

## **PROLOGUE**

### **Ebrahim**

I once chased a silvertongue up the twenty-third peak of the Devil's Ridgeback in the dead of winter. Didn't have a cloak, furs, gloves, or anything a sane person would think to wear in the middle of a blizzard. Nearly lost my left ear to frostbite, and two toenails blackened and fell off afterwards. Still caught the silvertongue at the end though, and that's what matters—placing the mission above all.

Now, I can't help but compare the coldness settling over my skin to that wretched adventure from two winters ago.

A cool draft whispers against the nape of my neck. The soft swish of a heavy cloak dragging along the marble floor echoes in the throne room. Frost spiderwebs beneath my leather boots, chilling my feet into a deep ache. Only one person in the kingdom of Elysia controls such powerful magic.

"Rise, young Tracer." Queen Hiema's voice comes like a breath of snow.

I finally straighten from my deep bow, spine protesting, neck and shoulders stiff. By the time I lift my eyes, the Winter Queen has already made her way onto the dais in front of me, though she doesn't sit on the throne. My breath hitches at the sight of the queen. In person, her cold and terrible beauty is more devastating than even the most vivid descriptions sung by the bards. Pale lashes frame cat-like eyes the color of ice chips. Lips stained a deep wine red, long fingernails painted gold and studded with diamonds.

She lifts her narrow chin, looking out past me. I resist the urge to look over my shoulder and follow her gaze. "Leave us," she commands.

The thump of steel soles against the floor followed by the muted thud of a door closing announce the guards' departure.

My skin prickles, though whether it's from the power radiating off the queen or from the cold, I can't tell. I draw a smooth breath. It's just me and the Winter Queen, alone, now in the chamber.

"Do you know why I called you here, Tracer?" She turns to face me directly, the train of her pale blue dress swirling around her feet as she gracefully takes a seat.

“No, My Queen.”

A tiny wrinkle pinches between her thin brows. *I've upset her.* “Actually,” I hastily add, “Master Tracer did mention something about a task.”

Her forehead smooths. She steeples slender fingers, elbows propped on the armrests wrought in ice. “Yes, a task,” she says the last word quietly, almost a whisper. “A very important task. One that must be kept discrete.”

I incline my head, the collar of my uniform scratching my throat. “A Tracer’s job.” The queen pauses, tilts her head as she stares me down through narrow eyes. *Idiot. Why did I interrupt the queen?* For a second, I’m convinced that I’m about to be turned into an ice statue. But the queen laughs instead, a sound that shatters the air like crystal striking stone. “You are bold, young one. Only eighteen winters yet with more spine than half my councilmen.”

I bite back a relieved sigh. One day my brashness is going to get me killed, or at least that’s what Master Tracer always tells me. *But not today.*

“Have you heard of the Argentia Case? No? Good. Only those directly involved should know of it.” She steps closer, close enough I can see the hoarfrost rimming the hem of her dress, an elegant attire with a beaded bodice and delicate needle work on the draping sleeves. “It’s believed that there’s a silvertongue infiltrated among the leadership of the Fifth Regiment.”

Something clicks in my brain. *The Fifth Regiment . . . also known as the Ghost Regiment.* “The most successful fighting force in the Elysian Army,” I say. “The regiment that conquered the Golden Plains and won the battle at the Endless Forest.”

The queen nods. “Which is why it is imperative that the silvertongue is removed before it causes any lasting damage. A Tracer was sent to investigate the situation two months ago, a supposedly quick job to be completed within a few weeks at most. The Tracer went dark a month ago, lost all forms of communication.”

“You don’t think he was--”

“Killed?” She raises a bony shoulder. “His fate is anyone’s guess. Perhaps the silvertongue discovered him before he could identify it. Perhaps he got killed by an enemy ambush.” She blows out a long breath, frosting the air. “The Fifth Regiment

marches out for Dark Water Point in three weeks. It will be the Regiment's most ambitious campaign within the last two years, one that should teach the Vigilanthams a lesson."

