

The Starlight of Shadows

A Yurvanian Transition Novel

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1

The sky was streaked with gold, but under a canopy of ancient trees, shadows reined. Amalai let a velvety blossom fall into her palm. Crouched beneath the waving ferns, she breathed in moist forest air and the sweet, cloying scent of the trumpets that had, just now, opened their bodies to the night. The one moment when their fragrance was wildest, their power strongest. The one time to collect them.

Tendrils of ambiguous aroma rose up to tease Amalai's nostrils, an impudent earthy call somewhere between lust and decay, enticing to the point of nausea. But Amalai knew how to be a companion to the pale, ghostly flowers, how to lure and coax their disturbing essence into a vial. From where, eventually, it would flow into a hot bath and bring ease and joy to a troubled human body.

Amalai sighed contentedly as another colorless blossom fell into her hand. Just one or two more, she thought. The rest she would leave.

At that moment the monkeys shrieked and birds flew up in alarm. Some large animal broke through the undergrowth without care or caution, but loudly and rudely, with sounds of distress.

Amalai ducked down deep among the ferns, her body tense, her ears pricked. She could feel the blood pulsing through her veins. Cautiously, she crept forward between the black trunks until she could see.

It was cadets, from the Diamondtip fortress. They moved awkwardly, as if tied together. No, they were carrying something, a burden both heavy and delicate, it seemed.

Amalai followed.

As the cadets approached the back wall of the garrison courtyard, two guards came out across the little bridge to meet them. Soon, another soldier followed from inside, and another. An agitated little group had formed by the time Amalai reached them. She waited on the fringes of the small crowd, slowly and unobtrusively moving forward until she could get a peek between the uniformed backs.

A young man, a youth really, lay on a makeshift litter, eyes closed. He was no more than maybe sixteen years old and strikingly beautiful, with a face so even and perfect it could have been that of a marble statue. It was as white as marble, too. He was dead.

A large cloth covered his body, and Amalai did not know if she could truly see the shapes of crushed and mangled limbs underneath or if this was her imagination running wild. She turned away, shuddering. But then she turned back, anyway.

The soldiers surrounding the stretcher were mumbling. Some were silent with shock, some cursing under their breaths or growling angrily. The cadets explained, again and again.

Until one of them lost it. "I swear! I swear! I saw it with my own eyes!" His voice broke. He was a sturdy lad, with strong, bulging muscles. But his body was shaking.

One comrade put an arm around his shoulders, trying to calm him down. "There, now, Kortid."

But Kortid did not want to be calmed. "I am telling you!" he shouted. "I was the one who found him. And I saw! There was a shadow crouched over him, a ghost, a demon! It killed him, pinning him down, drinking his blood dry!"

Kortid was shivering. His face was unnaturally pale, even for one as white-skinned as he, and little beads of sweat were standing on his brow. Some of the soldiers seemed to believe him and were awkward and uncomfortable with fear. Some still tried to soothe him like a sick child.

"See for yourselves then! Go check his neck!" Kortid shouted.

The soldiers looked at each other uncertainly. Then one of them, a squat woman, stepped up and pulled back the blanket in one short, measured move. In the glow of a lantern, the neck of the youth shone like the pale moon, as white and immaculate as his face. It was not mangled, not slit, nor did it show any other sign of violence or injury. The only thing visible on the snowy skin were two small red dots. Right above the artery.

The soldier pulled back.

Others leaned in more closely.

A hushed murmur began to weave through the group that had fallen silent in anticipation before. The murmur grew, and turned, and came back to its origin as a full-grown rumor, a tale, a suspicion. A denial, a question. Heads were shaking or nodding in the middle of deep conversations.

They broke off abruptly when orders were shouted from the garrison gate. All the soldiers snapped to attention immediately.

They carried the stretcher inside.

The gate closed.

Amalai began to walk back home slowly, haltingly, her body and mind in a daze.

* * *

“But demons don’t exist! Everyone knows that!” Rebonya asserted hotly, her almond eyes shooting fire at her fellow cadets.

The common room was full of agitation.

Hun had died.

Over by the fireplace, Kortid was telling and retelling his story of the fiend, the terrible shadow he had seen in the forest. Several cadets were listening, asking questions, their faces pinched and troubled. Some were kicking the wall or crying quietly, heads in their hands.

Heated arguments had broken out in various corners.

“Demons are just a fairy tale! Used in the feudal age to scare people into submission!” Rebonya shook her head vigorously, sending her short black hair flying. “Old mages conjured up illusions to make people afraid and, once afraid, easy to control. We’re not going to fall for that again!” She snorted.

The cadet beside her wagged his head. “But Hun did die in—”

“Yes, he did die!” Rebonya’s rage interrupted him. “And I can tell you which evil spirit has killed him!” She pointed an accusatory finger in the general direction of the castle’s core. “That spirit! A spirit that sends people into danger for no reason, calling that ‘correction’. Which is really just a flimsy excuse for the powerful to inflict suffering on their underlings.”

Rebonya’s hand clenched into a fist. “These ‘corrections’ have never helped to improve anyone’s character or conduct.” She sneered. “They have only brought about fear, pain and humiliation. Self-deprecation, making people think they deserve such things. And making them ready to treat others the same. Everyday cruelty, preparing future soldiers for dealing out what they have received, and more.”

That was going a bit far. Was one allowed to say such things? The other cadet drew back a notch, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at Rebonya with narrowed eyes.

Rebonya charged on regardless. "You may say Hun has had a logging accident. But why did that accident ever happen in the first place? Why was he cutting down that tree on his own?"

"It was not an accident." Kortid passed beside her just then, his face still pale, taut. His voice had grown tired. A mere whisper. "I saw. It was a demon."

* * *

'A demon.' Berqar took a few strides toward the window, looking out between iron bars. The castle lay cold and stern beneath the gathering darkness.

'A demon has appeared in the forest. And it has killed Hun.' This was how the tale had come to her, the Commander of Diamondtip. It seemed like an omen, an oracle. A sign, full of secret meanings, full of foreboding perhaps, or full of hidden promises. A road to follow, if only one knew how to find it, how to decipher the signs that had arrived at her doorstep, but in disguise, in veils of both mystery and urgency.

It was a call. An order. Berqar felt it. But she could not yet name it. Could not spell it out. She looked up into the dusky sky, at streaks of crimson hanging over the castle's tower.

Slowly, meaning began to come to her.

She saw the menace hovering over the forest, over the soft, helpless town of Behrlem. A darkness full of power, immense, unearthly, inhuman. A force that would kill without mercy.

Berqar felt a glow, a red-hot energy rise up in her. This was it. Her quest was clear, and its call pulsed through her veins like fire from the core of the earth. She turned around, a gleam in her eye that had not been there for a long, long time.

But it was back now.

* * *

Amalai leaned against the wall of her rooftop terrace, pulling the warm body of her lover more firmly against her chest. Lahoon eased back into her arms. His torso was bare, leaving his butterfly skin to shimmer in muted hues of blue and turquoise. He looked for all the world like a fay lost in the terrene realm. But he was of this earth, as far as any of them knew, as much a human animal as the rest of them. Yet the yearning for the otherworld ran deep within his soul, making him ready to clutch at straws, or to reach for the stars. And this was how he had heard Amalai's tale. Lahoon tilted his head back, meeting Amalai's dark eyes. His voice was raw, riddled with hope and longing.

"This may be the time. Maybe, just maybe, this is my chance to touch fay." He pushed a strand of ink-black hair from his brow. "I will go into the forest tonight. I will call for the fay. For the shadow. For whoever may be there, if anyone."

His eyes were out on the horizon, where the black mass of the forest lay beneath a starry sky. "I have called so often. Prayed and waited, beckoned and lured. The fay are there, I am sure. But I don't know who they are. Demons, fairies, unicorns? Angels and spirits? Beings beyond name or conception?" Lahoon's words turned to a whisper, carried away by the wind. "They have never revealed themselves to me. But maybe tonight, they will."

Lahoon rested his brow against Amalai's dark curls. "I need to go alone. You will not fear for me, will you?"

"No."

An owl hooted in the distance.

Amalai shifted a little. "Yes," she amended. Her fingers closed around Lahoon's hand. "You are going into danger. But what else could you do?"

The plants of the terrace rustled beside her, in the language of leaves. Amalai leaned into their comfort. "I trust you will know how to call to that shadow in the forest. That your love for the fay will guide you well."

*

The night forest closed around Lahoon like a sea, drawing him into its depths. No moon was in the sky, and gloomy shapes of fern and leaf shuffled between the black outlines of trunks. There was movement all around, stirrings of wings and feet and branches, shiny eyes and twitching nostrils.

A magical lantern swayed in Lahoon's hand, casting a circle of muted gold onto the forest floor. It allowed Lahoon to see as far as his next step. But, by contrast, it made him visible for miles around, a single glowing light in an ocean of darkness. All beings of the forest would know where he was. No hiding in the shadows for him.

However, maybe that was just as well.

Lahoon was a seeker. But one who mostly relied on being found. All of his nature was to be an invitation, an enticement, an overture. He wanted to meet, and his way to do it was not to pursue, but to beckon, to charm, to offer.

So Lahoon sent his borrowed light out into the darkness without regrets. He even wanted to do more.

Lahoon listened. The voices of the night were cooing and rustling, croaking and chirping all around him. Monkeys moved in the branches overhead. Twigs cracked beneath his feet.

Lahoon felt his way into the polyphonous symphony of the forest. And let his own sounds chime in. Humming and clucking, whistling a low, hesitant question, Lahoon moved on, letting himself be guided by the thick intensity of life and by his own quivering intuition.

It led him straight to the fallen tree.

The massive trunk lay across the edge of a clearing, in a scene of devastation and disarray. Grass was trampled all around, among traces of branches torn off, of loads pulled across the ground, of past commotion and agitation.

They all lay silent now in the black of the night. Only the muted glow of Lahoon's lantern spilled light over the body of a mighty tree that had died here tonight, taking the life of a boy with him.

Lahoon sank to his knees, touching his brow to the gnarled bark.

For a long time he remained motionless, feeling his breath leave his body, mingling in with the smells of wood and sap and moist forest soil. The breeze whispered in the wilting leaves around his head.

Slowly, cautiously, Lahoon began to respond, to join in with his own rasping breath, with the sounds his own wind made as it moved through his human body, through the leaves and cords in his throat. A gentle hum vibrated out from Lahoon, soft and low, turning into a plainsong, a lament.

A mourning and a call, tuning into the mystery of death and the shadow of fay looming above it. Lahoon's voice broke from his chest without his own doing now, a calling, a quest in the realm of ether.

The pain over death mingled with his endless yearning for a life he could feel but never touch.

Lahoon did not know if he spoke in words, or only in the shape of his melodies, the tone of his voice, the swaying of his body. But he knew he spoke. And he felt the presence, sensed the fay he could not see.

"Who are you? What is this?"

Tendrils of death were still swirling over the scene. Lahoon could feel them. He leaned into their remains as he continued, singing to the fay in low, tentative tunes. "You came here at a moment of death."

The leaves trembled.

“Who are you? Why did you come?” Lahoon’s voice was raw.

“Did you kill?”

His hand caressed the rough bark. Looking for an answer, or a better question.

“Do you accompany the dying? Soothe the pain, guide the soul?”

Lahoon’s finger caught on a cleft the ax had left.

“Or is death the only moment you can cross between the worlds? Is that chink, that little fracture in the fabric of being, the portal you pass through?”

Lahoon’s vision shifted.

He felt the world around him grow denser, fuller, as if layers of reality he never knew existed had made themselves available to him.

The forest was full of death. Lahoon knew that now.

In the glow of the lantern, at the edges of the night, a beetle was eating a leaf. Lahoon could see the leaf dying, transforming into beetle. Its delicate green cells dissolved, their complex structure evaporated. But all of the life force remained, rearranging itself, turning itself into cells of a beetle, into dark eyes, into transparent wings hidden beneath a carapace. The beetle sniffed the air with delicate antennae and took off into the night, vim from a leaf flowing through its shiny body, tiny muscles knowing how to rise and fly.

A golden dot drifted out of the lantern’s light.

And turned into a bat. The beetle cracked between small sharp teeth. Death tore another sharp, painful rupture into the fabric of life, like a scream, a searing flash. And then the beetle cells dissolved. They stopped being beetle, and became bat. They turned into a beating of leathery wings, into the sensitivity within the ears of a mysterious being calling itself through a tangle of leaves, a flurry of life. The energy flowed on, the life force pulsing as strongly as ever, a wellspring of motion, of unfolding, of desire.

Lahoon felt the bat leave in its jerky, angular flight and had a sudden vision of its death. The small, furry body lay on the ground, sprawled, still. It became home to the beginnings of beetles, and to a microcosmos of beings so unfathomable Lahoon lacked the words to name them. The bat’s body was the space of a universe, a whole teeming, alien world, until that world had used itself up and died, falling in on itself, turning into soil, into the origin of trees.

Lahoon licked his lips.

He could sense the passing that was in the forest at all times. The death, and the transformation. There were millions of rips in the tissue of reality. Moments of instability, places where the unimaginable was happening, where shapes shifted, where life force passed from one to the other.

If death was the portal that allowed the fay to cross from one realm to another, there must be myriad ways to come over.

"Or is it a human death that you need?" Lahoon whispered. "Those of you who cannot squeeze through the chink of a beetle?"

Lahoon shivered.

Was he ready to die? To be eaten, to have his body and his life force transformed into a fay?

"No," Lahoon whispered. "No. Not yet. I am not ready to dissolve, not even if it means melting into you. I wish to meet you first, as who I am now. I want to have this very body to feel you touch me. This very soul to know you with."

All around him, Lahoon could see death, could see the cracks in the essence of the world. They shimmered like ghostly fireflies, like spiderwebs of moonshine.

With the gentle touch of a druid, Lahoon reached into that light, into that darkness. It came up his hands like a gossamer veil, an ethereal fabric.

