

For the moment Diana's mind was turned away from her frustration over the gilded prison and empty bed that she found herself in, and instead her thoughts were on the prisoner she left behind. *'The House of Yan is absurd. What will he do, keep Nervai confined until either he dies, or the royal house does?'*

She barely noticed the breeze on the way back, their break was in her mind, far too short, but admittedly her husband at least took his role seriously. *'If we left him alone, then he might be an adequate Prince. Of course the same is true of his cousin.'* She hit on the word she needed just as their guards opened the door to allow them back into the main hall. *'Adequate. They are 'adequate'.'* She judged her husband and his kin, and considering the reputation of demon-elves for their intelligence as well as their magical acumen, *'I wonder how much of a role jealousy played in the decision to confine and debase Nervai that way?'*

She made a mental note of that as well and more or less 'drifted' mentally through most of the remainder of the day, her meal was barely tasted on her tongue, and Yanlim barely spoke to her as hour flowed into hour, occasionally she glanced toward the noise of the turning hourglass, and occasionally Diana would turn her eye toward the open window in the stone of the castle that let light stream into the throne room.

The sun crept past until the beam of light it gave off was all but gone, and a bronze gong announced the end of the day's petitions. Yanlim leaned over, close to his wife's ear so that the heat of his breath kissed her skin even if his body didn't touch her own. "Come to my quarters tonight." He whispered.

Diana gave a very subtle nod as the pair rose to their feet, and one of the ones Diana dubbed 'the old crones' curled one finger toward herself. It was discreet, at least, but around her neck Diana felt the ghost of a collar as if it had not been struck from her neck by her former mistress.

"I will join you presently, *husband*." Diana said when she made to turn from him rather than follow, "I have some small things to attend to." She said it in as regal and formal a voice as she could, and he accepted it without complaint.

"Sevari, follow." Diana gave the order to the silver collar, and the girl bowed her head, folded her hands in front of her waist, and followed her mistress out of the hall. There was no question about where they were to go, nor unfortunately, did she expect the old crone to follow her.

When she was out of the throne room she made a turn down a long hall with very few doors to additional rooms until she reached one that was now more familiar.

In this room there was a curved table, a handful of seats for those who were to sit, and a crossbar ten paces back where petitioners would stand. Diana approached and placed her hands on the iron bar, she stared in silence at the empty seats. "Infuriating, isn't it, My Lady?" The young woman whispered at her back.

"It is. My Mi- my mother would never tolerate this treatment." Diana hissed between clenched teeth. "To be kept waiting at an empty table for those old bags of bones to come and sneer at me, it is disgusting."

Sevari blinked in mild surprise at the way Diana seemed so affronted to what was just 'routine' to most. "My mother sometimes came home and locked herself away for hours after these meetings. When I was small, I often heard her crying and shaking. It was no better for my father in his meetings with the old men. They dole out tasks, rewards, and futures as they wish, carrots and whips to keep us all in line." Sevari whispered her words and stepped closer to Diana, she put a hand on the flowing dress of her mistress, closing just the tips of her fingers against the fabric and giving the smallest persistent tug.

"I beg you, don't lose your temper with them. Yanlim may rule the city, but he didn't conquer it. He needed Prince Aiwenor, so he can rule it now only because the old ones allow it. Being his wife will not protect you."

"Yanlim fought a war over me. He would never let anyone bring harm to me. He- He loves me." Diana insisted without looking over her shoulder. That much she was confident of, and it made the empty bed a more tolerable thing.

"Mistress, that was when he had no power. Now he does. And even if he feels that way for you, poison and a knife in the dark are not things he can guard you perfectly against. And if they had to, they would simply overthrow him." Sevari insisted and released her fingers from her lady's dress. "Please, contain any outburst of temper. It will damn us both to a fate only death will let us escape. Even if they can't kill you because of your mother, never underestimate the death by shame that they will heap on you."

Diana took a deep breath and finally looked over her shoulder, her bright, sunny face betrayed no hint of dismay, her full red lips perfectly done and a faint hint of rose on her cheeks gave her a youthful vigor that anyone would have envied. Most shocking in Sevari's eyes was that the sharp eyed intelligence was all but gone. Diana's eyes looked almost vacant when she said to Sevari, "Why, slave... whatever do you mean? It's just a simple meeting, nothing to get excited over."

Sevari's jaw snapped shut and Diana turned her face away to look at the empty far wall just as the door behind them opened, and old crones in their finery began to hobble in to take their places at the back of the room.