"If I understand correctly, My Queen, you're under a time constraint."

"Precisely." Her voice hardens. "The silvertongue must be rooted out before the troops leave."

"My Queen, you have the right person for this task," I state matter-of-factly. I have more captures than Tracers twice my age. I'm a prime Tracer, no denial.

She smiles thinly. "I would hope so, because I do not make mistakes."

I return her smile, the corners of my mouth curving up. "And rest assured you're not making one now."

She glides down the dais, her fur lined cloak dragging behind on the steps. "Information pertinent to the task, including your cover." She hands me a thin leather file containing sheets of parchment. "Destroy this upon memorization. You are to keep a low profile and cause minimal disturbances. Your objective is to secure the silver tongue and discover the fate of the lost Tracer, Marcel Turner. Do you have any questions?"

"Would you like the silvertongue alive or dead?"

"The usual. Alive. Send me a bird, and I will dispatch the Royal Guards to bring the silvertongue back." She waves a hand and a savage gust of wind flings open the double doors at the far end of the throne room. "Dismissed."

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I stretch, fingertips brushing the crossbeam. Scattered papers lay across the wooden desk. A magicked notebook lies in the center, filled with writing and hurried sketches. I rub my exhausted eyes, probably smudging ink onto my lids. The clock tolls three times outside.

"Lieutenant Davis Stone," I murmur to myself. "You can't hide forever."

The man had been assigned to the Fifth Regiment the past two years, and was considered Captain Youngblood's right hand. The Youngblood-Stone duo held

considerable fame within military circles, having turned the Fifth Regiment from a laughingstock into a lethal force--most battles won, most hostages taken, most land conquered. But what had caught my attention was Davis' remarkably outspoken hatred for silvertongues. The man has acquired quite a notorious reputation for being a silvertongue's worst enemy--right after Tracers, of course.

*People have the tendency to lie about their true selves.* My fingers curl, nails digging into my palms. Davis' facade is probably how he evaded capture for so long. Who would suspect a silvertongue hater to be a silvertongue himself? An ingenious cover, truth. But not clever enough.

My eyes skim over my instructions one last time--I'm to assume the identity of Mikhail Pierceson and join the regiment as a new recruit. Not the most interesting cover, but it'll do.

I gather all the papers and the leather folder the queen gave me and toss them into the hearth. Hungry flames swallow the parchment. Only the journal remains on the desk. I place a hand against its cover. A warm glow spreads beneath my palm, then cools a few seconds later. I flip through the book; blank pages yawn back at me. Perfect. I tuck the journal inside my jacket, collapse onto the cot, and allow my heavy eyes to close.

Just before sleep claims me, I remember to mumble, "My name is Ebrahim Tracer, son of none."

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Alivia**

*Once, there was a girl and from her lips fell words of silver.*

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The new soldier isn't going to last a week. He has a pretty face—acute green eyes, aristocratic brows, and a light dusting of stubble along his jawline. Unfortunately, the pretty ones are always the first to go in battle. Maybe the gods have a twisted sense of humor. Maybe it's just bad luck.

Captain Alivia Youngblood jams her knife into its sheath and nods at the young man some twenty paces away, conversing with a sergeant. First Lieutenant Davis Stone, her

second in command, stands beside her with his arms crossed. “Who’s the new one?” she asks, not taking her gaze off the green eyed soldier.

Davis follows her line of sight. “Mikhail Pierceson.”

She frowns at the name. “I pray he’s not related to Lord Edgar Pierceson.”

“Afraid he is. Transferred in this morning along with the reinforcement troops.”

Alivia narrows her eyes and mutters, “Another richling? Why do all the nobles seem to think the army is a dumping ground for their pampered sons?”

“Must be because you do such a *wonderful* job shaping them into respectable young men. Instilling good character and responsibility and all.” Davis shoots her a wry grin, straight white teeth glinting and cropped brown hair catching the sunlight. “I could have Pierceson scurrying home within a week, maybe even by tomorrow. Morning and evening slop duty paired with night watch for five days straight ought to do the trick.”

