wall. A creature writhing with tentacles. Its ‘face’ split in half to reveal two parts of a gaping toothy maw.

I shuddered in fear as I imagined the creature. Then I imagined that Poppy was down there, being attacked and I surged down the stairs. I charged in, my veins flooding with adrenaline. Not tonight. I screamed into the room, erupting from the archway.

A single torch blazed from the floor of the center of the room. Someone must have dropped it. When I entered, I was met with an even more hideous sight than I’d imagined. Illuminated on one side by the low light I saw a monster. It was obviously, visually, alien. It must have come from another world—and not a mundane one. Something about its presence was obvious, powerful, absolute. It had a large group of souls I was sure. It had a roughly humanoid body covered in grey scales like a fish. Spines erupted from its back, which I could see because the creature’s posture was bent down like a great ape. It’s head had four glowing red eyes. The light matched a series of knicks and marks carved into it’s body. It had a series of horns, some

were broken and ended in knubs. Finally, It had a toothed mouth from which a group of writhing tentacles flowed. The stink! The thing smelled like an abandoned cavern full of coagulated fish blood and rusting metal. It made a horrifying wet wheezing sound which made me level the tip of my sword to it.

“Stand down or I will cut you!” I threatened.

It gurgled in response.

“Have you seen an ifrit named Poppy?”

It roared again, launching spittle from its mouth. I didn’t know how to interpret that.

It moved its head from side to side, looking at the stairway, then me, then at an illuminated passage on the other end of the room. As I followed his gaze I flinched. Lying at the threshold was the body of another, similar creature. The body’s spine was shattered and its chest lay splattered across the floor in multiple pieces. Bite and suction marks lined the wounds...marks which matched the monster’s snout.

I locked eyes with the monster and made a flourish with my lamp. Fire spewed out of it into the air in front of the beast’s face. I was attempting to scare it off. I might have succeeded too well. It wretched in wheezing horror. Its whole body shuddered and then it took off in a sudden jaunting, jerky sprint. It beelined for the archway I’d entered from.

There was no way I could let it escape. That thing, loose in the Palace? What about Scilla? Or defenseless servants like Ash? I made a snap decision and hucked a Fireball at it. It tried to throw itself to the ground in a dodge, but it failed. The fire wracked across its demonic skin and more red scars opened across his back.

It shuddered as it stood to full height, and then charged. My dodge failed as much as the monster failed to dodge my fire. It slammed its full weight against me, I imagined it might feel similar to being shoulder-checked by a rhinoceros. The force threw me into the wall and my ribcage cracked. I spit blood and I hated the reminder of being facedown in blood on the courtyard floor. It clawed its hand across my chest, opening a group of scars. They glowed in red as I felt poison flow into my bloodstream. The same red as its wounds. Could it transform me into one of them?

This was a horrible night. I could use a little opportunity to let off some steam. I screamed as I crashed the sword into the monster’s chest. The scales gave and I thrust the blade inside it to the hilt. The monster screamed and writhed. It moved away from me with such force that it wrenched the hilt from my hands. It circled around the room, gaining distance from me. Good, that meant it was farther from the archway. It would have to go through me. I hurled a knife at it. It raised a clawed hand and batted it out of the air, useless.

As we eyed each other, I saw how the sword was glowing in its signature red. I saw the other numerous wounds across its body for what they were. This creature was as beleaguered as I was. It roared and the red wounds across its body erupted in light. Mine echoed and pain shot through my body. It felt as if my chest was dissolving below me, every nerve and atom of my body unraveling. I forced myself to breathe faster to do anything but focus on the burning pain.

I managed to remain standing despite how my legs swayed. My body was melting while I still needed to fight. I backed myself up against the archway to stand, pointing my lamp at the monster in anticipation.

“I’m not dead yet, you demon!” I took my best guess at the origin of the creature. Endless hunger, alien proportions. It felt like a good fit.

The monster charged. My last spell flew across the room. Its momentum didn’t stop. I slid to the side to avoid the creature’s bulk hitting me head on.