When Lahoon began to lift his arms, thick folds of starlight gathered above his fingers, full round pleats of invisible velvet. Silvery shimmer came together like a lintel, like the edge of a blanket Lahoon had lifted, leaving a gaping hole of blackness underneath. A cave, a passage. Just large enough for a human to crawl through.

"Come," Lahoon whispered into the tunnel. "Come."

There was no movement. No sound.

No living being Lahoon could ascertain.

He sang softly into the darkness, a ballad of welcome, of hope, of invitation. Of longing, of love.

The sounds disappeared. There was no echo.

Lahoon's soul cried out with yearning and need. His body was shaking.

With a sleepwalker's certainty, Lahoon raised the folds of starlight in his hands and, ducking in underneath, fell into oblivion.

2

Clad in gilded armor, Rebonya stood perfectly still beside Hun's body, a guard of honor. Night fell in through the window. The last streaks of crimson had deserted the sky long ago.

Hun was laid out in state. The shallow case around the body was big as a bed, covered by a huge flag, with only his head showing.

Rebonya glanced down at Hun's face from the corner of her eye. Her fist clenched.

But then the sign came.

In perfect synchrony with her line, Rebonya lifted Hun's coffin and carried it inside.

The vaulted ceiling of the great hall arched above them, high as a temple. The floor was filled with formations of soldiers. Some had taken up position on the wide stairs, some on the hallway balconies one or two stories up. They were all standing to attention. Hundreds of eyes watched as the case was set down on a mighty table in the middle of the hall.

Hun, still as beautiful as a marble statue, looked like the epitome of an ancient prince, a hero on his tomb.

Berqar had paused dramatically in her speech.

Now she took up again, her voice low, but even her whisper could be heard in the utter silence of the hall. "An unimaginable peril is towering over us, over the gentle, vulnerable town of Behrlem."

The fiery glint of torches caught on armor. Berqar's voice grew stronger. "Hun was the first to have been taken. By an enemy such as we have never seen before. An evil, a menace! Full of bloodlust, devoid of mercy."

She let her gaze roam out over the assembled soldiers, calling out loud and clear now. "A force of darkness has torn away our comrade's life. May his sacrifice not have been in vain! Let his death be our wake-up call, our rallying cry!" She tore the cloth off Hun's bier.

Hun was naked, his body mangled and covered in blood.

A gasp went through the hall, an indrawn breath in a hundred throats, a missed beat in a hundred hearts.

"This is the demon's work!" Berqar's voice thundered through the hall. "This is what you will look like if you don't fight! But I say: No! We will not end up like this! We are strong! And we are at war!"

The pulse in the soldiers' veins resumed. And quickened.

"War! War!" Berqar bellowed into the vastness between ancient walls.

Slowly, the soldiers began to join in, as they were meant to, picking up Berqar's shouts, giving them force and volume until the whole hall was resonating with the fervor of their cries, the echo stirring up ghosts in the dungeons.

"War!! War!! War!!"

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Lahoon woke. His head ached. Dreams and shadows were dancing across the back of his eyes, the depths of his mind. He groaned.

And was answered by myriad voices. Chirping and singing and rustling.

Lahoon opened one eye. A monkey hopped down to the ground before him and disappeared up the next trunk. The warm light of morning was dancing through the treetops.

With difficulty, Lahoon pushed himself up on one elbow. His body was stiff, sore. But Lahoon had no doubt. Despite all the images in his mind, all the marks of travel on his weary body. He knew he had woken up in the same old forest. In the world he had always lived in, firmly and securely rooted in the terrene realm.

He was not in fay. And all he remembered of the night was his own seeking, his own endless yearning.

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Exhausted, Lahoon leaned back against the wall of their home, looking out over the rooftop terrace. The first rays of sun were reaching the neighboring bath palace, making all colors come out soft and warm. The deep golden yolk of the walls, interspersed with dark oleander green on doors and windows. The soft muted red of tile roofs proudly tilting upward at the corners. The luscious verdancy of the gardens.

Lahoon placed a kiss on Amalai's dark curls, followed by a sigh. "It was powerful. It was magical. But it wasn't fay."

He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. "Unless I have forgotten. Lost consciousness." Lahoon's voice drifted on, seeking its way through the uncertainty of wind and air. "Or unless the meaning

of fay is precisely this. All these wonders I do remember. Perhaps fay truly is nothing other than the magic of the terrene, as you keep saying.”

Amalai softly shook her head. “I keep saying that only for myself. For me, every herb is a miracle. And a person, a living being. I don’t need to see a little fairy sitting inside the flower to relate, or to be amazed. I am awed already. By who the plants are, as themselves. I will never tire of the mysteries of this earth.”

She turned toward Lahoon. “But I fully believe in your path, too, as I always have. If you feel the fay so strongly, I am sure that they do exist. And that you will meet them one of these days.”

She kissed his shoulder.

Lahoon pulled her close, a pained look in his eyes. “One of these days.”

A flock of birds rose and circled upward, higher and higher still, aiming for the clouds, for the distant forest, for the mountains beyond.

Lahoon sighed. “However, last night, as all the times before, I have not seen. Not touched. Not met.”

Lahoon ran a worried hand through his hair. “I felt close. So close. But no.”

Amalai shifted slightly. “Well. Maybe there never was a fay in this. No demon, either. That cadet’s neck did bear marks as if from a bite. However, he bore other marks, too. Much more serious ones. He had a tree fall onto him. That seems very likely for a logging accident. Very unlikely for a hunting method of some otherworldly being.”

Lahoon caressed the round terra-cotta pot beside him and let the plant play with his fingers. The dead, dried-up body of a blossom fell to the ground.

Lahoon’s hand tightened into a fist. “That boy died. He truly died. While felling a tree under perilous conditions, because those were his orders. His ‘corrections.’” Lahoon swallowed. “They risked his life like that in the garrison. Dealing out danger, disciplining people.” His lips were pale. “Really. What kind of a place is that?”

Lahoon pushed himself up in an impatient move, pulling Amalai along with him onto the narrow balcony running around their roof. He stopped where they could best see over the garrison wall into the courtyards. They were full of soldiers, standing in straight lines and neat squares in the early light of dawn, drawing and sheathing their swords in response to shouted commands.

Lahoon gritted his teeth. "Here. This is where the actual danger lies. With our neighbor. An institution ready to use violence. Against people!" Lahoon's fist clenched. "Honestly. What is this? Or: When is this? In the time before the Transition?"

He let his breath out with a hiss. "It sometimes seems to me like that. As if the garrison, filled with fear and aggression, were some little marble of ice, frozen in time, where the world of decades and centuries past has been preserved. Where the same play is being re-enacted again and again. Where every time you shake the crystal ball, the snow begins to fall and the little soldiers move, all in the same moves, all at the same time, caught in some hopeless and endless repetition of servitude and brutality."

Lahoon fell silent. He let go of the balustrade and leaned back against the wall of the house. His eyes grew a little unfocused as they wandered out into a place far beyond the castle towers. Lahoon raised the flute around his neck to his lips and let out a plaintive song, a mourning. A lament coming from a harsh gray world, a place of endless hurt, of people caught in a cycle of cruelty without hope and without exit. He played on, letting the notes fall into the air, blow away with the wind.

Then he stopped. He kicked against the post of the balustrade. "It is not true! There is a way out. There has been an exit, and we have gone through. We are out! Aren't we? The Transition has taken place! How come there still are these remnants of old spirit? And of old practice." He gestured angrily. "What is this? Why haven't we gotten rid of this yet?"

Amalai shrugged woefully. "Because the Transition was not done in a day? Even though it had a few very dramatic days in the middle, I admit, where it all seemed to happen very fast. But in truth, the movement had built up over decades, if not centuries, gathering momentum. At least that is how I believe it has won, and is winning still. By perseverance more than drama. And you can see that slow, steady, inexorable change right there."

Amalai made a sweeping gesture toward the castle's west wing. It was standing empty. So were many of the stables and the auxiliary buildings. They all lay still, lifeless, with their doors barred and their windows dull, no sign or sound emanating from them. Useless and forgotten, they yawned over at the spectators, reminders of ages past, when the number of soldiers in Behrlem had been many times that of today and all courtyards full of shouting and commotion. When

Diamondtip had been one of the biggest garrisons in Yurvania, dominating the whole south.

Lahoon grunted. "I know. The garrison will be closed, like so many others. And the cadets still here can't even fill the rooms of the school any more. It is all dwindling away." He clenched his teeth. "Slowly."

Amalai sighed. "Yes. Slowly." Her finger traced a firm line along the length of the banister. "But for now, while the soldiers still exist, at least they have no power, no presence in town. You and I and all citizens are living in the spirit of our new society, in freedom and equality. With decisions taken by the community, not orders given by overlords. With no one kept in poverty. Behrlem is free. The remnants of trouble, as they are, are banished to inside the garrison."

Lahoon looked at the stark, warlike castle and was suddenly seized by nausea. He felt the trouble coming out of the garrison like a thick black liquid, leaking out under the doorways, running down from the windows, rising up like a cloud of soot above the towers and drifting toward him, drowning him and the whole town in its poisonous embrace. Lahoon's hand cramped around the banister, his head reeling with premonition.

"Are you all right?" Amalai's concerned voice penetrated the haze. Slowly, the clouds dissolved. The world came back into focus. Lahoon was wheezing. He straightened up slowly.

"Yes," he rasped. "Yes. I guess so." He took a deep breath, leaning back against the wall of the house. "It is just . . . that this place makes me sick. Apparently." He turned around wearily. "Let's go."

Lahoon wrapped an arm around Amalai and walked her back along the balcony, taking his time to look down into the lush green of Amalai's herbary, and then over at the wide, open meadows and flower beds of the bath gardens.

3

Rebonya sank down onto her mat with a huff. They had started exercising before dawn. Everyone. And would soon be back at it. 'Now that we are at war,' Rebonya thought viciously, 'I am sure we cannot overdo it. Allow people to get some sleep and they just might forget to clench their teeth for a while.'

At that moment, her only roommate made his entrance. The morning light played on his black skin as Gureev quietly closed the door behind him.

Rebonya watched him laconically. No one she had ever met had come anywhere near this perfection of poise and posture, had moved with such irrepressible grace, had been so incessantly dignified. It was quite annoying. And it came naturally to him, quite visibly. Gureev did not have to concentrate to move like that. No one possibly could, Rebonya thought. You would have to concentrate your head off to keep on doing that all the time. No, Gureev was used to it. He would probably have to concentrate to make an inelegant move every once in a while. Well, he might still get there, given time, Rebonya thought with a wicked grin.

Gureev cautiously laid down a heavy tome he had been holding to his chest.

Rebonya came up, curious. "What's that?"

"Strategy and tactics. I am to read a chapter each week and hand in an essay summarizing my thoughts on it."

Rebonya looked at him in surprise. "To whom?"

"To Berqar. She will discuss them with me."

Rebonya let out a low whistle. "Berqar is giving you private lessons. On strategy." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, why be surprised? It was to be expected, really." Rebonya's eyes narrowed as she looked at Gureev. "She knows of your family. Ever since you came to Diamondtip a few moons ago, she has considered you a prince. Her prince. The one who should be her ruler. And mine, too. But I can tell you right now that is not going to happen! Not ever!"

Gureev raised an eyebrow. “Do you have to keep pointing that out every other week? In case I might forget?”

“Yes. I think I had better. Just to make sure,” Rebonya scoffed.

She frowned at Gureev. “You may say it’s not your fault Berqar gives you preferential treatment. But it is your fault if you don’t even notice she does.”

Gureev looked a little uncertain. He touched the binding of the voluminous book. “I get to do extra study on strategy because I need it. I am not good enough yet. And especially now that there is—” He checked himself. “Especially now.”

Rebonya huffed. “Now that Hun has died from Berqar’s reckless corrections, you mean. Now you need lessons in the strategies of armies. Very logical.” She pursed her lips. “And you think the reason Berqar does not give me extra lessons is because I am already brilliant? As is everyone else in this school?”

Gureev said nothing.

Rebonya scoffed. “Huh. Never hope. She’ll be using you in the end, just like everyone else. Like Hun.” Her eyes narrowed. “Even in his death, Berqar still used Hun. But who will fall for that? Soldiers are not idiots, after all. Just people, under pressure in a brutal system. Many will nevertheless hold on to their minds, or find them again soon enough.”

She raised her gaze, eyes sparkling. “Ever wondered why Hun’s body looked the way it did? Why he had not been cleaned, dressed and straightened up, as is common when people get laid out?” Rebonya’s fist clenched. “Hun was not naked in the forest. And where did all that blood even come from? Maybe Berqar had to sacrifice a rabbit for dramatic effect?”

“Enough!” Gureev’s voice was cutting, authoritative. He held her gaze. Then Gureev turned around and carefully picked up his book. He did not open it, though, just held it in his hand, with his back turned to Rebonya. “You do not believe in anything,” Gureev finally said, cold reprobation in his tone.

Rebonya stiffened.

Gureev turned around in slow, measured moves to face her. “Why are you here?” he asked, his voice aloof. “What are doing in this school? If you think you know it is all so very wrong?”

Rebonya snorted. “I’ll be out as soon as I can, don’t you worry. As soon as I get my seal, I’ll be admitted to the Academy of Magical Arts in Varoonya. And that’ll be it. Just a few more moons to go.”

Gureev's eyebrow rose again. "Of course. So you said. But why did you come here in the first place? Why did you not stay with your family?"

Rebonya exploded. "Not everybody has parents who spoil and pamper you," she snarled. "Some people actually have to leave, no matter what." She shot Gureev a venomous look. "My parents were terrible, and all their friends weird. The whole atmosphere was just poisonous. And at age eleven, I managed to get myself out. 'The Diamondtip School of Cadets' sounded wonderful to me." Rebonya crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I was a child. I had no idea. And once I realized where I had landed, it was too late. I just had to survive in here while figuring out where to go next."

That was a bit more than she had intended to say. Rebonya cast a sideways glance at Gureev. "Anyway. I am here now, and so are you. With your family at least as far away as mine. And as much surrounded by tactful silence."

