

The group strode wordlessly through the hallway; their only sound the striking of leather soles on polished stone. Leading was a Human, who wore the navy uniform of palace staff, but following him were five Daithars: amphibious beings with smooth skin ranging from grey-blue to grey-green. Each had prognathous jaws, flat noses with two diagonal slits, small beady eyes, and heads topped with thick ropy tendrils that grew with age.

The features of the Daithar in the centre were hidden, however. Anjhali Jethwa was the only one using the hood on their long brown cloaks, concealing all but a feminine shape and gait. She had only a narrow view from under it; even then the grandeur of the path ahead was pervasive.

Massive pillars lined one side of the sweeping hall, perfectly spaced between even bigger windows made from the sap of a tree. They allowed light from the two moons – one white and twice the size of its blue twin – to shine as much as the fire torches on the opposite wall. No other country she'd visited had glass as large, clear or hard as what the locals called rocksap.

The small island nation of Alrestor was home to many exclusive commodities, technology, flora, fauna – but most importantly – Var·lysians. It's solely why the King of Sithain sent her on a six-week voyage. While Var·lysians were widely known as sentinels of order, stability, peace, and justice, one had allegedly left Alrestor and executed a Sithainian official in public. For this the King demanded questions be asked and answers given.

Her guide rounded a corner and slowed the group before a set of arched wooden doors. Two men stood at either side, gloved hands resting on upright spears.

"I present Miss Anjhali Jethwa of Sithain," said the guide.

Both guards were Human and wore silver breastplates atop their navy-blue uniforms. Their helmets cast ominous outlines across the bottom half of their faces as they studied the new arrivals.

"Master Ejer is inside," stated the one on the right. "Master Sadith hasn't arrived yet."

Anjhali nodded curtly. "I'll wait for her inside then."

"And I'll ensure your people are provided refreshments," the guide interjected smoothly, shifting his eyes from Anjhali to her entourage. "Follow me please, gentlemen." He gestured as well but the Daithars ignored him as the one called Hasaj reached beneath his flowing cloak.

*“Tith aishen har visas?”* He asked Anjhali, also showing her the object he unclipped from his belt.

She recognised the small blue hourglass and produced an identical one of her own. *“Faren thi ash.”* At once they both nodded and turned the timers upside-down, then promptly secured them back onto the leather belts from which they came.

“Lead the way,” Hasaj instructed the guide like his synchronised act with Anjhali never happened.

From his ensuing look, it was clear the Human considered asking for an explanation of what he’d just witnessed, but he brushed it aside with a brief shake of his head. “Very well.”

Hasaj and the others followed the guide down the hall, leaving Anjhali alone with the door guards.

“Your men will be notified when the meeting concludes,” the one on the left assured her, assuming that to be the purpose of the hourglasses.

“Fine,” she replied impatiently. Taking the hint, the guards gripped the iron rings and pulled open the thick doors. The hinges groaned to protest the entry, but Anjhali proceeded through and cast off her yellow-embossed hood, revealing her blue-grey skin. The tendrils on her head ran no further than the nape of her neck, indicating her age in the early to mid-twenties, but her eyes were more akin to an angry child as they scanned the surroundings.

Like the many hallways traversed to get here, the meeting room was generously spaced. Four massive chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, each containing more candles than she cared to count. Centred below them was a large wooden conference table, on which sat platters of food and drink half a dozen others grazed around.

Worried she’d be distracted by a watering mouth, Anjhali averted her eyes, though she was still able to track the approach of a middle-aged Human. She knew instantly who he was – or, more specifically, *what* he was.

The customary outfit of a Var·lysian was unmistakable; except for a black sash, wide leather belt and matching black boots, the rest of their clothing was a pristine colour of white. Most alternated styles of shirts, trousers, tunics, and coats, but all came double-breasted with a solitary strip of colour adorning the edge of the overlap. This man’s was red.

“You must be Ambassador Jethwa,” he said with a warm smile. “A pleasure to finally meet you. I am Master Winsal Ejer of the Var·lysii Council.”

Anjhali glanced down at Winsal's proffered hand. It was clean but the disinclination to accept it showed instantly on her face, prompting a frown to form on his. No one refused the chance to shake the hand of a Var·lysian, dirty or not. They were an order devoted to studying the ways of Var·neia, a mystical energy force aptly translated from an ancient language to mean *divine gift*.

