

Chapter 1 - Avin

Avin leaned in the door frame of her antiques shop, watching with a boredom that was slowly blossoming into a paralytic, red, irritation as the noble parade went by. Garishly colored minstrels flipped and spun, a tiger on a multi colored lead sullenly meandered by, and the musicians? How many trumpets were truly necessary to herald the weekly procession? The onslaught of sound and color were taking far too long to pass her store. As long as the march continued, potential customers would not be able to cross the street to buy her wares. She considered bringing this up at the next vendor meeting.

Reflexively, she let her rage pull her back to an encounter with a lady of the court earlier. Gaudy jewelry clinking as she had breezed into the curio shop.

Avin had looked up from the book she was flipping through, swallowing a groan. Although she knew women like this could potentially buy enough in one go to cover her bills for a month, she still detested catering to their better-than-thou antics.

"Hello!" Avin feigned warm hospitality, "What can I help you find?"

The noble stood firmly at the door, nose upturned as if she might catch poverty if she took one step more. Ignoring Avin's questions she said, mostly to herself, "It's like this entire part of the city was erected out of the waste of Karta. How... industrious."

Pulling herself back to the raucous parade, Avin ran her tongue over her lower lip, bruised from how hard she had bit it to stay quiet.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, blowing it out and imagining the street clear and the noise gone. When she opened her eyes, she was paralyzed by the vision before her. The street was devoid of life. Even the vendors who had been standing in windows and doorsteps were gone. Silence had fallen so complete that she could hear the blood in her very veins pounding.

She closed her eyes, squeezing them shut this time. Hoping she wasn't going insane. Slowly, she peeked from beneath her lashes. Avin, for the first time in years, welcomed the percussion of the parade.

"What was that?" She gently put one hand on the threshold, praying it wouldn't dissipate. Taking one step backwards so that she was fully in the dim and muted caress of her shop, she shut the door.

Avin walked slowly around glass cases to the washroom in the back and inspected her reflection, backlit by the sunlight streaming in through the window. Mahogany hair still in its braid

from the morning and feline-like eyes bright despite the usual dark circles . She looked the same.

She realized her hands, on either side of the water basin were trembling, sending errant medical supplies to the ground. She shoved down the blood soaked memories of the King's army slaughtering occultists in the street. That was almost two decades ago. Magic was dead.

"It was fatigue. It was a trick of my mind. It was those assholes always showing off while we struggle down here." Avin tried to conjure more reasons why her eyes and ears and all other senses had temporarily deceived her when she heard the door of her shop swing open. "I guess it was a short show today. Thank the Gods." Running a quick hand down her oversized button up and straightening her brown trousers, she made her way to the front to hopefully sell some goods.

The stranger stood, back to Avin, over a glass stand that held ancient relics. Along with her eyes, her unintended stealth had also been compared to that of a cat. Avin considered making her footfall a bit louder so as to not startle the patron, but it proved to be unnecessary as the stranger spoke without turning.

"Where did you find these?"

The voice was velveteen. It made the hair on Avin's arms stand at attention. She looked at their broad shoulders, ink black hair, falling out of its leather band in a wavy mess. This stranger in their worn leather jacket hanging to their knees, satchel, and paraphernalia didn't fit. She wanted to see their face.

"They were brought in by a traveler many years ago. They said they were forged in dragon fire." The last part wasn't strictly true, but Avin knew that people would pay far more for metals touched by mythical beasts than the local ironsmith.

The stranger finally turned. "Dragon fire, huh?" A smile pulled one corner of his mouth up. His eyes shown, a mixture of colors that were reminiscent of a forest floor.

"Is there something amusing about dragon fire?"

"Nothing at all. But that piece of metal wasn't touched by dragon fire anymore than I am the king of this city." Now fully facing her, leaning on the glass that held the relic in question, Avin was able to fully take in the details she couldn't have noticed from behind. He was tall, and even with his arms now loosely folded over his chest, she could see the many scars on his hands trailing into his sleeves. He wore several necklaces that she longed to look at, sheerly out of professional curiosity. She *did* own an antiques store and they looked like they had been around for quite some time. She hadn't realized she had been staring until her eyes returned to his face and saw his eyebrow cocked.

"My apologies. I noticed your amulets and well... It's a force of habit. I'm Avin. What brings you in?"

"Rihla." He replied. "I'm actually not looking for any more jewelry but one of the shop owners, Mad something, told me you might know where to find some lodging for a few nights."

"Her name is Maddie but I don't have space in my shop. I'm sorry you were misled."

Rihla nodded and pushed up from his position against the glass counter, wincing with the strain as he did. It was only then that Avin noticed a dark spot she had mistaken for dirt on one of his pant legs.