My fire burnt across his face again and the flames blinded it long enough for its face to bury itself into the archway. It screamed again as it tried to wrench itself from the wall. I raced forward. I could get my sword back! I gripped the hilt and pulled it from the beast’s skin, but it wouldn’t budge. Once... Twice... Thrice I heaved with all my strength only for the creature to flex its muscles and buck like a bronco. In a final motion it ripped its head—now covered in red scars—out of the wall. It cascaded backwards. The force it needed to use to free itself from the wall made it stumble now that the wall was no longer there to dam the force. My grip held and I was flung across its shoulders and onto its back. When I did, I saw the back of its neck which was usually hidden by its crest of horns. A weak point! I just needed to take advantage of it.

I held the hilt for dear life. The monster made a final thrashing loop of the room, desperately clawing for me on its back. I held the hilt in one hand and grabbed for one of its horns in my other. I locked my thighs around the creature’s back and prayed to the Sun that I would not slip off.

The monster started running again, picking up pace to fling itself into a wall and dislodge me. Wrenching and pulling, I finally slipped Gaudent’s sword out of the monster’s chest. The monster rocked as its pace increased, making my hand shake. My aim was unsteady and I couldn’t be sure I’d be able to make the hit. I just. Needed. To. Aim... The monster was ten paces from the wall. I raised the sword in my hand in a reverse grip, using the tip like a spear to pierce the monster’s throat. My aim was thrown off as it shook again. Seven paces. I adjusted my aim to a precise point in the center of its neck, hoping that even if I missed I would still get something vital. Four paces. I thrust down with all the force I could muster, begging the souls in my body to power my muscles. It worked and the blade sunk to the hilt in the monster’s neck. Its stride broke and the body skidded across the floor. I ducked into the cavity between its horns and neck to brace for impact. The body thudded to the floor and I followed, hitting the rib that it’d previously broken. The pain jolted across me. I retreated into the fetal position. I awaited another blow from the monster’s claws, but none came. My side stung with pain and I felt even more exhausted than before.

Relief came. Power erupted inside me as the monster’s souls flowed from its body to mine.. Hundreds of them. As I suspected, this was a powerful creature. I ordered the souls into my muscles and bones. I wanted to be stronger, monster resilient, more able to work with a blade. I needed that edge if I was going to survive another fight.

There it was, though. Relief. Peace. The thing was dead. I lay panting on the floor and let myself take some time to pick myself up. I staggered back onto my feet and stared down the

room. Now that the monster was dead, my mind was set on the doorway where the corpse lay. Deeper down, there were more of these *things*. Were they connected to Gaudent somehow? Or were they indigenous to this labyrinth beneath the Palace. Who built this place and why. What had happened to it? Most importantly, where the hell was Poppy?

I continued my sneaking. I had to stretch my legs to gently step over the broken corpse in the doorway. Even though I'd just killed another one of the monsters, I still hated the sight of the body. I didn't want to think about the hypocrisy of that, about the monstrosity of my own violence. I had been right to kill the monster. Hadn't I? It was dangerous, it had killed. Now so had I. Would someone like Gaudent or Takabirit use that excuse to kill me if it was convenient? What about Xhindi? Was I right to spare him, knowing he'd killed and would kill again on his quest?

I don't know. All I knew was that my friend was missing. I hastened down the stairs, running away from the room full of corpses as much as I was running to Poppy. As I descended the stairs, I heard a strange grinding sound. There was no light in this room at all. Too late, I realized I was practically making myself a signal flare. The dark walls imposed on me, lined with pillars. Places monsters could be waiting or Poppy could be hiding—terrified of the horrors she'd faced here. I heard heavy metal footsteps ring through the room. It was large and the sounds made a terrifying echo. I glanced around wildly. I didn't find the source of the sound, but I saw the walls covered in scars. Burn marks, blasted stone, claw marks. Another demon body was laid on the floor, this one as small as a cat. As I searched I found three more. I crouched, getting low to the ground and wrapping a cowl over my hair. The room was left in total darkness, save for a tiny aura around my head.

I found my way forward, until I came to a table at the center of the room. It, too, was made of stone in the large and bulky carved style of the Palace. I felt its edge. Blood. Fresh blood, still dripping off of the stone and onto the floor. I jumped back and then lit my lamp. For one torturous second the room was illuminated. Scattered around the room were corpses, more of the monsters and knights in black armor. Atop the stone table was Poppy. Her face was distorted by wounds and a black iron spear had been thrust through her chest, pinning her body to the table. I shrieked and the light went out. I stumbled backwards in surprise, flailing in the dark. Poppy is hurt, Poppy is dead, what do we do, what do we do? She's dead, She's gone. Gone because of me. No. No. No. No. No. My breathing got out of my control.