Sado planted himself at the door of his Lady's quarters, one glance within told him she wasn't present, but it was only a matter of time before she returned to her room. *'To change clothes if nothing else.'* He closed his eyes and rolled them a little. *'She was always a little bit vain, but the women here make her look down right slovenly.'* The women of Hanak'sen, at least of the upper class, tended to change their clothes several times per day. At least the younger ones. *'I wonder if it's the humidity that makes them do that?'* The sticky warmth of the air was definitely taking some getting used to, and even freshly bathed, Sado could feel like he would need to clean himself again in hours.

He was lost in his own thoughts when he saw Yanlim approaching, and Sado immediately, albeit not without some begrudging thoughts, went to his knees in the presence of the ruler of the city.

Since his time began in Hanak'sen in Diana's service, the two had not been in one another's presence in a capacity that would let them speak to one another, and more than once Sado wondered, *'Is he avoiding me? Or am I avoiding him?'*

Whichever was the case it proved a fairly simple matter as Sado's chief and only official duty was to protect Diana from harm.

But rather than pass him by as Sado expected, Yanlim stopped and looked down at the Prince in the golden collar. "Is my wife inside?"

"No, master." Sado said it abruptly, and Yanlim crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"I opposed my cousin's choice to go to war with you." He reminded the fallen Prince, and Sado's answer was just as abrupt.

"Thank you, master. I regret that he didn't listen." He could feel Yanlim's eyes burning into his head as the silence stretched between them.

"My wife, she used to belong to you?" Yanlim asked.

"No, to Kaiji of House Najin." Sado replied, and that merited a grunt.

"But did you ever sleep with her, *slave*?" Yanlim pressed, and Sado felt his heart lurch into his breast.

"When we lived in Komestra, before the war? Yes, master, we did sleep together." Sado answered, carefully structuring his answer to avoid the more recent mention of their last time together before they left Pas'en.

Yanlim's glare deepened, his face turning a jealous red. "You may guard her now, *slave*. But if I ever suspect that has begun again, I'll cut off every part

of you responsible. Do I make myself clear? She is *mine*. And I will *never* let that change."

It was times like this that Sado regretted that he didn't have the same wit as Diana, or the brutal air of Nua, or Kaiji's raw cunning. '*Any of them would have known exactly what to say in this situation. But me? I have the sharp edge of a mace.*'

Unable to come up with anything clever to say, he could only answer with formal propriety, "I understand, Master."

"My cousin died over her, what do you think I'd do to you?" Yanlim replied and let the unspoken threat hang and slid his right foot forward. "I know I can't exactly complain about what you did before, she is beautiful, isn't she?"

Sado didn't answer instantly, his nerves tingled like he was stumbling into an ambush, but again lacking the wit to give a double answer to escape difficulty, he gave an honest one instead. "She is."

"But I don't like the thought of those lips of yours having ever been on her first, quite frankly, it's just *repugnant*. Just looking at you... it makes me angry." Yanlim said, the red on his face deepened, and Sado sighed internally.

"I'm sorry to have angered you, Master." Sado said serenely. "But there is nothing to be jealous of."

"*Jealous?* I'm not *jealous!*" Yanlim snapped, his muscles tensed and he raised a hand to strike the kneeling bodyguard across the face, but when Sado did not look away, he lowered his hand slowly back down to his side, then cleared his throat with a cough. "You may apologize for offending the Prince."

Sado paused, but Yanlim's right hand did not come out, nor did his left, instead the Prince of Hanak'sen cleared his throat again and tilted his right boot up.

The fallen prince sighed internally, to refuse would no doubt spark a fight with Diana over her bodyguard's 'pride'. That would not do. Unable to think of any other response, he slowly lowered himself to kiss the toe of the Prince's boot.

"Better. Tonight, *you* can stand guard outside my quarters when she comes to my room." Yanlim said as Sado straightened again.

"As you command, my *Prince*." Sado said, keeping his voice as even as he could while he looked up from his place of defeat, to the one who stood in the place of victory.

"She is mine. This city is mine. Never forget it." Yanlim snarled as if Sado had questioned it.

Sado's patience ran its course as the man seemed to want to claim credit for everything, though he didn't rise from his knees he did snap out his response faster than he could seize control over his tongue, "My Lord, the city is yours to rule and Diana is your Prince Consort, but it was not *you* who won either. Your blood-sister did that. It was her armies that found their way through the wall, and if not for her, your cousin would have killed you, and Mistress Diana would *never* have been in your arms again. And even if you had defeated your cousin, if it were not for Prince Aiwenor choosing to favor you with a bond, you wouldn't have had the strength to take her. No *one* city can defeat Komestra, and that is something that you, Master, should remember as well."