“A tempting offer, but one I’m afraid I must turn down.” She bets Pierceson has ever sharpened a sword or cleaned a shield before. Just a spoiled richling, thinking war is nothing more than a game when she would be the one to pay the price if he gets killed. *I’ll talk to him, convince him that he’s better off back home flirting with fine ladies and attending masquerades.* Isn’t that what richlings are into anyways? Enjoying the luxury life of the upper class, sheltered from the brewing restlessness among the poor. Elysia’s already on the brink of an internal revolution, and the war against Vigilantham is only stretching the kingdom’s resources near the point of breaking.

She strides through camp, brushing past rows of identical gray tents. The camp is packed, a condensed block a quarter click wide and half a click long, housing nearly a thousand soldiers. The soles of her boots sink in the soft earth, damp from morning dew. Pierceson snaps to attention when she stops three paces from him. *At least he has some discipline.*

“Captain Alivia.” He throws out a hasty salute. The other soldier who had been talking to Pierceson clambers onto his feet and follows suit.

“Mikhail Pierceson.” She nods at him, then glances over at the second soldier.

The other man is at least five winters older than Pierceson and sports copper hair that hangs half a span past his ears. He inclines his head. “Name’s Bryan Averlight, Captain.”

He jostles Pierceson with an elbow. "Only known Pierceson for a bit over a week, but already trust him with my first born." He cracks a grin. "He's not like the other richlings I've worked with in the past."

Alivia hides a grimace with a tight smile and checks Averlight's rank on his collar--an arrow with double fletchings. "As you say, Sergeant." She jerks her head at Pierceson. "A private word, soldier." No need to embarrass him in front of his unit leader.

She walks out beyond the sea of tents, stopping only once to make sure the richling follows behind. She halts when they're far enough from camp that they won't be overheard. "Pierceson," she begins, "I'm not sure what prompted you to join the army--as a dare, out of curiosity, or what--but I urge you to reconsider your decision."

He arches a questioning brow, but doesn't say anything. She sighs. "I need you to leave. Trust me," she adds before he could protest, "you won't regret returning home. It's almost the Mid Summer Festival, and surely you wouldn't want to miss the celebration going on in the cities, the food, the light displays, the Games."

"You think I'm going to be a hindrance to the Fifth Regiment," Pierceson states.

*Well, at least he's not one to hide from the truth.* "Yes. I *know* you're going to be a hindrance. I've worked with more of your type than I can recall, and the results are all the same." *Careless bastards, always flirting with the nurses and drinking themselves senseless; half of them wouldn't last a minute in battle.* "Save yourself the trouble and take my advice--go home." She pauses when his expression doesn't change. "To put it plainly, your father is a powerful man."

He laughs dryly. "So I've been told."

"You think it's funny, don't you?" she snaps. "Lord Pierceson--your father--could have my head if I so much as allow you to cut yourself while whetting a blade."

His laughter cuts out as he dips his head. "Apologies, Captain. I meant no offense."

She strides closer to him, eyes flashing. "All you richlings are the same. Young and stupid and ready to take over the world." She lowers her voice. "For your sake and mine, turn back home now. Return to the Imperial City or wherever you wish to go, just don't stay here."

“No.”

“Soldier, I’m *ordering* you to leave.”

Pierceson juts out his chin. “You said my father could have your head at his want. And I can assure you that he won’t be too pleased when he finds out Captain Youngblood rejected his son for being a *hindrance*.” There’s a razor edge to his voice--this isn’t a bluff.

*How dare he rejects your orders? Strike him down.* A chorus of whispers rise from the depths of her mind. Her jaw clenches as she looks away for a moment to regain her composure, tamping down the voices.

Davis has wandered near the edge of camp, still too far away to hear their conversation but close enough for Alivia to see that he’s watching them. He uncrosses his arms and begins walking over. She shakes her head and motions for him to leave them alone. He stops in his tracks, but doesn’t retreat. The sun throws his shadow against the ground before him, twice the length of his height.