I staggered back to the table and felt for the body. I checked her pulse. Maybe, somehow she was alive. Maybe I could bring her back. No pulse. I ripped my diamond necklace off of my neck without a second thought, plunging the core to her chest. If I got her out I could bring her to a cleric, someone who could cast Revivify or Resurrection. The spell should bring her back, should return her to life. Midway through casting the spell, I realized the black iron rod would still be in her chest if she was revived, doing more damage which would require more healing. I could do healing, though. I struggled to remove the rod and fought back tears and hysteric screaming. I hefted the rod out of Poppy in the same motion that I'd removed the blade from the

monster in the room above. I ripped it from her broken chest. The end of the rod was soaked in her blood.

I grabbed her body and sagged under the weight. I could manage it, I could carry her, she needed me. She...She was heavy against me. I could smell the rot in her body, the first signs of decay. Her pulse was dead and she'd been killed by impaling. Someone else had claimed her soul, I'd need it to revive her. Souls degenerate after about a minute, after which they cannot be re-attached to their original body. No soul, no resurrection. I didn't have her soul. I searched the many flowing in my veins, empowering my spirit. I looked for Poppy's soul and I couldn't find it. Her body was fresh, but not that fresh. It had already been a full minute since I'd entered the room; not to mention how long ago she'd actually died. There was no saving her. I let her body fall off of my back, limp.

I shattered. My body slowly retreated into the wall. I didn't think about it. I couldn't think about anything. I slumped back onto the stone. I expected it to be cold, as cold as Poppy's body and the grave. The walls were warm. Given an even greater heat than the surface. The further below the surface of the sun, the more intense the heat. I'd forgotten even the most fundamental aspects of my home. The heat didn't feel comforting, as it had when I'd returned. Now it felt like a freezing taunt. Even the stone was warm and full of life when she was not. Mother, now Poppy. All gone...

I held the fetal position in the alcove and cried.

The clinking sound came again, metal on stone in a pattern of footfalls. One sounded less than five feet from me. Close to her body. Every hair in my body stood up. I wheeled around and drew my sword and lamp at whatever it was. I was not letting anything touch her. That was the least I could do. My hands shook as I threatened the oncoming creature.

It was magnificent. The creature smelled clean and burnished, fresh metal polish and then the rust of blood and smoke covering the base sterile smell.

It was an art piece made of metal. I saw it as it moved its hand towards me in a slow gentle manner. It wasn't just a suit of armor, I could see the gaps where a humanoid creature's body would have to be. A knight—no, a golem—a living creature. It towered over me, even taller than Takabirit and not that much smaller than Sayf al-Hajar. It was almost a reverse image of the stone demon. Both were enormous, gargantuan creatures not born of flesh. They both held presences, power and strength. Where Sayf al-Hajar was all force and slow, grinding destruction like the lava flow that was his voice. This creature has an ethereal aura, it stood on the air, of the air. It must have been hundreds of pounds but it stood like a ballerina. With a slow, precise movement it leaned its face down to me and cocked its head.

As it moved, I saw that across its exterior—Skin? Armor? Shell?—was a pattern. A litany of dots connected by lines. The dots were different sizes and some had multiple lines running between them. I'd seen a pattern like this once before, on the chart that we had used on the Ifrit's Freedom. A map to transport across the Timescape. I looked down from its face to its torso, where a series of lines lead to the center of its chest. There was no dot there, instead the metal was split open. Cracked and scarred like a sandstone pillar after I hit it with a Fireball. Leaking

out from the inside of this creature was a chaotic swirl of magical light. An endless storm, eating itself and writhing every second.

“He...llo? Hello? I am...Midnight. Midnight’s Uproar. They call me Midnight’s Uproar.” It said. It’s voice was limiting and artificial, stringing itself together like a split seam being sealed.

I stared up in grief, fear, and pain. My expression hardened to anger, deeper and truer than the enhanced animalistic rage that Takabirit implanted in me. I frowned at the creature and roared a question at sword point. My voice was broken but rumbled with the pressure of a solar flare.

“What happened to my friend?”