"Insolence!" Yanlim bellowed like a wounded bear and raised his fist, Sado never moved.

Again and again the punch descended on the face of the slave, but to Sado, who could stand against even headman ranked adventurers and not fall until they all did? Yanlim's fiercest blows were nothing but a gentle rain, a rain that stopped when Yanlim felt the bones in his hand fracture, and Sado heard their crack.

"I should have you whipped instead." The Prince snarled, bringing up his wounded hand with its badly bent fingers, it was shaking with pain, and Sado only bowed his head.

"The master's will be done." He said, and Yanlim, unable to think of a retort, spun on his heel away from the kneeling servant and snapped an order to one of his guards.

"Have a healer brought to my room before Diana comes, and be quick about it!" He barked after one last baleful glare down at the still kneeling servant.

'I didn't know he had that in him... but then again I suppose I never knew him all that well, and you never really know somebody till you live with him.'
Sado pondered and rose to his feet again as soon as Yanlim and his escort were out of sight.

They'd kept her waiting by changing their clothes again, this time into short dresses intended for more casual outings, as if this were but a lark, and leaving Diana in her more formal attire. Their clothing was dotted with golden stars sewn into blue fabric, their wrinkled limbs bared and wobbling as they hobbled to their places. "You know why you are here, Prince Consort?" The eldest of the old women said, her flapping lips exposing a toothless mouth.

"Not really, no, Prioress Atropos." Diana casually shook her head and put on her most charming smile, "I assume it is for a more 'formal' introduction since between my visit with my mother, the recent civil war, and just getting accustomed to the city, things have been rather busy."

The old crone with her gaunt face and deep sunk dark eyes did not smile back, nor did those who sat on either side of her. "I am the Prioress of Fate. We are here to decide *yours*."

Diana felt a faint stab in her heart at the unexpectedly overt threat. Though the woman's posture, hunched forward with her hands laying one over the other, was anything but threatening. Her rough voice was like gravel to

Diana's ears, and if there was any love for her in that room, the Prince Consort felt it only from behind her.

But she kept her cool, tilting her head slightly and saying in the most ingratiating manner, "I'm afraid I don't understand," she rested her hand on her chest, "I haven't committed any crime as far as I know, if I had, I'm *sure* my husband would have informed me of it."

The table of crones cackled hard enough that several launched into coughing fits, "You think you have committed no crime? Is not causing a *civil war* a crime? Are you that *stupid*, woman, or do you believe *us* to be?" Atropos hissed and closed her hand over a small round rock which she pounded against a gray slate, the loud cracking noise calling her hall to order.

Diana put on her most wide eyed, vapid expression, "Prioress Atropos, I did nothing but catch the eye of both the Prince *and* his cousin, back when I was a mere slave in the service of the House of Aiwenor. How could someone in my position then have caused such a *disaster*?!"

Glares met her from the curved table, and Atropos was quick to respond, "Do you think you speak to *men* here, *child*?! We may be old and withered, but we remember timeless truths, that a man in the throws of desire will do *anything*, even crawl on his belly through a pit of vipers, to hold the woman that has the reigns of his hunger. We're not as foolish as the young men *or* the old."

Diana's lips parted into a shocked 'O' and she quickly covered it with one hand and clung to the iron bar in front of her with the other. "No! I was simply sent on a diplomatic mission as an aide to Prince Sado. Perhaps I was intended to beguile the former Prince and make him more amenable to the Lady Aiwenor, but to cause a *war*?!"

"At last we come down to at least some small measure of the *truth*." Atropos hissed the words out like a serpent threatening with its fangs.

Diana looked around, "Is this a trial, am I under threat here? Where is the Prince?" She snapped out the three questions, and Atropos smacked the smooth gray rock against the slate again.

"Silence! No, you are not being charged with a *crime*, child. But you *are* suspected of being a malignant force in our city, and not *all* crimes are written in *ink*!" She leveled an accusing finger at Diana and rasped out, "Your 'fate' cannot be averted by the Prince. Perhaps you are just a brainless but pretty bird sent off to live in the Prince's gilded cage to keep him happy and lazy. Or perhaps you're a viper at our city's breast."

Diana kept her luminous eyes drifting from one old woman to the next as if she were afraid of being struck down at any moment, "If I'm not being tried, why am I here?"