The wrinkles on Winsal's bearded face suddenly relaxed upon realising what the issue was...

He changed languages to Daitharsh. 'I'm sorry, I was told you spoke Human.'

...At least what he *thought* was the issue. Anjhali was merely waiting for the guards outside to close the doors again. The moment they did, she looked at Winsal with a glint in her eyes.

'Allow me to repeat myself,' he continued in Daitharsh. 'I am Master—'

Anjhali's fist flashed red as she struck Winsal's sternum like a battering ram, violently expelling the air that would have finished his sentence and sending him instantly across the floor. Others in the room – a mixture of Humans and Daithars, diplomats and bureaucrats – gasped at the abrupt and malevolent use of Var·neia, but the attacker had already turned to the doors behind her. Hands aglow, she channelled her power to the security latches, seizing and then slamming them down.

"What are you doing?" demanded one of the diplomats, her voice a mixture of anger and fear.

"It's an impostor!" cried one of the Daithars, knowing the real Anjhali wouldn't do this. And *couldn't*. He was about to say as much but with a wave of her hand, the impostor swept him up in a wave of red and slammed him into the nearest wall.

The sickening crunch and sight of his body falling lifelessly to the ground coerced terror onto the expressions of the remaining four occupants. Like Winsal, they were in the latter half of their lives, and would struggle in combat even without the hindrance of their layered and ornate clothing.

For a moment the impostor felt pity. Killing the trapped, scared, and defenceless provided no challenge for her, but she couldn't leave any witnesses to alert the others where she was heading, and one of the women shrieked upon the realisation.

She staggered backwards, knocking over one of the chairs in her haste, but before she could fall, the impostor threw out a hand and caught her telekinetically about the throat. Clamped, the woman couldn't breathe, much less scream as she realised the red glow was starting to lift her into the air.

By the time her feet cleared the floor and her legs started thrashing, the impostor clenched her fist, snapping the woman's neck. When the vice around it disappeared, her body collapsed to the stone like a ragdoll, and although there was no more screaming, filling the void was the sound of frantic banging on the doors.

The impostor quickly turned her attention to those remaining. Thrusting out, she launched one man off his feet, and if he didn't die when he hit the ceiling, he did when he crashed back down onto the sturdy conference table. The other woman in the room was hurled backwards to the large window at the end, then through it in a storm of rocksap fragments that disappeared into the night.

The lone survivor – a Human – dropped instantly to his knees. “Please, I beg you. Don't—”

His words twisted to a scream as red rope yanked him towards the impostor, who met his skull with another augmented punch that shattered it instantly. By the time his body hit the floor, the noise in the room was only increasing.

The guards outside threw themselves into the doors, shouting between each attempt, demanding to be let in. After one such particularly loud thud, the impostor heard the muffled words she'd been worried about.

“Get Var·lysians here. Now!”

While some younger Var·lysians would provide a greater challenge than that of an older and unsuspecting one, fighting was not her objective. After glancing down at the hourglass on her belt, she realised just shy of a third of the dark sand had made its way down the tightly cinched waist.

She had to keep moving.

The air rippled with energy as she focused her power. With one movement, she threw out her hands – one to the ceiling, the other at the nearest wall – sending two powerful blasts into the stone. Shards exploded from the points of impact, raining debris in every direction, but she was able to summon Var·neia like a shield.

Once the buffet of rock was harmlessly deflected, she redirected the energy to bolster a leap that sent her all the way up to the newly created hole in the ceiling. Landing with ease, she cast about the dark new room. The only source of light was her aura, but it was enough to identify the figures of two Daithars.

The impostor recognised the two men from the group that had accompanied her to the meeting room below despite the fact they'd ditched their cloaks and now only wore the uniforms of palace officials. "Any problems?" she asked.

"No," one of them replied, and the impostor found herself momentarily impressed by their ability to escape the guide and get up here on time. She was so accustomed to being disappointed by others, though there was still plenty of opportunity for that to happen. After all, the hardest part of this mission was yet to come.

Dismissing her concerns, the impostor removed Anjhali's cloak and tossed it down the hole from which she came, discarding the identity and resuming her own once more: Sabra.

"Good," she said. "Let's go."