"There are reasons for the silence, in the case of my family." Gureev drew his head up a notch.

"Yes, and in the case of mine, too," Rebonya sneered.

"That is nothing like it." The verdict of a king could not have been delivered with more authority. "Nothing like it at all."

"Oh, no, not at all." Rebonya made a sweeping gesture with her arm. But her eyes held a certain gleam, and her hand ended up in a fist. "Your family were Feudals, and mine were just ordinary nasty. So except for the nastiness, no overlap. But then, maybe your people were never nasty to you, only to others," she added sardonically. "They may have spoiled all their nearest and dearest even after they had left Varoonya with their pockets full of jewels."

"When they were driven into exile, the only jewels the feudal families were able to take with them were the ones in their hearts," Gureev pronounced with dignity. "True diamonds," he added, at the exact same moment Rebonya said, "Hearts of stone."

Gureev did not grace her with another reply. Head held high, his face set in regal equanimity, he turned away to arrange the folded sheets on his rolled-up mat into even greater perfection.

Rebonya watched. This was so like him. Even to make his bed Gureev would go down on one knee rather than bend over. All so that he could keep his spine straight and look poised and dignified. Rebonya shook her head and thumped down onto her own mat, thoroughly rumpling her sheets.

The buzzing and bustling of Behrlem had faded into the distance. The air was quiet out here, a strange quality of silence, devoid even of birdsong.

Berqar rode into the empty courtyard overgrown with weeds and thistles. Blackened walls rose all around, silent accusations, memorials of mourning. Remains of a fallen roof still moldered in a corner among ashes and charred beams. What had once been a lively homestead, teeming with ducks and goats and running children, was now a ghostly stillness, dead, abandoned.

Berqar dismounted.

She stood facing the one part of the building that, in its innermost chambers, still had not crumbled, and clapped her hands in a short, precise rhythm.

Then she remained motionless, her gaze fixed on the walls, her strained face betraying no other emotion.

Suddenly, an eerie wind began to blow out of the forsaken farmhouse. The whole courtyard blurred, shifting out of vision as if losing substance, as if all reality was transformed into a mirage of glimmering hot air.

Berqar did not move.

All around her, the universe stretched and twisted in wavering contortions of half-transparent images, writhing ghosts of a reality that once seemed solid. A thin, hungry wail wove into the wind, haunting this dream or nightmare of a world.

And then the waves parted. As the whine transformed into the beautiful sound of a flute, a path of perfect clarity opened before the charred wall, around the remains of a door. With an aura of purest power and solemnity, a mage in dark flowing robes stepped out into the open.

Berqar bowed down low, in the courtly posture of a reverent liege.

*

Pramus strode across his antechamber, the burnt remains of the homestead's hall, his long, gnarled staff in his hand. "This is our quest indeed! Never has a moment called to us more strongly in all these years. The demon realm itself is reaching out." His voice was firm, with only the slightest tremor betraying his excitement.

Berqar stood by the gaping window, her hand lightly resting on the charred remains of an old pitchfork. The handle was all black. But the pikes were still long and sharp.

“Will you go to the forest?”

“No. The demon is not there. It will reappear elsewhere. And when it does, I will become its master! Enslave it, make it my servant, bound to true power! I will summon and banish the fiend at my will. And the world will cower in fear and awe, as it has done for centuries.”

Pramus ran a hand down his long gray beard. “This is a door opening. We have been patient for so long, biding our time. How much of my life have I spent traveling, seeking out all those loyal to the Restitution! Weaving the ties, tying the knots, feeding the covens. So that one day, when the time has come, we will be ready! When the Restitution holds sway, mages will walk alongside princes once again, and generals in golden armor, in all their glory! People will bow down low in reverence, as they should. With the force of staff and sword unleashed, power will once again lie where it belongs!”

Pramus had talked himself into elation. He turned with a flourish, sending the embroidered beasts on his robes shivering. “It is lucky I am in Behrlem. We have to be quick. Feed the flame, move like lightning.”

Dark eyes glowed at Berqar from beneath a broad-brimmed wizard’s hat. “My servant will be ready tonight. If only you create the opportunity.”

“But do we even know where?”

Pramus waved it away. “It’s a habit. We can take that chance.”

* * *

“I can do it with you.” Gureev’s hand came up in an elegant overture.

Kortid shot him a grateful look. “Thank you.” He took a step into the corridor. “It is not that much. It’s just . . .”

Gureev nodded. “I know.”

Kortid turned and led the way up to the chamber. He paused with his hand on the handle. Then he tore the door open.

Gureev stepped inside.

Hun’s things lay about haphazardly, mingling in with Kortid’s, as if in the middle of a day, of a life. As if Hun had just gone out for a minute, quickly, without making his bed or closing his books, only calling back over his shoulder to his roommate. The crumpled sheet still showed where Hun had lain. The comb beside it still waited to run through his hair.

Kortid stood on the threshold, his arms tightly locked around his chest.

Gureev went down on one knee, gently picking up the comb. He ran a finger over it. Then he laid it down in the packing bag Kortid came to hold out for him.

* * *

“You are early.” The innkeeper scratched his head, looking at the five soldiers. “Garrison note said extra meat’s being ordered, they running short in their kitchen. But it was not supposed to be ready until later.” He wagged his head. “Can’t take it off the spit now. Would be a shame.”

He gestured toward an empty table. “But never mind. Just you sit down here for a little while, and it’ll be done before you know it.”

The soldiers stood by the counter, their faces grim, their bodies tense. A cold cloud drifted off their group, slowly reaching the tables where farmers and craftspeople had been talking and bantering, playing cards or enjoying a quiet dinner.

The atmosphere changed. The baker cast a furtive glance at the uniforms. A farmlad cleared his throat and shuffled on his seat. Nevertheless, the mood might have swung back to humdrum ease very quickly had it not been for Tenatetlan, a peddler woman who began to draw the soldiers into a conversation. Asking them questions. Had there not been a death in the forest?

Kortid was there. He had not recovered ever since he had found Hun’s body in the dusky woods. Every time the matter came up, he either walked away or talked himself into a fervor. As he was doing now, his face flushed with vehemence.

“I am telling you! I saw it! That was a demon that got him!”

The disbelief of the peddler spurred him on. The woman drew in guests from other tables, appealing to them for their opinion and judgment. Kortid was burning with intensity, the claims of his tale stampeding on with fury and ferocity, drawing all his comrades along in support.

Tenatetlan began to waver. After her initial skepticism she swayed and got drawn into the fear and alarm that Kortid radiated. She became oil to the soldiers’ fire. Now they were all raving. About the nature of the demon. The bloodlust. The danger that they may all be in, each and every one of them, any day. No telling who’s next. No moment was safe. Any corner might be a death trap now, at any time. This very moment. When you leave this inn, when you go home.

The shadow might pounce on you from behind, sucking your blood dry. Where was their protection?

The air at the inn was seething.

Ojorsven, the town scribe, who had been hoping for a calm convivial evening in his favorite tavern, shifted uncomfortably.

* * *

The sun had set, leaving the summer air soft and warm, full of memories and promises. Amalai stood on the roof terrace of her home, leaning back against the wall, sipping a glass of dark, aromatic juice.

In the neighboring bath gardens, magical lanterns of all colors hung up high on lines between swing seats and blooming bushes, their reflections floating gaily on the waters. They filled the wide, generous grounds with a pattern of gentle glows, like flowers opening at the invitation of the night. People idled between them in the pools, sending ripples of splashing waves over the edges, or strolled around the winding pleasure walks.

Amalai listened to the low hum of contentment, human murmurs mingling in with the song of devoted birds after sundown, with the rustling of leaves and petals in the wind. Then a soft thread of music began to weave into the mellow air. A smile came to Amalai's lips.

That was Lahoon. It was his concert tonight at the gazebo, and the sweetness of his melodies reached straight for Amalai's heart. She had heard this so often. In endless practice sessions, going over the same sequences again and again. Yet, once more. Once more she was entranced, enchanted by the yearning, the sense of wonder that Lahoon managed to weave into his music.

Amalai leaned her head back against the wall and let herself drift away, carried along by the river of harmonies flowing through the air, companion to the magic of colors and scented blossoms.

Then she froze. Surprised, she squinted down into the obscurity of her own garden. Something had moved there. Someone? She took a careful step forward, toward the balustrade. She leaned over. And she saw. No doubt. There was someone in her herbary, a black shadow ducking behind bushes, hiding from the light. A fast, noiseless, inscrutable presence. Darting forward, quickly, furtively. Rushing from darkness to darkness, cover to cover. Disappearing into the night.

Amalai kept on looking, searching. But she saw no more.

* * *

The courtyard lay dark, still, empty. Gureev walked past the stables to the forsaken west wing and sat down on a cornerstone. Long shadows fell from the walls of the garrison, stern, black, implacable in the dying light. A torch was lit somewhere far away beneath the portcullis of the main gate, and the walls of the castle drew together around it, a massive hulking bastion of night.

Gureev still felt the memory of Kortid's shaking shoulders against his arm, where he had held him out by the bridge. Saw the wild, panicked eyes.

Gureev bit his lip.

Visions from his childhood rose in his mind.

A dark, secret library, full of polished wood and dusty tomes. A ray of sun falling in through a skylight, pointing a golden finger at the greatest treasure of all: a heavy volume with gilt edges and large, embellished letters at the beginning of each tale.

Gureev's small hand reverently turned a page. To see the knight in shining armor ride out at him from a hand-colored painting, his head held high, his heart kept pure. Slaying dragons and protecting the innocent, the essence of a hero, a true prince.

Gureev had learned the story by heart. The way the book told it, and the way his grandfather told it by the fireside. It had sunk into his dreams, into the core of his being.

And yet. Somehow . . .

Against the dark silhouette of the castle, Gureev could see the image gleaming like a mirage. The rider came toward him, the white steed stepping proudly across the courtyard. But suddenly the mare reared up in fright, nostrils flaring, eyes torn wide. In the dust between her hooves lay Hun's dead body.

4

In the pale light of morning, the silhouettes of two fighters charged forward. Their bodies locked, drew apart, met again, their moves deft and forceful, their swords flashing, clanking. In restless pursuit of each other, they lunged and danced, thrust and withdrew, in a vigorous, driven encounter that knew no other purpose. Sweat ran down their chests as they crouched, muscles tensed, bodies poised, ready to plunge.

Then one sword fell to the ground. A shallow cloud of dust enveloped it as it hit the sand. One fighter's arm came up in a gesture of surrender, of protection, of persuasion.

"Enough already," Gureev panted. He leaned against the wall of the courtyard. A cool, scented breeze from the forest touched his sweaty skin. Gureev shook his head lightly as he regarded Kortid. "Give us a break. We'll still be exercising all day."

Kortid was just as winded. But nowhere ready to quit. "We need to prepare," he hissed out with the bit of breath left to him. "We need to be the best fighters we possibly can. With all our strength, all our skill, all our mettle. And when the demon comes, when the enemy rises, we will give it all we have." Kortid bit his lip. "And hope that it will be enough," he spat out through clenched teeth.

He gripped his sword more tightly. There was a gleam in his eye that did not yield to exhaustion.

* * *

A golden sun caressed the county house with long, lazy fingers. It was a thick-set, friendly building, much as one might expect in a provincial capital such as Behrlem. Red wooden beams of a timber frame shone between tidy white plaster inlays, some of them decorated with lacy lacquered woodwork. A wide porch ran around the building, sheltered by a roof with tilting edges and broad eaves, giving a sense of both quiet pride and comforting homeyness to the place.

And usually, that worked. Ojorsven, in all the decades that he had been a scribe in the Behrlem county house together with Nenimoria, had felt very much at home both in the house and his position. Despite all the rapid change the country as a whole was going through, Ojorsven's own life was a calm one, gentle and convivial. Full of old acquaintances, of farmers and craftspeople coming in with requests and suggestions, leaving well satisfied after a little chat and a helpful service.

But now . . . Things were disquieting, really.

Ojorsven wished that Nenimoria was here. To share thoughts and doubts with, to form an opinion. But his trusted colleague was on leave, with her family in the countryside.

Ojorsven sighed. He took off his high felt cap, looking at the ornate embroidery as he carefully set it down on a side table. His morning tea waved at him with thin steamy flags and soothingly familiar scents, and Ojorsven leaned back in his chair to take a sip. Nevertheless, he absentmindedly tapped his fingers on the desk as images from the night at the inn kept replaying in his head.

People were worried. Frightened and agitated. Was there a demon? Did demons exist? Ojorsven had always rather thought they did not. That's what they told you as a child, after all. That it had always just been inventions and illusions by old mages. The central office in Varoonya would certainly hear none of this, either. And yet. People were upset. And seemed to believe that he should be doing something about it? As the county scribe?

Ojorsven had no idea what, though. He heaved a heavy sigh. But anyway, he did not have to know. He was only the scribe. Implementing the wishes of the citizenry, not deciding or divining what those were. As soon as any concerned citizen had an actual idea for measures to be taken, they could put it up on the board outside and call for a vote. Or come to Ojorsven directly, if it was a smaller matter. And as long as no one had any suggestions to make, Ojorsven would let the matter rest.

Nodding to himself, ignoring the uneasy feeling that remained in his stomach, Ojorsven brushed over the surface of his desk with one hand, then pulled up some papers from a stack beside him. Some other business. Business he actually did know how to attend to.

At that moment, the door of the county house flew open and two people stormed in, stomping to a halt right before his desk.

“Scribe Ojorsven!” Berqar bellowed, as if she expected him to stand to attention. Ojorsven did indeed get up, disoriented and a little apprehensive. He ran a hand over the neat side parting on his head.

Berqar charged on like a general before an epic battle. “Behrlem is in danger! A ravenous monster is roaming at large, vicious and cruel! We must defend the town! It is a matter of life or death!”

Her eyes were flaming. “I know the county house has no means to fight such danger. But fear not! Diamondtip comes to your rescue! Soldiers will take up position right away. The town will not remain unprotected!”