"Sit. Why didn't you mention you also needed medical care?" She now realized why Maddie had referred this man to her. "I'm going to go and get some supplies from the back but I need you to understand that I am armed. If you try anything stupid while my back is turned, you will find out how well the women of this city can protect themselves and you'll have a lot more than a wounded leg to worry about." With a stare that communicated her earnestness, Avin turned on one foot to get her medical kit. Had she turned half a second later, she would have seen Rihla's lips twitch into a grin.

Several stitches later, Avin sat back and admired her work. The wound on Rihla's leg had been large and becoming close to infected. He had insisted it came from a branch he had run into but the wound was too clean. A branch would have left a jagged cut - not the deep and precise slice she had just sewn back together.

"So are you a bandit? And before you attempt to lie, this part of Karta isn't filled with nobility. I've seen enough wounds to know when a wound was delivered from a well honed blade."

In lieu of herbs to numb the pain, Avin had come back with her medical gear brandishing a bottle of back alley booze. The concoction was vile but Rihla had continued to take gulps as his leg was cleaned and sewn back together. He shook his head as if he could slough off the buzz.

"Did you ask if I'm a bandit?" his words slurred lazily out, eyes widening in drunken revelation.

Avin's looked at Rihla's face for the first time since she'd begun work on his leg and she began laughing. A laugh so hard that she had to steady herself against the floor.

"Is this your first time drinking fire water?" She was barely able to get the sentence out between laughs. The man's lips quivered in a lame attempt to hold back before he joined her laughing.

"Who gives someone something called 'fire water' without first asking if they've had it before?"

Chapter 2 - Rihla

Rihla stared at the pitched roof, the sound of shopkeepers locking doors and indistinct voices floating in through the window. The street lamps outside glowed softly, creating a show of shadows on the second floor ceiling that made his head spin. Closing his eyes, exhaling, he willed the world to still and steady. "Who gives a complete stranger fire water?"

Avin had helped him limp upstairs after they had regained some semblance of composure. She had guided him up the narrow steps to a small room with an unmade bed, what he presumed were her clothes, and the large window that was now open. Her braid had whipped, tickling his face when she had lowered him down. Although he had been half drunk, he still remembered the smell of her hair. It wasn't some ethereal scent, but rather, a scent he hadn't smelled in years.

Where he called home, there was a bush that bloomed once a year for about 48 hours. When it did, the people of his town would gather the flowers and dry them to use for medicine, perfume, and sometimes magic. Those who possessed the gift could take the flowers and distill them into powerful potions.

He opened his eyes again - memories evaporating. How does she smell like home?

"You're finally awake." It wasn't a question. Avin toed the door open, arms laden with tied packages, and sat at his feet.

"Are you shocked that I survived your medical help, doctor?"

Avin lowered her head, poorly hiding a smile. "I brought some food. As you were passing out, you muttered something about an empty stomach. I thought it might have been an excuse for being a lightweight, but grabbed a few things anyway."

Now it was Rihla's turn to grin. Avin began to unceremoniously open up the packaging, tearing into butcher's paper with her nails and biting bound bags with her teeth. Soon there was a veritable feast of dried meats, cheeses, and fruits on the bed.

Rihla gingerly sat up and surveyed the items before diving in. He was, in fact, ravenous. After he was satiated, he realized he had yet to thank the shopkeeper.

"I am eternally grateful for everything you've done. I would like to repay your kindness."

He longed to look in a mirror to see why Avin was regarding him like a specimen. Finally she said, "You gave me the first real laugh I've had in years. That's payment enough. However, you do happen to be in my bed which I'll be needing. I can send you over to a friend who should

have a spare place for you though. Just promise you won't bleed all over their floors or they'll never accept guests I send their way again."

Rihla chuckled, running a hand through his hair. He braced a hand against the mattress while using the other to grab the bedpost and hoist himself up. Even with a stomach full of food, his head still swam as the last of the alcohol bombarded his system. Avin was there, grabbing his elbow to help him sit back down before he had fully registered what was happening. As his knees bent, he felt himself falling but not the few inches on the mattress - but into chaos.

Rihla looked around in terror as the town of Karta burned. He was no longer in the small room above the shop but had a vantage point that could only have been from high within the castle. The walls around him shook and shrieked and he knew without a doubt that when the sun finally broke the next morning, it would shed its cleansing rays on the massive grave of the city.

And then he was back in the small shop. He had fallen to his knees, gasping for air, eyes darting frantically around for any trace of what he had just experienced. Everything was exactly the same except Avin. She stood frozen. Her hands still poised to help him sit on the bed but her eyes were opaque and staring.

Avin

Avin's eye's transitioned from a sickly, milky-white to their original golden hue before Rihla could stand and shake her from her reverie. "Are you ok?" He asked.

She continued to stare into the distance, as if she was still in that nightmare for what felt for ages.

"Avin. How long has that been happening?"

This question finally hit something within her that brought Avin back to the present. "How long has what been happening?"

"That vision you showed me. How long have you been able to do that?"