She tears her gaze away from Davis, and settles it back on Pierceson. “I need experienced men, not an unproven soldier.”

Pierceson’s right cheek twitches, and Alivia notes the thin scar that runs halfway down his jawline. *Interesting that he didn’t have it erased with a potion or spell.* The Pierceson family certainly has the coins to spend on such aesthetics.

“I have experience,” Pierceson replies. “I spent three months at Crossknox Fort. Also spent four months at Killington Post before relocating here.” He jabs a thumb back toward camp. “And I have people who can vouch for me, truth,” he says, using slang native to the Imperial City.

“Sergeant Averlight,” she says, remembering the decorated Sergeant. The red star for seven years of service, two silver crowns for fighting in a key battle, two golden suns for saving the life of a comrade, and the black cross for undertaking and completing a dangerous mission. “I am sure he is a trustworthy man, but he does not know everything.” She closes her eyes, then flicks them open and says in a firm voice, “I commend your willingness to serve, but your experience at Crossknox and Killington is nothing compared to what’s to come if you remain.”

“Do you mean Dark Water Point?”

Her eyes widen, and she inadvertently flinches. “How do you know about Dark Water?” She glances around furtively. She’d only received orders from Queen Hiema this morning regarding the regiment’s next mission. Aside from Davis, she’s told no one about it yet. The richling must have many connections and snooping ears to have acquired such information.

Pierceson raises a lazy shoulder, and Alivia is tempted to swipe off that insolent smirk beginning to creep onto his face. *Do it*, a voice whispers from the back of her mind. *Go on. Slap it off him. Show him his place*, another voice provokes.

“Captain Youngblood,” Davis’ voice jerks her back to the present.

Pierceson greets the Lieutenant with a salute. Davis’ eyes dart between her and Pierceson. “Is everything--”

“It’s fine,” Alivia says curtly. “I’m just a bit . . . frustrated.” She fights the urge to silvertalk Pierceson into obedience. Just a couple silvered words, smooth as oil, and the richling would be on his merry way back home, out of harm. But Davis is here, along with a good sized group of onlookers gathered near the fringes of camp. Definitely not a good time to silvertalk. Too many eyes on her. The risk of someone suspecting her of being a silvertongue is too great. If she ends up in the hands of the law, she would be branded and thrown into a labor camp with her tongue cut out--and that’s if she were lucky.

Davis braces his feet, cocks his head, and shoots Pierceson a long stare. “I hope you’re not giving your captain grief, kid.”

The richling bristles at the last word, but evenly returns Davis’ look.

*Fight the richling, shove him down.* The whispers croon once more in Alivia’s mind. *How dare he threaten you?* She inhales sharply, banishing the violent thoughts.

“Just having a few words with Pierceson.” She directs her words toward Davis. “Pierceson will be staying with us.” *For now.*

A look of triumph glints in the soldier’s eyes, and the voices in her conscience rise up in indignation, threatening to overpower her. She needs to get the richling out of sight



before the situation spins out of control. Waving a hand, she motions for Pierceson to leave. "We'll talk later," she calls after him, voice curbed.

She turns away from Davis, her back towards Pierceson's shrinking figure. The sun hangs high in the azure sky, nestled behind wispy clouds. The gentle nickers of horses float on the breeze, soothing her, calming her racing heart. She'd never felt the presence of the whispers as strongly as just then. *I will not go Berserk. I will not lose control of myself.* She repeats the words over and over in her head. Eventually, the tremors in her hands cease.

Inhaling, she catches the faint smell of leather and smoke. A familiar scent. Davis. "Pierceson threatened me," she finally says without looking over at him.

"Richlings," Davis spits, scuffing the earth with a boot. "They think they can do whatever they want without cleaning up the consequences of their actions."

"Quite literally," Alivia mutters. "Lord Pierceson could have my head rolling at his whim."