Berqar slammed down a sheet of paper in front of Ojorsven. “This is a state of emergency. No time to call a vote. You need to give interim authorization for immediate action. Sign here!” Berqar’s finger rested on the respective spot on the paper.

Ojorsven looked down. His eyes moved up to the top of the document as he began to read. But the letters danced before his eyes. His head was spinning.

“Hurry up, scribe!” Berqar barked at him. “We have not got all day. People’s lives are at stake! So get a move on, unless you have a better plan at hand.”

Ojorsven did not have a plan at hand and would not have known where to look. Or what to look for. Driven by the expectant pose of the woman before him, he took up the ink brush and let a hesitant hand waver over the paper. Then he signed.

* * *

The garrison castle rose up cold, unforgiving. Its stone was old as the mountains, but no longer wild, nor free. Hewn, and arranged to another’s will. Subjugated. And subjugating, in turn. With a mug in his hand and misgivings in his heart, Lahoon looked down from his balcony into a courtyard full of people. People made uniform. Arranged in neat, tidy squares, they marched forward, turned, marched sideways, stopped. A shout cut through the air, telling them what to do next. They marched again. Shout, stop. Shout, turn. Like puppets ready to do whatever the string-puller commanded.

Lahoon shook himself. “Those soldiers. All the things they have done in service to the Feudals. ‘Quelling peasant uprisings.’ ‘Subduing restive provinces.’ Which just meant: bloodshed. Killing anyone who dared to say that maybe all humans are born equal, and no divine right puts one on top of the other.” Lahoon’s eyes held an ardent gleam.

Amalai crossed her arms over her chest and stared into the tower's shadow. "True," she said to Lahoon and to the darkness looming above them. "True. And still, in spite of it all, we have won. Change has taken hold in society, slowly but steadily. Irreversibly, in the end. And in defense of the soldiers' honor it has to be said that at long last, most of them did indeed desert."

Lahoon huffed unwillingly. "At long last. When the soldiers finally decided they would not go on slaughtering people, even if someone called that an order."

Amalai nodded and gave the threatening fortifications a defiantly triumphant smile. "They did walk away, turning their backs on violence. Becoming farmers and merchants, fathers and mothers, sons and lovers. Ordinary people, who had other things to do than to kill someone."

The fortress looked back at Amalai with bland walls and a forbidding expression, making no response. But Amalai had not finished. She turned to Lahoon. "And indeed, it was the soldiers' desertion that let the Transition reach its peak. After all, only when much of the army had disintegrated did the palace guard step in, siding with the delegates who announced to the king that the monarchy was abolished and that all Feudals were under arrest, awaiting exile."

"How wonderful," Lahoon commented. "The soldiers have been brutal and oppressive for ages, but eventually they stopped doing it. How good of them."

Amalai held his gaze. "Yes. Exactly." She leaned heavily onto the balustrade and let her eyes roam over the scene in front of her. There was a sky over the stern, grim castle. It was just as vast and blue as anywhere else. And there was the bright little stream that marked the end of garrison grounds. Beyond that, she could see the rich dark green of the forest.

Amalai half turned her head toward Lahoon, black curls blowing across her cheek. "Actually, it is not quite true. You can't say that 'the soldiers' have been oppressive for ages. It was not the same soldiers. It was only the institution that has stayed the same for centuries. The people in it have changed."

She let her gaze drift back toward the garrison, where a few soldiers were marching away from their formation. "Most of the people in the garrison today are too young to have served under the Feudals. They have never killed anyone."

Lahoon followed her gaze and watched as the lone soldiers disappeared under the portcullis. "Yes. Many were even born after the Transition. But still, or even more so: Why did they join? Why did they go into an institution like that? The institution has indeed been oppressive for ages. It can be blamed. And it should be blamed. Blamed, and dismantled." Lahoon slapped his hand down on the banister impatiently.

Then he froze, staring.

The garrison gate had opened.

The soldiers were marching out.

* * *

When Amalai and Lahoon burst into the Behrlem county house, they found that a friend of theirs was already there, and on the same mission. In fact, she had already gotten halfway through the conversation.

"There is no way you can authorize the soldiers to march into town like that," Unleha scoffed at Ojorsven. "Hunting down some imaginary demon. Really!" Unleha radiated disapproval like a steaming dragon.

Ojorsven cleared his throat. "People were quite worried," he said somewhat defensively. "Upset. There was a real frenzy last night at the tavern, I am telling you. So something had to be done quickly."

Unleha shook her head angrily, her numerous short braids flying. "I don't know what happened last night at the tavern. Or why there was a frenzy. But I can tell you that the town as a whole is not shaking with fear. Nor are we all beset by beliefs in demons and ghosts. Lay off it!"

Unleha pointed a finger at Ojorsven. "A youth got killed in the garrison when he was put into danger as a sort of punishment. That's worth an inquiry! Even in their internal dealings, the garrison should be held to some basic standards, should not be allowed to subject people to violence of that scale. So here is something for the county to do: Increase control over the garrison! Have a scrutiny! But don't let the soldiers come out of the garrison and into town! That is exactly the wrong way around. There is no way we are going to tolerate this!" Sparks gleamed in her dark brown eyes.

Ojorsven drew himself up high, looking very dignified in his blue caftan and silvery dhoti. "There will be a vote, of course," he pointed out, his voice official. "Within one moon, as is stipulated. We put the

placard up directly. What I have signed is only an interim authorization. To cover the period between now and when a vote has been taken. So." He twirled his impressive black mustache. "No need to get all worked up. There will be a vote, and if general opinion is as you say, no doubt the interim measures will be put to an end soon enough. Before the moon is new again."

"It's outrageous!"

*

They were walking down a quiet, peaceful lane, and gentle sunshine bathed Unleha's black face in mellow hues and a soft warmth. But none of that calmed her down in the least. With well-aimed force, she kicked at a pebble and sent it flying off the road in a high arc.

Then she glimpsed the soldier standing guard at the next corner. Now that was all she needed!

She charged straight at him. "Buzz off!" she shouted into his face. "You are not welcome and have no business in this town! Be gone! You're the evil spirit here, the one and only! And we'll have you out before you know it!"

The soldier was young. A cadet, probably, no more than sixteen. He stiffened, eyes narrowed, his hand instinctively moving toward his sword. But at that moment, another soldier stepped out of the doorway, his face open and searching, looking from one to the other.

"What?" he asked.

Amalai laid a hand on Unleha's arm. "Leave him be. Don't take it out on the individual person."

"Why not? It's his fault, too! He does not need to be a soldier. He chose to go into that system, offering to take orders. He should know what we think of it. And he should know he's personally responsible for his actions."

But Unleha allowed herself to be pulled along, just shooting a venomous glance back at the uniformed pair.

"All true," Amalai sighed. "It is indeed unbelievable. And it should never have come this far. But there is no doubt where it will go next." She flicked her hand in the obvious direction. "Out." Her black curls bounced with the decided shake of her head. "No one wants to return to the feudal ages."

"Someone wants to return to the feudal ages," Lahoon said darkly.

Unleha glowered. "Yes. And her name is Berqar. I am sure in her dreams she is galloping over people's corpses and calls that glory."

Amalai snorted. "Come, now." But she had to concede. "I admit Berqar may be a Restitutionist at heart. And it is all very worrying. She is still head of Diamondtip, and she shouldn't be, and the whole garrison shouldn't exist at all."

She tapped her fingers against her thigh. "It was a coup. An attempt to overthrow the current rules in one swift move. And Berqar has succeeded. In that. But she doesn't stand a chance overall. Society is a long-term thing. You can't change it with just one single act. And Berqar will never be able to hold out for long."

Amalai's eyes narrowed. "The Transition is strong. And we will prove that right here and now. And make sure that when the moon is new again, the soldiers will be voted out of town."

* * *

Berqar was down on one knee before the mage, amidst a cloud of thunderous darkness. Blood-red lightning flickered around her, outlining her body as she held her head up high, her sword upright before her, the epitome of the eternal warrior.

Berqar remained poised, motionless, while the rumbling died down and the colors changed. With a turn of his staff, the mage beckoned her to rise.

Pramus's voice echoed through the vault. "You bring honor to your name. One first foray, and a sweeping victory!"

The torch let flickering flames lick up into the darkness.

Berqar's eyes caught their spark. "Soldiers have a presence in town. Like they have not had in ages." Her shoulders were straight. "We'll be on every street corner. Every day. People will get used to seeing soldiers on their doorstep, in uniform, and on duty. Making it their business to ensure everyone has come home safely. Asking questions about the neighbors. Concerned questions, of course. Followed by good advice, which may over time turn into small admonishments. And outright orders," Berqar concluded with barely veiled triumph.

She carried right on. "Some citizens will complain, resist. Get aggressive. There will be civil unrest in town. Needing a strong hand, to keep the peace." She tilted her chin up a notch. "I have declared war. Inside the garrison, where I can do so without fail. Now it will take time and skill to let that tremor ripple out into society."

Berqar still held the sword in her hand. "All the soldiers know the danger. Have seen the mangled body, the demon's legacy. They will

pass on their alarm until the whole town takes it for granted that we are in a state of emergency. In exceptional danger, needing exceptional measures.”

Pramus’s dark eyes glinted at her. “Very good. But move carefully. Our first sally was victorious. Now we will lay siege. Appear to be doing nothing while in fact we are fortifying our positions, preparing the ground. Until the time is ripe for us to lunge again.”

* * *

Amalai had pulled up a sun sail for midday. She stretched out languidly on the mats of the terrace, carefully avoiding the remnants of lentils and delicious rice balls beside her.

A satisfied sigh mingled into her speech. “We’ll not let the soldiers rule our lives. Not even indirectly.”

Lahoon’s face was still clouded. Amalai interlaced her legs with his. “It is easy to get drawn into a warrior world just by constantly worrying about them, or figuring out how to fight them. We will vote them out, definitely. And in the meantime, we shall go on being ourselves. I will not sit here all tense and fearful, living in battle mode as they do. Life is still luscious and enjoyable to me, and I’ll relish every single moment, best that I can. As I have been doing for years.”

Lahoon reached for his lute, a few doubtful tones falling out. Voices from the neighboring bath gardens mingled in with birdsong and the familiar far-off noises of Behrlem, the rustlings of a country town, the sound of home.

They reassured him. More courageously, Lahoon began to play himself a path back into his own life.

Amalai listened, memories of night gardens and luminous colors coming back to her, of sweet melodies drifting over from Lahoon’s concert.

And then she remembered.

“Lahoon.” She turned to face him. “There was something in our garden last night. Someone. I saw it from the terrace. A shadow. A dark figure, hiding, running, darting from cover to cover. Disappearing into the night.” Amalai moved a little. “What do you think that was? Who could possibly want to lurk in my herbary?”

Lahoon tilted his head, his hands busy with his lute. He let an explanatory ripple ring out. “Perhaps it was a couple from the bath. You know how people tend to withdraw into the last corners of the

park to make love. So perhaps some of these lovers got lost and withdrew a little too far. And when they realized afterward that they had ended up in someone else's garden, they wanted to leave as unobtrusively as possible."

Amalai smiled, a little crookedly. "You think so? So I would have seen the last of the lost lovers leaving?"

Lahoon nodded, well satisfied with his own answer. And, perhaps inspired by that marvelous alliteration Amalai had just come up with, he turned his strumming more in the direction of a song.

*

That night, when the moon was new and the sky fraught with dark, scurrying clouds, a shadow moved through the herbary. Hiding, darting forward, hiding again. There was noise and agitation all around. The wind tore at the bushes in angry gusts, making leaves rustle and shutters rattle against window frames. Grasses bent down low to the ground, yielding to the onslaught. A thin shingle, torn loose from a barn roof, was hurtled along by the stormy wind, sent crashing against a fence, then torn off and driven on once more.

The shadow kept moving, inexorably, purposefully. This time, no one saw. No one knew.

5

Lahoon woke. It was way before dawn. But he felt the call, the unspeakable pull at his soul. His heart was raw, open. He tried to go back to his dream. To the forest. To the portal. To the fay who had called to him from beyond, who had danced his magic, who had summoned flames of moonlight.

Lahoon stayed quiet for a while. Then he got up. Silently, careful not to wake Amalai, he slipped out of the room.

He found himself in the usual disarray of his studio. Cautiously, he made his way between the shadowy shapes of easels, between stacks of frames and paintings leaning against the wall. Lahoon sat down on the polished wooden floor, arranging the cushions before the low table. In the soft glow of a magical lantern, he pulled up a new sheet of paper and began to draw.

✱

Soft stripes of rose and amber filled the sky with light, and Lahoon was able to add dashes of color to his sketch.

A creaking floorboard made him look up.

Amalai, a sarong around her waist, came up to him on quiet, naked feet. Lahoon smiled, leaning a tired head against her rounded hip.

Amalai buried a hand in his hair, looking down at the paper. "Dreams?" she asked sleepily.

Lahoon nodded. "Yes. Dreams." He heaved a sigh. "Or not dreams." He picked up his drawing and ran a finger along the lines. "It is a call," he whispered. "I feel it." His voice grew rough. "I know the fay realm exists. I just do. I don't know what it is. I don't know where it is. But it is where I belong."

Amalai pulled him close, cradling his head in her hand. He lay quiet against her body, feeling her breathe, feeling her belly rise and fall. Lahoon gently moved his cheek over her skin, in both question and comfort.

Then he looked up. "I cannot find the path on my own. I have tried, and I am trying still. But I need help. And I am running out of options."

Amalai let a strand of inky hair flow through her fingers. "Hmm. Yes. If Varoonya was no good."

Lahoon sneered. "It wasn't. I was excited to go to the capital. And 'the Academy of Magical Arts' for sure sounded promising. Like the right place. But. It wasn't."

He scoffed derisively. "At the academy, they would not notice a unicorn walking down their corridors, nor a wraith sitting on their lectern. They have no perception, no knowledge, no interest. No tolerance, either. They are firmly of the opinion that fay beings do not exist, and they have convinced the rest of society to agree with them. So that's it. Nothing else to be done about it. Not at the academy. They have dismissed the fay along with the old mages, saying it was only ever illusion, a despicable deception."