Atropos folded her hands over one another again and said, "As I said, girl, to decide your fate. You are tasked with one shameful thing, and one impossible thing. You can escape both with a suitable *contribution* to our coffers. Make your offering to the Women's Temple Association, and when we have seen your devotion, we will assign you something befitting the bride of a Prince."

"An offering, is that-" Diana did her best to appear scandalized, stiffening her limbs and blinking her eyes as if she could not believe what she was hearing, "like a *bribe*?"

"No, of course not!" Atropos snapped at her and sat up straighter than Diana thought she could, "Bribes are for criminals. This is just the cost of admission into our ranks at the most junior level, plus a tribute for the privilege of joining with us, plus access to the most valuable projects, projects that you would be able to choose the hiring, firing, and more for."

Sevari's warning returned to Diana's mind, but now seeing it up close, the system became clear. *'The old men and old women control the assignment of jobs, they collect bribes from wealthy families to get the ones with the best chance for profit, power, pleasure, or punishment, and since they control the purse, the Prince's control over the army is almost meaningless. Anyone who doesn't fall into line is simply cut out of access to anything. A few rounds of heavy fines and taxes later, they're ruined.'*

But while those wheels turned in the back of her mind, she kept her vacant eyes on the Grand Prioress. "I don't understand, I didn't bring much money with me... and even if I did... do you expect me to ask for it from the Prince?"

The very smallest groans went up from some of the old crones, but Atropos did not waver.

"You have a *dowry* do you not?" Atropos demanded. "Turn it over to us, we will manage it for you, that is traditionally how it is done when a foreigner marries into the nobility here, rare though it is."

Diana gave a humble bow of her head and put a light tremble into her fingers on the crossbar, leaning more on it as if she were frightened she said, "I-I am the lawfully endowed daughter of Prince Aiwenor. By Komestran law that gives me the right to five towns and twenty villages. But those are administered by the slave 'Priceless' as part of the crown's possessions. Surely you don't expect the *Skinner Prince* to hand over management of Komestran land to anyone in Hanak'sen?"

That brought the old crones up short, as Diana expected that it would. *'Angering the one to destroy the last Prince would not be something they are likely to do, but if I leave here without putting anything into their hands, I may need Sado's services much earlier than we thought.'*

"But," she said, opening and closing her mouth like a fish under the water for several seconds and then touching her forefinger to the dimple in her pale cheek, looking away as if deep in thought, "I will get the money from those assets if I ask her for it. I can't sell the land or hand it over, but I can pay you a part of the revenue, enough that the White Tree of Knives will not be offended."

"And how much is that?" The Grand Prioress pressed.

"I have no idea, I haven't drawn on any of those funds yet, but- I can send a message and I'm sure that the Prince will send it to us with all due speed, and I can tell you then." Diana promised and folded one hand over the other in imitation of the posture of the women at the table.

Silence hung like a blade by a fraying thread, "Until you have paid your due, your tasks remain as they are. You will feed the lowest creatures of the city and preside over their 'feast'. And you will be tasked with solving the flooding problem. Am I clear?" The Grand Prioress's tone said 'it had better be', and Diana nodded, then kept her head humbly bowed.

"Then get out, we have other matters to discuss and you are no longer needed here." Atropos said and leveled a withered and bony finger at the far door.

Diana gave a deep curtsy and scurried from the room with swiftly moving feet and Sevari only a hair behind her.

Once out, Sevari shut the door with an audible click, and Diana's retreat from the room became a stroll. She held her left hand out and curled her fingers toward her palms, indicating for her servant to rush to her side.

When Diana saw Sevari fall into position she said with the utmost calm, "When we return to my room, take a letter and send word to my mother. And one to Kaiji, I'm going to need some help with this."

Sevari brushed her hand back through her soft brown hair and her gentle hazel eyes were wide with anxiety, and Diana could have sworn she saw them twitch a little. "Mistress, aren't you *worried*?"

"Not really." Diana replied, "If worry would help, I'd do it, but since it doesn't, I make it a policy to never worry. I just fix whatever is that I would otherwise have to worry about. And it's even easier when everybody thinks you keep your brains in your boobs and extra air in your head."

Sevari's mind whirled, '*Could she already know what to do?!*' she wondered, and leaning close she whispered the question out loud, "Do you already have a plan?"

"Oh by the shadows no, I have *no* idea what to do." Diana said, but shrugged along with the statement and added, "But I'll figure it out."