Davis tilts his head up to observe a flock of snow geese flying above. "Don't worry too much. You know how richlings are--they join the army for the initial thrill and bragging rights. Pierceson will probably be gone within a few weeks. How long did the last richling last under your command before scurrying back to the city? Two weeks?"

A soft grin tugs at the corner of Alivia's mouth; only Davis can coax a smile out of her so effortlessly. "Eleven days."

"See? You have nothing to worry about. My previous offer still stands." He stands face to face with Alivia, a mischievous spark in his dark blue eyes. "Slop duty, night watch, *and* trench digging will definitely have Pierceson running away in a blink."

She shakes her head ruefully, "Your proposed tactics won't work." She pauses, turning thoughts over in her head before carefully choosing each word. "Pierceson's different. Stubborn. Persistent." *Ruthless. Reminds me a bit of myself.* "And he's not afraid to pull strings if he needs to."

Davis frowns, mumbles some choice words under his breath. "I don't like him hanging around, especially with the upcoming march toward Dark Water Point in two weeks."

“Even sooner. If we want to avoid the worst of the summer rains, we’ll need to begin marching out in a week. I would prefer to leave earlier if possible, as the flooding along the western rivers will be severe once the rain starts, but I’m still waiting on a shipment of supplies.” Her fingers tap against the hilt of her dagger tucked in her belt. *Pierceson must be gone before the Regiment departs.* Getting rid of the richling would be much more difficult later on. Yet, some part of her is curious to see how the richling will fare. Her instincts prickle--*this richling is not like the rest.* For nineteen winters she's trusted her instincts. That was nineteen more winters than she ever expected to live.

Davis remains silent long enough for Alivia to slide him a glance. She catches him staring at her. “Well, what is it?” she asks, recognizing the expression on his face. “Say what you want.”

He opens his mouth, then closes it and looks away, past her and into the distance. She traces his line of sight into the rippling plains, tall stalks of golden grass swaying beneath the summer breeze. Two clicks farther lies the Devil’s Ridgeback, a mountain chain composed of twenty-seven peaks. Here and there, small copses of reedy trees with crooked branches dot the landscape.

“Maybe it’s a sign,” he says, refusing to meet her gaze, “for you to leave. You’ve already done much for Elysia.”

She leans away from him. “You think I’m incapable of securing Dark Water Point.” She doesn’t hide the hurt in her voice.

“Bloody snow, *no.*” He glances sharply at her, alarmed. “I’m just saying, you’ve been out in the field for almost three years. There’s no shame in taking a break for a month, two months, even a year, before coming back.”

*He’s lying. There’s another reason why he wants you to leave,* a snide voice taunts from the depths of her mind. “You can shove the suggestion down a rat’s arse.”

“Please, Alivia.” A note of desperation tinges his voice. Strange. “Consider--”

*He wants all the glory for himself, that backstabbing bastard,* the voice rasps, drowning out the rest of his sentence. *He wants you out of the picture so that all credit of Dark Water Point will go to him.*

She clenches her fists. Davis would never do that. She trusts him with her life, despite his reputation of being a silvertongue antagonist, a reputation she tries not to think about too much.

“I’m staying,” she repeats. “And so is Pierceson.”

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Ebrahim**

“That was a mighty long chat you had with the Captain,” Sergeant Averlight remarks, dropping down onto the dirt beside me.

The fire pit casts a ruddy glow onto his face, highlighting his deep set eyes. I turn the block of wood I’d been carving over in my hand, fingertips running against the smooth edges of the half finished fox.

“Word is you got in an argument of sorts with her,” he continues on.

I raise my eyes. “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

He chuckles. “Of course not. I’d believe that Vigilantham horses eat flesh and that the Lost Isles actually exist if I did.” Leaning forward, he props both elbows on his knees, ignoring the sparks that land on his clothes. They flare brightly before fizzling out.

“Listen, Pierceson, I haven’t known you for long, but I know you’re a good kid. I want you on my unit, but I won’t tolerate my men raising a ruckus. Whether the rumors are true or not, if I catch word of you having a dispute with a superior, I *will* request you to be transferred out.”