A deep sigh escaped from Lahoon's chest. He impatiently pushed away from Amalai and stood up. "I must find another way. I absolutely have to. I can feel the fay in my heart, but I don't know who they are, or how to reach them. I need help."

He ran a hand through his hair. "And I will try to get it wherever I can. Even if it seems dodgy, or unlikely, or dangerous. I just have to try."

Amalai took a step back. She crossed her arms over her chest, her brow furrowed. "That mage, you mean. Pramus."

Lahoon's hands held on to the frame of an easel, clutching it tightly.

"Yes. Pramus."

The silence between them stretched, tense, uneasy.

Lahoon stared down at his fingers. "I know this is awkward. He is a mage. Such as history has seen throughout the ages, ruthless and imperious, walking alongside feudal rulers. Banishing demons at their behest, commanding fear and submission from the people. Until the Transition came to oust them all from power." He swallowed. "It is a grim heritage. Why would anyone still walk in that tradition today?"

Lahoon's knuckles were turning white as his grip on the easel tightened. "What kind of path would I take, apprenticed to him?"

He raised his head, his eyes wild. "But what if the mages truly can find demons? And if this is my only chance to come through. To touch at least one kind of fay."

Lahoon's voice was raw. "I know this is dangerous. And it may be very wrong. But as long as there is a slim chance that it may be right, or at least help me forward a sliver of a step, I do need to try."

Amalai grabbed hold of the easel as well, her hand right beside his, her knuckles just as white. "If there is a way to try, yes. Which I hope there will be. But as soon as he proposes to take you any place, inner or outer, where you cannot leave again on your own, I am begging you, please don't go!"

* * *

Berqar pulled a torch from a sconce and advanced deeper into the murky gloom of the castle's old armory. Swords glinted along the wall, neatly lined up, one beside the other, a long row of deadly teeth. But the beast was asleep. No jaws would snap shut just yet, no ravenous bite tear into enemy flesh.

Berqar let a finger trail over the cold steel. She could sense the strength, the unyielding power lying in wait. She turned. In the shadows of the back wall, two halberds crossed in mute salute, in warlike reverence. Beneath them, an antique painting showed muted glows of oil in a darkening frame. Berqar stepped up to it, raising her torch.

A windswept plain surrounded by mountains lay before her, the grass bending down low, the last leaves torn off withering trees. Dramatic clouds scurried across a thunderous sky, pierced by a setting sun. Its reddish glow reached down to the bodies of hundreds of unknown soldiers lying on the ground, their limbs distorted, their blood staining swords, soaking dirt.

In their midst, a glorious general let his steed rear up high. His cloak billowing in the storm, his eyes shining proudly, he held his saber in a determined grip, ready to rip open the sky if he must. An inaudible war cry was breaking from his throat, echoing through the scene of death and destruction around him, and down through the centuries until it reached Berqar.

Her spine straightened imperceptibly. Berqar held her head high, the gleam in her eye much, much deeper than a mere reflection of flaming torches.

* * *

Unleha was crouched among the ferns. Along the far side of the bath gardens, hidden among the greenery, a huge tube of copper lay in the grass like a giant old snake. Where it met the creek, it rose up in a tower of coils, its aged skin spotted gray with dust and lichen. Only a few patches of bare metal were still gleaming as gloriously as sunset.

A round dome hunched on the ground, squat and heavy, half buried among the bracken. Unleha was bent over it, listening in deep concentration to the low thumping sound coming from within, a drum that was deep, regular, unceasing, like a heartbeat. Magic was pumping the waters up into the spirals. As it should be doing.

Unleha pulled out her wand. As an artificer, she was the type of specialized magician capable of handling this traption and the countless others the bath used for all its needs and purposes, from heating the waters to illuminating the gardens.

Unleha carefully took the lid off the pumping traption before her.

The late evening light caught in a gossamer web spun out of glass, fine as a spider's threads, an intricate design connecting precisely marked points on the dome. In between, pure crystals glinted.

Unleha's palm came up open before the glassy miracle, offering a shiny dark amethyst. Her lips began to move, forming just one syllable, vowels round and full, ending in a grating lisp, the perfect pronunciation of an ancient rune. And at the touch of her wand, the stones danced. From the heart of the spidery labyrinth, a crystal floated out, a deep purple like the one in Unleha's palm.

The pipe gasped and spluttered, choking on water caught in midmotion, on swirls of upward and downward and chaotic roundabout flows in its insides. But the new stone had already drifted in among the arabesque crisscross, never touching, never disturbing any of the delicate threads. Neatly and naturally, it lodged itself into place.

The pipe gave one more drowning cough. Then, with a deep sigh, the pumping resumed. Unleha listened attentively to the steady rush, to the sound of magic underneath.

She touched her wand to the midst of the ethereal web, sunstone meeting dark amethyst, and let another incantation roll out over her tongue, arcane words of power and meaning. The stone heard. A spark flared up in its transparent heart, then ran swiftly and purposefully along the gossamer threads, lighting up crystals along its

way. Each one glowed with its own color, with the force of a spell held deep within. Unleha leaned forward, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

“What are you doing there?”

Unleha whipped around. A girl with black hair and eager eyes was standing behind her.

“Rebonya,” Unleha sighed. “One of these days you’ll give me a heart attack.”

“Sorry,” Rebonya said, not overly apologetic. She was already bending forward, leaning in toward the traption and its crystal heart. “Why did you replace that one? Is it the vim stone?”

Unleha pulled the purple treasure from her pocket. “There’s hardly any vim left in this one. I’ll take it back to be refilled.”

Rebonya nodded. “And the spell at the end?”

“Was just to make sure it works all right. Wait, I’ll show you again.”

* * *

The evening air had turned soft and mellow, and the lights were almost completely faded from the sky, just leaving an inkling of deep blue over one side of the horizon and a last stroke of purple on a cloud.

Amalai was idling in the garden, saying good night to the plants that were still up, plucking a leaf here and there, breathing in the scents of the summer evening.

Then she froze. There it was again. A rustle, a secret motion. A shadow. A dark shape darting forward, swiftly and furtively, hiding between the bushes, flying on. Without thinking, Amalai stepped right into its path. Into a collision.

Violently stumbling backward, she grasped for a hold to keep from falling. Her fingers closed around firm human flesh. No ghostly shadow, no smoky demon dissolved under her touch.

Regaining her balance, she found herself staring into dark almond eyes.

“Um. Hello,” Amalai said.

The girl before her glared. Then she tore loose in one frantic move, causing a black mass to hit the ground with a thud. A book, Amalai saw. Like a hawk, the girl swooped down to pick it up. She had a somewhat panicked look on her face by now.

"Don't tell," she whispered, threat or plea or urgency in her voice. Then she turned and ran. In a swift, desperate flight she bounded across the garden and ducked into the shadows of the hedge. A few more crushing, rustling sounds, and she was gone.

Amalai looked after her. Then she followed slowly, in contemplative, uncertain steps, up to the spot where the girl had disappeared. Amalai ran her hand over the leaves of the hedge. She wavered. Then she slipped through. Finding herself just outside the garrison grounds, Amalai edged along the length of the bordering wall, squeezing into the narrow space behind the hedge. She felt the twigs scratching her shoulder on one side, the rough stone chafing against her probing hand on the other.

Until her fingers caught.

Amalai bent down. Right before her was a hole in the wall, low, uneven, small. Just large enough for one person to crawl through. And in its middle, crumpled into a messy ball, lay the loose cloak the girl had been wearing.

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Rebonya was cursing under her breath. How could she have been so careless? How could she have missed it, not noticed someone was in the garden? Now the herbalist had caught her. But she would not tell on her, surely? Or would she?

'Perhaps I should have stayed and negotiated,' Rebonya thought. 'Explained and pleaded. She sighed. 'Or maybe running away was the right thing to do. She won't remember my face. Will she?'

Rebonya was moving stealthily along the far side of the garrison wall, as far as she could get while still under the cover of plants. At the edge of the kitchen gardens, she squinted out into the courtyard, very thoroughly this time, before strolling out into the open in the manner of someone who has just taken a little turn for the sake of fresh air.

As she entered her chamber, Gureev looked up from his book.

"You've been out," he commented.

Rebonya hummed a brief reply and sank down onto her mat.

"You've been out a lot lately," Gureev persisted.

Rebonya froze. Silence filled the room. Expectant silence.

'Oh no,' Rebonya prayed. 'Oh no. Not Gureev, too.'

"Almost every moment you are not on duty, you seem to be out," Gureev kept on going.

"I was in the courtyard," Rebonya murmured.

Gureev waited. Then he said, "Yes, of course. In the courtyard. Where else would you have been? You are not allowed to leave the garrison, after all."

The expectant silence was back in the air.

Rebonya writhed inwardly. What now?

She turned around on her mat to face the room. And her roommate. "Exactly. I am not allowed to leave the garrison. So I would not do it, would I? And most of all, I would not let you know if I did, so as not to force you to go against your conscience by keeping my secrets. After all, you might feel honor bound to report me. For anything. Even for having a disrespectful look on my face."

Gureev stood up rapidly. "In fact, I have not," he said, his voice scathing. "I have not. As you might have noticed. You've had a disrespectful look on your face every single minute I have shared this room with you. Not to mention the things you've said. But I have not reported you. Nor have I remarked on your frequent absences to anyone." His brow was furrowed in angry lines by now. "But maybe I should. Now that you mention it. It might be my duty. You could be a danger. A subversive element."

Rebonya burst out laughing. "Thank you." Her laugh was shaky, though, a bit like a cough or an attempt to catch breath. "I don't think anyone has called me a subversive element to my face ever before. Much less a danger."

She sat up on her mat. Then she even stood up and made a move toward Gureev, a small, hesitant one. "I am, alas, not involved in some secret plot to overthrow Diamondtip. All I do is get on with my life. The life that I truly wish to lead." She looked down at her feet, then raised her eyes to meet Gureev's. "I am preparing for the Academy of Magical Arts in Varoonya. I borrow books from an artificer who has studied there. I watch her work. Ask questions."

Rebonya dropped her gaze again. Her voice had become lower, softer. "So. I am not a danger to anyone."

Gureev assessed her with a glance. "I believe you," he ruled with a gracious nod. "I believe that you have been out studying. For the academy. And that this is where you wish your life to go." He paused. And arched an eyebrow. "I am glad you have something in your life that you find worthwhile. Something you believe in."

Rebonya kept her gaze fixed on the floor, making no reply.

Gureev went on in measured tones. "Being an artificer is useful. A good occupation. I respect your endeavors. And your fervor for

study." He hesitated. "But it is still against the regulations. Soldiers, including cadets like us, are not allowed to leave the garrison on their own." Gureev drew himself up straight. "There are reasons why such rules exist. And why we are actually expected to follow them." He looked at Rebonya expectantly.

Rebonya ran a hand over her hair in a worried gesture. "Well," she muttered uncertainly. "Actually, that is one of the few rules that I do indeed agree with myself. In principle." She cleared her throat. "However, I was not strutting around town. I was not showing a soldiering presence anywhere. I went out discreetly, going directly to my studies, and straight back." Images of the meeting in the herbary came unbidden to her mind, and she cursed inwardly.

But she kept on talking. "Truly, I am no danger. I am in danger, much more likely. Of expulsion. Or of being ordered into correction, into some terrible, perilous kind of work. Like Hun." She crossed her arms over her chest in an anxious, agitated gesture.

Gureev had gone silent. He turned away.

Rebonya took another tiny step toward him. "Gureev. I will be more careful. I can see it was too risky this way." She unfurled her arms and clasped her hands in front of her. "But I do want to go on studying. I need to."

She looked up at Gureev, her eyes intense, pleading. "I do not know if this is enough for you. Truth, and a promise. Please tell me if it is. For even though I can't tell what exactly my punishment would be if I got discovered, I sincerely hope that it will just never happen."

She cleared her throat. "And in that sense, I will indeed be grateful if you do not report me."

Gureev gave her a long, appraising look, his head held high, his body poised. Then his posture eased. He inclined his head, a subtle, courtly move. But he did not utter a verdict this time. "Grateful, indeed?" he asked instead. "You will be grateful? That would be novel. Do you intend to even let it show?"

Rebonya scoffed. Then a rueful look stole onto her face, together with a tiny lop-sided smile. "Yes. I do. I intend to let it show. If you truly won't report me, I admit you deserve it." Her nascent grin grew a little more pronounced. "I am not in the habit yet, I am afraid. Showing gratitude is an untried challenge to me. But I will go at it valiantly. And should I succeed, I am sure it will be a valuable lesson for me, one of the most useful skills I may ever have acquired in my years as a cadet."

Strategy and tactics.” Berqar was pacing up and down the officers’ room, lecturing. She paused beneath a large oil painting that had recently found its way to the far wall. A general beneath a crimson sky, astride on his rearing steed, blood and corpses at his feet.

Berqar turned around, a spring in her step.

Gureev had put his essay back down atop the heavy tome, his dark eyes earnest, his pose lithe and graceful as he was listening.

Berqar relished his full attention. The fire in her voice grew stronger. “Our battle is not only one of the body, but one of the mind. And of the heart, too.”

She proudly puffed out her chest. “For war to triumph in glory, it takes more than sheer force and brutality. The true believer, the right ruler needs to be cunning, scheming, just as much as any fiend.”

The charred remains of an old pitchfork leaned in the corner. Gureev vaguely wondered what they were doing there. But Berqar touched a hand to the iron pikes as if to a source of inspiration, her voice growing intense, in the way of someone driven by vision, or by nightmarish compulsion. “The enemy will not wait for you. Nor meet you with honesty and integrity. War is a dirty business. And you need to be prepared. Prepared to be sly. Ruthless. To do whatever it takes.”