"You saw it? The fire... the death..."

"I've known one other scryer but their visions were never that detailed."

"Scryer? As in..? No." Avin was pacing now, picking at her already short nails. She whirled on her boot, planted her feet with her hands in her trousers and looked up at her bedroom ceiling. "I don't want it. I don't fucking want this. I only ever wanted to do better than my parents and I've made it this far. I don't need this right now. Or ever for that matter."

"How long." He asked again. He was finally standing, seemingly sobered by their shared apocalypse fever dream.

"It happened for the first time earlier today. I thought I was hallucinating. But what I don't understand is how you were able to see it."

"I don't know how to say this," he said, running a hand over his face, "But you have magic and by the looks of it, it's powerful. I don't know why it was dormant but I know you need to get out of this city before the King's forces pick up the occult reading and come looking for you."

Avin was a statue, eyes still glued to the familiarity of her ceiling. Her face was impassive but tears had silently started to push their way out of her eyes, trailing into the collar of her loose shirt. She considered her options quickly as there really was only one viable one. She couldn't stay here and die at the king's hand. Not after years of clawing her way out of the gutters of the godforsaken city. She shook her head as if to clear it and resolutely addressed Rihla.

"How do I know you're not one of the King's spies, here to take me in?" She doubted this man would have cut his own leg in service to the King and then subsequently gotten drunk on her store floor but she had to check.

"I guess you don't." and then, "I can help you though. I have... friends in the occult. You're the walking dead if you remain untrained."

"Thanks, Rilah, for the sunny disposition. Is this the usual way you pull someone out of a downward spiral?" She didn't know the man but when he grinned at her retort she felt something akin to relief. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad letting this stranger, who wasn't put off by her sharp tongue, help her. "I'm assuming we have to leave soon?"

"That assumption would be correct. If you had a vision earlier then you've used the occult twice within a small radius. The ministry's sensors will probably have been triggered. We don't have long to get out of here."

"Fuck."

Rilah didn't respond. Just continued leaning on the bed frame, face impassive.

"I have to get some things in order before we leave." Avin left her small bedroom, feeling the weight of her crumbling world pressing down on her with every step.

Avin had thought she would be consumed with fear and dread but she felt nothing but cool and calculated resolve. She made a short list of instructions for Maddie, her one friend in the city, ensuring that her store would continue to operate in her absence. She'd be damned if her legacy went up in smoke.

It was late and all but the taverns were closed. As Avin approached Maddie's shop, ascending the side stairs to the upper living quarters, she could hear loud music being played on a phonograph and voices drunkenly singing over the music. She smiled at the merriment, wishing she was on the other side nursing a buzz instead of making plans to abscond for the sake of her life. Her hand hung in the air, ready to knock but came up short. How could she explain her sudden departure? She wasn't prepared to lie to her friend and although she was a great liar, she knew Maddie would see through her. Avin hadn't left the city since she arrived almost two decades ago. A sudden trip would be so out of character that she knew it would warrant a thorough questioning. She let her forehead gently touch the door, vibrating with the party on the other side. Straightening, she tucked the instructions into the door jamb. It would be better this way. She touched two fingers to her lips and then the door.

She was about to descend the steps when she saw the King's guards marching down the street. It wasn't unusual to see patrols in the more affluent parts of the city but they didn't care about the debauchery in the outskirts. Avin squinted, attempting to make out any details that might let her see what type of patrol it was. The group of guards consisted of 6 tall, armored figures. Even from meters away she could see the glow of their eye displays. Their side arms were holstered in leather carriers but the two guards leading the patrol had small devices that shed a wedge of faint green light over door frames and the cobbled road. Occult sensors.

She reeled back, pressing herself to the side of the building. Was there another Kartan who they could be looking for? She didn't want to find out. She took off, running lightly around the balcony that encircled the top of Maddie's shop. There was no staircase but she had scaled the back several times on drunken dares and knew she could do it sober. Lowering herself, she took off in a dead sprint and didn't stop until she was at the back door of her own store.

She flung the door open just as Rihla came down the stairs, hurling a bag in her direction. "I put some of your things in there. We'll need weapons."

Before she could protest, he drove his elbow down into the glass case that housed the decorative blades and grabbed them all. Shoving aside his cape, he put one in each of his boots, one next to a gun on his thigh, and passed her the last three.

"I have no place to hide these!" The calm she had felt earlier was giving way to blind panic. Rihla approached her, each step an indication of his ease that somehow unsettled her more. He snatched a holster that had been on display and stowed the three blades into it. He didn't ask permission. He grabbed her arms, sliding them into the belt now laden with blades and fastened it around her shoulders so that it hugged over and under breast.

“Grab your coat. We have to go.”

Avin didn't hesitate. Donning the brown leather trench that went down to her ankles she pulled the hood over her head and darted out the back door on Rihlas heels.