I shave a couple thin slices off my carving, adding a small flick to the fox’s tail. “I didn’t go looking for trouble,” I reply. “The Captain brought it to me.”

Averlight sighs and tosses a twig into the flames. “Richlings have a bad reputation in the army.”

“I’m well aware of that,” I answer wryly.

“There’s no need to fuel the reputation.”

I look up. “Sergeant, I have no intentions of doing so.”

His shoulders are still hunched, tense. No matter what he said earlier, the man has still only known me for a week and a half, and I can tell he's starting to have doubts about me.

"Have you been assigned to this regiment before?" I ask, an attempt to change the subject and relax him.

It works. The sergeant leans back, crossing his ankles in front of him. "A handful of times--enough that I recognize a good number of faces around here."

I fish out my notebook and rifle through it until I find the page I'm looking for. I flip the journal around so that Averlight can see the ink portrait of Marcel Turner, the missing Tracer who went dark, I'd sketched earlier. "Have you seen this man before?"

He squints, creases appearing in the corners of his eyes. "Who is he?"

"A friend of mine. He joined the Fifth Regiment a couple months ago."

The sergeant shakes his head. "Last time I was with this Regiment was nearly half a year past." He scratches his chin and unscrews a canteen, takes a long drought, then says, "If I were you, I'd go find the smithy. Anyone who's been here long enough is bound to have paid the smithy a visit at least once. Granted, he might not remember your man. Lots of faces cycle through here."

I nod and tuck the journal back inside my jacket. The fire begins to sputter, belching up more smoke than flames. Averlight bids me farewell and turns in for the night. I stand, stretching cramped knees, and snag a couple more logs from the woodpile. The chorus of crickets and spring chirpers puncture the air. It's been a while since I've been assigned a mission out of a city, and the night's melody brings back fond memories of a younger self; the summers I spent on the estate with my half brothers, racing each other through the wooded trails and catching fire frogs by the pond.

Out the corner of an eye, I spot Lieutenant Davis Stone half hidden by a couple tents. Dropping the logs into the fire pit, I take a few subtle steps closer. My ears strain to catch what he's saying. *Tonight. Orders. Medical tent.* I puzzle over the meaning of those words. Shadows obscure the other figure Stone is talking to, though I assume it's the field medic.

I'm about to turn away when something, some sort of instinct, forces me to pause. I'm missing a key detail here. I observe the duo from my peripheral. Stone's left hand buckles and unbuckles the small clasp on his right glove, like a nervous habit. His right hand flexes as if it wants to strike the other man. Both Stone and the other man have their backs facing outwards, shoulders rounded for privacy. But what catches my attention the most is the other man. Feet braced slightly past shoulder width, a stance that generally indicates complete confidence. Where Stone keeps shaking his head and casting quick peeks over his shoulder, the other man remains still, chin slightly lifted.

*Interesting.* Assuming the other man is the medic, then why is Stone, a Lieutenant, so nervous around his subordinate? *Especially if Stone is a silvertongue, then he has even less to fear.*

The two men finish their conversation and part ways. The medic leaves in a hurry before I can get a good glimpse of his face; there's a red band of fabric wrapped around his upper left arm. Lieutenant Stone remains rooted for nearly a minute, lost in thought. Finally, he spins and strides after the medic. *He's going to go Berserk*, I realize. Fearing that the Lieutenant is going to attack the medic, I silently slip after him.

As if sensing that he's being trailed, Stone weaves a maze through the camp, stopping several times to double back, take abrupt turns, and tossing wary glances around him. He never sees me, though. I fold into the shadows every time, keeping Davis at least twenty paces away, but never so far that I lose track of him. This is what I'm trained for. I'm nearly certain Stone's the silvertongue who's infiltrated the Fifth Regiment. I can feel it, deep in my bones, and it's my job as a Tracer to secure him before he harms the medic.