* * *

Dawn rose in misty pastels, framing the stern dark towers of the garrison castle. Within the cadets’ chamber, Gureev was rolling up his mat conscientiously, never casting so much as a meaningful glance at the sloppy heap of a bed Rebonya was standing beside as she buttoned up her shirt.

But Rebonya had comments of her own and was not holding back. “The right ruler!” Gureev had given her a very limited account of last night’s lesson with Berqar. Nevertheless, Rebonya’s eyes were narrow, angry slits. “Do we have rulers? In this time and age?”

Gureev paused. Then he straightened up, turning away. "No." His ears were burning. "Of course not."

But he still attempted a rescue. "Berqar was speaking historically. Or metaphorically." Gureev cleared his throat, touching the worn binding of the tome. "Also, these are simply terms used in the book. Berqar was referring to that. It does not mean anything."

* * *

"Fare well in my absence." Lahoon placed a kiss on Amalai's dark hair. "And keep an eye on the soldiers."

"I will," Amalai promised. "Good travels to you." She tapped one of Lahoon's numerous crates. "May you return with empty trunks and full coffers," she added pompously, making it sound like a traditional benediction from some foreign realm.

Lahoon chuckled. "We will see." He pulled Amalai close. "Toan is a nice town. Much like Behrlem, really. Except that my presence there is rare, and people tend to give me much more attention whenever I do come. I am really looking forward to the concerts. And I will surely sell a painting or two. So even if I may not return rich, I will at least be well-fed and satisfied."

The cart driver arrived, and Lahoon hopped up onto the back, next to his trunks. A tone both tense and wistful stole into his voice. "And the temple library is calling me, too. Perhaps I will see something this time. A sign, a hint. Some breath of an idea of how to find my path into fay."

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Amalai had to hurry. Precetlan and Naleewa were going up into the mountains today with the other shepherds and their flocks and had promised to take her along. Precetlan thought he had found deewelarque bushes in a remote little ravine, and of course Amalai wanted to see.

So it was with happy anticipation that Amalai rode her now-empty pedalcart straight to the livery stable and saddled a horse. She caught up with the shepherds just as they passed out of the dark, dense woods into the open highlands. The wind was fresh and enticing up here, and Amalai felt it ruffle her hair, like a constant loose caress in her curls. The air carried the smell of wildflowers, but also a sense of the far-off peaks, of snow and ice. Precetlan began to chat and banter easily, telling Amalai stories of mountains and loneliness, of sheep and companionship.

It was after midday when they parted from the flock, promising to catch up with the other shepherds in their camp at night. A long and winding path took the three riders around slopes and valleys until finally Precetlan, with a proud inviting flourish, pointed them to a deep rift in the mountainside.

“Right there.”

They left the horses by a copse of shrubbery and carefully approached the edge of the ravine. It was awash with scrawny, angular bushes full of dark leaves and long, thin needles of thorn. Amalai reached out to one that had managed to crawl over the edge and picked a berry, full and round, black as night. Amalai squeezed it, feeling the juice run over her fingers, sensing the rich, strong fragrance sting her nostrils. She jerked back her head. That was deewelarque. No doubt. Amalai turned around, her face beaming.

“This is wonderful!” She gave Precetlan an enthusiastic hug and Naleewa another.

“Deewelarque are poisonous, aren’t they?” Naleewa asked.

“Yes, they are. You should certainly not eat these berries. But they can give enormous power to certain potions. If added wisely and competently.” Amalai hesitated. “They can also cause wild, feverish dreams. Hallucinations. Or clairvoyance, some say.”

Amalai looked down into the ravine. In between the bushes, bare rocks punctured a fall that led down into invisible depths. Yearningly, she let her gaze roam over the innumerable deewelarque in the cleft. “I would love to be able to reach those. I would love to.”

“Well. There may be a way. From below.” Precetlan pointed, craning his neck.

It took them a while to round the hill and descend as far down as the bottom of the ravine. But once there, they saw that, indeed, there was a way in.

Not a very easy one. They climbed over rocks and boulders, scratching their knees, squeezing through in between the thorny deewelarque that were now growing thickly all around them. They moved on, farther back into the ravine. Sheer cliffs rose up on both sides, and the shadow of the towering mountain plunged everything into gloomy twilight. They had gone quiet, as if taking care not to awaken the place.

A trail of soft, green grass appeared beneath Amalai’s feet. Like a silky thread, it wound across the otherwise hard and stony ground. Amalai raised an eyebrow. And followed the path ever more deeply

into the realm of shadows, beckoned on by a meandering lure of vivid life. Until she reached a sheer wall. At Amalai's feet, the grass spread out into an inviting carpet.

Cautiously, Amalai knelt down upon it. "A well," she whispered. She parted the long blades before the cliff and found crystal-clear water bubbling out of the rock, running over her fingers with the cold freshness of glaciers. Amalai turned around to beam at her companions.

But she froze in horror.

A black cloud was drawing up behind Precetlan like a ghost.

Precetlan looked over his shoulder and jerked back.

The dark shape moved and turned out to be a thin little man in black clothes. His hair was black, too, and his skin pale as the moon. He stepped back a little, seeing the shocked faces, but said nothing.

Precetlan cleared his throat. "Um," he rasped, his voice shaky. "Good afternoon."

The little man inclined his head, somewhat shyly. After the first fright of his sudden appearance, he seemed almost strikingly inoffensive. "Good afternoon." His words came in low, gentle tones, like a tentative offer.

"What are you doing here?" Precetlan asked, not entirely logically.

"I live here." A cautious gesture, a half-raised hand. Between the deewelarque bushes on the side of the cliff, a little stone house stood pressed against the rock. It was half covered by greenery, and generally so much embedded in its environment that it was no wonder they had not noticed it before.

"And you?" The question drifted out toward them.

"We are just visiting," Precetlan said, and it sounded extremely odd even in his own ears.

But their host seemed to find nothing unusual with three people just visiting an almost inaccessible little ravine full of thorny bushes. "Visit, then," he said, with a quiet friendliness that made Precetlan relax instantly.

Precetlan let out a deep breath. There was something incredibly reassuring about this man, something inherently trustworthy.

The stranger turned his gaze to Naleewa. "Will you come in?"

And Naleewa unwound. She, too, began to smile and gently nodded her head, entirely at ease now. "My name is Naleewa," she offered, "and these are my friends Precetlan and Amalai."

"Verlem." His fragile body bowed in an almost imperceptible

motion. "Will you follow me?" And his eyes shifted over to Amalai, getting lost in her gaze for one endless moment. Then he turned and began to walk toward the cabin.

Amalai's heart beat fast. She could feel her pulse racing through her whole body. She wanted to run. And to come close. She wanted to be with this man, and to be as far away from him as possible. She felt incredibly reassured by his presence, by his calm gaze, his quiet voice; and her whole body screamed panic. Amalai knew, if she followed Verlem in now, followed him into his room, into his realm, she would fall for his charms and lose herself in his world completely. She was yearning for it. The longing tore at her heart. It tugged at her in a way that was agonizing, beautiful—and not altogether natural, her mind told her. The remnants of her mind. The last thin shreds of her mind that were capable of thinking such thoughts, those last ragged threads of consciousness were screaming at her. Then the tug at her heart came again. In a moment, she would have lost all ability to think at all, to know anything other than trust and loyalty toward this man, Verlem.

Amalai took a small step sideways. Naleewa and Precetlan were already walking up to the cabin in Verlem's wake. They reached it. Verlem opened the door and disappeared.

And Amalai ran. She scurried along the grass trail, stumbling but not falling, and on across the shrubbery. She scratched herself incessantly on the deewelarque but did not care. Her lungs were stinging, her breath ragged. She hurried on, somewhat blindly, and was almost surprised that she found the opening again, the way out. She climbed over the rocks, slipping, hurting her knee, but making it through.

Amalai came out onto the open grassland on the other side. She charged on, then threw herself behind a lone boulder. Her pulse was racing, her whole body throbbing with pain and exhaustion. A whirlwind was raging in her head, her heart. Amalai closed her eyes and leaned back to let the storm inside her blow out. She stayed as she was, sprawled on the ground, in complete exhaustion and disarray. For a long, timeless moment, she knew nothing else of the world.

Then she sat up with a jolt.

Naleewa and Precetlan. She had just left them there. Abandoned them to a situation that had aroused such a strong sense of danger in Amalai that she had run with all her might. If it was that perilous,

how could she possibly have forsaken them? But there was nothing else she could have done. She had only had one last moment in which to run herself. If she had stayed an instant longer, come one step closer, she would have been lost completely.

What could she do? Amalai hugged her knees. Then she hugged the boulder, the solid, reassuring presence of ancient rock, and prayed for strength and guidance.

At least some strength came. Her heartbeat slowed down, and the vertigo subsided. With her brow still against the boulder but her eyes open, Amalai noticed a flicker of movement on the periphery of her vision. She drew back, looking harder. There was movement by the entrance of the ravine. A shadow, a human, drawing close. Two humans. Naleewa and Precetlan were coming toward her.

Amalai slumped onto the ground and exhaled.

*

Precetlan and Naleewa gave Amalai a concerned look. "Why did you go?"

"I didn't go," Amalai said. "I ran."

She tried to explain. And failed, mostly.

Precetlan could not see the point at all. "There was nothing scary about Verlem," he asserted. "Quite the opposite. I feel he inspires a sort of deep trust in you with his shy, quiet ways. We were just startled to find him there all of a sudden. But once you take a closer look at him, there is no reason to be worried at all."

"Yes," Amalai replied helplessly. "That is just what I mean. You take a closer look at him. He takes a closer look at you. The moment he looks at you, you begin to trust him. You begin to trust him so deeply, so unquestioningly, so implicitly, that there isn't anything else anymore. It is too much. It is more than is natural. It is as if Verlem has used magic on you. As if you have drunk a potion, one that makes you forget your doubts, or feel warm and safe no matter what. There are such potions, you know."

Precetlan wagged his head. "Well, yes. In a way. I suppose there are. But, anyway, Verlem did not feed us any potions, did he?"

"No, he didn't," Amalai admitted. "It would have to be some other kind of magic. One that he can work just through his presence. Through his gaze."

Precetlan gave her a look. So did Naleewa.

"I've never heard of any magician able to do that," Naleewa finally

stated. "But really, even if he could, why would he need to lure us with magic? Verlem is a hermit who collects herbs and berries. What could be more harmless than that? Of course we would trust him. What do you think he would want from us? What could he want that we wouldn't willingly give?"

"I don't know," Amalai said wretchedly. She was exhausted, and could still feel the turmoil within.

"Let's go back," she suggested weakly.

They made their way uphill slowly, laboriously climbing back to where they had left their mounts. The horses were still there, fortunately, well and unharmed. Amalai was relieved and instantly felt ridiculous for it. What had she expected? She shook her head, trying to clear it. It did not change much.

In silence they rode back the way they had come.

When they reached the crossroads, Precetlan reined in, looking at Amalai with friendly, concerned eyes. "Are you all right?"

"No. Not quite. But I will be. Thank you." Amalai shook her head with a rueful grin. "I am sorry for the drama. I could not help it. I don't know what came over me. But, in any case, I am very grateful for the deewelarque. It is a wonderful discovery. Thank you so much for showing me."

"Of course," Precetlan replied. With a few more worried looks and warm hugs, Precetlan and Naleewa left, riding up into the highlands to rejoin their friends and their flock.

Amalai stared up into the sky, her eyes unfocused, unseeing. Then she turned her horse and let him lead the way back home under a rising sickle moon.

'In legends and fairy tales,' Amalai's inner voice said, 'there are more reasons why people are irresistibly drawn toward another. It is not only the use of magic, of spells, of potions. It can also be fate, prophecies, the stars. Like lovers destined to be together.'

Amalai was not sure she wanted the voice to continue. But it did. In a calm, quiet tone. In an inexorable manner.

'And then, there is yet another kind of legend, of myth. There are stories of fay. Of otherworldly beings, some of whom have the ability to lure humans, just through their presence, or their willpower. Like nymphs.'

Amalai turned her head aside.

'Like vampires.'

It was almost noon, with the sun up bright and strong, and beads of sweat were running down Amalai's face as she hung the last of her bushels on the racks in the drying shed. She swept her brow with her forearm, dislodging glimmering drops from their trails over her hazel skin. Time for a break, Amalai thought.

She walked up the path into town, stopping at the third house only to place a dish on the doorstep, now filled with fresh mint leaves instead of the delicious pastries her neighbor sometimes regaled her with. She blew the sturdy man a kiss when she spotted him up on the balcony between lines of laundry.

Amalai began to hum a little, heading in the general direction of the plaza. She was retying a colorful scarf over unruly curls as she turned the corner into a busy street, but even with her hands in motion about her head, her subconscious mind noticed.

Someone was watching her.

Amalai turned around.

The soldier on the corner quickly looked away. But then she secretly glanced back over her shoulder.

And locked eyes with Amalai.

Amalai knew instantly. That was the girl. The one she had caught in her garden. A cadet.

The girl realized Amalai had recognized her. Her eyes grew wide, filled with—fear? Pleading? Amalai intuitively made a calming motion with her hand.

The soldier girl watched her, suspicious. Hopeful.

Amalai sent her a cautious smile and a short, small nod. That seemed to help. The cadet's pose grew a little less rigid.

Amalai took a few more tentative steps, approaching at an angle, feeling her way in to make sure she was not startling anyone.

The girl allowed her to get close without showing any renewed signs of panic. Amalai was as pleased as if she had managed to befriend some strange, shy animal.

As she took one more step toward them, Amalai finally drew the attention of the second soldier, a black-skinned youth who stood poised and upright, looking very proper and official. Amalai cleared her throat and introduced herself to the pair of them. She was rewarded with words of greeting and two names: Rebonya and Gureev.

Amalai smiled.

"It is unusual to see you here," she ventured. "For the longest time, soldiers were not allowed to leave the garrison."

That brought an instant gleam into Rebonya's eyes, who by now had lost all signs of shyness. "No, they were not!" she responded a little hotly.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, in a pose very far from exuding either timidity or soldierly discipline. "But there is an exceptionally good reason for this change of rules, as you may know," Rebonya continued with an edge to her voice. "In any case, we've had it explained to us at great length. A terrible demon is threatening Behrlem, an unearthly horror. No one but us soldiers can step in to save you all. So fear not. We are here for you. We are your protection."

Amalai regarded her thoughtfully. Rebonya stuck her chin out a little. Gureev had chosen to turn away slightly, looking out straight ahead with an expressionless face.

"You know, some say demons don't even exist," Amalai probed.

Rebonya gave her a knowing look from underneath her black fringe. "Fear not. We are here for you regardless. We will even fight nonexistent demons. So that you are safe. And under our protection."

"Ah." Amalai nodded. Her interest in Rebonya increased by the minute. "And how exactly will you protect us? When the demon comes?"

The glow in Rebonya's eyes grew so intense it practically equaled a grin spreading all over her face. "At the moment," she related with palpable complacency, "we will mostly say, 'Begone, demon!' And tell the citizenry to seek shelter. We could also draw our blades, in case they have any kind of effect on demons." The edge in her voice grew sharp. "However, soon there will be more."

"But demons do not exist!" Rebonya practically stomped her foot, gesturing at Gureev. "They were only ever illusions! A deception mages used to inspire fear and subordination in people. Demons are just a fairy tale from the age of the Feudals!"

Rebonya shot a spiteful look at Gureev. "And so I am not surprised to see you doubt and waver. To see that you have some liking for such tales."

Gureev held his head up high. "Yes. Of course. Everything I think must be because of my family and what they have told me. Whereas everything you think has nothing at all to do with what people around you have told you. Your opinion is not influenced by anyone, and therefore is so correct and indisputable that it is not really an opinion at all, it is just obvious Truth. Isn't it?"

Gureev turned toward her. "You always have all your explanations ready. You never listen, never consider. You simply rule out all other possibilities, and that's that." He unfurled his hand in a questioning gesture, raising it up before his chest. "At least I am uncertain. Open. At least I can admit that I do not know. Have you ever been ready to do that?"

* * *

Kortid's hand dug into his pillow.

}}} Darkness was creeping into the forest from all sides. Beings of the night awoke and spread their wings, turning their senses toward those who lingered, those who trespassed in foreign land. Ferns whispered as Kortid passed, touching his knees, wondering whether to object, to hold him back. Gnarled faces hid in the bark of old trees, watching Kortid with inscrutable expressions. On thin silvery threads, spiders climbed and descended over Kortid's head, looking down from the heights of ancient bows onto the large, awkward animal beneath them.

Kortid stumbled over a root. He caught himself, rasping his hand roughly against a tree by his side, scraping his skin. He moved on purposefully, urgently. Cautiously. He had to find Hun, to bring him back home before night fell and the forest swallowed them whole.

Kortid called out in a subdued voice. Hun did not answer. The woods did, in a thousand murmurs and rustlings, gray waving fingers, swift darts of movement between the roots. Kortid licked his lips. He moved on, his eyes searching the gloom. The undergrowth was thick all around him. A fallen tree blocked his way. Kortid sat

down on the trunk, swung his legs over—and landed in hell.

A scream tore from his lungs. Right before his eyes, Hun's naked body lay on the ground, mangled, covered in blood. A black demon pressed down on him, a specter of nightmares. At Kortid's piercing cry, the fiendish ghost flinched. It turned into a huge flag tearing away into the night.

Kortid stumbled forward. He fell to his knees beside Hun, grabbing his shoulders, calling his name, looking down into his face with pleading urgency. A white mask stared back up at Kortid, its eyes empty, dead. {{{

Kortid woke with a gasp, his hands tangled in the sheets in a cold, sweaty grip. Kortid could feel his heartbeat, quick and shallow. He bit his lip. Limbs tense, shoulders hunched, Kortid stared out at the darkness of his chamber, at Hun's empty mat, and at the images replaying, without pity or reprieve, in his mind.

* * *

Amalai was roaming through the forest, foraging. Birds and monkeys commented on her presence, calling down at her and hopping away through the treetops. The afternoon sun lit up leaves from behind, making them shine a bright young green.

Berries and bits of bark lay in Amalai's basket, roots and shoots. Even the mushrooms she needed for the ointment the bath had requested.

A good harvest. Amalai could turn back and go home now.

But she did not. Something was calling her, leading her away from her usual paths. She had gone much farther east into the forest than usual and kept moving in the general direction of east, then south. Soon, the ground began to rise up before her. If she were to continue along that route, she would soon find herself climbing up into the highlands.

She did not stop.

Amalai did not know where she was going. Or rather, why she was going. But she did not argue with herself. She did not spell it out, neither the question nor any attempts at an answer. She just kept walking. Just a little farther. The slope before her grew steeper and steeper, until the trees and bushes were barely holding on to the sheer fall between the protruding rocks. With difficulty, Amalai found her path taking hold of a root here, a stem there, scrambling on.

And then she was out.

She emerged from the woods to find herself bathed in bright sunlight, with the mountains' wind in her hair. The highlands rolled on gently to her right, granting a view of an endless sky above and a gentle earth down below. But to her left, steep slopes lead the way on to higher peaks. Boulders and dark, spindly bushes came out onto the meadow on that side, with stark, forbidding walls of sheer rock rising behind them. The ravine.

This was where Amalai had gone. This was where her roaming and rambling in the forest had led her. She had known it, somehow. She had felt the tug, sensed the place. Rather than taking the long and winding road of the shepherds and then going back down again around the hill, she had climbed up straight through the woods.

And here she was.

She could see the first of the deewelarque bushes, the ones that had managed to sprawl just beyond the outskirts of the gorge. She could see the entrance, sense the darkness behind it.

Amalai walked toward it, halfway, then halted. She remained still, looking up toward the boulders, the deewelarque, the rise of the cliffs. The wind took up once more, tugging at her robes, blowing her skirt into a billowing sail, then letting it fall. Amalai stood, unmoving.

She watched. Was there anything unusual, anything unearthly? There were rocks. There were dark, thorny, poisonous deewelarque. There was a breeze flowing through them, making the leaves turn and susurrate. There were whispers, becoming clearer, louder, more personal over time, a dark green voice reaching out in blurred, husky murmurs.

Amalai tilted her head back. She closed her eyes. She listened. She entrusted herself to her ears, taking in the rise and fall of airy tides in the bushes, the muttering of gnarled wood and craggy stone, of soft young shoots and swaying stems.

And Amalai responded, after a while. She murmured back. She hummed a little under her breath, mumbling, weaving in words she herself did not know. Amalai let her chant rise with the wind, with the agitation of the leaves, becoming louder, more urgent, as if in an argument. And she subsided again, relenting, as the breeze died down. Amalai crooned a few soothing sounds, a reconciliation, a concession. An understanding. She returned to the softness, the quiet, the listening. The peace of companionship. Companionship with the rustling leaves, the whispering grass. She remained there a

long time, listening to their utterances, singing with them in as hushed and secret a tone as they did themselves, weaving in sounds that came from she did not know where. Her own sounds, the ones she had within her, to talk to the wind and the whippers.

Amalai did not feel time pass. But she did see, eventually, how the shadow of the mountain moved across the meadow. The sun had almost gone down behind the crest, and evening was beginning to creep up into the highlands on all sides. A pale moon had grown well beyond a sickle.

Amalai turned slowly. She began to walk back, a few hesitant steps at first, then more firmly, until she moved with a clear, steady stride, headed toward home, toward human settlements, while there would still be light enough to let her make the steep, unfamiliar climb back down.

At the brink of the forest, she stopped and looked back. The entrance to the ravine lay quiet, unmoving. The deewelarque were turning from dark green to black, and taciturn boulders guarded an opening that, slowly, was beginning to be covered up by night.

She did not see Verlem.

How old were your parents during the Transition? When all the Feudals were sent into exile?" Rebonya asked.

Gureev raised his eyes to her, then looked down at his book again.

Rebonya calculated a guess. "Toddlers, probably. They were not interested in politics at the time." Rebonya's tone softened. "We are too young. Even your parents are too young to have been directly involved in the Transition. How could you still be affected that much?"

Gureev shut his book. He got up and walked over to the window, staring out into the courtyard, or into nothingness.

But then he turned, and decided to answer. "I did not grow up with my direct ancestors. Those were more like aunts and uncles to me, not parents. I spent the winter moons in town with them sometimes, when I was older. They were kind. And interesting. Just not as close as parents." Gureev ran a hand over his curly head. "It was my ancestors' ancestors who became my parents, who gave me care and love and attention day after day."

A full moon came out from behind a cloud and lit up the window beside him. Gureev let the pale light play on his hand. "So my parents are much older, over seventy by now. And they did hold positions of power at the time of the Transition. They were princes at court. In their thirties they had their future before them. So they were perceived to be a threat, and got exiled to a far-away estate for the rest of their lives." Gureev stared at the bare walls of their chamber. "I shared their exile. On the estate, I was given a home. And an education."

By former princes of the feudal court, Rebonya thought, and choked down a scathing comment. Hooking her fingers in her belt, she stared down at her feet. And managed to keep her silence.

Gureev turned his head to look at her.

"Tell me about the estate," Rebonya mumbled.

A warm glow came into Gureev's eyes. "It is beautiful land. Soft, rolling hills. A few orchards. Mostly fields, vegetables. Some pastures.

The estate itself is not terribly large. A few dozen people lived there.” He paused. “It is in Zonzelon. All the feudal families have been spread out over different counties in Jovaden, as you probably know. Without contact. So my parents have never heard from any of their friends again. Nor from their families, except those closest few who were exiled with them.” His tone took on an edge of anger and bitterness. “And of course, the few dozen people on the estate were all our prison guards. Even if they tried not to look it. If they kept up appearances. As if we were some random genteel family spending time on their modest country estate.”

“Very modest,” Rebonya murmured, and instantly wished she hadn’t.

Gureev spun around. “Why am I even telling you. Anything,” he snapped. “All you do is look for new material to reproach me with. To turn against me any way you can.” He grabbed his book and walked out the door.

Rebonya kept gazing down at her feet. She kicked at an invisible pebble. Then she turned to follow Gureev.

The common room was almost empty. A few magical lanterns gave a soft golden sheen to an old coat of arms here, the curving lid of a trunk there. Two young cadets were seated at low tables by the wall, enveloped in an amber glow beneath the black square of a window, poring over open books before writing down another line on the sheets in front of them. Other than that, there was only Gureev, his gaze firmly locked onto the page of his book.

Rebonya walked up beside him. She let her gaze roam over the tomes on a shelf by the wall, letting titles of faded gold wink at her through the twilight, as if she had come for that. She stood quietly for some time, running a finger down the weathered spines.

When she finally spoke, it was as if to herself, her voice very low, the word just falling out.

“Sorry.”

Rebonya turned and went back through the door, not waiting for Gureev to respond.

* * *

A warm, mellow light slanted in through the high windows of the Toan temple library, playing on the worn limestone floor, on the winding elegance of the pillars. The whole room was bathed in invisible mists of dust and sunlight, suffused with pale gold and a quiet sacredness.

Lahoon began to wish he were dressed in white so that he could blend in, be another figurine of honey and ivory in this beautiful tableau. But then the temple servant came back and all of Lahoon's attention reverted to the treasures she carried.

"Thank you!" Gratefully, Lahoon received a bundle of old scriptures into his arms. He settled onto a mat by the wall, the stillness of the temple all around him. As he unrolled the first bamboo scroll, the dust of decades and spirit of centuries welled up to greet him. He reverently ran a finger along the painted slip, sinking down into ancient tales and deep absorption.

Hours later, the sunlight had faded, and only the muted glow of magical lanterns shone between the shadows. Lahoon had noticed none of it. He was buried in divine chronicles, in old yarns and forgotten prophecies. But finally, the temple servant came to bid him good night. And that was just in time.

Lahoon mumbled hasty words of gratitude for being allowed to leave a heap of legends to lie until morning. He grabbed his bag and hurried on toward the Summerstar, the most celebrated tavern in Toan, where his concert was about to begin.

* * *

As she climbed over, Rebonya let her hand rest on the giant copper pipe snaking through the bath gardens. She listened to the sound of rushing water within, and to the steady heartbeat of magic underneath.

Rebonya smiled as she pushed through the high ferns. Before her, a small house lay hidden among the bushes, its low roof of terra-cotta tiles overgrown with moss. The yellow coating on the walls was tarnished and crumbling, as was the dark green paint on the shutters. It looked homey, secret and magical all at once, Rebonya thought. She could not imagine a better place to spend her evenings off. Her heart was beating in happy anticipation as she cautiously knocked on the door.

"Hmm?" answered a voice from inside. Rebonya pulled the door open a crack and slid in. Unleha stood bent over a narrow workbench, looking down at the intricate patterns and myriad lines on a large scroll. All around her, the disarray of magic piled up: heaps of glass thread and crystals, half-opened wood cases, metallic instruments of an outlandish nature, and more scrolls.

“Rebonya!” A scrawny twelve-year-old girl hopped off the bench by the wall. Veertan, one of Unleha’s daughters. “Look what we’ve got!” She proudly held out a slim oval wooden case, smooth and polished, about as long as her lower arm. “A traption, built from scratch. Unleha has just finished setting it aglow, and I helped!”

Rebonya stepped closer gingerly and peered inside. A labyrinth of nearly invisible threads glinted back at her, interspersed with shiny clear crystals glowing pale green and amethyst purple.

“What will it do?” Rebonya asked.

“Don’t tell, don’t tell!” Veertan instantly begged of Unleha.

“I’ll show you!” She grabbed Rebonya’s elbow to pull her out into the wilderness around the cabin. The evening light was dim, full of blue shadows, the trees a black outline against a sky striped with lavender. They waded a few steps through thick, knee-deep greenery until, among the vines and the bracken, Veertan found an open, even patch of moss and sat the traption down upon it.

Rebonya squatted beside the girl, her dark eyes full of anticipation.

“Watch this,” Veertan whispered.

At her touch, a column of bright blue light shot from the wooden case, a clear, incandescent beam cutting through the shadows of night creeping up all around them. Beneath the fading colors of evening, amidst the waving shadows of ferns, the blue glow seemed almost otherworldly.

“Isn’t that beautiful?” Veertan turned to Rebonya, bright-eyed.

Unleha came to crouch beside her. “It is very special. An entirely new form of putting light together. No way any of our old magical lanterns could ever have produced a beam like this.”

Rebonya let her eyes rest on that brightness of blue, on that finger of a god, pointing straight to the heavens. She was suitably awed. It was only after long moments of admiration that she turned around to ask, “And what do people want that for?”

Unleha shrugged. “No idea. Does it need a purpose beyond looking great?”

“Did they not tell you when they ordered it?”

“No. I did not speak to the people directly. I only talked to Tenatetlan, the peddler, who wanted it for somebody else. I think she even ordered several of these, asking all the artificers she could get hold of. But, anyway,” Unleha switched topics suddenly, “there is another bit of good news, have you heard?”

She sent her beaded braids flying with an energetic turn of her head. "The scrutiny has started. Because of Hun's death. So the county scrutinizer will be showing up in the garrison soon. In the Diamondtip School of Cadets, to be precise. To find out how it could have happened that one of the youths got killed." There was a wicked gleam in Unleha's eyes. "And whether perhaps anything needs to be changed within that system, to make sure it does not happen again."

* * *

Kortid wielded his blade with strength and precision, cold metal flashing in the evening light as he spun around, parried an invisible enemy, then lunged for another. Straw puppets winced as the sharp point touched them, withdrew, came again. Sweat was running down Kortid's face, but his eyes were fierce, unrelenting.

He turned only when his companions called him. This was the hour. Time to move out of the training court and into the streets of a dusky town.

"This is the last time we will go out unprotected, thank goodness." Kortid squinted up at the pale round moon rising in the sky. He sheathed his weapon with a deft, forceful move. "Tomorrow the magic swords will arrive." He pressed his final comment out through clenched teeth. "We can only pray that we will survive another night."

Rebonya scoffed behind him. "'Survive another night', my word. It's not as if our lives were hanging by a thread."

"Shut up!" Kortid spun around, eyes furious. "Don't you dare say another word," he hissed. "Don't you dare question me again. I saw what I saw, with my own eyes, and I won't have anyone tell me I didn't. You were not there. You have no idea! So shut it!"

Rebonya's body tensed. "I was not there, but I am here! And I have got eyes too, and I can see what is going—"

"No, you cannot!" Kortid shouted ferociously. "You know nothing! All you have is stories and conjectures. Theories. But I saw that demon! Directly. In front of me. Sitting on Hun's dead body." Kortid's face was pale by now, and every muscle in his body hard as steel. Images of night came unbidden to his mind, of a forest of darkness, of looming black trees. Of Hun's mangled limbs, his lifeless mask of a face.

Kortid's breath had grown shallow and ragged. His eyes were feverish, fixing Rebonya.

"Don't you dare!"

Dark clouds were hanging over the town square of Behrlem, making the late afternoon seem tired and gloomy. However, every now and then a ray of light fell through the cracks, and lines of silver flared up dramatically in its wake, tracing the outlines of the billowing clouds with exclamations of brightness. Then they disappeared again, swallowed up by mountains of rainy gray, plunging the town into shadow.

The soldiers stood in formation at the far side of the plaza. A small, orderly squad in the middle. Around them, a wider circle of individual soldiers, with plenty of space between them, a very loose boundary. But still a boundary. People stood around that wider circle, watching. No one crossed in.

Within this theater's arena, one soldier after the other stepped up, leaving the formation to come to Berqar at the front. In a solemn gesture, each soldier received an oval wooden case, polished and shining, into outstretched hands; bowed in reverence; and turned to march back into the formation. Each one, except the very last. Gureev, receiving a special command from Berqar along with his case, took up position outside the orderly lines of the squad and remained, singled out and alone, in front of the first row of his comrades.

Berqar stepped back.

Light seemed to drain from within the circle, leaving the soldiers to drown in darkness. But then a creek of sparks began to pour in, bringing a warm glow back into the murky theater. The shimmer grew deeper, denser, finally becoming strong as burning embers, bright as sunlight. People shielded their eyes for a moment.

When they were able to squint out again, their pupils slowly adjusting to the return of the twilight, a mage with a long, gnarled staff stood in the fading glimmer of gold, his gray beard coming down to his chest, his blue robes swirling.

Pramus.

He stood upright, proud, and unbending, an image of power and authority. Imperiously, he raised his staff.

All the soldiers went down on one knee. They held out their wooden cases before them, reverently, expectantly. Their eyes were fixed on the mage. Pramus seemed to hold them all with the power of his gaze. Then he released them. With a turn of his hand, he made the soldiers touch the wood, all at the same time, all in the same way. And a forest of light shot up.

Bright blue beams pierced the gloom, reaching for the clouds.

A growl of thunder came from the sky. People looked up in worry. The rumbling grew louder, closer. But it was not natural. Lights of purple and crimson formed in the darkness above, deepening, gathering into a spinning vortex right above the soldiers. As the thunder grew almost intolerable, the whirlwind began to descend upon them. The soldiers did not waver. Down on their knees, their swords of light upright before them, they held firm as the gyre came down at them from the clouds. Blue light pierced the maelstrom of black and purple and flared up for a moment at the contact. The thunder became deafening, and as the swirl touched the soldiers' heads, it exploded out into the roar of a dragon. Or a demon. All the swords flared up in bright white. Then they cooled. The thunder had died, the vortex gone. Silence rang through the air as the magic swords dimmed their glow, going back from a white-hot flame to a gentle blue.

The soldiers still knelt. Breathless, speechless, they remained in a pose of reverence, of awe. Briefly, the spirit of the eternal warrior became visible in the air, larger than life: dark, slim, beautiful, wielding a sword of light with immeasurable grace and power.

The apparition faded.

The mage tilted his staff. As one, the soldiers rose, sheathing their swords. They turned to march, and in a heartbeat had disappeared into the dusk.

* * *

"She is trying to get you," Rebonya told Gureev. She turned over on her mat to look at him, then threw herself onto her back again with a thump. "What do you think? Why were you singled out to stand in front of everybody else? Like someone special. Visible to everybody. Not only to us soldiers, but even to the people of Behrlem."

Rebonya shook her head. "Everybody was meant to witness. To see that traptions are just banal contrivances giving light, but the arcane

art of a traditional mage can endow these swords with real, earth-shattering power. Able to ward off demons. And while it takes loads of us unknown soldiers to do the fighting, there is one above all others who is destined for the final deed. The lone hero. You. No coincidence that dream warrior at the end looked like a Gureev."

Gureev pulled at his sheets uncomfortably. "He did not look like me." He turned over. "He did not have black skin, either. It only appeared that way because of the strange light. That is all."

* * *

"And to think that I unwittingly contributed to the whole thing!" Unleha fumed.

"They've used us." Tenatetlan pressed out her words through gritted teeth. "They sent out inconspicuous middlemen to ask me, as a peddler, to ask you, and so they have solicited the services of dozens of artificers who would never willingly have lent their skills to the fabrication of lies and illusions. Swords of light, indeed! What an affront to the profession of artificers!"

An involuntary grin spread across Unleha's face, her black cheek dimpling. "The traption is great, though," she conceded. "I had a lot of fun making it. Seeing how you could put together a beam like that. Amazing method, really. Totally new approach to light. Never seen anything like it before."

"They have abused you!" Tenatetlan spat out venomously. "Are you some despicable underling, to be treated like that? They spit on you! Every time they are waving their 'magic swords' around in town is another slap in your face! Will you let such an insult go unrevenged? Do you have no pride at all?" Tenatetlan's eyes were on fire. "You have to show them! Fight!"

* * *

Kortid posed the wooden case gingerly beside his mat. He let his hand glide over it, feeling the smoothness, the polish. He took a deep breath and pressed down.

Light flared up. Straight, bright, blue, the sword of magic pierced the somber darkness of the chamber. The ghost of a smile came to Kortid's lips. He leaned back, cautiously releasing his hold on the sheath.

Kortid slid in underneath his covers, his face turned toward the room, making sure he could sleep with one eye open if need be.

Checking that the sword was well within reach and that he could brandish it in an instant.

He lay still, listening to his thoughts.

It was at nighttime that the danger was greatest. He was sure of it. The demon would come in the gloom. When it came. When it struck again. It would be in the darkness.

Which was why there must be not any darkness. There must be light, at all times. And the swords must be out, ready. The soldiers must never be defenseless. Not for a moment. Especially not at night. Not a night like this, when the full moon was swallowed up by remorseless black clouds.

Kortid bit his lip. He turned back toward his blade, toward its unflinching brightness, its promise of power and safety. A deep sigh escaped from his chest. This was how it should be. They must be ready for combat. With the swords' magic by their side, they might stand a chance. Including the chance that the demon might not even dare to draw near. That the magic of the light would keep it away. Would keep them safe.

Even if people did not see it that way. Thought it exaggerated. Or let their little comforts of the moment blind them. Like preferring to have lights off at night.

'Fools,' Kortid thought. 'Risking their lives. Going to sleep, even if to never wake up again.'

* * *

Amalai squinted into the pale morning light. Her hand crawled over to the mat beside her but found it cold and empty. Amalai wavered; but then she remembered. Lahoon was in Toan.

She got up and walked into his studio. Amalai carefully stepped around Lahoon's easels and the half-finished paintings that still crowded the room. Unicorns and dragons looked out at her from the canvas, alongside unearthly beings of light and ether that bore no names. She saw a pilgrim lost on his way to a desert temple, and the subtle lines of water fairies in a pond. Amalai walked on among the images of dreams, of tales waiting to be told, of worlds wanting to be found.

She felt the love and the yearning.

She thought of Lahoon.

And she thought of Verlem.

*

In the deep dense green of the forest, Amalai was walking up toward the highlands. Again. And again. She had given up any attempts of arguing about that with herself.

She just went. For another fleeting moment, another immeasurable hour spent with the wind and the grass, the mountains and the deewelarque, the sky and the wildflowers. For a presence, for a whisper of fay.

Amalai approached the entrance of the ravine very slowly, very cautiously, never directly. She changed her path a little, drifting over just one bit toward the side. She edged forward a small measure, then stood there for the rest of the afternoon, listening to the wind and the whispering leaves.

Another time, when she came back again, she moved in only one step farther and sat down, still as a plant, until a rabbit came and sat down opposite her, a good distance away. They remained there, exchanging glances, until it was time for the rabbit to go home.

Amalai felt the air move around her, drift into the ravine and out of it. She came to know the particular smell it carried of the atmosphere within, of the enclosure, of the darkness and secrecy in its depth. She touched the boulders, conversing with the cold hardness of stone. She made friends with the lichen growing upon it, with the ever so tender shades of gray and whitish green they shared. Allowing them to show her the pace at which time passed for them. Staying with them, ageless.

Amalai saw streams of cloud pass over the mountain. Saw the light shift on the meadow, a waning half-moon fade into morning. She saw the darkness of the ravine behind the boulders change texture.

She felt Verlem.

He was there. He had been there all the time. Every time. Amalai had known it, even on that first evening, when she had not seen him. But he was there. Verlem was watching her, sensing her. Feeling her presence. Just as she was feeling his presence. Or the presence of the whole mountainside, the grasses, the thorny bushes. Amalai could not distinguish between Verlem and the wind, or the scents of the ravine. But she did not care. It did not seem to matter. Or, somehow, to amount to the same thing, in the end.

Amalai returned, again and again, to be with him, with them, with all of it.

And Verlem was there.

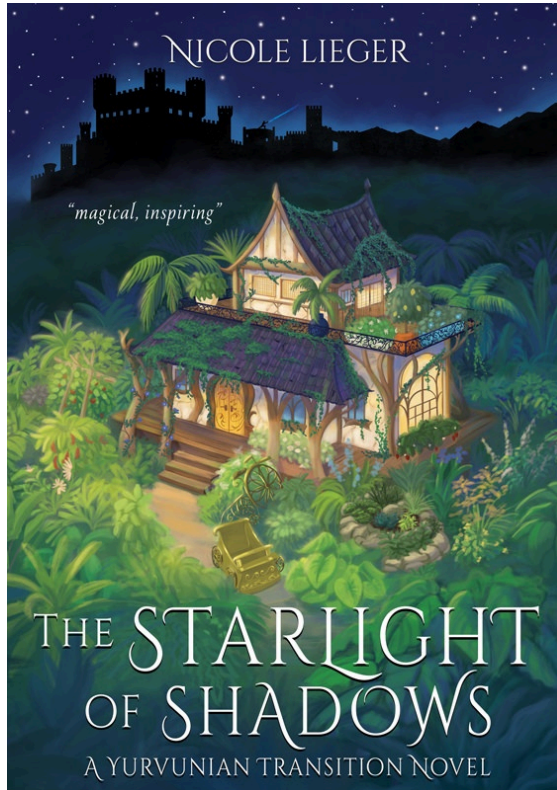
He never came close. He never approached her. He never made a move to meet her, or to speak to her. He was just there. He was sitting on one of the boulders in the opening. He was standing beside one of the deewelarque bushes, a shadow in its shadow, blending in so much she noticed his outline only after having been there for hours. Or maybe he had only just got there? No, she was sure. He had always been present, all the while that she was there. She felt him much more than she saw him.

Sometimes he looked toward her. As she was looking toward him. But he did so only for a moment, just one glance, just enough to acknowledge that he had seen her. That he knew she was there, and that he knew she knew. Then he turned away again, to look out into the open valley.

He was sitting there now, on the grass before the boulders. His eyes were turned toward the slopes of the mountain, toward the waving grass and nodding wildflowers, toward the forest down below.

Verlem was keeping very still. He had his feet planted on the ground, his legs falling open slightly, his hands joined loosely around his knees.

She could see his profile clearly, his fragile body, his face as he



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